

**TYHINI**

2012

## EDITORS' NOTE

Each year Tyhini publishes work by students doing the MA in Creative Writing. The work in this issue was written in the first six months of the year by the nine full time and twelve part time students who joined the course in 2012. It is taken from students' weekly seminar assignments as well as from work in progress on their long projects.

In our MA course we embrace a wide range of styles and genres in both reading and writing, and each of this year's writers has managed to find a way of giving form to their own experience and aesthetic preferences. We salute the writers' enthusiasm and tenacity, and their willingness to take risks.

Paul Mason and Robert Berold

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Saaleha Bamjee

## Growing bones

First soft and unknit  
to mould through mothers  
to begin this work  
of hardening frame  
growing upwards  
to fall free when six  
from the top of the world  
fracturing fear  
and breaking in three places  
casting a school-term in plaster  
scribbled on in fruit-scented markers.

Bones, I drink to your strength.  
The milk, always, in tall glasses  
good for glugging in one go  
and skilful lickings  
of wet-white moustaches after.

Under stretched-out bras and holy panties  
I scribble bones into perfumed diaries  
that close with a heart-shaped lock  
pickable with a paper clip.  
Bones, you make good backs  
built to bend  
under the weight of adolescence  
and spring up  
when  
the world becomes  
ready  
for a woman.

**Morning**

Before the birds  
 is the ebb-less tide  
 of the highway.  
 We are just far enough  
 for it to be pleasant  
 swathed in goose down  
 Egyptian cotton and  
 electric blankets  
 close to the coarse cawing of the hadedas  
 and the soft twisty calls of a songbird  
 I cannot name.

The day is just about to glow.  
 Men are arriving for morning prayers  
 at the mosque across the road.

The air is still singed  
 from Friday's fire on the ridge.  
 The lightest of its smoke  
 crept through our windows,  
 left threads of ash on the sills  
 its incense caught in the curtains.

**My grandmother breaks her hip**

My grandmother says we've brought her here to die.  
 Her paranoia probes under our fingernails  
 with a splintered stick,  
 splitting the tissue-beds, prying us apart.  
 We give her pills for our pain.  
 Her cataracts cloud over  
 her unlettered bewilderment,  
 but she can still see old blood on the ceiling  
 of the state hospital.  
 My mother is wrung.  
 Guilt stretches out on her bed,  
 nesting on sheets of the unsigned hospital plan.  
 The doctor at the private clinic tells my uncle  
 hip operations costs hundreds of thousands  
 and old people don't make it that far.  
 We've had to put a price on my grandmother.

## Fathers, love your sons

Love them beyond  
 the first fallen tooth,  
 beyond the scrapings of their knees.  
 Love them beyond  
 the breaking of toys  
 beyond the whistling crack of voices.  
 Love them beyond  
 the down on their chins,  
 beyond the girls on their walls.  
 When you can no longer carry them,  
 this is when you must hold them.  
 Love them when they make your mistakes,  
 when your wisdom gets too small.  
 Love them when they leave you.  
 When their choices are not yours.  
 If all you know is what your father gave,  
 take that with its lacking.

## Prayer

I seek you out  
 in the cradles of hands  
 between the creased ditches  
 and the padded mounds.

My thumbs are search parties  
 covered in prophets' ink  
 rubbing through piles  
 on prayer mats.

In a palmful of Joburg snow  
 I am again a child  
 who sees you clearly.



**Tangier**

Eleven hours  
 on the train to Tangier  
 reluctantly asleep within  
 the queer intimacy  
 of strangers  
 breathing deep  
 and softly farting.  
 Sea and sunlight  
 bake the scent of detergent  
 and frying fish into  
 our socks and underwear.  
 I look towards Spain  
 with eyes less wide than  
 the boy on the boulder  
 on the beach gazing out.

**Secret**

We were eight  
 when you made me  
 hold your secret  
 squeezing my fingers  
 around it  
 until joints fused  
 and skin knitted.

I still hold your secret  
 in my open palm.  
 I have not seen you in twelve years.  
 I hear you are  
 a good mother.  
 Should we ever meet  
 somewhere  
 I won't be able to tell you  
 teach your children  
 to shatter the secrets  
 in their fists  
 over men in sweet shops  
 who touch them.

Marika Beyers

**ode to a pencil**

*after pablo neruda*

Oh pencil  
 humble master  
 of every class  
 of fingers learning  
 the loops of letters,  
 the deep concentration  
 splintering off  
 pieces of wood  
 and colouring  
 between teeth  
 and the line alive.

What desk  
 can be complete  
 without you,  
 oh pencil?  
 Some people carry you  
 behind the ear  
 with the elegance  
 of a secretary bird  
 all long legs  
 in the late sun  
 steadying  
 for take-off  
 a hopeful line  
 against the horizon.

Oh pencil  
 in grey simplicity  
 beside the multi-  
 coloured suns  
 trees houses flowers

playing children  
 and their parents  
 hovering  
 at the edge  
 of the page.  
 Pencil  
 growing  
 smaller  
 as the children grow higher,  
 abandoned  
 for ball-point pens  
 with their thin-mouthed leaking  
 and sudden stops.  
 Oh to hold on to you longer  
 returning from words  
 to the clarity and confusion  
 from before,  
 to celebrate  
 your squiggles  
 and smudges  
 the doodles  
 and doings with daring  
 against boredom  
 on pages and pages  
 of duties and rules  
 queues and claims.  
 Your friendly nudge,  
 pencil,  
 nestles in the hand,  
 submitting  
 to pressure  
 to teeth  
 the pouring out

to quietly leaving  
 the page  
 when asked.

### to my parquet floor

your three-by-three pattern consoles me  
 holding me home in the night  
 when I glide on that road without gates

you are my ground up in the sky  
 you cannot see how my heels hear you  
 whispering rhymes to remind me

when I leave you hold up the walls  
 tell me, do you long for the voices  
 of the people I don't bring to greet you

**breathing**

one time when I sent myself to watch her breathing in those last years when she thought she would die and didn't, she wasn't. I mean, I intended the barefoot tiptoe to her bed, scarcely breathing myself so as not to wake her, to comfort myself with the lift and fall of her breath until the cold of the floor shook to my shoulders. instead I found her crying. soundless. hopeless. helped onto the commode, held, hurt. she did not see me. thrown against the railings.

**in the land of the living**

*go tell her, my friend said, before she dies,  
and leaves so much unsaid through time*  
but so wordless was that waiting  
with remorse as little as the breath  
she wished to hold      and could not  
what was to say      everything  
the endless words      the silence of the years  
the loneliness      that the hills continue  
and, for now, the cycad's seeds break open  
into sun      what is to say  
I never understood      yet  
if I were to stand beside her now  
I'd still leave those words unsaid

**sailing boats**

moving in the perfect stillness  
of a flute

holding the horizon  
in a single note

between sky and no  
place home

**recorded**

I don't know how  
my grandmother spoke that way  
as if all her words  
were already recorded  
inside her. my own sentences  
that couldn't be like that.  
it was worst with her.  
I'd watch myself as if.  
but couldn't line them up  
properly. did it matter  
she never mentioned it  
and so I kept on  
talking to her  
in my head

**graveyard**

the leaves rustle and we do not count them  
 one by one the moss grows into words  
 William Lucas died aged three  
 is this stone more of him by now  
 than the child crying a mother stoneless  
 folding herself out like a cloth  
 this is what mothers do the weepful chanting  
 may he be not a soldier not that William  
 from another land died twenty-one  
 does it matter on sea on foot  
 the wind blows through the trees

**the pot**

my eyes climb out as if to reach  
 around the rim of this deep pot  
 fingering its dark lip to the mouth  
 as if my words could hold hold  
 more full its presence than a hand

**winter's throat**

this night pours winter's throat  
 from the horizon to my door  
 a blade of cold a fist of fear  
 as I walk in the dream of my brother's death

the streets in my city are ash  
 the cathedral tower obscured by darkness  
 buses rumble by more gently  
 than dry leaves on concrete

these are the streets I know  
 the trees shudder in the wind  
 folded inside I only find  
 these two suitcases and such heavy feet

**unheld**

you don't cry anymore  
 claws bloodied  
 as if tunnelled to stone  
 walls to fly into  
 you tremble still  
 in your wildness  
 like the threat of glass in a riot

**weekend pass**

it's four in midcity's Sunday  
 the bus is late to camp  
 another week closed in  
 where the phones are broke  
 the water some days cut  
 tight count of toilet paper    steps    salutes

it's four-thirty and no-one else to wait  
 his hands slip inside his sleeves  
 nights of beers and bravado  
 listing bad luck and injustice  
 the mountains of it and the dust  
 as medals        as proof of life

it's past five in the grey  
 his luggage lumped at his feet  
 he can't show his hands  
 tastes the mud in his throat  
 as the bus pulls in  
 out of nowhere the others appear

**office block**

the mysteriousness of buildings  
 how they swallow people up  
 inside all that business like chewing  
 and you cannot call out  
 doors open like smiles  
 that ask but cannot hear

**song**

cold is the wind  
 and dark the night  
 I let the blue bird fly

all day it sings  
 they tell me  
 to a greener sky

come back I pray  
 unstone me  
 from this windy plain

hard the days  
 close the door  
 I cannot hear the rain

Vonani Bila



## Ancestral wealth

*(For my father Risimati Daniel Bila: 1931-1989)*

### I

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees  
 My ancestors dwell  
 Jonas is buried in a woven grass kenya  
 When Dayimani woke up dead at 10 am  
 He was buried in the afternoon, the same day  
 His body covered with white linen and a thin blanket  
 My ancestors dwell here  
 Seated, facing home in the east  
 Facing Bileni, far away in Mozambique  
 A broken mattress and xihlungwani heaped on the grave  
 Cracked enamel plates and mugs heaped on the grave*

### II

Papa, when you finally got admitted at Giyani Block  
 We thought the learned doctors who can see what's hidden in  
 blood and water  
 Would remove the needles  
 And pins and spears in your veins and wearied bones  
 But their bewitched green-red flashing machines in theatre  
 confirmed you healthy  
 And when you got into the late night train ride to Garankuwa  
 Hospital  
 Far away in Pretoria, on that ultra-distance bumpy ride  
 We thought the learned doctors would have removed this  
 excruciating pain  
 In your chest and packing bones  
 But doctors in white gowns saw no fault in your stuttering engine  
 They sent you home

You got into that long bumpy train ride uncured  
 They asked you to come with your wife on 4th December 1989  
 For possible heart surgery  
 And the next day you came back home  
 Sat with your family around the fire  
 That night you didn't cough blood clots, nor groan  
 That night you didn't vomit  
 Nor was your body a river of sweat  
 Your face was sun-beaming  
 Blue eyes were shining  
 We ate chicken stew and pap  
 Drank Rooibos tea with buttered bread  
 That night owls and the wind didn't howl in trees  
 The mountain snake and *dzelehani* didn't cry  
 Dogs and cats didn't wail nor mew  
 That night I slept like a baby

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees  
 My ancestors rise and hold hands  
 They sing in unison  
 Dance in rhythmic step  
 Around the fire*

### III

Wednesday 13 September 1989, 1am:  
 You asked mother to extinguish the paraffin lamp  
 Burning on the red polished cement floor  
 The time to switch off your tormented heart beat had beckoned  
 That day you requested *mhani* N'wa-Noel your concubine from  
 Mbhokota  
 To sleep in the grass-thatched rondavel with your girl children  
 Because the last night of intimacy  
 And pain belonged to your wife Fokisa N'wa-Mahatlani

Your black beauty of twenty six years  
*Yena wa ka mkhamu wa nsuku na ngwavila*  
*Mbati ya ku fuma*

Your last night belonged to your wife  
 Who birthed you seven healthy children  
 Children born between 1964 and 1980  
 The last night to outline your will –  
 Because you knew *n'wana wa munhu u le kusuhani*  
 The last night to outline how your homestead should be run  
 So that you don't return home wearing shorts  
 And run riot  
 In case your house was turned into a playground  
*Emachihweni, emathumbhanini*  
 You sat on your three quarter bed  
 Wearing that brown striped t-shirt from Pep stores  
 Eyes fixed on the old leaking zinc roof  
 Then you paged through the Old Mutual policy document  
 And you said:  
*Mhana Oom (he called me Oom)*  
*The roof is old*  
*I have bought the bricks*  
*But they'll not be enough to build a decent house*  
*When they give you my little pension fund*  
*Build a house:*  
*A room for Oom, a room for Simon, another room for Makhanani and*  
*Julia*  
*If God had given me seven more years to live*  
*Oom and Simon would be working*  
*They would take care of Makhanani and Julia*  
 Then the burning paraffin lamp was extinguished:  
 Each sleeping in their separate three quarter beds  
 Suddenly a heavy hand whipped mother's shoulder  
 It was her grandmother N'wa-Xakhombo

Whose voice shrieked:

*Pfuka wena N'wa-Mafelalomo* (Wake up, you who dies in far distant places)

*A wu swi voni leswaku wa weriwa?* (Don't you see the roof is falling, collapsing upon you?)

All she heard was one groan

Hhmmm, hmmm!

And papa, when she came to your three quarter bed

Daniel Risimati Bila the son of Dayimani and N'wa-Zulu

Had packed for good

Papa, your room was filled with cold air

Misty cloudy smog covered the room at 1am

Mama says you didn't hit nor kick the walls violently

As you wrestled with the monster

*Kwalaho ndzi n'wi longa* (Then I laid out his body)

*Ndzi koka minkumba ndzi zola milenge* (I removed blankets and elevated his legs)

*Ndzi lola mavoko ya longoloka na yena* (I lifted his hands and arms along his body)

*Ndzi vuyetela mahlo* (I gently closed his eyes with a simple touch)

*Ndzi n'wi sula xikandza* (I wiped down his face)

*A hlambile a nga se etlela* (He had bathed before bedtime)

*Mapfalo ya mina a ma file* (I was remorseless)

*Ivi ndzi khomelela mubedwa* (Then I held the bed so firm)

*Ndzi ku kumbe u ta pfuka* (Thinking that he would wake up)

She searched for Rattex in the wardrobe

If she had found it

She would have crushed it

Swallowed it to burn her liver and heart

And join you in the other world

How would she raise her children

With cents from selling bananas and tomatoes

At the Elim market?

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees*

*My ancestors rise and hold hands*

*They sing in unison*

*Dance in rhythmic step*

*Around the fire*

#### IV

'My time to go has arrived,' you told mother several times

The ZCC prophets Markos Mukhuva and *vho*-Ramantshwane

Had tearfully told you the same at Magangeni church:

*Your life's ticket is over*

They told you a few months before your departure

To the land yonder

They told you to stop chasing after the skirts

Because skirts were a cloth covering a big bottomless pit

And you came home to tell your wife

You were not taking anyone's cows nor calves in the kraal

But helping the wandering women in need

You lived facing the tomb

Facing the red setting sun

Knowing your living days

Were vanishing fast like paraffin paper fire

You lived facing the tomb

Knowing you couldn't afford skipping monthly subscriptions

To Saffas the undertaker in Louis Trichardt

Because the ancestors *emaxubini* were calling you

You lived facing the tomb

That's why you cleared the bushy shrubs

Making the road with a pick and shovel

Making the road with a spade and hoe

Because you wanted the hearse

To collect your remains at home with ease

Because you didn't want to be loaded in a wheelbarrow

And driven to be collected at the main road  
 Watched by birds, monkeys and stray dogs  
 You lived facing the tomb  
 Because papa, something so sharp was piercing you  
 Needles stinging your veins with deadly venom  
 Nails biting on your flesh  
 The sharp spear jabbing your heart  
 Something so sharp was numbing your veins  
 Draining your energy from your bowels  
 You breathed heavily every time you climbed a steep hill  
 You coughed strenuously, sneezing, lungs rattled  
 Sometimes you collapsed on the narrow paths  
 After vomiting blood, groaning, vomiting air  
 Sometimes you bellowed  
 Like someone who had eaten fresh poison  
 But papa, you carried the burden of a family man  
 On your shoulders  
 Working every day of the week  
 Slowly walking ten kilometres every day  
 To Elim Hospital  
 For all these thirty years  
 Helping doctors carry out post-mortems –  
 Cutting through skulls, stitching and cleaning the dead so stinking  
 Burying the dead in black shrouds at ten o'clock every day  
 Behind the hospital sewerage  
 Papa, you did everything at Elim Hospital:  
 Ferrying patients to theatre  
 Feeding relieved mothers at the maternity wards  
 Scrubbing the floor in the Eye Department  
 Papa, you did everything at Elim Hospital  
 Just a for a paltry R300 salary in 1989  
 Because you had beaks to feed  
 And clothe

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees*  
*My ancestors rise like elephants*  
*At the break of dawn*  
*To drink water*  
*From the mountain's fountain*

## V

Saturday 26th September 1989 we hid you  
 In this sacred ground where shoes are taken off  
 It's not a cemetery for commoners  
 It's not Mazokhele nor Avalon  
 It's the Bila gardens, within my yard  
 It's a pity you spent two weeks in those mortuary pans  
 Ice must have burnt your skin and bones  
 Silencing the sense of hearing that never dies  
 Burning the growing beard and hair  
 When Saffas brought you home at dusk on Friday  
 In that dark hearse  
 Candles and a paraffin lamp burnt the whole night  
 In your lonely bedroom  
 The funeral parlour had bathed you  
 Dressed in a white silky shroud  
 Mother and the elderly women wearing blankets  
 Slept on the floor around the coffin the whole night  
 In your two-roomed house  
 I remember *hahani* N'wa-Mandlalele  
 And *muhulu* N'wa-Danki were there to support my mother  
 Their husbands had long died  
 Papa, when you left us  
 Your three quarter bed was removed from the room  
 Put outside the house against the tree  
 I was a small boy of seventeen  
 Doing standard nine at Lemana High

For days I didn't go to school  
 Even though a *ka ha ri vusiku*  
 The elders said *ku fanele ku songiwa masangu*  
 I listened to *Ta lava hundzeke emisaveni* on Radio Tsonga  
 To hear your name mentioned on that dreadful programme  
 7am, your light brown casket covered with a blanket  
 Was displayed in the courtyard  
 We walked around it to view you for the last time  
 People cried, some fell to the ground so hard  
 It was the first time I saw a dead man  
 And the fallen man was my father  
 Who in that fateful night  
 Told mom that had he known  
 That he would die prematurely  
 He wouldn't have fathered his four last children  
 Including Oom  
 So I viewed you for the last time on earth  
 And I shed no tear because death had long come  
 I had seen you walk away  
 Eaten by an illness no doctor could detect  
 The night before the funeral—  
 I sat around the big fire  
 Reverend Chabalala was preaching in the crowded tent  
 Papa, know that John Zulu your uncle donated a beast for the  
 funeral  
 It was slaughtered *eka Mapuve*  
 80 kms away from Elim/Shirley  
 Papa, know that people spoke so well at your burial  
 Elias Machume was the Programme Director  
*Hahani N'wa-Risimati Xisana*, in tears,  
 Informed the mourners about your death  
 And asked your ancestors Dayimani the son of Jonas  
 Jonas the son of Makhayingi

*Makhayingi wa Mpfumari*  
*Mpfumari wa Xanjhinghu*  
*Xanjhinghu wa Ntshovi*  
*Ntshovi wa Xisilafole xi nga ri na nhonga xi sila hi mandla*  
 To receive you on the other side  
 Your brother John Bila who had disappeared  
 For more than twenty years  
 Came back home the day you died  
 He trembled, speaking on behalf of the family  
 Can't remember what he said, because he said nothing, but cried  
 Your wife's brother J.S. Mashele also paid tribute to you  
 Even your colleagues from Elim Hospital came in numbers  
 They sang hymns melodically  
 P. Mathavha spoke on behalf of the ZCC  
 Meriam Shetlele represented the neighbourhood  
 Thomas Mahlasela read the wreaths  
*Sivara* Rev Maluleke, the short and handsome friend of yours,  
 Carried your coffin to the grave  
 The ZCC *mokhukhu* men danced in khakhi and *manyanyata*  
 Chonaphi Cawuke, Phineas N'wavungavunga, Shilowa,  
 Mahanci and Xikhudu the great dancers were there  
 The yard was full of mourners  
 Men wearing jackets and women draped in blankets  
 Even The Lion of Judah, your first wife's brother, was there!  
 He gave the vote of thanks with his moving coarse voice  
 Mourners contributed cash –  
 It was recorded in a book. It was good money.  
 But some members of my family with long fingers  
 Never showed all the money to my mother  
 I was still small papa. But I've forgiven these thieves  
 We planted your remains  
 Filled the grave with blood red soil  
 It had a hump like a bull  
 The elderly planted maize, beans, corn and pumpkins

Inviting the rain to come  
 Because your death was never going to bring famine  
 And starvation in this house  
 The elderly placed coins and your preferred drinking mug and plate  
 On the grave  
 We laid you beside your mother Makhanani N'wa-Zulu  
 Who died on 16 November 1980  
 And your father Dayimani who died in June 1964  
 A white cross marked your name:  
*Daniel Risimati Bila*  
*Rest in peace*

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees*  
*My ancestors rise and hold hands*  
*They sing in unison*  
*Dance in rhythmic step*  
*Around the fire*

## VI

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
 Because Giyani Block breeds the pungent death smell  
 Shallow breathing skeletons crumble in the crowded ward  
 With no family member to preserve their sanity  
 The jaws lock, eyes fixed  
 And the white pupils enlarged in the light so bright

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
 Because shivering patients with bluish lips  
 Watch tearfully as the final air bursts from the belly  
 Of a patient next door, bursting like a detonated bomb  
 Misty air blackening the ward with coldness

Papa, you came home to rest forever

Because the restless patients with irregular pulse  
 Watch helplessly as the nurses remove the linen  
 With that stinking last black stool  
 Transferring this man who died in the night to another ward –  
 Next to a living patient in a single room  
 The living patient is happy he's got a neighbour  
 But the neighbour is fast asleep, wearing a shroud  
 The new neighbour is neither hungry nor thirsty  
 The living starts to hallucinate  
 Gets lost in nappies  
 Now he knows the nurses brought him a strange ghost  
 Who'll gnaw at his dreams

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
 Because in this hospital, like many hospitals  
 Just an hour after someone has been confirmed dead by the doctor  
 The nurses make up the same bed  
 A new patient sleeps in there comfortably  
 He doesn't know someone has just died there  
 He collects the spirit of the dead  
 In the middle of the night  
 The new patient rushes to the toilet to pray  
 Pleading to see his only son from Joburg  
 And when his son arrives the next morning  
 And holds his father's cold hand  
 The old man opens his mouth with difficulty  
 As if to say, my son take care of my cattle  
 But no word shoots from the mouth layered with white foam  
 And again goes another patient  
 In broad daylight

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
 Because patients with a blotchy skin

Cry to go home to try herbs  
To heal the cancerous rotting wounds that breed worms

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because the groaning and wailing movie never stops in the hospital  
Some pale-faced patients urinate in coffee mugs and plates  
The very same mugs they use for coffee and tea

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because some patients jump from the bed like impalas  
Tearing drips and tubes away  
They race around the ward wearing the catheters  
Bubbling with urine tea  
They too scream in hallucination:  
*Nurse, come and help*  
*They are here with knives*  
*They want to suffocate me*  
*They want to cut my throat*

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
In the intensive care unit, someone is motionless  
Trapped in a truncation  
His car rolled three times into the donga  
His head was almost crushed  
Perhaps he's brain dead  
But the heart is still beating slowly  
The nurses feed him  
They change his nappies every hour  
His family won't allow the medics to  
Switch off the life support machine  
Because though he's brain dead  
Miracles can still happen  
They happened in the days of Jesus Christ  
And when his spear suddenly rises

The nurses know the brain dead patient's life ticket is still intact

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because some burnt-out nurses simply talk on cellphones  
Watching this ongoing groaning and vomiting and shitting drama  
But you papa, you didn't want to die like your mother  
Makhanani N'wa-Zulu  
Who spent five months at Shangaan Block without eating  
Nor going to the toilet on her own  
My grandmother who died alone  
Who when her coffin was opened for viewing  
Even a brave man like you, papa, cried  
Because there was no one to close her mouth

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Like Dayimani your father  
And Jonas your grandfather  
And Makhayingi your great grandfather  
You came home to rest forever  
After a family meal  
In the hands of your wife  
In your bed  
In the morning so still

## VII

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
I'd buy you a suit and soft skin ostrich shoes  
I'd fly you to Durban or Cape Town  
So that you walk on the beach  
Feel the soft grains of summer sand  
I'd take you out to sit down restaurants  
Try out shrimps, mussels and this good food I eat

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
 We would plant avocado and litchi trees  
 Grow spinach and beetroot together  
 Pinch and prune sweetest tomatoes that yield  
 You would teach me how to dig a trench  
 How to prepare a seedbed for seedlings  
 How to make ridges and furrows  
 How to mulch and make compost and manure  
 How to save water and use grey water  
 We would grow those red roses  
 And maintain those white lilies  
 We would do gardening on our ancestral land  
 Singing your song:  
*7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*  
*U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
 You would tell me how you survived the white dog  
 That followed you every morning to work  
 The dog that would run fast past you  
 The strange dog that would slide through your legs  
 Or even hit your legs with its tail  
 The dog that walked ahead of you  
 The dog that numbed your feet  
 The dog that shook and wearied your bones  
 The dog that disappeared at the bus stop  
 Just before the hospital gate  
 The same white *vaveni* that received you back from work  
 But couldn't enter the gate to your house  
 To throw you into a grave  
 If you were alive today, *madala* –  
 You would tell me about that rope

That roamed in your nightmares  
 The rope that made you so impatient  
 And hate everything about your wife  
 The rope that made you hit her  
 And want to kill her with a knife  
 The rope that prophet Muvhangeli said:  
*Don't pick it up when you find it placed on your path*  
 The tough rope of wicked relatives  
 Who had long sized your neck

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
 You would tell me how you and Ngholeni  
 Picked up that dead rabbit  
 Early in the morning on your way to work  
 How you skinned the rabbit with delight  
 How you wanted to cook it for lunch  
 When suddenly a strange man came  
 And touched your forehead  
 And said, "*and hi yena buti wa Frank.*"  
 Then your forehead ached and pounded  
 And when you came back home from work  
 The same strange man  
 Hobbled to your house  
 All he said was one sentence:  
 I needed to find Frank's brother's place  
 Then he vanished  
 Stealing your heart  
 Placing it in a cave  
 Planting a cockerel's heart in you  
 And you coughed and coughed



Papa, I know it took us twenty years to erect your tombstone



All along the wind was blowing you away  
 The sun was burning you  
 Your pillow was your hand  
 But now Bila, Mhlahlandlela, rest in peace  
 Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts  
 Since you left, your wife has remained in the house  
 I've not seen a man sitting on your chair  
 It's still your house  
 Full of trees and vegetables

*7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*

*U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*

## Glossary

*Kenya* : A woven grass mat used to roof huts. Among the Vatsonga, this mat was also used to wrap and preserve the corpse of a poor person who couldn't afford a decent blanket or linen.

*Xihlungwani* : A carved wooden crown that is used to close the top of a grass-thatched hut. Among the Vatsonga, when the head of a family dies, the *xihlungwani* is removed to indicate that he is no more; and the place is usually referred to as *emachihweni*, meaning the place of lawlessness.

*Dzelehani* : An animal like a cat that cries like a baby at night, usually a bad omen.

*Mhani Xi*: Xitsonga for mom.

*Mbhokota* : A populated rural village near Elim in Limpopo province.

*N'wana wa munhu u le kusuhani* : The Son of Man is nearby, meaning Jesus is coming.

*Vho-* : Added to a person's name as a title of respect, e.g Mr or Mrs.

*Emaxubini* : In the ruins.

*Vaveni* : Xitsonga for tokoloshe, evil spirit or voodoo.

*And hi yena buti wa Frank* : And it's him, Frank's brother.

*7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*

*U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani* : An IsiZulu song that my father Daniel Risimati Bila liked with passion. The composer is not known, but the song was performed by a male song and dance troupe during his school days at Shirley Agricultural and Industrial School for Natives, and during the potato tasting festivities organised by the Swiss missionary and liberal, Herbert Stanley Phillips, and his wife, Lucette Phillips, at Shirley farm.

*Hahani* : Aunt in Xitsonga.

*Muhulu* : Your mother's sister in Xitsonga.

*A ka ha ri vusiku* : Xitsonga for I was in the dark, meaning I hadn't started dating.

*Ku fanele ku songiwa masangu* Xitsonga proverb : Mats must be folded; meaning sex is prohibited.

*Ta lava hundzeke emisaveni* : For the deceased [a Radio Tsonga programme in the 80s which was aired every night].

*Eka* : Xitsonga preposition for *at*.

*Wa* : Xitsonga preposition *of*, in this poem meaning *the son of*.

*Xi nga ri na nhonga xi sila hi mandla* : He who crushes [tobacco] without a mortar and pestle but with bare hands.

*Sivara* : Brother-in-law in Xitsonga.

*Mokhukhu* : Sepedi for a shack dwelling. In this poem, *mokhukhu* refers to the local Zion Christian Church's male organised rhythmic dance which is characterised by frequent and collective leaps into the air and coming down stamping their feet on the ground with their white boots called *manyanyatha*. Usually, the *mokhukhu* performances last for hours, with no meals in between, except the drinking of sugarless tea and *mogabolo* (holy and blessed water) before the performance. The *mokhukhu* dancers are usually called *mashole a thapelo*, meaning the soldiers of prayer.

*Madala* : Nguni [isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele and isiSwati] for old man.

## Crossroads

December 2005

I know that I am awake because I can feel my body. I lie still, my mind blank, hoping that the throbbing pain will subside. It does not, and I can't locate its source, it seems to be coming from all over my body. I open my eyes, slowly. I am at home. I am in my own bed. I wince when I move my left hand – that hurts more than anything else – wince again as the first memory of the night before drops into my befuddled brain. I fumble my way through the lace curtain across the bedroom doorway, stop at the chaos in the lounge. Broken glass, coloured with lines of gold and blue and red, broken glass that used to be my favourite wine glasses. All four of them lie shattered on the floor, my special present to myself the first Christmas that I spent without my children. I bought the glasses, wrapped them, opened the present on Christmas day. They would have bought them for me, I said to myself, if they were older, if they had money, they would have made sure that I had a present to open...

Shit! My nephew lies on the sleeper couch under a thin blanket. I forgot that he was spending the night! Forgot to put out bedding. Shit! I retreat, as quickly as I can, back into the bedroom, but he has not seen his aunt, naked and shaking in the unforgiving light of morning. I draw a gown over my body with my right hand, the left one is blue-black, can bear no weight, sends blades of pain up my arm.

More memories of yesterday begin to drop down into my awakening consciousness. The magick, the working, Patrick, school, dinner, wine... There is a gap. A dark patch, like the Bermuda Triangle, where memory is sucked into the void. It is summer, the scent of flowers and trees rising in the morning sun, but I stand shivering on the black slate of the bathroom, sore and scared. I look into the mirror, there is a faint blue mark between my eyebrows. My fear grows as I stare at the puffy face staring back at me with frightened dark eyes.

*You want to change, you have to change.*

The voice is clear, I drop backwards into the middle of the small room, but I know that I will see no one.

*We cannot protect you like this, anymore.*

I hold my breath, waiting. There is no more. I hear nothing else.

I look at my face in the mirror, again, and I know that I am all out of chances. Next time I will break my nose, slice my hands on broken glass, smash my face on a piece of furniture, drive into a pole. Maybe hurt someone else. I have to change. I have to stop drinking.

My knees give way, I crumple towards the floor goddess help me daddy archie granny oh god!

### September 1965

Both my hands grip the iron bars of the gate, I stare out at the passing cars. I am small, barely 9 years old, and the wind is cold on my exposed neck. I don't like the feeling, miss my long hair. I told them that I can tie it up myself, plait it, even. Too much trouble, they said, there is no time to help all the girls with their hair in the mornings.

No time to make sandwiches either, for school. Allison and Archie are little, younger than me, and if I get hungry they get hungrier. I was too scared to sneak into the lower grades section at break, but we were all crying when we came back to the Home.

They took Teddy away, no room for him on my bed, I don't know where he is or if he is cold and maybe he is scared and he wants to be with me. Allison is on the other side of the dormitory divider, they said she must sleep with the little ones, not next to me. And Archie is down at the opposite wing of the house with the boys. When we are sent outside we stand together, I hold their hands and I tell them it will be ok.

But it's not. The gate is out of bounds, I am not supposed to be here, but I am. I know that the world outside is lost, is no longer mine. I live here, now, and Mommy lives in a little flat in town. She can fetch us, once a month. They call it Going Out Sunday. There is Visiting Sunday, also once a month.

The sky is blue, the sun turns orange as it dips below the trees, sending shadows across the street and up the grassy pavement.

I still don't know what death is, except that it means that someone never, ever, comes home again.

I know that it is useless to think about Daddy and how things would be if he were here. So I try to stop thinking about him and his big hands and warm lap and the laugh in his voice.

I try not to think about big hands, big fat fingers, the way that Uncle Steven's hugs are uncomfortable, his face ugly when he

stretches his mouth into not really smiling, when he tells me its our secret and slips his hand in my shorts.

I know, I know, in every cell of my body, that I am alone.

## Flow like water

Sales have been slow, but I have high hopes for this day. This suburb is one of those up and coming arty areas, full of old houses and village walk shopping centres. I read most of these books that I try to sell, and I have to tell you that some of them are really deep, man. I listen to a cd from Wayne Dwyers's book on the Tao. This morning's verse says: Be like water, go with the flow. So I try it. I flow along into my little car, when I would much rather be riding high on a Harley, I don't complain, I just do it.

I punch the first address into my GPS and drive in and out, left and right, along the narrow and haphazard streets in this old part of the city. It's still early, with sun shining in my eyes and off the wet tar every time I turn towards the East. I find the first address in amongst a row of old, semi-detached houses. There I am, squeezed into my under-sized car, watching the look on the little coloured girl's face when she sees me, this big man, unfolding himself out of the little seat.

I flow out of the car and look around me for the shop. Quaint and Quirky, it says on the card, but I see no sign of it. I check the address – 31 Cove Ave – and match it to the rusty number on the peeling wooden gate in front of me. I open the latch to go into the yard where I see an open door and the little coloured girl's mouth opens and closes. I hear nothing. What? I ask her, but I think she's mute, she opens and closes her mouth and shakes her head so that her pigtails bounce up and down as she backs away from the gate. Too late I hear a growl and a scuffle of paws and a mangy mongrel comes scabbling out of the house, snarling and barking and I jump kicking and screaming for the gate. I make it out, but not without a nip on the heel. It's a scratch, but it draws blood. I shout: If I have to get a tetanus shot you're fucking liable! But I see no-one and the dog goes back into the house, happy, I think.

So now, the hope fades a little and I flow a bit less. Still, I fold myself back into the car, frowning at the little coloured girl and her wide grin. I head off for the next address on my list. This looks more like it: Babs and Bets Books. The Cape Dutch style shopping centre has been freshly painted and has a neat, cobblestone parking with good-sized trees for shade. I find the store open, the bell chimes

happily when I walk in carrying my bag of books. I smile at the grey-looking woman behind the counter. You must be Babs or Bets, I say, expecting a smile. Instead I get tears, and a wet, sobbing story about it's only Babs now because Bets has run off with the bitch from the library and now the shop is done because Bets was the brains but Babs is just the brawn and anyway she's heartbroken and has no spirit left for the shop... I commiserate, hoping that she will pull herself together and buy a few books. No go.

Babs is babbling on, getting excited now, colour rising cherry red in her nose and cheeks. Bets will be sorry, I hear, when she finds out how much she misses Babs running off to the pharmacy and the bottle store and making sure she has a good stock of whisky and sleeping pills. Oh yes, she continues, pressing her damp hand on the samples to stop me from leaving, Bets liked to think she was in control, but it was Babs did the care-taking.

I had heard something like this before, from someone else, her voice now thin with time but persistent in my head. You like to be in control, she had said to me, but you're not, and you can't help me with my addiction.

I push the past out of my thoughts, consider speaking to Babs about codependent relationships, which maybe she had with Bets. Did you know that codependency can occur in any type of relationship, including work? The person doing the controlling has a pathological condition (I like that word: pa-tho-logical). Last week this guy, who bought six copies of *Shamanic Breathwork*, was telling me that the concept of codependence comes from AA – not Automobile Association, the other one, Alcoholics Anonymous – and the realisation that the problem is bigger than the addicted person, covering the family and friends who make up the network that supports the addiction.

He told me about the 12-steps for recovery that is the foundation of AA. "It's a profound programme for a spiritual life," he said, "but the good news is you don't have to be an alcoholic to access this wisdom." Waving one of his new books at me, he told me that it contained a shamanic recovery process based on the traditions and principles of 12-step fellowships. "Many of us act out some sort of addiction – it doesn't have to be about drugs and booze – like sex, for instance, or chocolate, or food."

I know how a person can be addicted to pain because I was addicted

to Dawn. It's as if she is speaking to me through this man, "The 12-steps are about experiencing a spiritual awakening, the awareness that each of us has a spiritual nature, besides our physical body and thinking mind. I'm telling you, Alan, there is a divine intelligence in these steps that can completely turn your life around. If you had a chance of getting rid of all those old beliefs and behaviour patterns that no longer serve you, learning how to live fully and presently, wouldn't you grab it with both hands?" He jabbed his index finger passionately at the book to emphasise his point.

Yeah, but I'm not a Shaman, I told him. But I was thinking of Dawn and another life, wondering why I had not listened to her, paid more attention. She had been excited, her hair bright with streaks of pink falling over sparkling green eyes while she spoke of her recovery. You can be your own Shaman, she might have told me, you can be your own inner healer. She would grab the book from me, open it and read, "Obsession alchemically transforms into passion, and the dance with our inner higher power becomes a union with the Divine. By facing and embracing the darkness we sought to avoid, we come home to ourselves." Yes, Alan, say yes! This time, I would ask her questions, keep her longer, stop her from leaving...

Babs is staring at me, I realize that I am staring back at her shiny face and her dishevelled grey hair. She takes her hand off the pile of books, leaving a damp mark on the back of the angel on the book cover. *Shamanic Breathwork: Journeying Beyond the Limits of the Self*. I leave the bosom-heaving, not-buying-any-books-today-Babs without enlightening her about the nature of her problems, trying not to think about mine. I'm starving and I buy half a dozen samoosas from the vendor. Fuck the consequences, I think, and wolf them down, followed by a Coke.

Hope? What's that? Two shops, no sales, and the better part of the morning gone! I forget to flow, kind of creak back into the tiny, stupid car and head to the next stop. The GPS loses its signal and I drive in circles through the winding streets and lanes for an hour before I find Carpe Diem, the next store. Roused now, memories of Dawn, my beloved, my lost one, thread their way persistently into my consciousness. The sweat trickles down the small of my back as I wind up the windows, lock the car, haul the bag of samples up a short flight of stairs. The shop is open, has a chirpy little bell that rings when I walk through the door. A thin, black woman is singing, yes,

singing, I do believe it's a hymn, staring at something above her. I wait, and without missing a beat she gets a "Whadyawant" inbetween "Tha Laud iss my shep-hard" and "I shall not waaant" still looking at the ceiling. I look upwards, too, see nothing so I put a couple of books on the counter. Bad move, it turns out. She starts shrieking, pointing at... What? I ask, what's the matter? "The temptations of the Devil! Get thee behind me Satan!" she shouts, grabbing Deepak Chopra's book on the Kama Sutra and starts twisting it. What are you doing, I yell, and she throws it down and starts jumping on it. You damage it you pay for it, I cry out, pushing her back and rescuing the book. She tells me she only wants Christian books, because she is newly saved, and her high pitched screech hurts my ears so I pack up the books and leave.

A sudden squealing of tires, the sickening crunch of metal, my heart leaps into my throat and I gag on the image that comes flying down the years. I almost shout *Watch out!* Her eyes are on me as she waves goodbye, laughing, turning too late as the taxi hurtles down the narrow lane crashing her body into sudden and shocking awkwardness. I never knew if she died instantly, or if she left her body slowly with her blood pooling gently around her still body, our conversations unfinished.

I force my eyes back to the present, carefully focusing on the altercation at the end of the block: the delivery van perched neatly on the low wall with its doors open and hazard lights blinking; a black man in orange overalls gesticulating wildly at an overturned trolley of vegetables, some squashed red and bright on the black tar; a fat woman in a busy floral dress, flat on her arse with one red shoe; a thin man in a white cotton tunic and a fez, feebly tugging on her arm. No real harm done, I think, not this time, and the shaking subsides.

My stomach is sore from the samoosas and Coke. All hope and flow are gone, fading with the sun. Fear and futility rise into my mouth with the acid reflux and bile. I need to find a toilet. I can't face driving around all squashed up in the car. I throw the books into the boot and head down a narrow, stone lane. My mouth is dry, I won't make my target today. I find a small hotel with a dark, wood-beamed pub. There is no-one at the bar counter, so I walk past it to the toilet at the back.

O shit! Literally, all over the place in the single stall. What can

I do? I'm desperate and have to wipe a little clearing before I sit down. Can it get worse? Better not tempt fate. I wash my hands carefully and go out to look for the barman. I find no-one. No-one to complain to about the dirty toilet, no-one to order a beer from, no-one at home to hear about the crappy day. I scratch in my jacket pocket and find a post-it note and a pencil.

Wiping shit from the toilet feels like wiping the dreams from my life. I stick the note on the bar counter and walk out:

*Somebody shit all over the fucking toilet  
Hope your day goes better than mine*

## On my own

Feet hard on the dusty path  
darkness stretches indigo fingers  
beneath the rust tree tops  
I am on my own,  
or that is what he told me

Bereft moon rises richly  
before my blurred mind  
You want to live on your own?  
I ask, repeat to check –  
– not with you?  
Feet stumble over stones in the dim moonlight  
no creature nor angel offers advice

I hear only the sound of his voice  
over and over again:  
we are no longer a couple

## Lifeless

Splendid wide horizon  
once plump with infinity  
now sucked dry and flat  
where a cardboard cut-out girl  
waves a perpetually  
bright farewell.

Irene de Moor



## Dr Simbwa

I need to call Dr Simbwa. Although nobody knows what he looks like, he's quite famous in Grahamstown. His advertising pamphlets pop up everywhere – under windscreen wipers, stuffed into letter boxes, or handed out in the street. He has strong spiritual powers and can handle almost any problem: love and divorce, court cases, barrenness, business stability and removal of witchcraft. But the one that interests me the most is “reconnect with your ancestors”.

It started in January. I was going through a box of my Mom's family heirlooms. These represented the accumulated documents and memories distilled from the lives of all six Holman aunts and uncles. When each of them died their personal mementos were passed on to their siblings, with the whole collection ending up in the possession of Aunt Ethel, the last survivor.

When Ethel died, the suitcase full of memories found its way into my cousin Margaret's backyard wendy house. If my sister Jean hadn't discovered it there, its last destination would have been the municipal dump. She was helping Margaret move house and they had spent the whole morning sorting and packing, ending up with a massive heap of junk, which they flung into the back of a bakkie. As Margaret's husband drove off with the load, Jean noticed the battered old suitcase and impulsively snatched it from the pile.

Since I'm the only person in the family who cares about our past, the suitcase was passed on to me.

I rummaged for hours. There were many photographs, spanning the years from about 1900 to 1950: new babies, school prize-givings, graduations and weddings. The most interesting heirlooms were in a small wooden box hidden in the suitcase lining. These contained Granny's most treasured objects: a balloon-post letter sent from the besieged City of Paris during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. And lots of medals: Queen Victoria's coronation, a WWI medal to Granddad, who had survived the trenches; and a Rand Pioneer medal that Granny picked up for herself, for having lived in Johannesburg before 1900.

There was also a silver locket with a small strand of soft human hair and a cryptic note: “*Robert 1918*”. This was the only memento Granny had of her small son, who had died at the age of 13 months

during the 1918 flu. Nothing else besides the locket: no photos, no baby shoes, no clothes or pictures. At the time there had been nobody to bury little Robert, not until a week after his death. They had all been too weak with the flu themselves.

I cried when I understood the significance of “Robert 1918” and realised that his memory would soon pass into oblivion. It had significantly diminished when Granny died but was now becoming fainter with the passing of time.

Then I noticed something sticking out from behind the silk lining of the locket. It looked like a very old, very thin, piece of paper, on which someone had written a message.

I didn't want to damage Granny's locket but I had to know what this message was about. So I took a deep breath and vowed to act with extreme care, determined to preserve every single remaining hair that had once grown on Robert's head. So I carefully placed the locket on my dressing table and went on a search for fine forceps and a soft clean cloth. As expected, these were in the study, at my husband's special dissection table where he examines insects.

I placed the locket on top of the Perspex sheet covering the table. Then, using the forceps, I carefully lifted Robert's hair and transferred it to a felt-lined wooden cigar box.

The next obstacle was the inner silk lining of the locket. I gently lifted the material from a spot on the outer edge, but there was some resistance, probably glue holding it in place. By carefully loosening the edges one millimetre at a time, I managed to lift the edge. Then I grasped the piece of silk with the forceps and gave it a gentle pull.

It came away immediately, releasing a tiny piece of paper that fluttered to the floor.

Then Akela came bounding into the study, scattering papers everywhere. I tried to grab her collar but she retreated to a far corner under the desk and I had to crawl along the ground and pull her out by her tail. I shoved her out the room, locked the door and took ten deep breaths to calm down.

After a twenty minute search I found it: a thin piece of paper hooked between the wall and skirting board. The writing was so small that I had to use James's magnifying glass to make out the letters: *'ks tickey 12 Bert'*.

At least I knew the meaning of tickey: three pennies, a quarter of a shilling, from the days when South Africa was sterling. But

what could 'ks' and '12 Bert' mean? There was obviously something missing.

The next step was a Google search for 'tickey', and I hit the jackpot. It turns out that there is such a thing as a 'Sammy Marks tickey'. My God! That's what the *'...ks tickey'* meant. This is the *number one* most valuable coin in South Africa. Sammy Marks was a Randlord with a difference, being quite a buddy of President Paul Kruger. He had helped the cantankerous old man with the railways and to thank him for his services, Oom Paul, in 1898, acceded to a strange request. He gave his friend access to the South African mint for one afternoon, during which time the mining magnate was allowed to cast 250 golden tickeys, as a gift to members of his extended family.

According to Google these tickeys are so rare and unusual that, at a recent auction, the starting bid was R1 500 000!

This reminded me of a family legend that we had always joked about. It happened on 11th October 1899, a few weeks after the start of the Anglo-Boer war. The Boers had encircled Johannesburg and advised all English-speaking people to leave. The Holmans had been warned, so they had buried their silver and other valuables in the back yard and were busy making plans. But they hadn't expected the impending closure of the railway service. Now there was no time to dig it up. The last train was leaving Park Station for Durban and they had to move fast.

My Mom had always been sceptical about the buried treasure story, but maybe it was true? Perhaps a Marks tickey had been buried along with the silver, probably hidden inside a teapot or something.

R1 500 000 would pay off our bond immediately. We'd also get rid of the overdraft and still have enough left over for fun: travel the world, enjoy ourselves.

'Bert' is a vital clue. I can't figure it out but Aunt Ethel would know. She was the expert on family history.

I must give Simbwa a call.

## Family legends (extract)

This story contains some elements of truth. The names of people, places and events may or may not have been changed, to protect those who may or may not have been involved.

1

I was born on the 26th May 1948, the day when the Nationalist Party was voted into power in a whites-only, gerrymandered election – a day when the shit hit the fan for the majority of South Africans.

It was a perfectly normal sort of day in the small mining town of Holpan where I was born. The blacks – who had never been able to vote in general elections – remained subdued, and the whites queued up quietly at the voting booths. By one o'clock the icy Northern Cape morning had given way to a glorious Highveld afternoon of clear blue skies in a landscape that stretched across mile upon endless mile of khaki Karoo bush. People waiting at the local polling station had to remove their jackets and jerseys in the warm winter sun.

My mother, who was a political being and hated the Nats with a passion, was too busy trying to delay my entry into the world – at least until the doctor arrived – to think about the fateful election or its scary implications.

He didn't get there in time. No wonder! It would have meant travelling all the way from Windsorton, over 20 miles of rutted dirt road, to godforsaken little Holpan. Besides which, he was probably caught up in election-fever and forgot about the squawking brat that was about to be born.

All of which meant that my mother had to rely on the services of a local half-trained midwife with the harsh-sounding name of Kristoffel. I arrived just after lunch. By this stage Mom didn't care whether it was a doctor or nurse who helped her.

Legend has it that my parents made a profit out of me. Dad was said to have fiddled the system somehow and managed to claim doctor's rates rather than those of less-than-qualified midwives, such as the much-put-upon Kristoffel.

But there is a lot wrong with that story. For one thing, the father that I knew was so scrupulously honest – to the point of stupidity

about petty stuff – that I can't imagine him compromising the truth when filling out a medical claim form. It also implies that poor old Kristoffel was rather taken for granted and underpaid, which doesn't sound like the parents that I knew. Be that as it may, the legend lives on. As with most family legends, it would have been a shame to let the truth get in the way of a good story.

My two sisters, six-year-old Jane and two-year-old Melanie, were so besotted with the new baby that they even fought over me:

“She's MY sister”

“No she's MINE”

This could go on for six to seven iterations until they tired of the argument, or my mother managed to shut them up.

It's a pity that I was too young to take in this conversation, which would have done wonders for my ego: by the time I became aware of my two sisters, the attraction had worn off. There are, however, some contradictory legends about my birth that don't entirely mesh with the adoring-older-sisters image: on returning home from school, Jane was disappointed to find that the wailing noise from the bedroom emanated from a new baby and not the kitten that she had hoped for.

Much later in my life – when I was about 12 – Jane wrote this message in my autograph book:

25<sup>TH</sup> MAY 1948

**THE WORLD'S  
LAST DAY  
OF PEACE**

Which was quite clever of her. Many thought it referred to the infamous election, but some members of our immediate family knew better.

## Winterberg weekend

They were climbing into high country, somewhere between Bedford and Tarkastad. The tar road degraded to dirt and Rory changed to a lower gear as they gained altitude, winding their way upwards towards the plateau farmlands.

There were no other vehicles in sight, but a sharp bend in the road brought them into direct contact with a flock of merino sheep. Rory attempted an emergency stop but stalled the car, which precipitated a sudden silence. For a few moments they found themselves locked into a staring contest with about thirty sheep.

Rory was irritated beyond reason. He leaned on the hooter for a full minute and then banged on the side of the car door. But the large ram, who appeared to be the leader of the flock, didn't budge an inch; he just stared back at them through unblinking pale green eyes, his passivity in direct contrast to Rory's rising hysteria. Rachael, in the passenger seat, could only think of the irony of their situation: this weekend, booked and paid for in advance, was supposed to be about "Relaxation, Rebirth and Rehabilitation".

The crack of an unseen herdboys' whip suddenly broke the deadlock. The leading ram plunged to the left, followed by a panic-stricken flock who bleated their way through the narrow gap between the car and the rock cutting.

Rachael took over the driving and after that things gradually improved as they followed the road through rolling grasslands. By the time they reached the farm, Rory had more or less recovered.

They parked the car in a privet-lined driveway and made their way through a gap in the hedge to a paved garden path leading to the house. Before they had even reached the veranda, their host emerged from the front door and came striding towards them: a large man, dressed in standard farmer's khaki.

"Do you realise what time it is?" he shouted, "I told you to be here by three o'clock. The others have already started. Hurry up... I might manage to fit you in."

Without any further introduction he turned and hurried onto the veranda and around the side of the house. Rachael and Rory weren't sure what to do next so they stood still for a moment, which

caused the man to stop in his tracks. He looked back and his features softened momentarily, as if remembering the good manners that his mother had once taught him.

"I'm Colin, by the way. Bring your suitcases along."

Then he switched back to aggressive mode: "Come along," he said, with obvious impatience, "you're very late and the others have already started. It's important that you don't miss the transformative stages."

He led them around the side of the house to a large barn of ochre stone, with corrugated iron doors that hung at an angle on bent hinges. As they drew closer Rachael caught a whiff of burning hair and she wondered if this had something to do with sheep shearing.

It took a little while for their eyes to adjust to the dim interior, and then to realise that this was no ordinary barn. The only light came from a bank of computers set up along a bench at the far end of the room where four middle-aged people sat, apparently playing computer games.

Colin suddenly reappeared. He had walked up behind them and was now more relaxed than before.

"I must apologise for being so abrupt earlier," he said as he moved up between them, placing his arms across both Rory and Rachael's shoulders. "I've already explained some of the fundamentals in the e-mail that I sent, but now its time for a brief tour. Please be quiet... we mustn't disturb the process."

They passed the game players and then moved to the furthest corner of the barn where six young children of about five to six years old were lying in the shadows. They seemed to be asleep but their eyes were wide open and each wore a leather cap attached to some wires.

One of the little girls started to whimper. Then another took up the same sound and the others followed. This lasted for less than a minute; then they relapsed into a restful state. Their breathing became regular but they remained in a kind of trance, oblivious to the world around them.

Then Rachael noticed that the bundles of wire emerging from the children's caps led back towards the computer consoles. She took a step back, but Colin blocked her way.

"Don't be disturbed by the children. They're fine... perfectly happy. They don't feel any pain."

“Then what was the whimpering all about?”

“They feel some stimulation, that’s all,” he replied. “They’re normally very relaxed but occasionally become a little restive. It only lasts for about 30 seconds. You’ll get used to it.”

Colin’s reassurance aroused further suspicion. What was he trying to hide and why had he distracted her from following the wire connections? She pushed past him and immediately saw that the wires led directly from the children to the computers where the elderly people were sitting.

By this time her eyes had adjusted to the dim light and she was able to pay more attention to the group of people she had noticed before. They weren’t playing games. They were also in a trance-like state.

She felt a sudden revulsion for the whole exercise: “I’m not staying. I’m getting out of here,” she said as she hurried out, pushing past Colin.

He didn’t try to stop her.

Rachael continued walking. She would not go back. If she had to, she’d fetch Rory later, but she would never enter that barn again.

As she reached the car, Rory caught up with her, tense and breathless: “You can’t go! We’ve already paid. I told you to expect something unusual and now you want to back off before we even start.”

“But what are they doing to those children?”



Rachael drove back to Bedford that night and booked herself into a B&B. Rory could find his own way home. But there was no message from him the next day so she proceeded on to Grahamstown in the afternoon.

She had expected him to call a few days later, either asking her to fetch him, or to tell her that he had a lift home. But she heard nothing. After four days, when it became clear that Rory was not going to phone, she tried his cell, but he was “not available”. After failing to reach Colin, she faced up to the grimmest option: contacting the police, the hospital and the mortuary. Although grateful for the lack of news from these sources, the uncertainty was becoming unbearable.

On the third Saturday after their trip, Rachael decided to drive

back to the Winterberg. She had just finished packing her bags and was about to lock up the house when she heard the roar of a motorbike outside. Then, a minute later, a knock on the door.

It was Rory. He stood on the front patio, decked out in motor cycle gear, holding a crash helmet under his arm. He looked younger, healthier. His hair was still grey and his face as wrinkled as before, but he had a certain jauntiness that she hadn’t seen in years. The treatment had obviously worked.

## Aunt Emily

When my Dad's Aunt Emily died in the summer of 2003, everyone said that it was the end of an era. She was the last surviving sibling and she carried the collective memory of her own and previous generations, going all the way back to her great grandparents who arrived in Natal in 1870. Their triumphs, dramas, losses, and conflicts were no longer significant. Yet they had left behind a faint echo of memory, something that still resonated.

Their stories recalled a time when people coped with antiquated technology: horses and carriages, wood stoves, no electricity or telephones. And outdoor fridges that normally stood under a grove of trees close to the kitchen door. I remember one such fridge on my uncle's farm. The box frame stood on wooden stilts and a double layer of wire mesh covered the sides. A layer of charcoal, stuffed into the gap between the mesh layers, was the most important part of this apparatus. To make it work, someone had to remember to water the charcoal twice a day: as the water evaporated, it cooled the inside of the fridge. That was it: an operating principle that even I could understand.

That fridge played an important role in the family's survival. When they slaughtered a pig, Great-Grandma and all the daughters spent a whole day in the kitchen, cutting up the meat, and salting and smoking the joints that they wanted to keep for a bit longer. They hung the treated meat from hooks in a cool pantry and the other parts went into the fridge outside. All of it had to be eaten within six weeks. They shared any extra meat with neighbours and if they still had more they invited friends over for a feast.

Way back in 1910 people also had to contend with wild animals: Great-Granddad rode to school on a donkey and remembered the day when a leopard stalked him. But he wasn't really scared: he knew that the leopard was more interested in the donkey.

The hazards also extended to farming: they were plagued with swarms of locusts, foot-and-mouth, rinderpest and disgusting-sounding diseases, like snotsiekte, that infected their sheep. But they struggled on and produced an alarming number of children, most of whom survived.

Our grandparents were more flamboyant, more colourful and

more romantic than the tough guys of today – the ones we see on TV competing for the Iron Man or Comrades Marathon just don't cut it. None of them can measure up to Great-Granddad, who rode his horse across 20 miles of rough bush country every weekend, just to see Great-Grandma.

I guess I'm a hopeless romantic who should learn to focus on the present. But the past has such an appeal. So when I lost my job five years ago I decided to capture the memories of my two remaining aunts and uncles. They were both over 80 but still of sound mind.

I started with Aunt Emily. We discussed commonplace things that are now unusual: their first car (a Ford with canvas windows that rolled up and down), pets on the farm (a baby pig that grew into an enormous porker and was later eaten); her greatest crime (setting fire to a haystack, causing enormous financial loss to the family – 70 years later, she still felt guilty); what they ate for breakfast (amazani, preferably made in the traditional calabash style).

Emily, the second-youngest sister, was awkward and shy as a teenager, but came into her own during the war. When Trevor disappeared "Up North" to fight against the Germans and Italians, she and her mom ran the farm. Emily loved every minute of it. She showed me an old photograph of herself and Great-Grandma, proudly displaying the wool that they had harvested from the merino herd.

Then Trevor came home. He had escaped capture at Tobruk by dumbly walking through a mine field. He then fought on the winning side in the battle of Alamein and returned a war hero. As soon as he returned, Emily was relegated to housework.

Trevor was a useless farmer. He set up gin traps for the porcupines that raided his vegetable patch; he put down poison for jackals and killed off the colony of vultures that had nested for centuries at the top of the Winterberg Mountain; he overgrazed the veld and made no effort to stop poaching, so that most of the buck on his farm disappeared. In spite of all his efforts to wipe out predators, his sheep didn't thrive.

But he lived a charmed life. He spent most of his days sitting on the front stoep watching his sheep being herded to and from the fields, supervised by his trusty boss-boy, Xolani. He smoked and drank too much and subsisted on a diet of fatty lamb chops. Although he was overweight and rather gross, women adored him. He outlived all his brothers and died at the age of 88.

Hailey Gaunt

**For the first time**

I cup the egg in my palm,  
feel it with careful fingers  
    (smooth as an underbelly)  
and consider  
the weight of it.

Turning it over,  
I stare through the shell and soft wall  
    to a place within,  
and somehow I've slipped  
into terrifying territory – and yet,  
my body softens.

I see a tiny hand  
spread like a star  
    and all over as delicate  
as the traces  
of a nail's paper rim:  
it's reaching.

Morning has scrubbed  
a strange gleam across  
    this skin finish  
and simple things have shifted:  
the arc of my hand  
the curve of the egg.



## Patronage

The last conversation  
I had with my father  
was about money –  
how I didn't have enough of it  
and how he too was watching it.

I recall the end of each summer  
he would hug me goodbye and  
slip a roll of twenties into my palm,  
the cash thick and warm –  
rude and kind as a tongue

but something I came to expect,  
even look for, like the silvery trail  
of a slug after the rain.  
No matter how much I resisted  
he'd insist.

So when I write to take him up  
on his offer, something in me knows  
I'm sliding back into mud  
we've passed through –  
the easy way.

## Standing in my kitchen

Standing in my kitchen  
you say you are lonely –  
not sometimes in the grey  
in-between but as an  
exile, constantly remote.

For a moment  
you are kayaking down a river,  
maneuvering against  
the muddy rush,  
keeping your centre  
with each paddle thrust.

I hear what you say  
though I look at your  
body: capable arms,  
the open plane of your face,  
your full lips –  
so balanced the equation  
of parts.

I should reach out and  
touch you, but instead I pour  
some tea and listen  
as your words circle and orbit  
like steam from our cups.

I listen but I'm sure  
one firm press of my palm  
will mean more than all this  
talk – something real again

like ground or gravity,  
pinning you to your  
own country.

### a love poem

Whenever you go,  
I catch myself looking  
for little signs of you.  
Evidence, if you will,  
that we are better together  
than apart.

It's silly, I know, because  
when you are here,  
I sweep up after you

fold your clothes  
wash your cups  
straighten your papers

And when you're gone  
I look for your debris.  
And then feel sorry  
that I'm the neurotic wife

folding your clothes  
washing your cups  
straightening your papers

And I worry you think somehow  
my life would be more ordered  
if you weren't in it  
and the clutter  
of two lives  
isn't worth the mess,  
and in the end  
love is a chore.

I worry that I only  
see these things too late,  
when you are gone,  
and your shoes,  
straightened by the door.

**We went for a walk**

You draw me out to the side yard  
 when your eye catches the grey dam of mine –  
 in its mirror it holds, tremors  
 and breaks.

Your hand against my head  
 my head against your frame.  
 I notice blue eggs hatched on the grass.

We wander some more,  
 edging the clutter and the rust.  
 At the bow of the old boat  
 I see the wildebeest calf.  
 Must be freshly gone  
 for there's no smell  
 and clouds still move across its black eye.  
 Kneeling down, you stroke its belly:  
 rigor mortis.

*Why don't we pray for him  
 to come back to life, you say.*  
 And I love you more.  
 For as long as I've known you,  
 your faith has had no boundaries.

**In winter**

*Ah, night*

*small rivers of water rise  
 and bend towards – sleep  
 (I am nearly sleeping)  
 – Marina Tsvetaeva*

She felt it –  
 that wakeful, watchful, always alert...

She felt it –  
 in the gold-grim haze of Russia in winter  
 (Russia at war in winter),  
 she felt that sleep was a luxury  
 of knowing tomorrow will arrive  
 bright and generous  
 with songs and words and odors.

In winter you must make your own songs  
 recite your own verse, hear your own bells.  
 In winter the trees grow bare  
 because it's all they can do to keep  
 their middle core.  
 She felt it –  
 growing more hollow  
 more strange  
 more bitten by the minute.

## The storyteller

I drink my wine and scribble another wordless love letter. This symbol scratched in ink on paper scraps shows my heart's as hollow as an overworked image. I am a writer who has lost his words.

Across the street the friendly neighbourhood witchdoctor opens her gate to yet another customer. Third one today. She smiles, nostrils stretching into twin planets. Her blue patterned skirt rimmed with red and yellow ribbon swishes as she lumbers inside; her great bottom a rolling bag of tricks. Mama Eve, they call her. Though I've yet to see her magic. For all she claims to cure – financial burdens, family feuds, mental illness, business troubles, unwieldy or undersized bums, breasts – she has a few problems of her own. *Hey Mama Eve – why won't the magic work in your own life?*

It's a fair question, one I'm asking of myself. My third book and I cannot conjure the magic. The characters are slippery and swim in circles inside of me, shifty and illusory like Sirens. I cannot call them out so they drag me under slowly, roping me with their seaweed webs.

I pour another glass of wine into the same crimson-crusting cup, never washed, only refilled, swirled and drained. I am a drunk and if only I'd drink from the bottle, at least I'd cease to be a liar too. It's a shameful habit but it keeps me at my only good one: sitting here at this oak helm, doing the only thing I now don't know how to do.

The book I'm writing takes place between South Africa and Europe in the mid-nineties. The two main characters, Christian and Camilla are cycling through France on a gap-year gallivant. They've left the anxiety and uncertainty of South Africa in 1995 for the fresh feeling of Europe. Christian is the son of Camilla's family housekeeper, and the two have grown up together. By way of private tutors and opportunities made possible by Camilla's parents, Christian has received an education on par with Camilla's. Following matric, Camilla wants to take a gap year in Europe. Her parents agree on the condition that Christian goes too. A simmering teenage romance blooms into a full-blown passionate affair while in France. Here, they don't have to hide; a relationship between a black man and a white woman isn't a scandal or a direct affront to society. *C'est la vie!* The French embrace them by never glancing twice. They are

liberated by this European ethos and the couple roams freely from village to village exploring this new intellectual and sensual world.

And the story grinds to a halt. After Christian and Camilla make love in every conceivable place, in every conceivable position, under every conceivable circumstance, at the next action, I draw a blank. This story has been brewing in my mind ever since I was sixteen and the daughter of my mother's employers went to Europe for a year. How I longed to go with her and fantasized day and night about the cobbled streets, the music the cafés the wine, the endless lovemaking.

But I am unable to imagine the rest. I cannot write it because I cannot conceive it. What future is there for two different coloured lives in South Africa – or anywhere? I hoped the story would be more than a passionate sabbatical, a mere hormonal soiree somewhere else, but I cannot convince myself their love can fly (however feebly) in the face of the status-quo. It seems foolish and impractical and this idea has brought me to the limits of my own imagination.

Mama Eve is now seeing her customer to the gate. Probably the last one of the day. She observes strict nine to five hours. We are not very different. While she invokes spirits of the ancestors, I invoke the muse or my own dark spirits. Her business relies on the persistence of problems. The more problems the better. I weave a story that hinges, tenses on a problem and then I doctor my own cure. Her characters are real; mine are amalgamations, conglomerates of real people – an expression here, a pesky twitch there, a flirtatious flick of the hair.

That I continue to sit here so unflinchingly despite my life's incremental disintegration, its steady crumbling, is a testament to my animal nature: I am bull-brained and pig-headed. Someone more sensible would have abandoned this work when its costs became unaffordable. I was too determined not to see them. But when Rose moved to another bed, that was the first wall down; when she stopped cooking meals, the kitchen flooded knee-high; when she'd sit slumped over the newspaper, weeping, the roof was caving in. I just grinned, fished out my umbrella and rain boots and told myself that art requires sacrifice. What I'd lost would be regained in other ways. The book would bring in a sum of money and, most essentially, clarity. The disparate streams would finally merge into a fluent river. But I am stuck now, stymied, damned-up.

Perhaps my self-reflection makes me wistful for companionship

because the thought strikes that I too can visit Mama Eve. She's closed shop for the day, but surely she'll oblige a neighbour. I take my notebook and pen, that way I'm only leaving my desk in body. Without a clear idea of where this plot is going, I find myself crossing into the story. Her house is five or six large paces from my front door but the chasm I'm bridging feels much greater. I glance back at my own house. It looks swollen and slouches heavily to one side; if it were alive it would belch. My hand grips a bar of Mama Eve's iron gate and I rattle it gently. The curtain pulls back and a dark face enters its transparent triangle.

The door opens slowly, with caution and then a formidable Mama Eve steps into the frame.

"We're closed for business! Come back tomorrow!"

*We? You and your other spiritual councillors?* "Please Mama Eve, I just need a few minutes." I decide it's unwise to offer to pay for her time.

Mama Eve squints. She's wearing an orange sherbet apron fringed with enormous ruffles. Her face relaxes having discerned something familiar. She wipes her hands on her belly and waddles down three steps. We are face to face, divided by the gate. She smiles.

"Yes," she says knowingly, "I was wondering when you would pay me a visit. Come, I'll make you some tea."

I follow the woman inside her home, half expecting the walls to be crowded with masks and tiny wizened heads – or at least altars of bones or animal tails and other voodoo paraphernalia. Nothing out of the ordinary save four shelves lined with bottles filled with dried plants and dark brown syrups, and a large mortar and pestle crouching on the floor. Something is bubbling on the stove and I see square chunks of pumpkin roiling to the surface. The scent of vegetable soup on the stovetop is an ordinary comfort that returns hunger to my faculties and I realise I've not eaten in days.

"Sit down, Vuyo," says Mama Eve with maternal authority. She might have divined that I would protest if given the option.

She disappears and I hear clanking in the rear of the kitchen. She returns with a tray of tea. In the cup there is something loose, a twiggy mixture of greens and browns. The steam rises and the spicy, cool aroma crawls through my nose, up through my mind, cradling it in a sensory lullaby. I sneeze twice, violently, my entire body participating in the act. Mama Eve laughs. She throws her head to

the back of her chair and her fingers unlock across her stomach. Her chest shakes like two galloping steeds.

"That happens sometimes," she says, breaking into a fit of laughter again. "See, Mama Eve knows what you need to clean out the cobwebs."

I take the tea to my nose and inhale, catching something very different this time – orange, mint, sage, something spicy like cinnamon though more pungent. It is intoxicating and wonderful.

"So," she says, "tell me."

I put down my cup. *Where to begin – Rose, the book, the alcohol, the failed enterprise of my life?* "Sorry to trouble you outside business hours, Mama Eve – it's just that I see your customers coming in and out all day long. What you do while they're in here is a mystery, but I see them return time and again." My voice firms, "I don't want spells or potions, or ceremonies or healing. I just need..."

"Ah! Perspective!" she interrupts, her index finger poised, upright. "Yes, that can be a difficult thing to find."

I shift in my seat. She has borrowed my word exactly.

Mama Eve raises herself from the table with her smooth, fleshy arms. "I'll be right back."

When she returns she is carrying nothing but she stands directly in front of me anyway, her large bosom staring me down. She raises an upturned fist and unfurls her fingers. Twin shells lay round side up on her palm. They are small nude carapaces. I gather I am to take them. On the other side of the mounds are small-toothed gaping-smiles like fault line cracks – or gummy grins – or painted hand-mouths talking mute. The teeth open to narrow chasms where tiny invertebrates once lived alone.

I don't know what she's offering me. There are a million inferences my metaphorical mind might draw – are they to remind me of nature and that a world exists outside my own selfishly myopic one? Is this couple, so perfectly suited, supposed to tell me that I am not alone but one-half of a perfectly matched pair? Or do they have some other, more tangible charm?

"To conjure the magic you must first learn to hold an object in your hand and know that it has its own story – its own reason," Mama Eve says with cryptic conviction, "and only then can you impose a new one."

I thank her, though I'm not sure what for exactly. Nevertheless the

tea has cleared a path in my head. A few paces later I'm at home in my damp, dark house and suddenly overcome by disgust with myself. I remove the newspapers from the floor and mop the remaining puddles. I sweep the kitchen and wash the dishes. I prepare myself an egg. I sleep.

The next morning I wake to the sun gently dripping through my blinds, glowing instead of searing me awake. I make myself a coffee and sit down to a cleared desk. In its corner the cowry shells balance on their backs. I pick them up and roll them in my fingers. Like sea change they chink. I imagine where they've been, what smoothed them over, what colour sand they've touched, on which beach they washed up, who took them for treasure. I think about their lives as shells and their lives before they were empty. I write and write. The words flow out of me, pooling onto pages, filling them to full. When I finish, I look at them again, tilting my head. I see two lives that can fit together if I want them to. I press their undersides against one another, their rounded girths tapering off to a narrow point, the outline of a strange heart. I return to my book.

## Andile M-Afrika

## Conversation with a ghost

We are now standing on Grey Street. You should remember Sir George Grey from the history they were punching into us, an English fellow who made his credentials in treating the subjects of the Queen in the colonies of Her Empire. That street on the left is Cambridge Street, no need to explain that. The shop behind is the Criterion Cafe. It is still owned by the same Greek family. This street on the right is Alice and the one at the end there is Wodehouse. I must remind you, we are in King William's Town, in one of the parts of Africa that Britain painted white. This used to be a park for white people only. There would have been a fence surrounding all this piece of land, and inside there would have been different kinds of swings and toys, a bicycle track and a little house for the maintenance keeper of the facility. All of these things are not here since blacks took over the administration of the town.

But that is not the reason why we are here. I brought you here for a different story. When I was a child I used to walk past here on my way to where my grandmother worked. I would stand exactly right here and watch white children enjoying themselves on the swings. Like any child I would be envious. And I was not the only black child who felt that way. So, there was a discussion with my chommies about this park. A mini conference, you know, that would have some resolutions and probably a programme to undertake. In that conference one of us suggested that we do not need to recognise the law that says black children are not allowed into the parks of white children because that law, in the first place, was made without the consent of black parents who obviously would have opposed it. A sensible suggestion that went direct to the issue. The view was carried.

The next step was when and how shall we get into the park. Someone raised a hand to say we would need a pliers to open a hole in the fence at a strategic corner. No problem, that could be done. At that stage, the conference was reminded of a notorious traffic cop called Riboh, the one who always kicked the fruit and vegetable stands of our mothers at the market. All in the meeting were silent. The Riboh thing was not an easy matter. Riboh, that hot boiling kettle, those seemed to be the words running in our heads.

A white man who was full of himself, Riboh never needed other whites to help him do what he wanted to do to black people. Judging by his uniform he should have been checking traffic. But I think they had either given him the duty of protecting their whites-only facilities and a right to kick away all that he thought was making his town dirty. Or he could have just been a bully, a coward who took a chance on the ruled black “baboons”. A lot of black people seemed to fear Riboh or were just careful about themselves. Anyway they knew that raising a hand to a white skin was a sure licence to the gallows.

Yet, there is a story about a heroic woman at the market who saw that her wares were about to be kicked away by that Riboh kicker who was advancing. She unwrapped a packet of tomatoes and readied herself for a fight with her tomato-stones in both her hands. As Riboh walked towards her with his folded sleeves half-covering hair-laden arms, marching with shining boots as if his body carried a wind-filled heart; the woman landed the first two tomatoes on his face and the blood-red juice splashed all over. He was blinded, and with his hands he was trying to get back his vision, when a rain of tomato-stones mixed with up hard potato-stones came down on him. Riboh was red and filthy. He had to run away, stumbling into his cop-car under the rain of hard-hitting vegetables. As a result of that victory a song was composed in the township about a Riboh who was doubly punched and knocked by tomato-stones.

But this park, as you can see, is too far from where the market was. And all the other blacks who would be this side of the town would either be scared or just too careful about themselves. The only breakthrough was that all of us would watch for Riboh and whoever saw him first would raise the alarm. And then we would run for our lives.

On this fateful afternoon we came here. All eyes were moved in all directions. The coast was found to be clear. Our main man armed with his pliers took seconds to create the opening in the fence. We went in one by one. Walking towards the swings, my broer, I was not sure if it is me really who was about to swing in the air or if it was just a dream.

We had been there for ten good and lovely minutes and we had completely forgotten about Riboh. We were pure, pure children consumed by the joy of playing, ghetto boys in their element, when

a voice rang out; Riboh! Riboh! Everybody ran for the hole in the fence. I was still swinging in the air unable to stop. I sprang from the swing and landed on my knees. Still unsure whether the unfolding event was in my imagination, I looked around. I saw Riboh in his marked traffic cop car coming around Cambridge Street. I sprang with fright knowing fully-well that the white man would put me in his jail. I ran to the hole.

There were two others who were running behind me, probably fellow victims of Riboh shock. But, as if recovering from a possibility of an imprisoning hell, the two guys came in full flight past me and dived through the hole, one after the other, one sliding on his back with his legs suspended from the ground, the other sliding on his chest with arms stretched and the head tilted to the side. I stood there perplexed at the acrobatics. By the time I could go through, Riboh was almost on me. I stood on the outside of the fence. He was still in his marked traffic cop car. He drove onto the pavement to block me against the fence. As he opened his door, someone shouted Baleka! Baleka! Run! Run!

I ran across the street, round the corner. He was back on his marked traffic cop car. He came speeding, turned the corner, onto the pavement trying to block and squeeze me against the wall. I turned and ran back. There was an up and down that went on, tearing my insides in fear of the white man. I was alone. I was panting. I was crying. Everybody else had escaped. The animal Riboh was going to catch me.

Without noticing, I was allowing my tiring body to be pushed by a lone voice, a woman’s voice, that never stopped shouting Run! Run! I realised that I was getting to the edge of the town. Something was telling me that Riboh was limping, which was why he was not getting out of his traffic cop car, or that he had too many guns on his body and these were heavy.

I had reached the railway line, when Riboh finally gave up, a clever coward who feared the black side of the town.

My life changed that day. Today, when government speaks about blacks as a previously disadvantaged people, they do not talk about me. I was advantaged by the battle of this playground. I had put my black buttocks on the forbidden swings. I saw the face of organised white violence and never gave up like a sheep. Riboh in his full uniform, chasing me with his marked traffic cop car and his



guns, protecting the facility of his race, the toys of his children and grandchildren, with this likely reasoning; 'no filthy buttocks on the white man's park, forget that they are children, they are not our children, that's it'. After that nothing was ever the same again.

## The raid

It's 5:30 am. The doors of their cars bang one after the other. 24 bangs all coming down like the hands of a possessed drummer. Their footsteps are coming into our yard. They surround our house. On the doors and on the windows at the same time, they bang and shout: "Police, police, vula, open-up". They are flashing their torches on the windows. They breathe hot air through the doors and the walls into the whole interior of our two rooms, into the pores of my body bringing it to a boiling point of fright. I look around. Everybody is perplexed. This is it. The police have arrived.

I should have listened to my grandfather, my grandmother's brother. I should have trusted his senses. He lived in the rural way. His meat came from wild animals around there, and his veggies had not seen refrigeration at the back of trucks. He was nature. We had been sleeping in the same bed when he kicked my lower rib, demanding his morning coffee. It was still dark. I protested that it was too early for coffee. He kicked me again. I stood my ground 'no coffee until later'. If I had listened I could have been up and had time to disappear. That's what activists did when there was a chance. I looked at him trying to communicate my regrets. Maan, the man's eyes were bulged out. He was scared. I looked at our second visitor, a cousin who had come to look for work. He had stood up. Yes it was summer, but in that house of my grandmother it was very hot that early morning. The police were on us. Our cousin had slept in his underwear (That's what you wore when you were jobless). There was a hole in the front and his prosperous set seemed to want to protrude through and find freedom. He was totally unaware that he was exposing himself. The man was scared too.

In seconds I raked together all my papers from the table. I had been putting together a programme for the tenth anniversary of the death of Steve Biko. That was what we did every year. I would type these on the following day and present them to my committee for discussion. The habit was that if no one took that kind of initiative all will have to do with a poorly structured meeting and risk poor planning. Somebody had to make time to think, reduce those thoughts to paper and present these to others. And, the police must never get their hands on your thoughts. I threw all my papers under

the bed, exactly that side where my grandfather slept.

This is my grandmother's house. She alone is the boss here. The relatives who come here are from her family, our family. I had never seen her husband, the father of my uncles. The story is that he was a reputable chef in a popular hotel in town. They met in the circles of the kitchen girls and kitchen boys. He found a small room for his family when he was kicked out by his mother. Since he worked awkward hours, he was at the hotel most of the time. In their marriage, there was a step daughter from my grandmother's first marriage and three sons. When I was born, me the son of the step daughter, he had left town and was no longer visiting his family. I had never seen him. That's what men do. So, my grandmother moved out of the small room that was organised by a ghost husband who could be alive somewhere. She found this two room house. Here, she is the father and the mother of all of us. All of her children including me, carry her surname. Shame, she is stuck with that fellow's surname because they are not divorced.

On this particular police raid I expected her to stand her ground. I was ready to read her her rights. If they had come to search, they needed to produce a warrant for that. I will read that warrant in the same way that Steve Biko used to read those warrants whenever they raided his mother's house. I will make them hold it in position so that I can read like a priest. A strong woman but a very private person, that was my grandmother. She worked almost around the clock. A domestic worker of distinction, a strong religious believer, a daughter of a great healer of the times but yet a woman of few words that come out in a gentle voice. Once, she told me of her drive in the years when she was growing us. She wanted to produce teachers. Her daughter, my mother, was to be adopted by a couple that was moving to teach in another town. These people did not have a child and they loved her so much. When the daughter resisted, saying she did not want to live with other people, my grandmother looks back at a lost opportunity to produce her first teacher. In her second effort she took one of her sons to St John's College. At the end of that year, the son failed and that was her second disappointment. She never gave up and that is what I was expecting when those police came that morning.

"Andile, we have come for you. But, first we are going to search the house", said the leader of the party. A well-fed huge white body

in the company of equally well-fed white bodies. Shame, there were also thin black types wearing the same overcoats and boots. It was a choreographed action. Major Nel, their head, was not there. Was he outside, I wondered? Or was he raiding someone else? Wherever he was, I knew that he was still the director of the show.

This was not the first raid in our house. I mean I was not the first one in this house to attract the attention of the security police. That son who failed at St John's College had once attended workshops of Saso. Although Saso was a university student organisation, they wanted to found a youth organisation that would accommodate youth generally. And Steve Biko was in the centre of this idea. He would pick young men he knew would stand the tide. Biko's cousin was a close friend of the son who failed at St John's College. Again, the son who failed at St John's College had tried his hand in journalism. He reported on political activities. At some stage he joined a newspaper run by black journalists called The Voice. He became the sole distributor of the paper in the area. The Voice would be sent from Johannesburg by train. He would pick up the bundles from the goods train, bring it home. His vendors would be there to pick up 30 or 50 copies depending on who was good in selling. They would come later in the afternoon and we would count the money against the number of copies sold. The son who failed at St John's College would then pay them accordingly.

Whenever a new edition arrived and they are preparing to go and sell, I would be reading The Voice. I had favourite columnists Obed Musi, Mthobi Motloatse, Rev Manas Buthelezi. I guess that was the beginning of my interest in reading and The Voice was an important read at the time. So, the security police would come and raid my home for the son who failed at St John's College. Even when he had fled the country the SBs (Security Branch), as they were called, visited us every week just to find out if he was not making contact.

These police raids were haunting. They created trauma. I was much younger when they started with the son who failed at St John's College. I was still young when they were coming for me. The old man who was visiting his sister confessed to me later that he was indeed scared. He had left his dompas behind. I asked what was he going to say if they had demanded the dompas. He said; "I would tell them I cannot hear". I think of my cousin who said he was no longer staying any longer. He went back home without a job. This violence

that was, obviously, intended to frighten us, especially those of us who were active against the system of foreign rule, was unbearable. How can one live with such a chaotic past, with scars that never cease to haunt the present?

I will write. I will kill the violent silence that was imposed on me and my family, on the schools and the teachers who taught me, on the church and the preachers. With my pen I will speak the unspeakable.

## At the graveyard

A German sedan pulls up.

“What are you doing here?”

Hey Mzala, child of my aunt. I should be asking you what puts you here? (We hug each other. Jesus! Mzala is wearing Old Spice. The car is smart, the clothes are fancy and the guy has gold in his teeth.)

“It’s our time cousin. Siphethe (we are ruling)... Why are you seated so lonely here? Is there anything wrong?”

No, not at all Mzala. I’m just running away from the noise in the township. It’s quiet here. The people here are silent in their sleep.

“You never change cousin. Still thinking, thinking, hey? That time has passed. Look at me cousin. Look at my car. You should look at my house. My quiet is in my house, not in the graveyard. Oh my wife and my children, my lawn, my dogs and my white neighbours. Cousin, when I come to my house my lights can see me, they welcome me and say qhaa (flickering his fingers). You must come and see this to believe it. I will give you my address but (lowering his voice) you have to go through my PA, you know these things cousin. Protocol, protocol.”

I understand Mzala. What puts you here Mzala? You are not like me. You must have a better reason.

“You’re right. I’m planning to dig out the remains of my mother so that she can get a proper reburial. I mean a classy funeral. You know what I mean? All my colleagues in business, in big places and even in the leadership of the party, you know, will be there. And, me and my wife and my children will wear what was never worn anywhere. And I will make my tribute to my one and only mother. I loved her so much but I hate the memory of her death because we were so poor. I don’t even want to talk about it. This time I can make her to rest in peace.”

You mean...

“I mean I will dig her out, get her in a casket, design a two piece suit even if they put it on top of her. Remember, she was a church lady, so I’ll get a nice uniform to be put on the casket. My friend has a funeral parlour. He wanted to give me a discount. I refused it. I have spoken to this priest guy. Jesus! You must listen when he preaches. He’s the best and he does not ask too much. It’s gonna be

the funeral of the century. And wena cousin of mine, you have to be there but (in a low tone again) we will have to discuss what you should wear.”

OK Mzala. But, what have you come to do here now?

“Right now I’m planning a tombstone. I have to see what is here. The thing is, anyone else who comes here must see, you know, that even in death we are... you know what I mean? Let me walk in, I’ll talk to you now. That is, if you want to get on the train.

Oh yeah! Mzala!

Hey! This cousin of mine.



A week later. My cell phone rings.

“Cousin, I’m calling you to say that we may have to delay the digging and the reburial of my mother. Something important has just happened.”

Has somebody died?

“No, something more important than that.”

What is it, then?

“Do you read newspapers? It’s out there. Everybody talks about this.”

I may have missed it. What is this grave thing?

“The city council had made an application to the provincial authority to be promoted to grade 6 status. An unreasonable, sorry, unpatriotic Provincial Authority has turned down our application.”

That looks like an administration matter.

“We are now grade 5, right? We earn like other grade 5s. If we could be grade 6 like Jo’burg and Durban, we will earn what we deserve, you know?”

I did read about this in the papers. And I read that you had already started to pay yourselves the grade 6 salaries.

“Yes, because money is in our hands, no sorry, freedom is in our hands.”

That is Mbongeni Ngema’s song.

“It is democracy, cousin. We have a mandate from the majority to bring better lives for all. So, there must be a starting point.”

And, the Provincial Authority is denying you a chance to be the starting point?

“Everybody in that office has to be removed, sorry, redeployed.

The Party must give them notices to show cause why they should not be redeployed to refuse collection. It is either they wear overalls, get on the truck and collect the refuse or they must resign.”

Why should they resign?

“We should be seen to be doing justice. It is out of order to dismiss people. You must make them dismiss themselves. That’s how democracy works.”

What will happen to those workers who collect refuse, currently?

“Well, many of them had worked for the apartheid government. So, a suitable reason will have to be found to delink them from the democratic system.”

Do you mean you will dismiss them?

“No, they will dismiss themselves. This is a democratic country.”

What has all this to do with you, Mzala?

“As a member of the mayoral committee I was going to hit 6 digits. Because we deserve the increase, we paid ourselves to test the waters. We wanted to see how do those figures look like on our pay slips. Remember we are the ‘who-is-who’ of the city, and the no.1 is on our side”.

So, the digging and the reburial of aunty will not take place?

“Let us say it is technically put for a later date to be determined by me. We have an urgent matter to handle at the moment.”

Looks like you are in control, Mzala.

“Always! You have to be flexible, cousin. You have to be able to pull the right strings at the right time. And if the strings are not right and the time is not right, open up a single malt you’ll see your way through. There’s a call coming. It’s the Mayor. I have to stand up. Sharp, cousin.”

Hey, this guy?

## A struggling ancestry

My great grandfather died struggling, screaming, calling out for the protective arms of his father while on a sinking boat in the deep seas of Europe. There was no one to close his eyes. He was a number, Anderson Soka... He had come forward when a new 'join', contract job in other words, was announced. How could he not respond when they promised to pay 3 pounds for every month, away in Europe? How could he, when men of reputation, sons and grandsons of blue blood were enlisting to fight in the defence of Her Majesty, Her Heirs and Her Successors. How could he, when poverty stared him in the eye and a son in his wife's womb kicked every time his name was called.

There was no doubt in the mind of my great grandfather when he enlisted. Granted, he feared the sea. He had no idea of where he was going. The Germans were said to be a brutal lot. He did fear for his life. Of course this war had nothing to do with Africa and her people but Chief Zibi used a persuasive language when recruiting volunteers. As he stood there listening to the Chief, conscience reminded him of his young pregnant wife. In his thoughts he was interrupted by a voice of the recruiter that called; "Hey, you tall one! Come forward." He was enlisted.

There was no looking back because men of education were there too. The son of Dyobha, the one who had a cloth around his neck, Rev Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, a man who came from Lovedale, a teacher, an interpreter of white magistrates, was there too. Men from the other side of the Kei River, men from the interior lands, Basotho and Batswana, were all there. He had no more doubts in his mind.

As he and the thousands of men were being sorted just like draughts since paper work had to be done in that military camp in Cape town, from henceforth to be known as the international labourers of the First World Great War, he lent his thumb to every paper they brought. He was a Native Labourer of the Imperial Government. For twelve months he would be paid 3 pounds per month and this would see the inside of his pocket only when he had returned. His right hand had been raised to vow to obey the orders of Her Majesty, Her Heirs and Her Successors, the Generals and Officers, whatever that means.

But, there was something else lying on his path, something huge that even his gods feared to hint at, that SS Mendi would sail out of Cape Town destined for France, but she would never reach her destination. In that tragedy my great grandfather, Anderson Soka No... died with his eyes opened. As he screamed and kicked being eaten by the sea ounce by ounce as his treasured breath drifted towards his home; his son, Eric Tose Soka, my grandfather, was arriving in the world mouth opened sucking in the breath of his father.

Fatherless and without the promised 3 pounds, Eric Soka, my grandfather, staggered and learnt to stand on his own. As he grew a voice, a voice of conscience, spoke to him. The voice led him to the company of poets at Lovedale College. And so, he wrote and recited his poems. He even lent his hand to the only native newspaper of the time, Imvo Zabantsundu. John Tengo Jabavu was the founder and the editor of Imvo and, curiously, the only native who supported and promoted the Native Land act of 1913.

In the words of Sol Plaatje, it was "a Friday morning of the 20th of June, 1913," that every native of the over four million at the time, became "a pariah in the land of his birth". A law that lifted black people off their land, setting out a condition that they would never occupy land as owners nor as tenants but as servants of white people. And this John Tengo Jabavu supported and even wrote articles in his paper that the natives of King William's Town supported the Act too. That educated liar, that coward of note, who ran away from meeting Sol Plaatjie when he was challenged about his stance.

Eric was not going to last on that newspaper founded by a person of such a standing. His body that was charged by a talking conscience moved him to more significant things in life, meeting and marrying my grandmother, seeing the birth of his only child, my mother, and passing the talking conscience through her to the next possible set of hands.

When death came he was wearing all white from the hat to the shoe, lying on a bed, not kicking not screaming, but at peace with the world.

Phakama Mbonambi

## A public snap

We were standing in line at the Rosebank post office. It was around 10am. We were about twelve customers in total. All of us waited our turn to do whatever business had brought us there before scurrying back to the routine of our daily lives.

For some reason that day there were not enough tellers. It seemed each client took an eternity to be attended to. That is why the queue was so long. Some of the customers stood still, patiently, but constantly casting glances at the tellers' counter. Some were fidgety, constantly shifting body weight from one leg to another like a wobbly table. The small talk others resorted to came in fits and starts, unconvincing, a result of convenience rather than genuine interest in talking.

I was there to pick up a parcel. I was armed with a slip that had landed in my mailbox. In the queue I spoke to no one. I was too preoccupied with the parcel: who had sent it? What was inside? To while away time, I looked around the place. Posters on the wall advertised various mailing methods. There was a Speed Services special – R48 for one kilogram of mail, a 20 percent saving. I never posted in bulk. I wondered if it was worth it. But I suppose it was. When I was tired of looking around, noting a new motor licensing machine in one corner, my eyes darted to the shoes of other customers. When you are facing down it's easy to turn, ever so surreptitiously, to steal a glance at the shoes of the person behind you. Shoes speak volumes. You can tell their owners' sense of style, where they have been, and whether they cared for them or not.

When I was second from the front, a middle-aged white man was at the counter being served. Stout, blond, clean-shaven. He wore fashionable khaki chinos, a blue shirt and black shoes. The office manager, who was clearly filling in for a regular teller, was serving him. The manager was a coloured man, late thirties, with an open, friendly face; he always greeted every client warmly.

My mind must have drifted off for a while for the next instant, seemingly out of the blue, I heard the white man at the front yelling at the manager; I had missed the build-up to the explosion.

"But I paid for my post box," the man shouted. "So why is it locked?"

“But our records show that you haven’t renewed your box, Sir,” the manager said calmly, looking straight at him.

“That’s bullshit,” the white man roared, pointing a finger at the manager and looking redder. “I paid for my box last October. It’s only February. What’s your policy of closing boxes? Why shut it in only four months? And why was I not told?”

“As I say, our records show that you have not paid us, Sir.”

By now the manager had long dispensed with the cherished notion that the customer is always right as irritation had now entered his voice. They glared at each other with hatred, nostrils flaring. Seconds ticked by with neither man speaking.

“OK, show me your register and I will prove that I have paid,” the enraged man said eventually.

“I cannot do that,” the manager said.

“Why not?”

“Because we are not allowed to give customers our books.”

“I said sh- .”

The man lunged for the manager’s throat. With a quick reflex, the manager stepped back and got out of the way of a grasp that would surely have crushed his throat.

A gasp of horror went up in the room.

“Wenzani lo?” one customer in blue overalls asked from the back.

Determined to solve the matter the cowboy fashion, the angry man tried to climb over the counter. His shoe slipped but gripped the counter in time to balance himself.

Another gasp.

Some sniggers.

The other two tellers, female, looked on in helpless disbelief.

For a while the man paced the floor like a raging bull. He cursed the inefficiency of the postal system and threatened to take his business to PostNet. I wondered how he was going to resolve this postal box issue now.

My turn to be served came. I handed the teller my slip, got my parcel and left.

## Shattered dreams

I’m at the cemetery. It’s my mother’s funeral. The air is thick with grief, lots of crying, depressing atmosphere. Sunny weather. The Durban humidity makes things worse. My mom’s simple coffin is suspended over the gaping ground by some contraption from the undertakers. Flowers lie on top of it. Because everyone is standing still, listening, praying, my eye suddenly catches the subtle movements of two men among the crowd of mourners. Even in plain clothes I immediately know they are detectives; something about their bearing gives them away – rigid and no-nonsense.

From time to time, as the preacher drones on about the need to prepare one’s path for the hereafter, I steal glances at the policemen. They randomly pull one mourner aside, a man from my neighbourhood. One produces a photo. Even though I cannot see who is in the picture I can tell that the man is being asked to identify someone in the crowd, just like policemen do in movies. Without hesitation, the man points at me in the little green tent funeral companies provide to grieving families, setting them apart from other mourners. My heart skips a beat. My time is up. I have to face the consequences of my actions two weeks ago.

Three years ago my mom, my younger brother and me escaped home in Chesterville after my dad had made our lives a misery. Whenever he was drunk, mostly on weekends, he beat up my mom and chased all of us out of the house at night. Not long before then he had been a loving and protective father. But it turned out all along he had been a closet drinker. He worked as a machine minder at a big printing firm in town and earned a reasonable salary. One day, after drinking at lunchtime, he had an accident at work, breaking his machine and spoiling the printing of a glossy magazine. He was fired on the spot. He struggled to find employment again. Sitting at home with nothing much to do, his moods grew dark and he drank even more and got violent. Mom, who worked as a cashier at a pharmacy in Clairwood, became the breadwinner. When the beatings got too much to handle, my mother left for Johannesburg with me and younger brother in tow.

Mom had a few relatives in Soweto. But they could not take us in permanently, allowing us to stay for only a few weeks. Their



homes were already crammed. After two months of squatting in Soweto, mom found us a flat in Hillbrow in a crumbling building overlooking Joubert Park. It was all she could afford with her pay as a packer at nearby Shoprite. Since it was the beginning of the year, my brother and I managed to find schools in Yeoville. I was in Grade 11, dreaming of becoming a teacher someday. My brother was in Grade 6 and had no idea what he wanted to become after finishing school. For a short while, we were a happy family again. We even made friends in this neighbourhood of high-rise buildings. Mom always cautioned my brother and me about crime. Not a week went by without someone being found dead, either stabbed or shot. Burglaries and muggings were common.

A year later a tall man began appearing at our flat. His name was Alfonso. Mom introduced him as a friend. From his frequent visits and the gifts he bore my mother, it soon became clear to me and my brother that there was more to their friendship. Alfonso was from Mozambique. He was a cab driver around Hillbrow and Yeoville. He treated my mom really well, made her smile and even helped her financially.

“What a good man. I wish your father had been so caring instead of being a drunkard,” mom would say when I plaited her hair on our balcony over weekends.

Then mom suddenly fell sick. Doctors diagnosed a kidney problem. She was in and out of hospital. Initially Alfonso was there all the time, a picture of concern. But gradually his visits to our flat, even when my mom was there, dwindled. Eventually he stopped coming altogether.

When my mom lost her job at Shoprite she struggled to put food on the table at home. I was forced to drop out of school. I found work as a cleaner at nearby Hillbrow Clinic. One day a friend told me of a club in Bryanston that needed waitresses. She said the pay was good and she knew one of the managers there. “You are beautiful, tall and petite. You will make a lot of money from tips alone,” my friend said.

It turned out that the restaurant was actually a strip club servicing an upmarket clientele. When my friend and I went there in search of work, my friend’s contact regaled us with tales of dance girls who had made tons of riches just from striptease performances. He said the job did not involve prostitution. “Of course, if you want to make some extra money you can go the extra mile. But if you do so you

must share half your earnings with management,” he said, winking at us conspiratorially.

Dancing at the club was not easy. You made money according to whether clients liked your performance or not. If customers liked your routine, money, in various denominations of notes, rained on the dance floor like confetti at a wedding. With my coffee-coloured lithe body that moved with ease on the dance floor, I was a hit. Right from the start it was clear that extra favours would be required to make the job financially worthwhile. Drugs helped me cope with sleeping with strange men for money in the dingy rooms at the back of the club. Some clients were abusive. Still, my needs far outstripped my earnings.

Six months later, while I was about to go on stage, I got a call from the hospital. My dear mom had died. The world spun around me. I had to sit down. I instantly thought how much she had suffered in life. How she gave her life to a man who eventually chased her away from her own home. And how she met another one, in another city, who momentarily raised her hopes of happiness again only to ditch her when she fell ill and needed him the most. I thought about her life of shattered dreams.

As her only daughter, the burden of burying my dear mom fell on my shoulders. She had always expressed a wish to be buried back home in Durban, her hometown. For that trip alone I needed R4 500 for the hearse. An extra R18 000 was required for the entire funeral, including buying a coffin, hiring a tent, buying food for mourners.

I reached out to Alfonso. He was not interested. “Your mother is dead. I have nothing to do with you,” he said straight to my face before getting into his cab and driving off. It was a rainy day. Hillbrow had never looked so grim.

My relatives in Soweto were of no help either. Fearing my mom would be buried in Johannesburg as a pauper, I decided to move fast. That is how I came up with the idea of robbing my club. I knew where the safe was and how much on average the club made on a given day. I roped in two of my Hillbrow neighbours, former inmates.

That is why the plainclothes cops are here today. Like vultures, they are patiently waiting for the funeral to end before dealing with me. I’m toast.

## Hunting for books

It's Saturday morning. I'm standing outside a second-hand bookstore called Collectors Treasure in downtown Johannesburg, on Commissioner Street. The bookstore, one of oldest in the city, is a stone's throw from Arts on Main, the new chic district that has arisen in this once forgotten industrial part of the inner city.

I press the little white buzzer on the right hand side of the door. Almost immediately the gate opens with a long hissing sound. I climb a short flight of stairs to the first floor. As I go up I see an elderly black man at the landing, patiently waiting for me. He must have been the one who pressed open the gate for me.

I ask him if it's safe to leave my car parked in the street in front of the store. "I think it is. Nothing has happened here in a long while," he says. Seeing that I'm not completely reassured, he adds: "But we have a parking lot round the back of the building. You can also park there if you want." He offers to go with me. We both get into my car and drive around the block into Main Street, where we park in the empty parking lot. Through a small green gate, for which he has the keys, we walk the short distance back to the bookstore entrance. Cars on Commissioner Street swoosh past. Pedestrians amble towards Carlton Centre deeper in the city.

I'm the first customer in the store. The store manager, whose office is by the entrance, greets me warmly. White-haired, potbellied, thick glasses and black suspenders over a short-sleeved white shirt, he has the air of someone who has been in the book trade for a long time, someone who can easily find you any book you want. The air is heavy with a musty smell of old books. I instantly get a sense that this is a special bookstore. Books, in staggering quantities, lie about in a seemingly chaotic manner. There are books in the passage, books stacked high up against the wall, desk-high piles of books on the floor of the manager's office, books along the staircase leading to the basement.

I'm not here for aimless browsing. I'm on a serious mission. I have to find books for the creative writing course I'm enrolled for at Rhodes. As students, we have to find at least one book for various categories on the course reading list: books on reading, on writing, poetry, non-fiction, crime fiction, science fiction, fiction in Africa,

experimental fiction, modern classics, memoir and autobiography. Our course teachers greatly encourage us to sample other genres of writing we may not be exposed to or necessarily like. They want us to stretch ourselves, to expand our horizons, to have fun. They want us to be complete writers.

With second-hand bookstores, luck is the currency: stock is determined by what has been sold to them and when you happen to visit them. Which is why most times you feel like you have won the lottery if you stumble on what you want, a question of being at the right place at the right time. To increase my chances of luck, I have added more titles to the list.

The manager looks at my list intently and, after a minute of silence, smiles knowingly. "Aha, I think I may have three of these. Let me see," he says, walking deeper into the store. I follow him. Suddenly he stops, looking at one of the walls with books. He looks with concentration at the bookshelf with modern non-fiction titles. Within seconds, without any effort at all, he finds Dispatches by Michael Herr. With some further digging, he also comes across a tattered copy of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. Feeling guilty for taking him away from his work, I offer to look for the rest of the books myself. "Alright then. African fiction is downstairs. For anything else you will have to browse by alphabetically... I'm in my office if you need any help." I'm relieved to hear that there's some categorisation in this chaotic jumble. He leaves.

Left alone, I soon get lost in browsing. I'm impressed that there's a box-set with all of F. Scott Fitzgerald's titles – from *This Side of Paradise* to *The Love of the Last Tycoon*. Of late, I've been devouring Fitzgerald, marvelling at how he captured the moods and style of the Jazz Age in the roaring 1920s. As I browse – picking up a book at a whim, reading snippets, chuckling to myself on reading gems of paragraphs – more customers come into the store. Except for one married couple who don't stay too long in the store, each customer is on their own. All briefly chat with the manager – a sign of familiarity – before losing themselves in browsing. Except for an occasional polite "excuse me" when a fellow customer wishes to go past you, all this browsing happens in silence. We are all here physically, but each in a world apart, in silence, sating our hunger for books.

Two hours later, after much poking around, I have found two more books – *Don't Let's Go To The Dogs Tonight* by Alexandra Fuller

## Sabata Mokaë

and Fragments by Armah. That makes four books in total. Not bad for one place, I think, as I'm paying. Before leaving the store, I am given soap and water to wash my hands – a custom here – because of the dust on the books.

It's been a worthwhile search. Just as I'm thinking of trying Thorold's African Bookstore on Harrison Street, I suddenly remember, like a bolt of lightning, something I had totally forgotten about – I have a Kindle! I have a Kindle, and I have not used it, even once. A friend bought it for me in the UK early last year. I have been putting off using it because I want to order a protective cover first, one of those attractive covers with a small torch at the edge for reading in the dark. Somehow, due to work pressure, lack of money, and simple forgetfulness, I've been putting off placing the order.

Maybe I'm too addicted to physical books. Or maybe, deep down, I'm a Luddite. The thought frightens and saddens me. Here I am sitting on a powerful tool and I have completely forgotten about it. I figure that Kindle will come in handy when I search for the books on reading and writing, most of them by contemporary Americans.

I'll go to Thorold's to resume my search next weekend. Then there's the Kindle. I need not worry. I'll find all the books I want. One way or the other.

## Closing the chapter

Like all the other winter days, it was still dark at six o'clock. That the street lights were not working didn't help much either. A water pipe in Hulana Street had burst and in the distance, puddles shone like mirages.

Walking as if he was tending to the goats in that icy cold morning was Tebogo Vuilgoed.

A man in his late fifties, with a beer *boep* leading his way and a Zionist hymn to keep him company, Vuilgoed was in search of something he had been missing for all of his life.

He had forgotten that Sunday would be Father's Day until he heard a radio presenter, who was wrapping up his show on Saturday evening, telling listeners that he would talk to them tomorrow "*ka letsatsi la borre*" – Father's Day.

For all the years of his life, Vuilgoed had been told many stories about his absent father. When he was very young his grandmother used to tell him that his father had been crushed by a goods train. When he got older, other kids at school used to ask him if he was related to so and so.

Sadly his mother was always away, working as a domestic in Lenasia and would only come home during Easter and Christmas holidays. He never had the chance or the guts to confront her about his father's identity.

Then one day his grandmother was very sick and had to be admitted to hospital. On the third day she asked those who visited her to ask her grandson to come and see her because she wanted to tell him the truth about his father.

Not knowing how the young man would deal with the bombshell and also afraid that Ouma Sanah might die after talking to him, they lied saying that he had gone to Johannesburg on a school trip. She died a day later.

Vuilgoed lived like a happy child; he did well at school and his uncles paid for him to go for teaching training. He turned out to be a brilliant mathematics teacher. But according to the grapevine, the reason he had no child at his age was because he had never seen his father and it haunted him. Those who knew him said that once a woman told him that she wanted to have his child, he would

disappear like the sun on a rainy afternoon. But he continued to probe until he found out that a certain respected priest was his father, and that there were few other children in Galeshewe Township who had been fathered by the same man. Families often kept quiet. The priest was never summoned to the commissioner's office for *pap geld*.

Vuilgoed responded to the discovery with long solitude.

Then he heard that the elderly priest had passed on. He never went to the funeral. But he watched the procession to the West End Cemetery.

"Black people are so obsessed with the suburbs. If they can't live there, they would rather bury their loved ones there because graves are cheaper than houses," Vuilgoed overheard a woman remark at the *spaza shop*, while looking at the procession.

He almost said in response: "The person you are talking about is my father". He restrained himself.

"*Batho ba tla reng*," he thought. What shall people say?

Now on a Sunday morning and remembering that it was Fathers' Day, Vuilgoed trudged in his drunkenness to the West End Cemetery to say a few words to a father he never knew as a father.



"*Jislaaik, man!* You look like a tramp. What's wrong with you," Jack Mogale asked his childhood friend, who just walked through the gate later that morning.

"There is nothing wrong with me, *my maat*. Nothing," Vuilgoed responded.

"You say nothing but it looks like the last time you took a bath was when Mandela was still in jail. *Where are you coming from?*"

"West End."

"You now live in the suburbs?"

"Jack, ask one of your treasured daughters to bring you a matchstick. It seems your ears need some cleaning." Mogale was getting irritated.

"*Wat sê jy?*" It was clear that Vuilgoed was not very sober.

"I am telling you that I come from West End. You ask me if I live in the suburbs. *Tussen ek en jy, wie is mal and wie is dom?* West End is a suburb. But the only West End that township dwellers like you and I have anything to do with is a cemetery, *my broer*."

Mogale realised that arguing with a drunken man when you are sober, could be a fruitless effort.

Vuilgoed carried on.

"I walk through your gate and all you can say is that *ek lyk soos 'n hobo*. Where are your manners, Jack? Can't you ask another man, even if he looks like a hobo, 'How are you?'"

Mogale called Mosidi, his eldest daughter, and asked her to bring a chair for Vuilgoed.

"Okay, *my maat*. I am sorry. But you don't look like yourself. You are usually neat and I am not used to you smelling of alcohol on a Sunday morning. Now you're telling me that you are from the West End Cemetery. All these sounds like a puzzle to me," Mogale said in a calm way.

Vuilgoed began to cry.

"Jack, do you know that you are all I have in this world, *my maat*. I have no child. No dog. No cat. My mother died when I was young. I never knew who my father was, until recently. This morning I went to his grave to say a few words to him."

In a friendship that spanned over half a century, Mogale has never heard Vuilgoed say anything about his father. Of course, like any other child, he must have had a father too. But many things are often left unsaid.

"You know, I spent most of my adulthood searching for my father. It was only recently when I found out who this bastard was. And at that time he was just about to kick the bucket."

"Tebza, I'm sorry to hear this."

"Jack, I'm hurt because I saw the bastard all the time and he knew that he was my father yet he said *fokol!* He stood on the pulpit every Sunday saying to the congregation to prepare for the second coming, yet he had dark secrets in his heart!"

"Tebza, *eintlik*, who are you talking about? Who is this father of yours?"

"Ramolehe."

"The late priest?"

"Ja."

Mogale kept quiet, bit his lower lip and moved over to his messed up friend.

"What did you say when you got to his grave?"

"*Niks*."

"*Niks?* So, why would you take all the trouble of walking such a long distance in winter only to get there and stare at a grave?"

“When I went there, I wanted to say something. But when I got there, I was so angry, all I wanted to do was to dig up that grave to make sure the *moegoe* is really dead and buried.”



News can fly. The sun had not even kissed the horizon once since Vuilgoed’s ill-fated pilgrimage to the West End Cemetery and the parasites at Parks’ Tavern were already riding on his name to their state of inebriation.

“*A o di utlwile tsa ga Tebza*,” most of their conversations began.

Little did they know that one man among them, Kanakotsame, thought of Vuilgoed’s loneliness and pain while others found amusement. Kanakotsame announced that he would be going home early that Sunday afternoon. Kanakotsame paid his bill and left anyway.

From a distance, Vuilgoed could see that the man who was fast approaching was Kanakotsame.

“I am not in the mood for some lousy small talk,” he said to himself.

“*Eitha*, Bra Tebza. *Hoelykit*,” Kanakotsame greeted.

“*Dis tjandies maar dis alright, my laatie*. And how are you?”

“I’m fine, Bra Tebza.” Vuilgoed went inside the house, brought two chairs for them to sit on.

“Bra Tebza, people talk.”

“Jong, mense gaan altyd praat. If you go to the toilet too often they say you have eaten expired tinned fish. If you don’t go to the toilet, they say you have got syphilis. You can do nothing about it. Let them talk,” Vuilgoed said, drinking straight from the quart. He offered Kanakotsame.

“I’m fine, Bra Tebza. I just had whiskey at Parks’ Tavern. I don’t want to cause riot in my system by mixing stuff like a parasite by drinking anything that comes my way.” Vuilgoed laughed for the first time that day.

“*Yo o sa go itseng, ga a itse motho*,” Vuilgoed said. Whoever doesn’t know is cursed!

Kanakotsame laughed out loud, reached for the inside pocket of his jacket and took out a nip.

“This is the traveller’s companion. Now you can finish your *Zamalek* and join me as I down this worthy water.” Vuilgoed, true to his style, downed the contents of the quart in one gulp. The two

men, one in his late fifties and another one almost young enough to be his son, continued drinking from the bottle cap.

“Bra Tebza, I came to see you because as people spoke at Parks’ I got worried about you. I had a sense that you are alone and might need some cheering up.” A tear, not the first one that day, dropped on Vuilgoed’s lap.

“*Dis waar, my laatie*. I was with Jack Mogale this morning. But I left him to caress his beloved Valiant. This is not a good day at all.”

“Bra Tebza, as much as you might have not been happy with your father, you realised that he had a dignified send off. Do you know how that happened,” he asked, extending his hand to offer Vuilgoed another cap full of whisky. He carried on.

“*Jou toppie* had an insurance policy. That is how he ended up getting such a dignified funeral service. Now even you, as much as you are angry, will be among the beneficiaries from that policy.” Vuilgoed stood up and looked suddenly like his lips never tasted liquor that day.

“You don’t say.”

“I hear what I am saying, Bra Tebza. *Jou toppie* had insurance policies in which only his illegitimate children were made beneficiaries. I have seen the file at work.”

“*Jong*, I don’t know if I am going to take that old man’s money. I am still angry at him for all the years of neglect.”

Kanakotsame advised Vuilgoed to take the money that his late father left for him and a throng of other illegitimate children in Galeshewe. Vuilgoed was still not sure that he would take the money that was left for him by a father who never publicly acknowledged him and others.

“*Jong*, I’m not sure. I am yet to meet my siblings. Can you imagine how it feels to meet your brother or your sister for the first time at some insurance company offices, especially at such an old age? This is bad, *my laatie*. Bad, I’m telling you.” He dashed to the kitchen and returned with some ice cubes to add to the whiskey.

“Those who shun *Zamalek* for these expensive whiskies say it is better on the rocks. Am I right,” he asked Kanakotsame.

“*Ja*, no. It is better on the rocks, Bra Tebza. But let’s not shy away from the issue of the table. *Wat gaan jy nou doen?* Yes it is true that the old man never got to acknowledge you. But would you tell the whole world that you had a restless libido in your youth, resulting

in a football squad of people who look like you all over Galeshewe Township? Think again, Bra Tebza. The old man was a priest, for goodness' sake."

"Yes, he was a priest. He was supposed to lead by example by acknowledging that we all have a past we are not proud of. That would have made him a better man."

Kanakotsame realised that Vuilgoed was not a *moegoe*. The man could reason his way in or out of any situation.

"Bra Tebza, let's say *jou toppie* realised that his career could be threatened by coming out about his many illegitimate kids. After realising that he thought that to cleanse himself, he must leave money behind for his kids."

"Buy us with money?"

"I don't see it as buying you with money. Of course he knew that you are a teacher. *Jy het jou eie zak*. Maybe he left it as a token. *Ja*, a token. That's all I can think of."

"Yes, I understand. Maybe I must just close this chapter. But I really don't need this money. I don't have kids. I don't have a dog. I am just me. *Ke feletse ke le so*."

Kanakotsame advised him to have an ancestral ceremony – *go tlhabela badimo*. "In that way you will be asking for forgiveness for your old man. You will also be pleading with them to forgive him. Think about it." In Vuilgoed's mind, Kanakotsame wanted the ceremony just because there would be a plenty to drink.

"If I do this ceremony, will you accompany me to buy the necessary items?"

"*Jy praat my taal nou, Bra Tebza!* We begin with five bottles of whisky, beer, meat and the rest will follow." The two men had to find elders to guide them.

"We must also find my siblings. They must be here too. This is also their ceremony."

That Sunday had a happy ending. Vuilgoed would be able to close the chapter and maybe even move on with his life.

"Bra Tebza. What you can do now to thank me is to take an insurance policy, just in case you die."

"Don't try and make business out of my misery."

"Bra Tebza, *jou toppie* took out an insurance policy and you're going to benefit from his decision. Now you might as well do the same. It's not about me making sales. It's about you and the relatives

you leave behind in case you die." Kanakotsame went home with a broad smile.

The day was not bad at all. He managed to play a hero by advising Vuilgoed how to find joy in a painful situation, and made him take out an insurance policy.



"Christmas has come early, *my laaitie*," Kanakotsame said to his nephew, Tema, who was busy fiddling with a hi-fi.

"Go on, *malome*. I'm all ears."

"Today we're going to dance *tot laat Piet kom. Tebza o tlhabela badimo*."

"Ao, *malome*. If Oom Tebogo is having an ancestral ceremony, how can you say that you are going to dance? It is not a party," Tema said.

Kanakotsame kept quiet a bit, looked out through the window.

"Tema, *kom hier*," he called.

"What do you see on the street?"

"I see people, *malome*."

"Don't act dumb. There are people on the street. But who stands out about these people?" Tema looked carefully. He threw his eyes on a young boy – he must have been seven or so – with an old woman. He pointed at them.

"That's it, *my laaitie*. You see a young boy holding his granny by the hand. They are probably going to the pension pay point."

Tema could still not figure out what that had to do with his uncle treating a sacred *mpho ya badimo* as a party.

"You look confused, sonny. Let your intelligent uncle put the puzzle together. You accuse me of turning Tebza's ceremony into a party. I ask you to look out through the window and you see a little boy holding his granny by the hand. Do you see a similarity in these two instances?"

"*Haikhona, malome*. I can't see the link."

"*My laaitie*, I'm trying to show you that there are very few relationships that are not dependent on benefit."

"Is this benefit mutual or one-way?"

"Either way, *my laaitie*. That little boy would not be holding his granny's hand on the street, in full view of his friends, if she was not going to get her pension."

"*En jy, malome?*"

“What about me?”

“I mean you and Oom Tebogo. Where is the benefit?”

“*Spinzer, my laaitie*. Ou Tebza bought some real whisky. The real *mpho ya badimo* will be over before eight o’ clock. After that we’ll be drinking.”

Tema could not believe that his uncle, who was no longer unemployed, was still sponging on others.

“*Malome*, I thought you can pay for your own whisky now that you are working.”

“Sonny, don’t be a *moegoe*. I’m an insurance salesman. Where do I get clients? I get them at Parks’ Tavern, funerals, in taxis. So, I’ll get some clients at Tebza’s ceremony too!”

“But there will be none of those this morning at Oom Tebogo’s house. It is a mere *mpho ya badimo*.” Tema had no idea that his uncle was the one who broke the news that Vuilgoed’s late father left some money through an insurance policy for his children born out of wedlock, or that Kanakotsame had asked Vuilgoed to take a policy, just like his late father, just in case he dies.

“*My laaitie*, Ou Tebza’s brothers and sisters he never knew will be there too. I think it is a good thing that their father left money for them. I am going to use the opportunity to get them to take insurance policies too.”

“Just in case they die, *malome?*”

“Just in case they kick the bucket, *my laaitie*.”

“*Malome*, I have one suggestion though.”

“And that is?”

“That you wait for them to down a few before you start the insurance story.”

“*Jislaaik*, sonny. I knew all along that you’re not a dumbo. This is the best advice ever. Maybe now I must walk around with a nip, share a tot before I ask people to take insurance policies.”



Jack Mogale’s metallic green Valiant pulled into Tebogo Vuilgoed’s yard just after *mpho ya badimo*, the ancestral ceremony, had been performed.

“*Askies, my broer*. I’m late,” said Mogale to his childhood friend as he got out of the car.

Oh, the Valiant. Men looked at it with envy. It was a shiny piece of

metal, a machine that hissed when it zigzagged through Galeshewe’s streets. When you opened it a pleasant smell greeted you. It was always spick and span. Mogale knew how to take care of his car. Valaza, they called it.

“How come you are late?” asked Vuilgoed.

“That *moegoe* neighbour was beating up his wife again last night. I was woken up at midnight to go and stop him from killing her.”

“You managed?”

“No. I had to pull a Big John Tate before the cops came to his rescue. They were just about to arrest me when his poor wife explained.” Mogale was spared a night in the filthy police cells.

“I only managed to fall asleep after four o’clock this morning. I could have been here early, man. You know I won’t let you down.”

Like old friends, they hugged and all was forgiven and forgotten. The ancestral matters had already been taken care of. *Umqomboti* had already been spilled, snuff sprinkled and Vuilgoed had his chance to make peace with his father. Life had to go on. It was now time to move some leg to good music.

The most trusted collector of music, Kanakotsame, was approaching Vuilgoed’s house when Mogale went to his Valaza, switched on the cassette player and let the music play. The voice of Sis’ Joyce Mogatusi came out like that of an angel in the morning. Sis’ Joyce led the flames of the time, Dark City Sisters, in a song “Mokupi” (The Beggar).

“*They shut the doors when they see me coming/ saying there comes the beggar/ calling me names*,” the song went on. It was as if slaves had been freed that day. Men, old and not so old, danced up a storm and got their Florsheim shoes dirty. Nothing made Mogale happier than seeing people dance to the music he played.

“The whole Galeshewe knows I’m the king of music collection, *my broer*,” he said to Vuilgoed with a chuckle. It seemed as if Vuilgoed had forgotten that some two hours ago he was shedding a tear at the grave of his father. The man was gay; happy as a child in a candy shop. It was only when the song ended and the dust settled that people realised that Kanakotsame had been standing and watching them from Vuilgoed’s gate.

“*Hey broer*, what’s the matter with you? Everybody is happy and you stand there like a lost child. Join us. Let’s break a leg,” Vuilgoed called him in.



“I’m no longer in the mood.”

“*Hoekom nou?*”

“Yesterday you asked me to bring LPs. I come here with a heavy beer crate full of LPs. Nobody offers to help me. The next thing you play this song to mock me.”

“Ag man, this is just a song. Plus we got caught up in the ceremony. You know *mpho ya badimo* is a serious matter. *Askies, my laaitie*,” Vuilgoed said.

“Bra Tebza, the fact that I asked you to buy liquor doesn’t mean I can’t afford to buy it myself. I’m not a beggar.” Mogale quietly went to his *Valaza* and turned off the music.

“*Askies, ma se kind*. Let’s play your LPs now,” Mogale said.

The Blaupunkt hi-fi was brought outside. The music played on.

Chloe Molino

## Wickerwork

The rain pattered on the thatch as Michael entered the small woven hut. He shook the water from his hat and placed it on the stand before doing the same with his coat and cane and the bottle. “Evening, love.” Looking up for the first time, his tired eyes scanned the room but found no one. “Abby, are you there?” Not seeing who he was looking for and getting no answer, he began to search the few rooms that were contained within the hut. Becoming increasingly agitated he began to call “Abby!” until he noticed a note pinned to the board over his writing desk. He pulled it down and began to read.

*Michael,  
I'm so sorry but I can't do this anymore. I do love you  
but I'm in love with Soggvare.  
I hope you will one day understand why my darling.  
Love always,  
Abigail*

Michael sat heavily into the wickerwork chair, crumpling the piece of paper in his fist. So that was it, she was gone. He looked around the room with cloudy eyes, not knowing where to turn next. He could hear the crash of the surf against the stilts of the house but the gentle swaying did little to break his shock. He just sat there until he couldn't sit anymore. He tightened his fist and stood up violently. Marching across the board floor to the window, he threw the note out into the ocean, the tears beginning to creep down his face as he thought back over the recent past.

Though she was hesitant to leave England, he had brought Abby to the Solomon Islands where he was to do research for the Royal Anthropological Society. They had arrived by boat three months after their wedding and quickly set up their modest home. Though she rarely left the house for the heat, Abby eventually began to talk to the only person who was often in the house, his guide Soggvare. For the most part he had thought nothing of it, she would send him on errands and he would complete them with all due haste as was expected.

It was recently that he had become suspicious that there may

be something afoot. He had come home after a day in the field to find Abby counting cowry shells, the kind Soggvare's people used for primitive currency. When he asked her where she had acquired them, she had told him that they were 'a gift for the lady'. He had confiscated them then and there as this was interfering with the local culture and although this brought tears to his new wife's eyes, she was in the wrong as far as he was concerned.

As his fist hit the tabletop, he was startled by the sound. He had unconsciously slammed it down to reinforce his own belief. The shock to the surface upset a vase of glass beads that Abby had insisted accompany them, sending them in every direction across the floor. As they rolled through the slats and into the surf below the house his anger flared at his carelessness and he stood once more, upsetting the table. He felt slightly better after this motion and began upsetting everything in the room until there was nothing left but ruin. Slightly more satisfied; he turned towards the door and grabbed his coat and bottle of rum, uncorking it as he stepped into the night.

## Blink

*Metallic taste in my mouth. Sharp pain in my jaw as it connects with concrete. I feel the skin tear on my palms. I just bailed, hard. Jake's board is reeled back in as I stand up and he's giving me that irritating half-smile. Such an ass. I wipe my hands down the sides of my stonewash jeans, feeling the burning sting. I remember, Shelly is watching. Oh God I need to win this. I see his smug face and spit as I climb on my board. I wheel away and wait for him to take his turn on the pipe. He kicks off and rolls down the half pipe. It's too soon, he's gonna bail. I wait without breathing, I'm gonna win. Only, he doesn't bail. He corrects his balance at the last nanosecond and soars off into the sky. He does a flip and then rolls past to do another and then another. The group is whooping and cheering. I've lost, she's his date.*

The organ has started playing Bach's All Men are Mortal and it breaks my reverie. That was almost fifty years ago now. The people gathered in the foyer move to their benches and pews. The silver-haired Shelly is walked past by her son, the spitting image of his father. "She is still so lovely," I think to myself as I join in the slow crowd and find my space. My Suzanne is next to me and she takes my hand as the sermon begins.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we are gathered here today..."

*"...to welcome you to your first college year. We hope you enjoy!" Applause rips through the auditorium as we are released for our first college weekend. Everyone begins to file out and that's when I see him: Jake. I knew we had applied for Harvard but I didn't know he'd gotten in. I wonder who his dad paid for the privilege 'cause he definitely didn't earn it. As it turns out, we take three out of four of the same classes for our entire college careers. I'm by now convinced he is following me for the laugh but that is not what eats at me. He is still with Shelly and she doesn't really remember me. I'm sitting at a night spot with Suzanne my girlfriend, watching Shelly and a few friends order food across the road. Jake drives up in the pile of junk he's so proud of and parks. Shelly sees him and her face lights up. She laughs as she runs and jumps...*

"... into the loving arms of God." The sermon ends and everyone is filing out. Shelly is crying softly and everyone is trying to console her. I follow behind my Suzanne as everyone walks the distance to the grave. It is an overcast day and the smell of freshly cut grass floats

in the air. The headstones while all different line up perfectly and lead the way. I'm being led by Suzanne as I'm watching Shelly and Michael as they lead the group, Jake's casket bringing up the rear. He is being carried by some of the boys from the firm.

We were both selected for a prestigious New York advertising firm and began work about three weeks after graduation. We were placed on the same task teams sometimes and if we were, we worked against each other like a pair of rams. We argued over everything the other said, finding all the holes, discrepancies or flaws. We involved no one else in our arguments and they began to put us together so often, we were moved into the same office. The ads that left that office were perfect, not one flaw in all the reams we created.

At the side I watch four boys, not much older than we were when we met, lowering the tapes carefully. He is lowered gently into the soft ground and the sermon continues. I don't hear the priest but look across the graveyard and see who is taking the chapel after us. A woman and man get out of a small car and meet a woman with a clipboard. She seems to be explaining something to them. The happiness radiating from the young woman can only mean one thing.

I'm standing in the groom's room and he is there, outside the window. He is chatting to a few of the groomsmen and telling them a story that makes them all laugh. He is relating the fact that we both fought for this chapel on this day. We both wanted it for the pure reason that our engagements were within a week and the other one wanted the chapel. Our fiancées knew us both and somehow made the two of us compromise. We were going to get married as two pairs. The sermon was held and we kissed our brides. Shelly and Suzanne were bouncing while holding hands, Suzanne in the white version of Shelly's cream dress. Jake looked at me with that half smile of his and I knew then that something had changed.

The ground has been filled in and it has begun to rain. Suzanne, Shelly, Michael and I are the last ones left. Michael is helping Shelly to the car but I stand still and Suzanne does not pull me away. My head is still reeling from my reaction in the office. Jake had been off more and more often and I was beginning to lose my focus. A haze filtered my vision as I remembered that I had had someone to argue with for so long that now having no one was affecting everything. I didn't know what was going on and neither did anyone else until

a rare staff meeting was called. It was announced that Jake was not coming back, he had leukaemia. I dropped the mug I was holding. I don't remember the rest of that day. That was three weeks ago.

It begins to rain in earnest and my Suzanne helps me to the car. One of the boys from the firm is driving and as we leave, she lets go of my hand for the first time that day. And that's when it hits me, the tears wetting my cheeks. I have just buried my best friend.

## Two sections from a novella

The first glimmers of dawn were creeping on the horizon as Cards stirred. It was still very early and he could still smell the bad wine and cheap tobacco on his coat and hair. He slowly uncurled his spine, his long dark-furred tail unwrapping itself from around him. He flinched slightly as the cold air rushed over his warm belly before stretching. He extended his delicate but filthy front paws and shook his head to get rid of the cloudy sleep. One of his large ears touched the stone roof of his hole and gained a few more grains of loose dust. He instinctively laid them flat as he stared up the dirt, unimpressed. While he had to admit this was the best nest spot yet, though it had a few drawbacks, one of them being that it was literally a hole in a wall. But it was a warm hole, and while the thought of leaving made him unhappy, the consequences of missing the meeting were far worse. He tried to listen for anyone on the other side of the canvas he had hung in front of the hole. Hearing nothing he slowly slid out of his lovely warm nest and out into the cold London air.

As he moved to pull himself out, a sensation passed over him, like that of taking a breath – and he felt that familiar change. The tail was the first thing to rapidly vanish back over the top of his trousers and he felt a little sad as his thick coat vanished, leaving only the dirty blonde hair on the top of his head in its now chilly wake. His delicate paws grew only slightly into long-fingered hands that gripped the hand-holds to pull him out tighter. The musculature of his legs shifted, shortening his foot and lowering the arch back into place as his knees became more necessary than his ankles as both feet lowered onto the ground. None of it was ever painful but he had to admit that shifting back and forth had taken some getting used to.

He stood outside the squat and continued to get the blood flowing as he rubbed his hands together to try and return feeling before he felt the first rumblings of his stomach. He reached back behind the canvas and pulled out half a loaf of slightly stale bread and a bottle of water. He quickly swallowed the bread and began to drink the cold water as he made his way to the end of the street so he could see the Queen's clock and find out the time. Twenty to five as it turned out. He had woken up a little too early but smiled at the news, pulling a rolled cigarette out of his sleep-creased coat. He leaned against the

street wall and lit it, watching the first stirrings of life and motion in the city below.

The tiny light shone brightly for one last moment before it was dropped to the filth below and snuffed out forever under a thick-soled boot. The lone lithe figure began to wander silently down Garford Street, the gas lights shining bright circles in the perpetual London smog. The sun was just starting to rise over his beloved Isle of Dogs, and Cards knew that he was going to cut it close for the early morning ship-loaders. He wandered past the food shops and market sellers, just beginning to unpack what would become the seething mass of customers, messengers and thieves in just a few hours. He ducked down an alley and managed to slink round a broken horseless carriage shell with a few sleeping figures inside, before appearing on Bridge Road.

He turned the corner and the sound of cobblestones was soon replaced by the creaking of dock timbers. The sounds of his steps were the only thing to be heard on the deserted boardwalk. As he padded under the dimming gas lamps, he took a look at all of the giants on either side, sleeping in their watery beds. Scattered around was the new machinery that the current status quo had 'gifted' to some of the wealthier warehouse owners in order to make the 'work easier on the men'. Currently the mechanical men, wider at the shoulders than three normal workers, stood inactive and slightly slumped against the wall, guarded by one sleeping guard. These gifts had made the work so easy, in fact, that quite a few workers had been sent on their way. Only a few of the carthorses that made the docks their home could hope to keep up, and even for them it was a push. He was about halfway down his usual stretch when he noticed two ships he didn't recognise and came to a halt. He looked them over to make sure he didn't know them and then took a moment to remember them. Who knew – maybe the information would be worth something to someone.

Satisfied, he continued down and passed the darkened warehouse of Messrs Scott, Russell & Co. He glanced up at the imposing steel doors and smiled with the memory. He was just ten years old and had just started to make it on his own when he moved down onto the docks. He had made a nest for himself in what he still considered a clever place. Not a week after moving in he awoke to a huge commotion on the dockside. The gentlemen who owned the yard had just finished

building the SS Great Eastern and Cards had managed, in the course of the day, to see it launch onto the Thames. Many of the people dockside had had to pay, but from his old nest, he managed to watch it for nothing. That was more than a decade ago.

As he was remembering the huge ship sailing past, he spotted the little staircase just before Robert Street and made his way down onto the short rocky beach below the dock. He knew he was a little early for the time specified on the telegram but better early than late. He took refuge deep under the boards to make sure he couldn't be seen. After less than two minutes, he was bored. He danced around a bit and jogged on the spot to try and keep warm but gave up quickly and sat down as the beach stones underfoot were making too much noise. Instead he took another deep breath and felt his warm red-brown coat seep out of his skin. His tail cascaded over the top of his trousers and he felt himself shrink slightly as his bone-structure rearranged itself to a lighter build.



He looked confused for a moment and was about to get Sarah's attention again when he heard a voice next to him.

"I think you have my drink." Zax turned to face one of the most beautiful women he had seen in a long time. She was a small woman, only rising to his shoulder. Her explosion of chestnut hair was held back from her face by a cotton scarf and the rest of her eclectic attire placed her as a gypsy. What captivated him however were her eyes, so brown they reached the colour of honey. He would have sworn that they sparkled but didn't have time to dwell on it.

"Would you like yours?" Her speech rattled him back to action and he handed her the whiskey tumbler and took his beer.

"Sure, here."

"Thank you."

As she turned to move back to wherever she came from, his mind, three miles behind the rest of him, only managed to just cope with, "Can I get you another drink?" The woman turned and looked over her shoulder at him, with a raised eyebrow.

"After you're finished that one I mean." She watched him for a moment before smiling at him and downed the double whiskey in one gulp.

"Sure, how's now?"

Zax picked up his beer and moved over to where she was sitting with another who was dressed like her. Zax was a little thrown but since there were no introductions, he was left to guess at who he was. The woman started up a conversation as to where he came from, what he did for a living and why he was here at this hour of the morning. As his mind caught up with his emotions he managed to take control of the conversation and start asking her questions back. She was comfortably evasive about personal questions but he managed to find out that she was the fortune teller at the local carnival just outside of town, Madame Lynn, and that this was her brother Larkin, another Traveller. The woman spent most of the conversation with her chin resting on her hands, a wide smile across her lips. She laughed easily and at almost everything he said.

A few hours passed in deep conversation and they both seemed to have nowhere else to be. They each kept buying rounds, something new for him, but he wasn't complaining and just content to be chatting the morning away. After much conversational manoeuvring, Zax eventually managed to get her to tell him what she was actually doing in the bar. As it turned out, she was waiting for a package to be delivered to her, and this was supposed to be the place it was coming to, although she refused to tell him what the package was. Throughout this conversation, Larkin seemed to have nothing to say, not even really answering questions directed at him specifically. He would just nod or grunt before settling back down to his pint.

Finding out about the package, Zax chuckled. "The only package boy around jumped ship from here hours ago," he said, as he drained his glass. Lynn raised an eyebrow at him but he seemed not to notice. He looked around for Sarah to refill his glass and that of his compatriots while Lynn lapsed into silence.

Her attention seemed to fade into the middle distance before her eyes fell on the dog at his feet. The bull terrier had found a comfy spot on the floor and had taken up residence as most of her kind did, generally alternating between watching the shoes of the room at large and sleeping peacefully on the floor. She seemed to sense Lynn was looking at her and so looked in her direction. Their eyes met and a low growl began to emit from Amelia's throat.

Zax seemed to hear it and nudged Amelia with his shoe.

"Hush girl, that's not very nice." He took his pint glass and

rearranged himself on the stool.

“That’s quite a pretty mutt you got there Zax.” Zax almost seemed to spit into his glass before swallowing and looking scandalised at Lynn.

“Ey? Be nice mate.” Zax put the glass down, leaned over and picked Amelia up into his lap, no fight coming from the dog.

“Amelia here is a no mutt, she’s a pedigree prize fighter, aren’t you my girl?” he asked, ruffling her ears as she sat on his lap. Lynn looked sideways at the dog before looking sceptically at Zax.

“She’s a prize alright but she doesn’t look like no fighter, friend.” Zax looked up sharply at Lynn through the haze that was beginning to cloud his vision over.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Lynn looked a little taken aback by his defensiveness but it was not enough to break her stride.

“All I meant was that she doesn’t look like a fighter, more like a lap dog is all,” she said as she took a sip from her new drink. Zax looked down at Amelia and back to Lynn.

“And I supposed you two would know what a real fighter looks like then?” he asked, the rising anger in his voice audible. Lynn looked back at him over the rim of her glass. Her face was generally unreadable but the amusement at his defensiveness was definitely there.

“Yea I do cause I have a real fighter. She ain’t no pedigree but she is the best there is.”

Zax didn’t really stop to think about the situation too clearly as his anger began to get the better of him.

“Is that so? Well I don’t suppose your fighter is around is she? Or is she a mythical creature only found at your carnival, viewable for a sixpence only?” Now it was Lynn who was becoming defensive.

“No, she’s here. We’re not much liked in London so a girl takes all the protection she can with her. I left her outside because no one told me that they allowed beasts in here.” Zax’s eyes narrowed.

“Well then, if she is here and she can fight, let’s have a go then. Or are you too scared?”

Lynn hesitated for a moment before her pride got the better of her too.

“You want a fight, my man, then find a ring and I’ll show you what a true fighter is.”

Zax stood up and Amelia slid off his lap landing on the floor. He downed the rest of his beer before storming over to one of the ringsides and grabbing one of the only referees left in the room.

“Get the ring ready, there’s gonna be an impromptu fight. A little bird needs to learn her place.”

The referee looked a little dazed and confused as to what was going on before glancing over Zax’s shoulder. His attention was held for less than a second before he looked back.

“Sure, whatever you say. Take your fighter to that side and get ready.” Zax nodded and dragged Amelia around the ring to the other side, as Lynn appeared with a dog on a leash. Zax packed out laughing when he saw the dog, holding onto the side of the ring to keep himself up in his current state.

“That’s your fighter? When you said she wasn’t pedigree, you were not kidding were you?”

The dog being led in by Larkin was a small dog, not the smallest but a little smaller than Amelia. She was narrower in the body and her coat was a dark ruddy brown. While most of her parentage was probably bull terrier, there was definitely at least four other breeds mixed in. She was a Traveller’s dog if ever there was one. Lynn led the dog over to the side of the ring and said nothing as she kneeled down and whispered to her.

The referee took up his station after calling two ring guards. Their job was to keep the people out and the dogs in. They lifted the hatches and waited for the signal.

“Alright people, are your dogs ready?” Nods from both sides made him hold out both arms.

“Right then, let the dogs in.” Both dogs walked into the ring, their leashes still attached, Amelia began to strain on hers the moment that she saw the other hound, but the other dog just walked in and lay down on her belly.

The referee looked at Lynn with a raised eyebrow. “Connie’s fine mate, just call it”. He shrugged and raised his outstretched arms above his head.

“Ready... Fight!” He brought his arms down at the same instant the leashes were released and the doors slammed down. Zax didn’t even have time to register what had happened before it was over.

In an ordinary fight, the dogs would leap at each other before disengaging and walking around and then would reengage. The

average fight was less than a minute long but this fight would break the record for the shortest start and end. What the referee would later tell Zax was that Amelia jumped to attack Connie but Connie didn't jump back. She lay on the ground until Amelia was airborne before launching from flat into the air and taking Amelia by the throat. Amelia couldn't change direction without traction and was dead in the air. Connie took a bite out of her throat and she hit the floor of the ring, bleeding to death.

She twitched a few times and Zax stood up in time to see both his prize fighter and his dreams in their final death throes, before they lay still.

Amelia's blood began to coat the ring floor as Connie wandered over the door where Lynn was and began to paw at it. The referee was as shocked as the rest and it took a bark from Connie to startle everyone back into motion.

"Fight over." He looked at Lynn as the door was raised and Connie's lead reattached.

"Connie wins."



Jayne Morgan

## The fortune teller

Sharona is the fanciest name she can think of. Nearly as fancy as Ma's other name. Sharona makes her snap her hips and wind her arse around. It makes her feel that pretty, chewing gum, turning and looking back over her shoulder at the mirror. The hair isn't good but that hat's somewhere. Red, shiny cap. "Shit, I look good." That's what Ma would say about herself.

Down the stairs with you, my girlie. Like on school mornings when the make-up was all off. Chew, snap, chew, snap, she's going, past Dr Simbwa's door and down stair by stair. Coming up is a wide, black mamma wearing a hat, too. The big woman is sweating and wheezing but she still flicks her chin out and hisses through her tongue and her teeth, making her lips lift. Sharona flicks her face back. The woman makes a spitting noise in her throat and heaves on up the stairs towards whatever help she's after.

Sharona has hit the street and is waiting for heads to turn. No one looks. It's hot and loud down here, black with taxi smoke and too many people around to be noticed. She leans on the flaking red pillar and stares at the Dr's sign like it's new to her. Who the hell believes this stuff? Like anyone could give you muti that meant you'd find a boyfriend or cure your insides with smoking weeds or tell the future with bones. If he could do all that why didn't he help Ma?

The cap itches but there's no way the hair can be seen. It's cooling down now and there are spaces on the pavements. The stallholders are packing up their soccer shirts and racks of bags. Time for Sharona to shine like Ma.

Around seven the first car slows but it speeds away as soon as she leans down towards it. Black men with sunglasses laughing through tinted windows that are buzzing with a heavy beat. Now it seems that only chubby women full of Pick n Pay packets and old men in beat-up bakkies are driving anywhere. She is looking down the road so she doesn't notice how close he is behind her.

"Your mother give you a name?"

He makes her jump like shit but she hides it with a snap as she spins round. Sjoe, but that's dark skin with eyes somewhere near the top. Tight maroon shirt, brown striped pants and long leather points of shoes, gold wire shades on his chest. She chews a bit to buy time.

“Sharona.”

“Ha.” Was he laughing at her?

“You got a place?” That’s a voice with a sound like nowhere round here, not for a long ways. Sharona jerks her head upwards. He jerks his head the same. He follows her in and up the stairs.

There are only two rooms and now they’re inside the first one. She throws down her bag and snaps a hip so hard she bounces. Now she just looks at him and looks at him. It’s OK long as she doesn’t need to do anything that means losing the cap. He looks at her and then he sits down on the sofa like he does it every day.

He rubs his hands up and down his thighs and leans back on the dirty cushions. Then he raises his arse a little bit and reaches into his pocket and she hears a soft, rough click. His hand is in a fist and he leans forward, holding it over the coffee table, above the ketchup and bits of ash. She doesn’t take her eyes off him but he is looking at his hand, which he turns over and opens.

“You know, where I come from we use these to tell our fortunes.”

He still sounds from far away. She has no fucking idea what he’s talking about so she has to look down at what he’s got there. Two shells. She carries on looking.

“Usually” the word takes him long to say “we have more of them. Usually” again “we have sixteen. But there are two of us so two will be fine”. The shells are round and smooth and shaped like the bread rolls from the Portuguese shop.

He explains carefully, “see there are two ways a shell can land. Like this...” and he places the shells safe on their flat bottoms “that is ‘closed’. Or like this...”, he makes the two shells rock on their curved backs and she sees that they each have a curling slit at their base “that is ‘open’”. He laughs a bit and holds out one of the shells, twisting it between his fingers. “This looks a little bit like you underneath, yes?”

He closes his fist again round the two shells and she hears them rasp together. Him saying about her ‘underneath’ like that made her want to see Ma again. Really want to.

“Let’s see what the shells tell us.” And he looks at her for the first time since he took them out of his pocket. “I throw them and they’ll tell us what they want us to do”.

Sharona is still chewing but she’s not thinking about it. He throws a shell and it bounces on the table like a die, turning and rolling, it

finally stops and tips onto its flat side. Sharona’s bones feel like they are going to break. He throws the other shell and there’s the crack of it hitting the plastic wood. It dances from end to end until it decides its final tilt. Then it lies with the curled split upwards, rocking gently on its back.

Across the landing, Dr Simbwa has finished with his final patient of the day. He locks up and, passing his neighbour’s quiet door, he goes down the stairs and out into the warm, empty street.

## A Dickens summer

One morning when he was eighteen, Timothy Appleton's father rolled him over in his bed and announced that the market-day ritual was to be his. This meant that on the first Wednesday of every month, Timothy would be up at four thirty, backing the truck to the barely-lit calf pens, letting down the muck-encrusted ramp and, with old Lenny's help, trying to herd the bullocks into the back. As the calves skittered in all directions, the men would call and spread their arms, dancing from side to side, trying to get behind them. The creatures would go up the ramp and nearly into the dark doorway, but then the first calf would balk at the unfamiliar threshold. Standing with legs splayed and braced, it would pause, trembling, its neck low, its black eyes bulging. "Keep 'is 'ed round, keep 'is 'ed round" Lenny would warn. They both knew that, once the calf's head turned away from the truck door, he'd be off, with all the others after him, and they'd be back to square one.

Once in town, when they'd left their animals at the stock pens, tradition had it that the farmers congregated round a barrel at the cornmarket, gossiping and talking shop as they waited for the auction to start. In the days when they'd gone together, he remembered listening while his father, glass clutched to his chest, brayed out his stories with the rest. Like the time he'd told them about Timothy shooting the Taylors' bull in the backside with a .410. The neighbour's son had dared him to fire the gun, knowing he wasn't strong enough to hold it steady, and then bolted the moment he saw where the slim cartridge had landed. His father had taken Timothy round the back of the barns and given him a spirited six with his belt, his arm strengthened by joy at his timid boy's sudden fierceness. Proudly, he'd recounted the story several times at the next market day, standing old man Taylor a decent whiskey by way of apology. Timothy, though, had said nothing. Only raked his hands down the sides of his rough, green trousers, and snorted through his nose as if trying to dislodge the scent of gun-oil and blood.

Now, without his father there, there was no obligation for Timothy to stand with the crowd. Besides, he couldn't stomach the warm, bitter ale at such an early hour. This made him grateful for the milder days of spring and summer when he could sit outside on

the wall, his back against one of the brick posts, still cool and dew-damp, away from the barrage of tall tales and rank breath. It was the first Wednesday in April and he was on the wall, looking across the road to the town's only teashop. Three young women were at a table outside, two were startlingly blonde, the other darker. The blondes had their heads towards each other, away from the third girl who was simply leaning her elbows on the table, smiling a half smile. His eyes stayed on her.

After a few minutes, she picked up her bag, placed some coins on the table and rose. It was only when she was standing that her companions looked up. From what he could see, she simply said 'goodbye' and immediately walked away, neat and purposeful, towards the town hall.

Timothy wasn't sure why he followed her. He certainly had no intention of speaking to her. As she turned into the stone-arched doorway of the library, she was already taking off her coat. He looked down at his watch, two minutes past 8. When he reached it, the heavy glass door was still swinging slowly to from where she had passed through it. He caught it and went in.

"Can I help you?" The voice wasn't unfriendly and it rang a little against the high wooden ceiling. She was in front of the library counter, her coat still bunched in her hands. "We've only just opened".

"I know, I'm sorry" his voice seemed too thick to echo at all. "I... just wanted to have a look".

"Of course" and she moved off, round the counter and through a door behind it.

Now he was alone in the tall white room with its rows and rows of shelves. He looked up. Pale sun was coming through the high windows. The paint on the metal ceiling struts was flaking. The flat cones of the tin lightshades stretched away from him in a line above his head. They were covered in grey dust, tiny motes of which, picked out by the sun, were drifting down through the pitched space and settling on their slopes.

He set off, uncertainly, between the stacks. The books, all with their backs to him, made uneven walls of brown, green, black, blue and grey. As he walked, he ran his hand along their cool rounded spines, feeling the changes of texture under his palm. He breathed in the smell. He pulled in more and more air so he could keep filling

his nose and lungs with the straw-barn, clean-leather, wood-shed smell, eventually leaning his forehead against a shelf so he could get closer. Then, he heard her footsteps on the linoleum-covered floor and jerked his head back, trying to focus on the titles in front of him.

“Are you finding what you’re looking for?”

Without her coat, she was smaller than he’d first thought but her figure was rounded. She was older, too. She was wearing glasses now, which made her greenish eyes seem large and inquisitive. Her hair was thick and, he saw, wasn’t dark at all but a natural blonde. Her mouth was wide with a deep dent in the middle of her top lip and her teeth were long and overlapping at the sides. Her dress looked soft and was the colour of field mice. Where her neck emerged from the lacy collar, the skin was nearly the same shade of pale brown as the dress and finely-grained, like chamois leather. He cast around for something that he could say. He swallowed.

“Dickens?”

She gave a quick smile and said again “Of course” and with the same decisive turn as outside the teashop, she invited him to follow her down more of the passages.

“Here. Which one did you want?”

He turned towards the books and, placing a thick finger on a brown spine, he said “this one”.

“*Great Expectations*”, she drew in her breath in a way that made him open his lips “–my favourite. Is it the first time you’re reading it? Lucky you!”

Before he could register those two words, she turned again, leading him back to the front desk. He carefully wrote his name at the bottom of the membership form, underneath the four digits of his telephone number and the name of the farm. He picked up the book, waiting until he was the other side of the heavy door before opening it and burying his face between the pages.

May was the next month, the calves went in readily and he was in town by six thirty. There was nothing for him to do but sit outside the cornmarket and watch the clattering, stinking vehicles go past, crammed with terrified livestock. Eventually it was quarter to eight and he was off up the road, the brown book under his jacket, hard and warm. He was there by five to, and the door was already loose. He pushed it open and went in, finding her, as if she had been there ever since he’d left, standing behind the counter putting cards into a

long drawer. The vaulted, white room was again lit by pale sunlight, dust particles dancing.

As he was about to move forward, another visitor arrived, walked past him and placed a stack of books in front of the girl. She looked up at the newcomer and smiled her thanks, saying something too quietly for him to hear. It was clear he couldn’t linger till she’d finished dealing with the pile, so he set off in the only direction he knew. Back in Dickens, he could still see the slight gap left by *Great Expectations*. He knew enough about libraries not to put the book back on the shelf. He could think of nothing else to do but remove another book and return to the front.

When she saw him, she showed no sign of recognition. It was only when he put *Great Expectations* on the counter that she paused in her smooth process of opening and stamping. She said, “Did you enjoy it?” He gave a jerky nod. “I sometimes wonder what I’d do if I were Miss Havisham. Can you imagine how it must have been, sitting, waiting, all alone at the table?”

“Oh yes” he said “I can imagine that.”

She had smiled at him then.

She put the first book below the counter and picked up the new one. “*David Copperfield*. They say it’s autobiographical.” She opened the blue, tooled-leather cover, took out the card and closed it again. “I hope you enjoy it as much.”

“Thank you.” As she handed him the book he noticed with a jolt that the last two fingers of her left hand were little more than stumps. Before he was able to look away, she caught his glance. She drew her hand back a little more quickly than she might have done but she still gave a little, rueful laugh. “Oh, an accident, when I was tiny. My brother ran over them with his bike. They tried to save them but they couldn’t. I forget about it most of the time”. Almost choking with regret, he turned and walked quickly away, his boots rapping on the hard floor and he forgetting to hide *David Copperfield* under his coat.

In June, it was *Nicholas Nickleby*, in July *The Pickwick Papers*, August *Oliver Twist* and in September, the considerable challenge of *Bleak House*. Each time, there was the polite enquiry about his enjoyment of the book and, occasionally, a comment on a specific part. Each time he was able to say how much he had, indeed, enjoyed taking the book out. He could have added, by way of conversation, that he

did so only to come again and to see her behind her counter. Or, just to pass the time of day, he could have mentioned that it was her face that greeted him every morning and her wrists and neck that he saw when he closed his eyes at night. Or, as she stamped the return date, he could have commented that it was the feel of her skin and the smell of her thick blond hair that his senses were keening for. There were very many things he could have said.

The first Wednesday morning in October was pitch black until seven o'clock. Only as Timothy wound the truck into the town's centre did any light appear and then it was weak, washed out by early rain. He was late. He and Len had been led round the shed by the calves a dozen times. It was not until nearly eight that he finally left the auction pens and parked the truck near the library archway. He picked up the book that was lying carelessly on the cracked leather of the barely-used passenger seat and went, once more, through the heavy door.

She was there, picking through a card index. Instead of heading out to the shelves, he went straight to her, laying the book down, silently demanding her attention. She did, indeed, look up and gave him a clear smile.

"I've brought this back."

"Yes, I see."

"I don't want to borrow any more books. I don't think it's right that I do."

"Not right?"

"I'm lying to you. I'm very sorry." He looked down, fixed his eyes on a rivet in the counter and added in a harsh voice "I can't read."

He kept his eyes down and set his jaw. He swallowed once and made to go. As he tried to move, he found he couldn't because her hand was on his arm, gripping his rough sleeve with its white, damaged fingers. He did not raise his head, so she was forced to bend slightly and twist her head to look up into his fierce eyes.

"I know that."

She released her grip on the jacket and allowed her hand to move down, to rest, light and dry and cool, on the back of his. She said again "I know that, so you are not lying to me" and she smiled up at him.

He looked, for one moment, directly into her eyes and saw the possibilities they offered. Then he was turning his head away and

pulling back his hand, he was pushing the heavy door and he was out, out and over the black, wet street and into the truck, starting the engine, wrenching the wheel round and pulling away in a roar of fumes and hard-fought revving.

## Travelling

The smell of ironing on a wet afternoon, the smell of the first lawn mowing in the summer, the smell of cow's breath in the shed, the smell of whiskey on my father's breath, the breathing of the animals and the birds in the dark, the smells that carry me past the beams and boards of time and I am travelling back to where I seemed to smell more vividly than ever I have done since. The scent on my mother's collar long after it was worn, the smell of cakes rising in the oven, the damp warm smell of bathroom air on a Sunday night as my father emerges from his weekly visit, house dark, or only dimly lit, and the radio says *Sing Something Simple* and cold meat and pickled cabbage for supper. The smell of fires lit in the early morning, of Sunday pork roasting, of the grass breaking under my feet as it reaches into Spring.

All the childhood years beset by fragrances that if now, by some chance, that exact smell emerges to confront me, I'm flying unbound. Cough sweets in the bedside table, the stale inside of the caddy with real tea. My mother's hands as she was dying smelt like nothing I have smelt on her before, even though she was the author of these memories - or so it seemed. A sweet, cloying smell that lingered on my hands as I drove home from another day spent in her receding company. On my clothes the ersatz sweet, sweet smell of the fancy home that gave her a mattress that inflated and deflated by itself. It assaulted me every time I went through the door, my panic rising at what I would find that day until, like Pavlov's dogs, as soon as that smell hit my nostrils, adrenalin would kick through me as I walked over the thick, pink carpet to the room.

Nothing now smells as it did, nothing is as it was and never again will we share our observations of the times we are together, the smells we smelled together. The conflicts we engaged in are all to be solved the easy way, one half of the equation simply bowing out.

Tomatoes in a greenhouse, bonfires on a winter's afternoon, Nivea soap and TCP. Witch-hazel for every wound and Milk of Magnesia for every gripe. Smell me back into the kitchen, as the windows steam up, yellow-framed and keeping out the endless rain. I perch on the arm of my father's chair and watch the iron move or the column of ash as it nearly falls into the cake mix, but deftly scooped

up and thrown into the fire. The fires that burn here, some of hatred, some of love, all of memory. I cannot really see that this has stopped because it lives so heatedly in my memory - which is all of smells and snapshots and fragments of fights.

## The usual misery

In the low, hot orange room  
the latest installment of the fight is playing out  
against a TV soundtrack.

There are no clean gusts of fresh fury,  
just contempt, stale as morning breath,  
spat back and forth.

She stands up, with empty supper plates,  
and the heavy, small stool is in her path  
as she tears through the room.

She walks, kicking, into it.  
It falls.  
We feel the wooden, hard thud.

When she has gone through the door,  
we look at the TV screen.  
We do not look at the fallen stool.

Sylvestre Ntabajyana



## I will found my church

I will found my church  
not in a remote village  
where people swallow dust  
and quench thirst with air.

I will plant my church  
on the navel of the city  
where pockets never go flat.

In my church  
I will speak of the right word  
from the right book.  
My voice will voyage  
through hills and valleys  
to the peak of the sky.  
Neither the living nor the dead  
will hide their joy.

In my church  
I will touch my followers  
and showers of blessings  
will dwell in their hearts.  
Before the eyes of everyone  
devils will run  
crying for help.

At the important moment  
I will ask the congregation  
to reflect on the motto  
drawn on the walls  
*“One man gives freely*

*yet gains even more  
Another withholds unduly  
but comes to poverty.”*

At this moment  
in a high voice  
I will ask them  
to curse stinginess  
when the collection plate  
visits their sides.

## Alcoholic

I am an alcoholic.  
The sun is my watch,  
The moon my torch.

For me,  
All days are today;  
Tomorrow is not mine.

My sin is to keep a coin  
In a pocket  
My prayer is not to be sober  
A single day.

I pity teetotallers  
Who, like toddlers,  
Torture their throats with lemonade  
And burn their mouths with tea.

I toast my comrades,  
Who remember me  
When my pockets  
Lose their weight.

## Our fathers said

Brother,  
*“Only the foolish  
 Can feed on thunder’s milk”*  
 That’s what our fathers said.

Now you despise their old wisdom  
 Saying they died ignorant.  
 Listen,  
 Our fathers’ words were not a river  
 That follows the only sloping way.

You read piles of books;  
 They did not read any  
 But they knew what  
 Was in the books.  
 They never did medicine  
 But were doctors.

Brother  
 Our fathers never studied  
 Climatology;  
 Yet they were rain-makers.

## The wedding

We were standing in front of the church  
 The sun combing our heads  
 With its strong arms  
 From the church-tower.

The first van came trailing  
 A cameraman on its back  
 His left eye sunk in the lens  
 The left hand steering the zoom.  
 Other cars, with flowers on their noses,  
 Followed in queues.

We tiptoed, raising our heads,  
 Children boosted up on shoulders  
 To have a glimpse at the bride and groom.

The cars stopped before us  
 The chief of protocol hurried  
 And opened for the couple.  
 Their shining faces emerged  
 Flashes crossing like a sparkling blaze.

They trailed towards the priest  
 Standing at the church-door  
 A big cross swaying on his chest.  
 Above their heads  
 His arms hovered  
 Dispensing blessings.

They proceeded into the church.  
 Friends and relatives followed

Covered by sweet songs  
 Struck by the Halleluiah Choir.  
 After all were at their seats  
 The choir's tune died down.

The priest approached the clean book  
 Resting on the altar.  
 The sign of the cross was made  
 And verses were read.

The priest lifted the missals  
 And asked the couple  
 To approach the altar.  
 He cleared his throat  
 And out his mouth  
 A question was heard:

*"Bride and bridegroom,  
 Have you come here freely  
 And without reservation  
 To give yourselves to each other  
 In..."*

"Yes" the bridegroom interrupted  
 And the whole church murmured.  
 The priest re-asked the question.  
 The bride said nothing.  
 Tears descended her face  
 And fell down in drops.

All faces lingered on her  
 Her closer relatives  
 Lengthened their necks  
 And their mouths touched her ears:  
 "Say yes"

These words split her head.  
 The old days started boiling  
 Making a huge steam inside her  
 Reactivating a memory  
 In the bottom of her brain.

She saw a lovely young man  
 From a village next to hers  
 Telling her some words.  
 She saw her own words  
 Given as green light.

In her deepest memory  
 She saw the family's words:  
 To turn back from her wish  
 To forget the poor boy  
 The boy with a dim history  
 The boy the family never embraced.

In her mind  
 She could hear the commands  
 From her only uncle  
 Marching like soldiers.

She heard the question again  
 She opened her mouth  
 Not to respond  
 But  
 Cry  
 Cry like a child.

Something from the past  
 Pushed her back.

She resisted  
 As her mind was tortured  
 She threw the bunch of flowers  
 On the floor,  
 And outdoors  
 She ran.

Silently,  
 The priest,  
 And the people in church  
 Followed her in amazement.  
 Some made the sign of the cross  
 Others dropped to their knees  
 Others lowered their heads  
 Allowing their hearts  
 To say something to the Lord.

She turned right behind the church  
 Kicking everyone at her sides.  
 She reached the main road  
 Running like a bullet.  
 She turned left at the corner  
 Into the wings of the hills.

### **A hungry vagrant**

He was sitting beside the street  
 carrying his hands  
 his face staring at the tarmac  
 his eyes, like traffic lights,  
 opening and closing.  
 As sleep wanted to ease  
 his disturbed stomach  
 the traffic noises stirred his brain.  
 He shook his head  
 stretching his arms.  
 Opposite him, in a restaurant,  
 pans were complaining  
 as the onion  
 sailed across the oil.  
 The aroma leaped off  
 and crossed the street  
 to hit his nose.  
 He sniffed  
 and opened his mouth wide  
 chewing saliva.

## The village river

You are a saviour and server  
 your colourless colour pleases my eyes  
 and your eternal songs feed my ears with soft tunes.

I like you zigzagging marshes  
 blessing beings along your path.

Your non-stop journey beckons all creatures;  
 animals, birds and plants  
 come speeding  
 to inherit your fortunes.

Women and men fill up their gourds  
 while their mouths let out praising tunes.  
 Their future is not uncertain;  
 you, saviour, are in their homes.

Birds flock from side to side  
 feeding their eyes with your colourlessness.

Grass and plants take off their dirty yellow coats  
 to put on beautiful green coats  
 you bear along your way.

You are a hero  
 you are a saviour and server.

In your heart,  
 dancing, diving, running,  
 fish are in their heaven.

## Double dealer

You are cunning brother  
 You warn and advertise.  
 On one side of the board:  
*"Attention  
 Tobacco kills"*  
 On another side  
*"This tobacco  
 is sweeter than that."*  
 Brother  
 My father's eyes are good  
 He will read both of your adverts;  
 My uncle is cross-eyed  
 He will read one;  
 My aunt is short sighted  
 She will read none.

**Gusoma**

In my language,  
*Gusoma* means three things:  
*Read, sip* and *kiss*.  
 When I breathe the word  
*Gusoma*,  
 One of my fellows  
 Pictures his shining beauty  
 With glittering lips.  
 Another fellow of mine  
 Sees a cold bottle  
 Standing on a table  
 Beside a shining glass.  
 Neither of them sees the letters  
 Journeying between covers  
 Running from page to page.

**Sun**

Sun  
 Before you  
 The cold trembles with fear  
 And runs away

When I see your golden face  
 I spread my mat in the garden  
 And there I lay my back  
 While your healing touches  
 Refurbish my muscles

Our future is in your hands  
 As the works of our hands  
 Can testify

Master of days and nights  
 When I see your mighty hands  
 Bidding us farewell  
 Wishing us goodnight  
 I join my bed  
 Fully energized

Isabel Rawlins



## An empty pocket

Anna reached into her pocket for her phone unconsciously. She fumbled around in her loose trousers before realising it wasn't there. She had been thinking about a film she had watched but couldn't remember the lead actor's name, he had played an artist. But Jess would know; Jess always knew these things. She knew if she described him, with his curly brown hair and blue eyes, Jess would be able to tell her. Anna wasn't really sure what had made her think of the film. It had just popped into her head. She kept her hand in her empty pocket, feeling the cool fabric between her fingers.

Anna was more distracted than usual today. Walking down High Street, she kept eyeing out people who didn't seem to be doing anything; people who stood around, leaning on street corners, watching pedestrians. It had been one of them who had fallen in step behind her yesterday – she was sure of it. And even though it was down a side street, without anyone around, being out on any street today made her shiver and look over her shoulder, while feeling around the vacant space of her pocket.

She had felt his intentions as if they could travel through the air, ghostly tangled energy that stung her from behind. He had matched her step by step; treading in the sound of her own footsteps until he was right behind her. Anna saw the flash of his knife before her face and felt his arm tighten around her neck. All in one moment they had stopped, caught in a close embrace, his feet standing firm in her last footsteps. "Don't scream. I'll cut your face." The cool blade brushed her cheek. She nodded. With his free arm he reached down into her pocket. "Shhh" was all he said, releasing his grip and disappearing down a side alley. Anna stood still, like the woman who had posed for the artist in the film she had seen.

## Empty room

There's no space for anything anymore, she thinks, in this uncluttered, empty room. She picks up the last box, the last suitcase and then comes back just to stand in the middle. It's the fights that echo loudest. The walls throw down the bitterness they held for months. She's forgotten to take down the pale curtains and wants to leave them there. She has to use a spoon to unclip the rails and sees his hands clipping them in, their laughter. With the curtains down the sun glares in. She makes a final turn and sits in the middle of this room's emptiness.

## Hitchhike

Dawn. Alone. No ride. My thumb outstretched. A jeep pulls over, stops. "Where you going?" asks a man with glasses. "Anywhere," I reply, "I was heading south, Cape Town; I got ditched here. "Okay, get in." The man has sunglasses on but it's barely light, he's wearing leather driving gloves and looks about forty. The man eyes my backpack warily, I wonder why he bothered to stop; I am a nobody, kicked out by my last friend when I stole his phone but I had to make a call. "Where are you heading anyhow?" I ask, he hesitates; leather clenches the steering wheel, "Visiting my brother" is all he will offer, I shrug and slump back, the seats are leather too, dark brown, they smell new; there's nothing in the car that might give this man away, he drives fast.

I realise I fell asleep when he wakes me, we're at a petrol station, "You want anything?" he lights a smoke, waiting for my answer, "Coffee?" he nods, taking the keys out the ignition. He's gone awhile so I watch the cars pulling up to and away from the petrol pumps, count all the red cars. "Here," he gives me a coffee, lights another smoke, gets in the car. "I had nothing... like you". A thin smile. Leather clenches. Ash. Smoke.

## Jazz smoke

He walked inside the jazz club. He took a table below the haze of smoke and lit up his own. A waitress appeared and he ordered a whisky. He'd been doing this for days now. Sleeping all day till dark then surfacing and finding his way to the jazz club, drinking whisky after whisky till the music stopped. He didn't have to think about anything, listening to jazz, it did all the thinking for you. It was the low bass of his dissatisfaction with life. It was the rolling drums, the startling trumpet. He no longer listened to his bodily desires; jazz smothered them, no hunger, no lust. He slept and drank and jazzed, mournful for the life he'd lost, the life he'd thrown away. And on what? He couldn't even add up the money he'd spent, the time wasted. All he had now was jazz and he didn't think it even wanted him.

## Marionette

I had never done the tango before. But he insisted. He had my hand, roughly and his other on my waist turned me like it was part of him. My body his vehicle; desiring corners. We were driving mountain roads. The tyres struck a moment on the tar. I don't have to tell you the car was red. He moved his hand from the gear stick to my knee, lifting my dress, lifting my leg to wrap his body; I swung pendulous on five toes. Sweat drawing between palms pushed together. He spoke to my bones, whispered his next move. He drew lines across my skin, puppeteer strings wielding the marionette.

## Spineless

She is searching for something yet unknown. Feeling her way through mindscapes, she stumbles, falls, crumples. She cannot stand; her body, boneless. She flaps her flimsy arms and legs, rolls her flimsy neck. And so she lies there, alone and untrusting.

She is searching for a spine. She fumbles in the dark, with nerveless fingers. She finds it, coiled, and decides to swallow. It lodges in her throat and chokes. Mouthful of vertebrae, she has no teeth to chew. She grasps her throat and raspy sounds come out.

The spine knows it will kill her if it doesn't act. So it inches down and in her stomach, ponders, how to get where it should be. Tear through the muscle walls? Dissolve bone to blood and reform in place? Some coughing reflex brings it up and so it makes a tiny hole to dart into her back. The spine settles; the woman stands and walks.

## Shoeless

A man runs by in socks  
grey, they are wet and worn  
he runs on tiptoes  
and his calves clench and flex

A man runs by in socks  
he wears only a vest and navy shorts  
on this cold morning  
he is lean and tall  
and shoeless

A man runs by in socks  
I look behind me when he passes  
still he runs,  
shoeless  
And I am hopeless  
thinking of my own lost shoes.

**Red bicycle blue chain**

Bicycles spend their days chained to fences  
 waiting for their people to return  
 their pedals lie still  
 their gears unturned.

The leaves fall around them  
 and gather below the tyres  
 their handlebars unheld  
 their seats unsat.

I see one like mine  
 but with a lock like his  
 red bicycle and blue chain  
 that I gave to him.

**Wineglass**

Her fingers grip the thin glass  
 she pulls her body up  
 to rest upon the edge  
 Down the other side  
 she slides

Toes break the dark red sheen  
 ankles, knees, hips, neck  
 the final fingertips leave the air  
 without breath

Dark liquid  
 pools in her eyes  
 the liquid dries her lips  
 she sinks down  
 curls up  
 dissolves into the wine  
 becomes it  
 as it becomes her

## Counting planes

She opens the fridge to find some leftover pizza, a tired lettuce, no milk. Oh well, black coffee it is then. The cat is quiet this morning, sauntering over from the neighbour's. Usually he is all miaow but today he is content to just sit near by, watching the world with her. She strokes him twice and he acknowledges but doesn't ask for more. She no longer gets hangovers and thinks cynically that maybe she's finally become an alcoholic. She used to get them; trapped in bed for hours unable to lift her head. Now she could get up at six if she wanted to, not that she does and not that she's ever drunk in the mornings.

Black coffee is pretty nice, she thinks. There's something clean about it, sweet darkened water. It's been almost two months since she left him and she is finally living for herself. No one else's dishes, no one else to cook for. Only her dirty clothes that might get washed once a month.

A plane flies overhead, one of those small propeller ones. She's surprised how quickly its sound is gone, leaving only the hum of the empty fridge, the highway over the hill, disgruntled hadedas. She gets the feeling, sitting out here, that the world, this world, has been up for hours already, though it's only 7.30.

The plane sounds like it's returning.

A couple lives across the path, about ten metres down the way. She sees them coming and going. The woman is tall and striking, the man is still enamoured with her.

No it's a second plane perhaps? It's flying in the same direction and she didn't see it circle back. It disappears faster than the first.

She never sees the couple fight. Though the woman always walks in front and the man follows behind, carrying his guitar.

The cat has gone now, wandered off for the day and she wishes she could do the same. Walk in and out of people's gardens, sit in a patch of sun or up a tree, unseen.

A third plane? It must be only one, a farm plane, circling round, only one stretch of its circuit coming into her line of vision.

She likes to sit out here on weekday mornings. People going past with a sense of purpose, all have somewhere to be. She almost misses that feeling, then doesn't, knowing one day she'll be just the same.

Another black coffee – she could get used to this.

The plane is coming round again and this time she's waiting for it, expectant. How many times will it go round?

Last night she dreamt of a crying man. She remembers asking him what the matter was. He replied telling her that he was deeply unhappy with his life; he felt that he had no way of expressing himself. She can't recall what she said to him.

The plane flies over again – the fifth time now.

A young man leaves his house with a headband keeping his long hair back. He walks past intently. She sees him running hard up the hill on the other side of the fence. He returns in less than ten minutes, running easily back to his house. Looking awake now, having shaken off his dreams.

She's waiting for the plane again. To see it fly overhead maybe one last time today, compelled to sit and keep count. This time she sees it circling round, far to the left, to come over her head again, flying straight towards the sun. She wishes she was up there, flying round intently. Instead she sits, intently doing nothing; smoking, drinking coffee, watching.

It's warm already for this time of day. Later it will probably get much hotter. people will sweat and seek out shade or hide indoors. These days always seem long, but they go by quickly. Before she knows it, it's night time and she's getting gratefully into bed. Some days she sees many people, other days none, no day the same anymore.

The plane is coming round again, one giant circle, seems the pilot too is getting his exercise, shaking off dreams with his routine.

She doesn't remember the words she said to the crying man in her dream but her tone, her attitude, is still clear. She was matter of fact, firm, she did not indulge him his tears. She can't remember if he stopped crying or if she only made it worse.

It's been a long time since the plane last flew over. It won't fly past again this morning.

Graham Conan Reed

## Triptych

### A son

As he pulled into the driveway, his two youngest, Kenny and Vern, came running out to the car, “Daddy, daddy, Graham was bitten by Ian’s dog!”

Their mother stood on the threshold, and called to them, “Let your father get out the car. Come on, supper’s nearly ready and you need to go wash up. You can tell him all about it later.” She looked grim, but not ashen. He felt certain it was not too bad.

The small boys reluctantly filed inside, and his wife took his briefcase, and turned away from the puckered lips. “Go speak to your son. He won’t listen to me.”

He made his way to his eldest’s room and opened the door.

“So, my boy, I hear you had a problem with old Pirate. Haven’t we told you that you shouldn’t go there if they’re out?”

The boy rolled over from facing the wall, and a small sob emerged, “But I didn’t know... I just wanted to play with Ian.” His little lower lip pushed up and out, trembling a little.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, and his son turned away. He thought of putting his hand on the boy’s tousled blond hair, but stopped himself.

“What exactly happened?”

And the story was slowly cajoled out of the sulky boy. How he’d gone over to play at Ian’s, but no-one was there, and Pirate jumped at him, and he tried to kick the dog away, and the bite, and the shaking and the growling, and the ages that passed before someone came to help him. Small sobs and gasps punctuated the story, and he suppressed an irritable sigh, gently told the boy to sleep, it would all be alright in the morning.

Later, after all the boys were in bed, he asked her for the details. She stood with her back to him, taking her time washing the dishes, and told how she had been called away from the office up at the hardware store with the news that her son had been attacked by a dog.

“That young Mr Ellis found him. Those dogs don’t let go once they’ve got a hold of anything, you know. I think it was the gardener down the road who called Mr Ellis, who somehow got the dog off

and took him to Dr Whitaker, and by the time I arrived the doctor had already cleaned the bite, stitched it up and given him a tetanus shot. I thanked Mr Ellis, and took the mild tranquillisers the doctor gave me for Graham. That boy must really start learning to be more assertive. I'm sure he could've kept the dog off if he'd tried harder."

Her first thought had been for the youngest, Vernon, who was fearless and often got himself into dangerous and stupid situations. On discovering it was Graham, she had felt a strange relief. These last thoughts she did not share with her husband.

He lit a cigarette as he listened, and thought about his sons. Three boys, a father's pride. But the eldest was different. Sensitive, insecure at times, and often alone, with his books. As a father he had been pleased to hear that his son had made a new friend in Ian, a precocious and confident boy and quite big for his age. Maybe this incident with the dog would toughen the boy up, make him stronger and braver. But he feared it might not. And as he fell asleep, his wife's heaving back beside him, a relieved thought passed through his mind: at least he hadn't heard the boy screaming.

### A dog

Rough.

Green rough. Master did leave me outside.

Hot. Pant. Pant. Find shade on rough green. Sigh.

Itch. Scratch, scratch, scratch-scratch, teeth in fur, fur, flea, squish. Sigh.

Thirst. Water lap lap lap lap. Tongue lick nose. Lift leg, ahh, sniff, ahhh, my place. Sit, lick balls. Shade. Green. Rough. Sigh.

Huh? Sound. Sniff air. Crunch, crunch, crunch. Wao, wao, wao. Me here, you go, two-legs on road. Crunch, crunch, gone.

Shade. Rough. Green. Sigh.

Sleep. I am bounding across an open green field in the sunlight with long-eared little animals running, running away from me. Oh joy! I will chase them, chase them, chase them, catch –

Huh? Gate sound. Master? Sniff air. NO! Stranger! Chase. Wao wao wao wao wao.

Little two-legs, one leg raised, moving. Catch. Bite. Hold. Shake. Sharp sounds by little two-legs. Shake, growl, growl, shake. Little two-legs on green. Rough. Whine and pull two-legs. Shake and growl. Hot taste on tongue.

Hold.

Hold.

Hot.

Hold.

Squeak. Shake, growl, shake, shake.

Big two-legs at gate (Master? No!). Pain on back. Hold. Pain in side. Hold. Growl GROWL. Hand at mouth. Hold... cannot. Snarl, growl. Snap, miss. Pain on head. Snap. Move... cannot. Strong master hold me.

Little two-legs gone.

Rough.

### A report

ATTENTION: THE SENIOR ECUMEN OF THE HEARTCLOUD  
FROM: YULKAN SECTOR, KILDEN OBSERVATORY MISSION,  
CUMULATIVE REPORT ON OBSERVATION OF ALIEN  
BEHAVIOUR,  
SECTION: INTERSPECIES INTERACTION, SUB-REPORT 3087.994

Background: The ongoing observation of alien races in the Yulkan Sector by the Kilden Observatory Mission seeks to document, analyse and attempt to understand the behaviour of the alien life forms found in this sector. Section: Interspecies Interaction (S:IntInt) makes focused observations within this field. One planet in this sector (Sol 877, Planet 3) provides many opportunities to record such interactions since the planet has a fractal explosion of life forms of different species, which is rarely observed on single planets closer to the Heartcloud Singularity.

Most of the interactions in the study of this planet seek to understand the power relationships between the many species. A species of bipeds that have been developing ever more complex technologies and social constructs over the last quarter turn round the Heartcloud Singularity find themselves at an advantage over the many other species that share the planet.

The case documented below shows a particular interaction between a member of the dominant bipedal species and a quadruped. This particular quadruped species has been taken into some form of vassalage by the dominant biped species, and its role in the social and personal lives of the bipeds has previously been documented as one



of subservience and obedience (See S:IntInt, Sub-report 3087.672).

As the evidence will show, this power relationship is fluid and there may be deeper factors our observations have yet to uncover or understand.

The central event: In a small community of bipeds on the second largest continent of this planet, a youngling of the bipeds (characterised by a smaller stature and dependence on adult members of its species for survival) enters the demarcated territory of a discrete collective of bipeds, but is confronted by a member of the usually subservient quadruped species. The youngling lifts one of its two peds. [Speculation and other observations suggest that this action can be seen as either aggressive or defensive, depending on the power relationship between individual members of a single species, or between species.]

The quadruped attaches its mouth parts to the lower section of the raised ped, and the youngling is unable to maintain its preferred upright bipedal stance and succumbs to gravity.

A close analysis of the recordings of this event indicates that the quadruped remains attached to the ped, while occasionally vocalising and moving its mouth parts from side to side. The youngling is also vocalising throughout this event, and the secretion of a saline liquid from its visual input devices suggests, based on other observations of bipedal behaviour, that the experience is problematic to the survival and/or well-being of the biped thus secreting.

The quadruped's hold on the youngling's ped also results in the release of vital internal fluids from the youngling in the region of the hold. This supports the hypothesis that the event is potentially life-threatening to the young biped, since previous observations have established that loss of this internal fluid can lead to the demise of said individual.

Three microturns later, an adult biped arrives on the scene and the usual power relationship between the bipeds and this particular species of quadruped resumes, in that the adult is able to control and suppress the actions of the quadruped with relative ease. The youngling is taken away and its injuries (minor) are suitably dealt with. It survives. The quadruped is attached to a series of metal links that inhibit its movements.

Conclusion: This particular interaction raises questions about the dominant species and their young. It would seem that younglings

have a disadvantage in the power relationship field, not only within their own species (see the groundbreaking S:Biped(domina), Sub-report 887.611, Title: Younglings: in a power deficit), but are also at a disadvantage when it comes to interspecies interactions.

Further observations of such interactions (i.e. between younglings and other species) will need to be documented, and this may add to the knowledge of the dominant bipedal species' development and evolution.

Signed: Loj Hurplok, of the Poika (Chief Analyst: S:IntInt)

Date: 257/67/21088

## Sa'ad

The growing friendship with Ahmed was lifting his spirits, giving him hope. They went swimming at the remote reservoir on his father's date farm, and Sa'ad saw him undress and felt an ache in his groin. Ahmed just grinned.

And then just as they stood on the brink, Sa'ad's mother phoned. "Sa'ad, my son, can you help me," not a question, a summons. Since women aren't allowed to drive, men are always being called on to ferry and fetch. When he got home, she was waiting at the street door, covered as required in abayya and niqb, and chatting to another, unidentifiable woman.

"Sa'ad, this is Ameya, from next door. She needs to do some grocery shopping. And I need to go to the hospital. And so you can drop me first, and then take her to the supermarket, and then come back for me when she's done."

He dropped Ameya off at the entrance and went to find a parking spot. Only then did he notice the three or four mutawwa, the religious police, watching him closely. What he failed to notice was another two mutawwa intercepting Ameya as she walked through the doors into the supermarket.



His fellow inmate stirs and announces he is horny, rubbing himself. Sa'ad stands up to wash at the broken basin. Fear and uncertainty make him spill water down the front of his scratchy prison-issue kamees.

"Khulwa, that's what I'm in for," says the horny man, still rubbing himself. "But I never got to fuck her." Regret so shallow, like his breathing. "I only sat with her for a few minutes, holding her hand. Then those bearded bastards pulled up and pulled us out of the car. Mutawwa! Such hard men. No mercy. Khulwa, they shouted, the illegal mingling of unrelated members of the opposite sex. You also, huh?" Sa'ad nods. The man stands, hoists up his kamees, goes into the corner to piss. "Gha! Can't piss with a hardon!"



Sa'ad considered driving away when he saw the group of mutawwa,

but by then there were two blocking his exit. He left the car running and lit a cigarette. Then he saw two of them dragging a black-covered woman towards his car.

A truncheon tapped against his window, "Get out of the car, brother!"

He stared forward, smoke in his eyes from the cigarette in his mouth as he gripped the steering wheel tightly. Another tap, harder, and the woman's shrill protests, louder.

An opaque web spread across the glass and the car door was wrenched open. Sa'ad was grabbed roughly by the arm and thrown to the ground, a truncheon finding the back of his head. Blood and bits of garbage filled his mouth.



He is grabbed from behind, as he replays the nightmare. His kamees is thrown over his head. It hurts sharply and deep, as he is pinned to the basin by the stronger man. It doesn't last long, however, and Sa'ad is thrown to the ground. He lies there realising that everything has changed. His crime is meaningless in the context of his feelings and experience. His punishment awaits, perhaps lashes and a short prison sentence. His future is not here in the Kingdom. He will go to his cousins in Beirut.

**Morning is broken**

In the still morning light  
 sleep moments ago  
 there's a rattle at the gate

The builders are back  
 after two days of absence  
 and private soul silence

The clang of a ladder  
 and a face at the window  
 watching me take a crap

I protest  
 "Some privacy,  
 please!"

The bossman calls loudly  
 to his men: "Ignore him,  
 he's not the owner.  
 he's just a wanker!"

My anger is uncontrollable and sudden:  
 "Fucking PRICK!"  
 Wrapped in a towel, I confront him

His belly, which precedes him,  
 intimidates my threshold

I push him and slam  
 the door in his face

More shouting and threats  
 from his Eastern Cape mouth  
 As I try to make tea  
 Spilling sugar  
 and milk

## Prologue to a novella

### I.

The flash of lightning reveals the best opening to the rocky inlet, but the wind continues to push at the boat, forcing it closer to the jagged cliffs to the south. He throws his weight behind the tiller, hauling and holding on as the waves emerge from the darkness, moving mountains backed by immovable ones. He tries to call to his companion, to warn of the danger, but the screaming wind, the thunderous air and water take his voice away.

His companion is desperately trying to control the flapping sail, the one that they had half up before the gale struck, the one they had hoped would get them into the shelter of the inlet before the racing clouds and ominous darkness engulfed them. The wind swirls and hits them first one side then the other, and the waves pile up against the rocks, plunge over the gunwale, and carry the wooden vessel high above the maelstrom, and then down, surrounded by heaving dark walls of water. And up again, and down.

The two companions have had many encounters with storms before, but never quite so fierce, and never in such proximity to mountains and a rocky shore. Their first storm had been out at sea, far from land, and the size and effortless energy of the waves then had kept them busy and alert through that long day and night. By the time their third or fourth storm came they were able to prepare, and manage the sails and tiller with some experience and facility.

But this night, the storm had come in quickly, racing in from the north-west, trapping them against the jagged coastline, forcing them to look for a place to shelter, even to haul out of the water. The mountainous islands and narrow inlets of this region had looked very inviting and the wide, v-shaped bay they were trying to penetrate had seemed particularly beautiful in the late afternoon sunlight.

They were looking up in awe at the grey-golden mountains and the slopes strewn with flowers and greenery, when he'd spotted the little house up in a dell, half-hidden by a copse of trees. Steering carefully up between the mountains seemed simple since the wind was then from behind and gentle. But as the sun reached the horizon, and the flooded valley they were slowly moving into narrowed and curved slightly, the wind suddenly gusted.

Their boat yawed alarmingly in the slap of wind, and they turned to look out to the more open waters to see the approaching storm. Within minutes they found themselves battling to keep from the rocks frothing the water at the edges of the inlet.

Another flash and he sees a beach ahead and to the port side. He waves wildly to catch his companion's attention, and points at the spot. The water streaming in his eyes from the rain and the sea spray is cold and sharp, but the flashes of lightning and the lighter colour of the beach allow him to see enough to know that, unless they turn the boat into the wind as they approach the beach, they will be thrown on the rocks surrounding the sandy cove.

He wrestles some more with the tiller, throwing his whole weight behind the thrust, forcing the prow to cut into the slapping waves and the heaving sea in the direction he wants. His companion has the sail under control at last, has tied it down, and is watching the approaching waves and the sandy beach for hidden rocks and other hazards.

The cove is slightly overhung by a cliff and, as they reach the relative quiet in the lee of the steep rocks, the boat's keel scrapes on something, and the next moment they are grabbing to hold on as the boat hits the sand and slides around and over on its side, the waves trying to push it further up, while the gusty wind seems intent on pushing it out into the churning, heaving waters.

He leaps, almost falling, onto the wet sand, splashing into a wave washing up around the boat. The top of the mast is stuck in the sand further up the beach, and the push-pull of wind and water is threatening with loud creaks and complaints. His companion has also made it to the sand and is heaving at the prow, trying to turn the boat upright. He gets to the top of the mast where it is dug into the sand, reaches under and lifts, grunting and straining as a wave shoves the boat on its exposed keel.

The mast snaps near its middle, and splinters and ropes fly off, many of the pieces disappearing into the howling gale. But the boat can now right itself and they haul it up the beach a little, away from the clutching sea, into the deep lee of the cliff.

The companions collapse with their backs to the hull and breath deep sighs, while checking each other for damage.

A small gash on his cheek, a deeply bruised arm where his companion was thrown against the gunwale during the first mad

moments as the storm front hit them, splinters and scrapes.

He looks into his companion's eyes, and says, "Now what?"



She was always the one with the plans. She was the one who had suggested they build up the little boat they found stuck on a beach below their old hunting grounds near where drowned old Brisbane lay. She was the one who scoured the few books they had, looking for guidance and information about boat repair, boat building and boat handling. She was the one with the restless heart, and the deep curiosity. She was the one who convinced him to leave their little community and sail off into the blue, looking for adventure and new places. Looking for legends. Looking for a man called Forest.

He never once regretted putting his life into her hands, allowing her to take control. He loved her, and through his respect and admiration for her intelligence and forceful energy he was happy. He had the greater physical strength, but she had the will and the ideas. Together they made a formidable pair.

Now, as they sit on a drenched beach, soaked to the very core of warmth, he looks at her, and she smiles.

"Well, big boy, first, let's get something warm and dry on our bodies, and then we can try to make a fire. I feel like some hot tea."



The rest of the night, the storm battering the landscape and the sea, they shelter in the little tent-cabin on the boat after piling sand and rocks around the hull to prevent further movement or toppling. They do not get much sleep, however. The complete lack of movement, of rockings and slidings, sways and yaws, up and down, make them freeze in anticipation of a roll or a jump.

But there is none, no movement of deck or wall or table or shelf. It all stubbornly remains unmoving. Except a mad vibration from the edge of the broken mast in the swirling winds.

He starts from light sleep more than once through the night, hearing voices in the air, or howls, and once for certain a rumbling like the engines of old industry. But perhaps they were dreams and fancies, perhaps landslides, or ocean booming in drowned rooms beneath the risen sea.

## Two chapters from a novella

It rained – horizontal, icy, incessant rain – for two or three days in that first week. Coupled with cold wind, it made the shortest walks – to Peppergrove Mall for a movie, or from a friend’s place after supper – the most unthinkable task.

The week set the tone for the next month or so, and though the cold did let up for a while, I had already become accustomed to spending my nights and most of my days indoors.

Like a splash of water to the face, it was exactly what I needed to wake me, and I flung myself into my work. The blocks on the calendar weren’t filled with red marks, but its pages did fly by, and after five or six weeks, I found I was way ahead of schedule and poised – if not eager – to take on the upcoming examinations. I was up-to-date with all my notes, assignments and essays, had planned and helped organise events for the Muslim Students’ Association, and had also seen to Mika’eel when it came to his speeches.

There weren’t many events in the second term, but he did call on me to write a couple of pieces for him. One of them, given during a demonstration protesting the illegal building of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, stood out for me. From the perch of an upturned bin, Mika’eel delivered it magnificently, and I could see that it moved the audience. I began to realise that the facts surrounding what was happening in the Palestinian territories would naturally appal most people – particularly young South Africans – but it took the right words and the right speak to *move* them and inspire some sort of action.

Mika’eel was a born speaker and leader, and in an odd way, I was immensely proud of him, but I did put a little pride aside for myself as well. I felt my contributions helped and that it meant something, especially when students returned – with one or two friends – to lend their support and listen to what was being said at subsequent events and protests.

I’m certain Mika’eel could sense my admiration. He could always sense admiration, and played to it the same way a child would when showing off to adoring parents – he’d do more of the same to get a repeat reaction.

People loved him when he spoke to them, when they saw him

or were in his company, and they always wanted more. He wanted them to want more, and played it just right. At his home, he would be the most spellbinding host, coolly floating between visitors, before leaving abruptly – but politely – not to be seen again that evening.

In public, he was the same. When trickles from the audience would clamour for his private opinion after an event, he'd tease them with his attention and charm, and then offer a helpful excuse to cover his escape:

"This is Ahmad... Brightest guy I know... My speechwriter... Does all the research... Probably knows more on the subject than I do... Why don't you ask him?"

He wasn't trying to flatter me, he was trying to flatter himself. I don't think anyone at campus had a 'speechwriter' at his or her side. It should have come across as pretentious or lazy, but coming from Mika'eel, it sounded regal and magnificent.

They were enchanted and he was gone, and it was like an illusionist disappearing in a puff of smoke – you couldn't wait for the next performance.

It didn't surprise me then, when I didn't hear from Mika'eel for two or three weeks. It was his style to ignore me completely and then demand my attention for a few, full days at a time.

It suited me fine, and with my course work out of the way, I started on a gruelling studying timetable where I spent most of my time camped out at the library. I could have worked at my flat – saving myself a walk in the cold to and from campus every morning and evening – but I found a study partner in Aaliyah, and my schedule revolved around her.

"It's freezing, Ahmad. Aren't you freezing? How is it you choose this freezing cold and this freezing library over your bed and cosy flat with food and tea and everything nice? I bet you brave this freezing cold to come and see me, don't you?" she asked on a particularly cold evening as I walked her back to res after a study session. She laughed and it warmed me through the winter night.

I'd smile and shrug it off whenever she spoke like that, not daring to commit any kind of answer.

"You have such a long way back home. You're silly, but it's an ok-kind-of-silly if it's for me," she'd often say as I left her at her doorstep.

It was as I was saying goodbye to her one night – four or five days

before my first exam – that I checked my phone. It had been on silent in the library, and I found a message from Mika'eel, sent half an hour ago:

MY PLACE IN 5. MAKE SHARP

"Sounds ominous," said Aaliyah, peering over my shoulder.

"I don't think it's for me," I said, my shoulders hunched in the wind. I was tired and had a walk with a bagful of books ahead. I tried calling.

"You'd better get inside and get warm," I told Aaliyah as I listened to his voicemail. I didn't know what message to leave and hung up.

"And you'd better get over there. The guy does pay the bills that keep *you* warm," she said, smiling. She waved and disappeared into the building.

Grahamstown often plays witness to nights where it seems that all Rhodes students descend on its pavements, migrating from one drinking hole to another. It almost always happens a few days before exams and I was always curious how word got out that the night to come would be set aside for 'going big'. There must have been some secret memo distributed, commanding students to close their books, disregard the weather and take to the streets for a night out.

I watched the hordes with amusement as I made my way down New Street – past Olde 65, the Rat & Parrot and Friars – towards The Wheel. Most of the people I saw weren't dressed for the cold, but they didn't seem to notice.

The door was unlocked but, unusually, there was no one in the house. I called out a few times and assumed that Mika'eel must have gone out for a while, and had left the place open for me, or whoever it was he was trying to summon.

I spent the next two hours between idling on the couch in the living room and reading over some notes in Mika'eel's room – the only place in the house with a desk. More than once I considered leaving, but I could hear crowds – drunk and rowdy – moving past the house, and feared leaving the place empty and unlocked. After a dozen or so attempts at calling Mika'eel failed, I reached a point of exasperation where I resigned myself to staying until someone came to relieve me. I settled on his big wingback chair in the lounge, hoping that it wouldn't be too long before that happened. His place was always so warm, and I struggled to keep my heavy eyelids open as I kept watch on the front door.

I woke – I’m not certain after how long – to the sound of a door being thrown open and Mika’eel’s figure standing in the entrance.

“Who’s been sitting in my chair, said papa bear,” Mika’eel said, stumbling in and looking me over. “Why, it’s Ahmad, the rock star, coming to join the party!”

I gritted my teeth and stood up. He wasn’t saying my name right.

“Do you know the house was open? I have things to do. What did you want...?”

I hoped my irritation would show somewhere in my expression or stance or in my shaking voice, but I was interrupted as two other figures stumbled into the lounge from behind him.

One of them was Neil, but the girl gripping his arm for balance was strange to me. Her top had slipped down her shoulder and she held a bottle loosely in her hand, as if it might drop at any second.

I looked back to Mika’eel, who seemed to be waiting for me to carry on with my rant. He was dressed in one of his long, plush coats. This one, with a darkening stain on the lapel, didn’t seem as immaculately kept as the others. The buttons were undone and untucked edges of his shirt had escaped his tight designer jeans. He swayed slightly in front of me.

I felt my chest draw tight and fingers dig into my leg as the pieces came together. I looked up at him.

“You’re drunk.”

I don’t know whether it was a question or a statement. I don’t know what it sounded like to him, but he straightened a bit to glare at me and for a moment, those arrogant eyes bore through my own and a darkness sank into me.

In an instant though, the stare was gone and he made for the couch nearest the door. Flopping down onto it, he ruffled in the inside of his coat for a pack of cigarettes. The couple followed his lead and took their place on the couch opposite, ignoring me entirely. I was standing in the same place as I was when they entered.

He laughed a bit as he watched Neil and the girl, and then placed a cigarette between his lips and then searched the room helplessly. With a sigh, he tipped his head back toward me and used the periphery of his eyes to scan the worn jacket I had on. I felt uncomfortable.

“Give me a lighter, will you?” he said, eyes fixed on my pockets.

“You’re drunk,” I repeated.

“What the hell are you on about? Do you have a damn lighter or not?”

The girl looked stunned. She had clearly never seen Mika’eel as an impatient brat.

“You know I don’t smoke,” I said. I wanted to shout, but my voice was low and meek. But I didn’t look away. I was staring him down, the same as I did that bully all those years ago.

The cigarette dropped out of his mouth and he stood to face me. His body wasn’t quite upright, but he was still much taller. He started laughing – a soft, sarcastic laugh that had a cruel sound to it.

The laughter stopped and he glowered: “Ya, so I was drinking. So what? Huh?!”

“You must think me some kind of lost soul, don’t you? I bet you want to tell everyone at mosque about me, right? Go on. You have my blessing. Paint it on the walls that Mika’eel Musa goes out and drinks with the white people!”

He did a kind of turn, hands gesticulating and sweeping from corner to corner of the lounge. By now, Neil and the girl had stopped whatever it was they were doing to listen to Mika’eel. My ears burned as I caught them looking at me expectantly.

“What are you even doing here in this place, you filthy hypocrite? You don’t belong. Go back to your life with the *moulana* and your family and all those self-righteous Muslims you call brothers!”

His jaw clenched and his face grew dark as he drew closer to me.

“Go on, tell me what I’ve done is *haraam*. That I’m going to burn in *jahannam* for what I do. You think it’s as simple as that, you poor ignorant hypocrite?”

I took a step back and launched a fist up at his face. It landed squarely in his mouth, knuckles connecting with lip and tooth.



The blow didn’t knock him over, but he reeled wildly on the spot. By the time he steadied himself, it had dawned on him what had happened. It took a while before it registered for me and I missed the precious few moments needed to avoid Mika’eel as he hurled his body into me.

We fell to the floor and for the first few seconds – through shouted protests and high-pitched screams from Neil and the girl – I did everything I could to block my face from a flurry of angry swings. I



wondered whether Neil would step in to stop Mika'eel, but in that cloud of fists and blood, I felt like his shouting could go on forever.

I managed to hook a forearm around Mika'eel's stomach and somehow pushed him over. I climbed on top and tried to pin his arms down, but they flailed violently and I could only grip one of his wrists. The stench of his breath reached me as he swore and cursed and ordered me to get off, and I reacted by throwing a punch – followed by another and another – into his cheek.

He seemed to go limp and I immediately let go of him, standing up quickly and retreating from his body as if it were diseased.

Neil was silent now. The girl was making a strange, crying noise with her mouth shut, and was hanging on to a part of Neil's jersey. Like spectators in a stadium, they both peered from their seats, nervous about the outcome of the game.

I wiped blood – I'm not sure whose – from my face. The skin above my brow was torn and felt like it was ablaze, but that was nothing compared to the inferno in my chest. There was a sense of burning anguish that came with the realisation of what I'd just done, and the thought of bone and flesh giving way to knuckles – my knuckles – stoked the flames.

Mika'eel groaned from the floor and slowly sat up, holding his face gingerly. His mouth was bleeding and his hair sat at right angles to his proud, broad forehead. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

I thought how unlikely it was that anyone had ever seen him like this before.

It seemed that he was thinking the same. He trained his gaze at me and then at the couple and spoke in a slow, measured tone:

“Get out.”

Neil and the girl were statues, stuck to one another in an absurd embrace.

“I said, get out.”

He didn't raise his voice, but the words rang out when he said it that second time. The two got up to leave, the girl leaving her bottle behind. I made to follow them, pausing for a second, because I remembered leaving my bag – with all my books and notes – in the bedroom. I didn't care. I wanted to leave all of this and get outside and into the cold.

I didn't look at Mika'eel at all as I made for the door, but I stopped

when I heard the soft voice, lifting from his place on the floor.

“Not you, Ahmad. Please stay.”

This time, he said my name properly.

I didn't stay. I didn't even turn around before closing the door and leaving The Wheel, but I only made it a hundred metres or so before my pace slackened and my feet ground to a stop. The wind tortured the cut on my brow and I took in long breaths of hard, cold air, and unclenched and clenched my hands inside my jacket pockets. White drafts of hot air pushed out of my mouth and I took a few moments to think. I had to go back.

I was relieved to find that the door hadn't been locked and I considered knocking after I pushed it open. No one else ever seemed to knock. Why should I, I thought.

I don't know if I expected Mika'eel (or some remnants of him) to still be on the floor where I left him, but I checked the spot carefully to make sure he wasn't there.

My bag was in the bedroom – his bedroom – and I entered without knowing what I'd say if he was there. I didn't get as far as forming an opening statement when I decided to return.

He was sitting on the edge of his bed with his back towards the door, but he must have heard the front door and turned to face me as I came in. Not unlike the brooding villain in a Bond movie, I thought.

“Oh, it's you. You came back.”

He was trying to sound nonchalant, but there was something in his voice that failed him. He turned away again, looking into the full-length mirror that stood in the corner. I wasn't gone for very long, but got the feeling that he had been gazing into the mirror for hours before I had arrived. I watched him, trying to decide how to respond, when he spoke:

“The fat, ugly bastard. I don't look anything like him, you know.”

He pushed his hair back and raised his square chin, turning it from side to side. He pursed his swollen lip as he examined himself. He was having a hard time focusing, as his body lurched back and forward in a slow, enunciated motion. His breathing was heavy, laboured.

“The fat. Ugly. Bastard.”

“Get into bed, Mika'eel,” I said, moving across the room to get my bag. My eyes were stinging from the cold and I was too tired and hurt to try and make sense of anything he was saying. He was drunk and rambling. He was always rambling.

Narrowed eyes still fixed on the mirror, Mika'eel waved for me to sit down. I carried on, getting together my things and starting for the door.

"I'm not like him, Ahmad. I'm not," he said, turning and looking at me, pleading.

Holding my bag, I half-sat, half-leaned against the surface of his desk, and looked back at him. It gave me some satisfaction to see him in this sorry state. I'm ashamed to admit that that's what made me stay.

"Who?" I asked.

"My ballie," he said, sitting up straight and puffing out his chest. "Yaqoob Musa. Jakes Musa. *My* father."

In the time I'd known Mika'eel, he'd never spoken about his family. I sat down on the desk. Even in this condition, he still knew how to hook an audience.

"He drinks too, you know," he said. He saw my expression and added quickly: "But I'm not like him, Ahmad."

I didn't want to hear him. It was misdirection, all of it. My rage at the situation, my rage at him – it had subsided and he was trying to win me over to whatever he was thinking or wanted me to think.

"He drinks and gambles and cheats people out of their money. Where do you think of all of this comes from?"

And just like that, the anger was gone and I was hooked again.

"People trust him and he steals from them."

"Mika'eel, how can you possibly know...?"

"How do I know what he does for a living? Not from him, that's for sure. I have to hear from other people. People – their parents – from our school. Families that you and I *know*. Angry people who come to his office, to *our house*. People we all pretend don't exist."

I looked at him blankly.

"Do you know why I don't go to mosque, Ahmad? Why I stopped going back home? I had to watch the ballie walk – walk into the house of Allah – and shake hands with men he knew he was robbing, and talk about business like nothing was wrong. Who can pray like that? How can you make *namaaz* and ask Allah for anything when the man you're standing next to is going to be destroyed by my ballie's fat, greedy fingers?"

Mika'eel's face looked bruised and defeated, and his voice seemed to match.

"I feel dirty in the clothes I wear. I hate what I have."

He gripped the top of his shirt and ripped it open with a sharp sound. Material folded with the tear, exposing his chest. He considered the damage and his attention was drawn to a button he'd clawed off, now clutched in his hand. Looking down at it, he began sobbing into his palm.

I moved towards him, but he looked up and I stopped.

"I could forget about that. I could forget it all if I stayed here and didn't have to see him, but I can't forgive him for cheating on my mother."

"Mika'eel..."

"No, I know he does. He and all those other rich pricks who think that they can do anything because they have money. They have their little 'social' clubs and go on 'business' trips all the time."

"You don't know for sure," I said. I don't know if I said it because I wanted him to believe it or because I wanted him to stop talking.

"No, I do know, Ahmad, and I want you to know because I need you to know why I'm... why I'm so..."

His head and gaze dropped a bit, and he wiped the side of his face.

"Cheats on her. The fat, ugly bastard. Cheats on *my* mother with who knows what kind of whores. My mother. Have you ever seen her?"

I shook my head, not knowing if I was meant to have known what she looked like.

"I don't even know how he got her. The fat bastard. He didn't always have money so I don't know what she saw. She stays because she has nowhere to go. She didn't study, she doesn't work. She only has me. *She stays for me*."

He pushed his nose against his palm and sniffed. After a few seconds, he exhaled loudly and looked up.

"She's incredible, Ahmad. Beautiful – so very beautiful – and so much *sabr*. So much patience to stay with him. She never even talks about it."

He looked at me now. That direct, piercing stare I remember from the first time we met. His eyes – usually shining with arrogance – were suddenly sober with tears. They shone with a hurt I'd never before seen in person.

"She doesn't even talk about how much he hates me, Ahmad. I know she knows, but she won't admit that he hates me."

Still I searched for words, but couldn't find anything. I just kept looking at the bent, broken figure in front of me.

Mika'eel looked away and wiped his face with the back of his hand. He laughed a bit and the old, handsome smile returned for a moment: "The ballie doesn't even know what I do here, doesn't even know what I'm studying, what I'm involved with. He doesn't talk to me. Just sends me all this money and thinks we're a happy family."

He looked around at the room – at the ornate white frame of the mirror, at the dark grey, pinch-pleated drapes drawn across the windows, at the sturdy, mahogany desk I was leaning against, at the soft duvet across the queen-sized bed he was sitting on.

"I don't want all of this. I don't want this life."

For the first time, I looked at Mika'eel and all that he had, and didn't see them as gifts.

"He's a piece of shit, Ahmad."

"Mika'eel, he's still..."

"I know, he's still my father, but I don't care..."

"No, you listen. Stop being such an idiot. All I'm hearing is justification for you to behave like this. You still don't have any excuse."

Mika'eel was quiet and he looked down at his feet, not offering any defense. I took it as a cue.

"You know as well as I do the status Allah has given parents, and maybe there's all this to figure out, but he's still your father. He might be wrong – I don't know – but that's not in your hands, right? It's not your place to call him 'a piece of shit' or any reason to drink or do whatever you've been doing. You have no damn excuse and I'm tired of you acting like it doesn't matter. Or that you don't care about anything. I know you do."

I was standing now, breathless and surprised at myself. Mika'eel looked at me, nodding sombrely and then laid back onto the bed, feet still touching the ground over the side.

"I know. You're right." he said, placing his hands over his forehead, palms pushing against his eyes.

His subdued reaction made me feel awkward. I thought the verbal attack might cause him to fling himself at me again, and I was suddenly aware that I had been holding my bag to my chest – like a shield – the entire time.

"You're right, Ahmad," he said again, speaking to himself more

than to me.

"Get into bed, Mika'eel."

"You're right, I should."

He kicked off his shoes and I helped him out of his jacket. There were dried bloodstains on it. I felt guilty as I looked at his torn clothes and discoloured face.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'll get it – all your stuff – cleaned tomorrow. I'm sorry... I hit you."

His eyes closed as he placed himself onto the mattress, pulling the duvet from the other half of the bed over him.

"Don't worry about it. I'll send it across to get washed..." he murmured. "Don't know where my keys are... Take my car back to your place if you need... Or use the spare room. Whatever."

His breathing shallowed and I moved to the light switch to the side of his bed. It was then that his eyes opened with a jolt.

"Ahmad, is there blood on my clothes?"

The words were clear, but the effort of speaking drained him. His eyelids seemed too heavy to stay open, and he started drifting again as I flicked the switch. The room was dark save for a stream of light from the passage filtering through the door and across the floor where I stood.

"*Jee*, there's blood all over. I'm sorry."

I could just about make out his words as he lay on his side facing me, as one side of his mouth spoke into the pillow.

"No, I'm sorry," he said. His eyes blinked open once more and then remained closed, "I have HIV."

**Anirood Singh**

## In the name of the family

A PLAY IN SIX SCENES

### GLOSSARY OF HINDI TERMS

<i>amadio</i>	expression of surprise
<i>Atma</i>	God, the Almighty
<i>beti</i>	daughter
<i>bhai/bhaia</i>	brother
<i>dharma</i>	one's moral and social obligations (like ubuntu)
<i>dharti</i>	earth; soil
<i>gora</i>	white or European male; light-skinned Indian male
<i>ha/ha ji</i>	yes
<i>karia</i>	black; dark-skinned Indian
<i>karma</i>	fate, destiny, kismet
<i>kasbeen</i>	bitch; prostitute
<i>kudhi</i>	vagina
<i>samajtha</i>	understand
<i>sarangi</i>	homemade fiddle carved out of a tree trunk
<i>shadi</i>	marriage, a wedding ceremony

### CHARACTERS:

HAWA, an emaciated Indian man in his sixties, is barefoot, wears an old straw hat, torn lounge shirt, his pants, rolled up to his ankles, are fastened by a necktie.

DONDHO, an Indian man in his fifties, tall, balding, with a potbelly, clean-shaven, pock-marked face, Stalin moustache, wears an old black suit three times too small, a bowler hat, and a soiled tie. Over his shoulder is a hooked walking stick around which is threaded a cloth bag.

SOOBRI, a dark-skinned Indian barman, in his thirties.

SETTING: INDIAN VILLAGE IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA, 1950s

## SCENE ONE: A HINDU MARRIAGE CEREMONY

*(Sounds of merriment – laughter, song, music, clapping, etc.)*

*(The stage is brightly decorated. Much hustle and bustle, by people in colourful traditional attire. The priest is chanting next to a small brazier. On a throne-like bench sits the groom in a Nehru suit and a jewel-studded red turban. His face is covered by a veil of colourful beads and marigold petals hanging from the turban.)*

*(There is a hush as the veiled, sari-clad bride is led down the aisle by her brother, and is guided to the bench. She sits alongside her husband to be. The priest motions to the bridesmaid. She nods, unclasps the bride's veil. The bride leans across and lifts the veil over the groom. An intake of breath, then a shriek. She runs from the stage, screaming. Pandemonium ensues.)*

## SCENE TWO: A YEAR LATER

*(HAWA sits on a bench in front of his shack, tuning his sarangi. A shadow falls across him; he looks up.)*

HAWA *(smiles)* Dondho bhai! Come, sit.  
*(DONDHO sits, with a sigh)*  
 What wrong? You look like your goat died. You still not thinking of that kasbeen that ran away from your wedding?

DONDHO *(bursts out crying, covers his face with his hands)* No, man. I forgot her long time ago. This last proposal, yesterday. *(beat)* She said “no”, bhaia.

HAWA Tsk, tsk, tsk. *(puts a hand on Dondho's shoulder)*  
 Never mind. There'll be other ladies waiting to get married.

DONDHO What, in my next life? My brother, I'm fifty years old – looking like sixty. Who'll marry a battler like me? Better I was dead *(pause)* like Sheila.

HAWA *(frowning)* Who?

DONDHO My wife – dead fourteen years now.

HAWA *(mournful)* Ha, I heard. Drowned in uMgeni River, no?

DONDHO *(shaking his head)* Hmm. Flood time. Never found the body.

HAWA Tsk, tsk, tsk. She never got a child?

DONDHO Naw. Married eight years. Nothing.

HAWA Long time. She didn't... umh... get in family way any time?

DONDHO Never got pregnant.

HAWA *(frowns, sips his drink)* You didn't try...? Never mind. We must find... suitable future for you. Quickly.

DONDHO Waste of time. I been looking thirteen years. All the girls say “no”.

HAWA *(nodding)* The last... bride never saw your face...

DONDHO Her father owed me money, couldn't pay...

HAWA So he gave you his daughter! My brother, don't get cross with me, okay? But I think problem is you want high caste wife. *(counts on fingers)*  
 Two, you looking for a gori, not karia. Three, bride must not be fat and ugly. Four, she gotta be young enough to bear children. Hard to find, like searching for a two-penny coin in the mud, especially when you getting old...

DONDHO And also looking like bulldog. Don't be shy to say that. But you forgot one thing.

HAWA Huh?

DONDHO I hope bride coming with big dowry so I can pay Dehal what I owe him. Last wedding costed lot of money. Still paying that one debt. *(HAWA frowns)*  
 No wife, no son, no money. Better I be dead. But looks like Ma is going before me – won't see no grandson.

HAWA Shh. Don't talk like that, man. Nobody must be frightened of dying. We all born to die... when, how, where is decided before. Live short time, then go back where we came from... ashes, throwed in sea.

DONDHO *(crooked smile)* Didn't know you can make speech. Worrying thing is Ma's blood pressure and sugar now gone too high. Doctor Pillay called me one side and said her kidneys not working properly. Ma won't live long. *(sniffs, wipes his eyes)*

HAWA I sorry about your ma. That's why we must find one bride, now, now. She'll look after you and her

mother-in-law, nicely.

DONDHO Hawabhai, tell me. What if a feller go before his time, when he not finished doing what Atma put him on this dharti to do?

HAWA *(sips his drink, looks apologetic)* That is karma. But let's not talk 'bout dying.

DONDHO Believing in dharma and karma means anybody can die anytime, just like that! *(snaps his fingers)* Only problem, if I have no son, family name can't carry on.

HAWA *(frowning)* You only man I know got only one problem.

DONDHO Eh? What you mean, bhaia?

HAWA Getting wife is one thing, but a baby don't come by magic. God will help, but you must... Samajtha?

DONDHO *(sbrugs)* I thinking man is like motor car – you have to keep fixing it as it gets old. When too rusty, can't start, and all, you leave it in Mothi's scrap yard, motor car graveyard.

HAWA *(smiles)* Didn't know you can make speech. We got to organise 'nother wedding proposal.

DONDHO *(wiping his eyes, sniffing)* I not sure, Hawabhai. Only yesterday, I heard that girl asking her ma why they brought such a ugly old man for future husband. Then her father told me, "Sorry, my beti is not yet ready to get married." He not sorry; I not blind, not deaf.

HAWA Forget 'bout all that; there's plenty more fish in Indian Ocean.

DONDHO *(digs in a nostril, extracts a piece of mucus, which he rolls into a ball with thumb and forefinger, and deftly flicks it)* Not worried 'bout no fish, pish... just shadi. *(licks his lips, dabs his eyes)*

## SCENE THREE: IN A NOISY INDIAN BAR

DONDHO *(sits at the bar, his top hat on the counter that SOOBRI, is polishing.)*

SOOBRI *(conspiratorially)* Know why no aunty with half a brain

will marry you, Don?

DONDHO Naw, but you gonna tell me, eh Midnight?

SOOBRI Ha! Because you look and dress just like a funeral undertaker, living in the time of Dickens...

DONDHO Who this, 'Dickens'? *(throws a peanut in the air and opens his mouth to catch it – he misses)*

SOOBRI *(shows perfect teeth)* Never mind, my big bro. If you want a woman, you must look better, talk better, smell better. Show you are a sharp gentleman... have style and taste.

DONDHO *(gulps his drink, licks his lips noisily)* Don't know why black feller like you think... and talk like European.

SOOBRI *(grins, pours another drink for Dondho)* Forget all that. Know who got nice and drunk here last night?

DONDHO I not God – don't got eyes everywhere.

SOOBRI Your father in law...

DONDHO *(rubs his nose)* Oh, what he said?

SOOBRI Plenty, like most drinkers whose tongues get loosened by beer and cane.

DONDHO So, he was talking nonsense?

SOOBRI Not sure it was all nonsense, Don, my bro. In summary, he said you are not a man, but a lady-killer.

DONDHO What he meaning, bhai?

SOOBRI *(grinning)* So, Midnight has changed to bhai, eh? Bishum said you could have saved your wife, his daughter. Said maybe you pushed her into the river.

DONDHO It was flood time, Soobri. We standing on the bank, seeing the pumpkins and cows and goats floating down, fast. The bank broke, Sheila fell in. I tried to catch her. Too late – water took her away, so fast, I couldn't do nothing.

SOOBRI Shame. And you didn't have any children?

DONDHO No, but we was happy, then God took her from me. It was karma. *(gulps his drink, wipes his eyes)*

SOOBRI A sad story, but that is history...

DONDHO His story? It's not my story, barman, it's what happened.

SOOBRI I know. I'm sorry for you. Don't be a loser, feel sorry for yourself. It's time to move on, get a new life. There's another way.

DONDHO Way?

SOOBRI *(looks about)* Seems like all you wanting is a womb, a bag of water to hold a baby boy. It's like renting a room, a womb.

*(laughs hysterically, thumps the bar counter)*

DONDHO Don't know what you talking, karia.

SOOBRI You can buy a kudhi, *(makes an "o" sign with thumb and forefinger)* white one, cheap, in our red light district.

DONDHO *(frowns)* Red light district? Where that?

SOOBRI *(shows teeth)* Point Road. But tell me, Don, why get buckled to an old cow when you can get fresh milk and meat at a low price, no worries, eh?

DONDHO Indian, coloured, African fellers can get locked up just looking at white lady. Big worry.

SOOBRI Looking is free, window shopping. Fucking, you pay for.

DONDHO *(glares)* Never paid for... for...

SOOBRI *(chuckles)* A kasbeen? You are stingy.

DONDHO Stingy, mingy, no.

SOOBRI So you'll only do it for love?

DONDHO Naw, just need son to carry Ramlall name, do the prayers, sacrifices, and all, after I gone.

SOOBRI You still have to pay your dues on earth, dharm. Anyway, once you get a taste of kudhi, you won't eat anything else.

DONDHO Can I get a nice, high caste wife in red light district?

SOOBRI *(laughs uproariously, thumps the bar counter)* Not even in your wet dreams, Don! Not even if you can pay a hefty price. You can't buy love.

DONDHO Just a wife, by hook or crook.

SOOBRI Didn't you hear the song, "Love and marriage"? You can't get married just to eat meat pie or only to make babies. Married life is like a prison sentence – you need love to take away the pain of slow torture.

DONDHO I don't want hear jailbird stories. If I can say like this: I have a nest, and want a warm she-bird to stay

with me.

SOOBRI *(grins)* If I can say like this: You can't buy a bird like a fowl at Singh's Poultry Market.

DONDHO *(shakes his head, gulps a drink, and belches)* So, I must 'find' love, something I can't buy. How will I know I got 'love' if I can't see or feel or hear or smell or taste it, barman?

SOOBRI How can I explain so even a big baby like you can understand? Love, between man and woman, is to do with happiness. Rush to get married, and you may find out too late what it is.

DONDHO *(shakes his head, gulps a drink)* Midnight, you can talk, né? Stop drinking that monkey piss you sell.

SOOBRI Ja. Love, happiness, nothing in life is free, bro. You always pay, somehow. Sorry, but I have to ask this question: you ever naaied a woman?

*(Dondho's startled expression is all-revealing)*

A sixty year-old virgin! Amadio!

DONDHO Fifty.

SCENE FOUR: IN FRONT OF HAWA'S SHACK – A WEEK LATER  
*(HAWA and DONDHO sit on a bench drinking Mainstay from two chipped enamel cups. A half-empty nip bottle rests alongside.)*

HAWA *(sips the cane spirit as if it were a vintage wine, his Adam's-apple bobs)*

Heard you got pick-pocketed in Point Road last Saturday. What you was doing in that kind place?

DONDHO Nothing.

HAWA *(wipes his hand over his face to hide his grin)* Got nice girl for you.

DONDHO *(eyebrows raised)* Who?

HAWA Kewla. Garib's daughter.

DONDHO But... but she got cut lip... shows her top teeth all the time, like she's smelling something bad.

HAWA *(appearing intoxicated)* What you, film star? Fat, ugly girl, like Kewla, *(burps)* got same thing between her legs like the pretty ones. What the gora call, love, will come. Takes time. You'll be happy.



DONDHO You talk 'bout love like that karia barman. But leave that, you don't think our children will have cut lips, and all?

HAWA *(showing rotten teeth)* Naw! Even husband, wife looking like pigs, can make pretty beautiful children.

DONDHO Ha, ji, before Ma goes to heaven. But, Hawabhai, even... middle-age girl can say "no".

HAWA Hmm, but then she'll know she gonna die alone.

DONDHO *(beams)* Boy.

SOOBRI Don, my bro, I told you to forget history and start on a new page. You're one smart guy, eh?

CURTAIN

SCENE FIVE: OUTSIDE DONDHO'S MODEST HOUSE – 3 MONTHS LATER

*(After a night of partying, people sit in expectation. Dondho's mother emerges with a toothless grin, holding aloft a white bed sheet that has a small bloodstain on it. There is laughter, clapping, handshakes. HAWA hugs DONDHO)*

SCENE SIX: IN FRONT OF HAWA'S SHACK – A YEAR LATER

*(HAWA and SOOBRI sit on a bench drinking Mainstay from chipped enamel cups)*

SOOBRI So, what happened to Dondho after he got married?

HAWA Don't really know, man. He went to stay by his in-laws place. His house was too close to the river. Durban Corporation said he must demolish it because it below the hundred-year flood line. Don't understand what that is...

SOOBRI What happened with him and his bride? Did he hit right?

HAWA Hit right *(beat)* or left, I don't know. But I last heard, 'bout six months back, Kewla was pregnant.

SOOBRI Talking about the devil – here he comes!  
*(DONDHO approaches, carrying a bundle, his cloth bag over his shoulder. He holds aloft a bottle of Mainstay.)*

HAWA *(shows brown teeth)* What? You caught jackpot?

DONDHO *(dancing, shouts)* Ha! Kewla gave me nice present one year after we got married. See! *(He puts the bottle on the bench and opens the shawl to reveal a baby)*

SOOBRI Let me carry. *(takes hold of the baby, makes cooing sounds and nonsense chatter)* The baby is so beautiful – boy or girl?

## Passage from India

I swallow nothing. My throat burns, my stomach growls, my nose twitches from the bad, bad, like someone mad mixed salt, sweat and piss. I can hardly see or hear anything, but the non-stop creaking. I can feel in my guts, the never-ending rolling and heaving, day and night, night and day, for weeks. I am so sick, I want to throw up, but my stomach got nothing to blow out. I see an object rolling on the wooden floor. I reach out, hoping it is something I can eat, and close my fingers around it. It is even lighter than air. A boot stomps my hand.

'Ma!' It hurts.

'Stealing, huh?'

I can't speak. It's like God got angry just now and struck me dumb. Water, like the *jal* from the Ganga River, falls from my red eyes. I shake my head from side to side.

'Look at me, coolie,' a big dog barks.

I look up to see a giant white man in a funny hat, black coat with big silver buttons all the way on one side, coming down to his knees, from where thick socks went to the side of black shoes tied with string. The man shows his yellow teeth, surrounded by black and white hairs under his big nose and on his fat cheeks, all looking like dog's hair.

'How old are you, boy?'

I shake my head.

'You travelling alone, feller?'

I lick my lips. What is this *gora*, the boss of the ship, saying? He grabs my hand and pulls me up.

'Come with me.'

I walk behind him, like my dog, Hira, who I used to pull along with a string tied to his neck. Is the man going to throw me into the sea, where *Dada* said all of *Atma*'s creatures came from and where all must return, one day? Is it today for me? Tears come into my eyes. The *gora* unlocks a door with a big key, pulls me inside. *Hai*, this is like Maharaja Jai Singh's palace, which Baba showed me once in Jaipur, only smaller. The man they call "captain" pushes me onto a chair. I sit, licking my lips. He sits across from me, his eyes the colour of the sea... *Shaitan*'s. He bites his thin red lips and then shows his

yellow teeth. He pours something from a dark green bottle into a round glass that looks like a lotus flower, with a stem. It is red. Blood? Is this the house of the Devil, or what? Baba is not here to save me. This *Kali* devotee will drink my blood, and then throw me in the Indian Ocean. I will never see the country where clever people said the side of the roads got gold and diamonds, and all. South Africa, the Promised Land for Indian coolies, as, I think, jewellery shop-owner, Cohen, had said. "Go, my boy, get stinking rich. Use your brains. Be sharp." I remember the old goat's face; believed that Jew.

'You want a drink, boy?' Master asks. I am so thirsty and hungry... but I can't drink blood. I shake my head. I want... need water. 'Go on, it's good wine... Cabernet Sauvignon, made from grapes.' He pours into the funny-looking glass. 'Drink up. See, it won't kill you.' He sips, licking his lips. I am dying of thirst. I will even drink piss. I drink a little. I can't stop coughing; it's sour like lemon or lime. The *gora* slaps his thigh, his body shaking like he got a trance with the spirit inside of him, his soul taken by the Devil. He sees my eyes, white like boiled eggs, just looking at the plate of roast chicken. I have never eaten meat before. My teeth are making a noise. I open my right hand. The soft brown thing falls on the table.

'Ah. You see that?' The *gora* points, his finger thick like a cucumber, 'It's a wine bottle stopper, made from cork...'

This man is rude.

'... cork, made from the bark of a tree, most probably from Spain.'

In Spain, trees bark like dogs and they make cocks from trees? Clever, the people who live in Spain. Captain takes the thing and drops it in a jug of water. *Ha!* It floats, like *Jagesur*'s fishing boat. I have seen such a lot of dead men, looking already like ghosts, skin and bones, bulging yellow eyes, sewed into bags and thrown into the sea, like rubbish, sinking like a big stone. Gone! No prayers to *Atma* to take care of them and save their souls. I am thinking, if I am not dumped in the sea and if by the grace of *Saraswati* I land in that place called Durban, I can use the cock as a floater, catch some fish for my supper. The man takes a big piece of meat and eats it, with spit falling from his mouth, like a small baby. With his left hand... *chee...* he gives me a piece. He moves both hands, like a butterfly's wings.

'Puk puk, puk puk,' he makes the sound of a fowl through the gaps between his yellow teeth. 'It's chicken, see, won't kill you.'

I swallow, grab the meat and eat like Hira who has had nothing

for a week. It tastes nice; my mouth makes so much noise, now more than my stomach. I blink my eyes; show the *gora* my white teeth. He shakes his head up and down.

‘Know where you are, boy?’

I am eating so fast I can’t talk or think of anything else. I move my head from side to side.

Captain opens a long, rolled-up paper that has pictures on it. He knocks on one place with a thick finger. ‘Know where that is, hmm?’

‘*Nahi.*’

‘Durban, in Port Natal. The *Truro* will land there in ’bout eight days from today,’ he looks at a piece of paper with numbers on it, ‘third of April 1872, God Almighty and Davy Jones willing, of course.’ He claps his hands, laughs like our donkey.

‘*Ha, ji!*’ That is the place Baba and Mr Cohen said I will be going, to make a fortune, whatever that is.

‘Good to see you smiling, lad. I’ll be mightily pleased if none of the 260 coolies are dumped overboard before we drop anchor.’ He hit me on my back. Something goes straight to my stomach. I cough.

The chicken, so tasty, is finished. I suck my lips and my right hand, and look up. I see a big *sunk* on the cupboard that has lots of drawers. It is the work of God, so many colours, stars on a clear night above Jaipur. It shines in the mirror, the colours sparkling bright, like sequins on the saris of dancing women in the Maharaja’s palace. The lovely shell must have been home once, to one of the *Atma*’s sea creatures. It is the size of what Baba called a butternut. Purple, light brown, and orange. On one side, it looks like the toothless mouth of a granny with wrinkled lips like she had been drinking too much vinegar when nobody was looking. Yet, so nice-looking... it is not that kind of *sunk* the *pundit* blows on to call God to come have the offering at the *katha* and *jhunda* prayers. The white man sees what I am looking at. I close my eyes.

‘You like that? It called a seashell, a conch. Beautiful, isn’t it? I picked it up at Goa, fourteen years ago; maybe about the time you were born.’ I drink the sour, blood-like juice made from grapes. He pours more in my glass. Does the drink make me see beauty, colours more clearly? Captain gets up, brings the conch back. ‘Here, look at it. A work of art, eh?’

God’s work, once a living creature, like us. I look at the thing, eyes wide. The Sahib picks it up, puts it to his ear. ‘You can hear the

sound of the sea, in here. Go on, try it.’ I rub my hand on my torn grey trousers that used to be my big brother’s, put the conch to my ear.

It is true. I hear the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the sounds of Ma and Baba, Eshwar, Rajesh, Radha... This may have been made by *Krishna*, to call the young girls or to talk to them in their sleep, in their dreams, over the mountains. Why, I am in dreamland myself.

‘... you can come here anytime you want and listen to the seas. It’s yours. If I weren’t contracted to deliver you to Mr Rick Hansen of *Natal Estates* I’d keep you as my cabin boy, you beautiful, stinking creature. Now, it’s time for you to take a bath.’

My eyes blink. Captain is taking off his clothes and making eyes at me. Only my mother’s seen me without clothes, or my friends when we bath in the Jamuna River. But the *gora* is a good man. He took me, fed me, and gave me this beautiful *sunk* and that thing he calls a cock – for fishing. The white man is not like us poor Indians – he gives his things away; we have nothing to give. He is three times bigger than me, his body red, covered all over with hair, a Hanuman, a black bush around his *nuni* that is standing up so big, like the *lathi* policemen use to hit beggars and rogues. He takes my hand and pulls me into a small room where on the floor is a bath with water. He carries me and puts me in there, like I was a baby. He washes me, like Ma used to do. Then he wipes me, showing his yellow teeth. That’s the last thing I remember.

I can see nothing in the dark but hear the ship creaking and someone making noises like a pig, holding me so tight that I can’t breathe or call *Vishnu* to save my soul. I see the *sunk* and the cock, and can only think of hearing the seas whispering, with my family and friends, so far away in Bharat.

I see the cock floating on the calm water, like a marigold from a wreath, for a long time, then going in and out, the line becoming tight. *Ha!* A fish is biting. Fish for supper, for me, alone, listening to the sea and faraway people and places, the conch whose whispers penetrate the darkest night and brings some comfort to a lost soul, a lone cork, bobbing on a vast and restless sea, with no gold or diamonds in sight.

Gideon Strydom

## The reader

“I may be the youngest, but you will find that I am by no means the least experienced,” says Kindle, diving into yet another pile of books. “I am extremely well read and I doubt that any of the others will be able to help you as quickly. And they will not have access to everything either,” she exclaimed, triumphantly holding up an older copy of Dostoevsky’s *Crime & Punishment*. “There you go. Be glad it is available in one volume now, otherwise you would have had me trying to find the original twelve monthly instalments.”

“Have you read the book?”

“Naturally! Raskolnikov. Raskol. A dissenter. Murder permissible in pursuit of a higher purpose. This is my stuff man.”

I take the book. “How much? With you everything is at a price.”

She tries to look hurt, but then smiles at me. “This one is on the house.”

“What’s the catch?”

“No catch, I do sometimes give stuff for free, you know. I believe every mortal should read Dostoevsky. About gratification and punishment. The whipped mare...” The idea seems to excite her, but she suddenly changes the subject, “Anyway, the copyright has expired on the older works, that’s why I do not feel too guilty to give my friends a little freebie sometimes.” She looks almost guilty, but I doubt that it is about the free book she is giving me. We are in dangerous territory now. We need to get some distance between us.

“And the other one? The one on reading, *Break Every Rule* by Carole Maso?”

“I found it earlier. It comes at a price though.” I watch her slim hips as she turns towards the desk, her short black leather jacket offering a momentary glimpse of a tattoo low in her back. Distance. I need distance. She hands me a book with a golden picture on the cover.

“I did not expect differently.” I take the book and open it at the contents page. The second chapter catches my eye: ‘Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose: A Lifelong Conversation with Myself Entered Midway’. “This could be me,” I laughed, “Having started a reflective journal only recently. I definitely want to read this. And I like the title. How much?”

“\$10,00.”

“God, Kindle, do you have a payment scheme?”

“Haha, very funny. Are you going to pull the struggling artist bit?”

“Well, it’s not going to do me any good, is it? But give me a few days, I will consider it.”

“Fine by me.” Kindle takes the book and puts it in an old shopping trolley next to the door. “I’ll keep it here for you, you just let me know.”

“Thank you Kindle, you are too kind.” We both laugh at the unintended pun. I will have to be very careful, I can quite easily fall for her.

“So I guess you are off to Old Libby next?” Kindle asks with a smile.

I cannot help but notice the slight sarcasm in her voice.

“Yip, none of this can happen without a visit to Lady Library. You know that.”

“Say hi for me,” says Kindle. I find myself waving at her back as she has already turned to receive someone else.

Aunt Libby is small town royalty, still occupying her mansion in Victoria Street that bears remnants of the 1960s CPA administration. A traditionalist, the old lady resists change as far as possible. She has recently installed a computer program to assist her cataloguing her vast collection of books though. OPAC they call it. Aunt Libby explains that a few collectors, mostly well-read academics, are also already using it. “Come,” she says, “you just ask me what you are looking for. Then I type it in here. Wait, not there, here. There we go. In there and then you click this one and... just wait a while... there, you see, everything you are looking for. Oh ok, I do not have it, but you see how easy it is?” She rubs her hip and glances around for a chair. “My dear, this helps me tremendously. I am way too old to walk up and down looking for everything. No, this really helps an old lady.” She looks at me pleadingly. As if to ask me to please forgive her for this treacherous deed. Asking me to endorse her decision.

I thank Aunt Libby and watch her shuffle back to her little desk covered in pile upon pile of books. I love visiting this place. The smell of thousands and thousands of stories that have been accumulated for years and years. Aunt Libby’s mansion is a magical place for me. A sacred space. And although I know I am falling for Kindle and her high-tech approach, I will always come back to Aunt Libby. This is where I can feel time. Feel time slow down to a point where I

actually know where I am. Where I was and where I am going to. I like visiting Kindle. I like the buzz of the rush. But this is where I find my sanctity. My sanity.

The OPAC system is a great help, but the biggest joy is to take the book off the shelf after following the directions on the computer. It is like finding an old friend. Time and time again I open the pages and breath in the smell of each new publication I find: *Shirley, Goodness & Mercy* by Chris van Wyk, Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*, three novels by Beckett, *Abyssinian Chronicles* by Moses Isegawa. Even Rian Malan’s *My Traitor’s Heart*.

“Quite a little collection you’ve got there,” says Aunt Libby when I take the books to her desk. There is no space to put them down, and she takes the books one by one to record the details of each of her precious possessions that I want to take home for a while. She really does not mind lending the books to me but, “They are my family. They are all I have. So you have to take very good care of them,” she always says just before I reach the exit.

“I promise, Aunt Libby,” I always answer.

“There’s a big African focus this week I see,” she says as she records details on Malan’s book, “A riveting read, but I prefer the fiction. Oh, I do so love a good story,” she says as she next holds Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy / Malone Dies / The Unnamable* to her heart. “Have you read Beckett? A most unusual writer in the footsteps of Joyce, taking no prisoners and language... oh the language,” Aunt Libby gasps. “But these books, the Isegawa and the Coetzee and Van Wyk will also give you such joy. And even though *Shirley, Goodness & Mercy* is not fiction, it is such an honest take on his life, such a delight to read,” she says handing me the book with the little bird sitting on a bottleneck on the cover. A Childhood Memoir the subtitle reads. “Did you know back in 1977 that *In the Heart of the Country* was considered as the best book written in English by a South African? You wouldn’t, would you? You must have only been a wee little toddler,” she laughs. “You phone me now if you wish to keep them any longer.”

“I most probably will, thank you Aunt Libby,” I answer, as I turn to leave.

“They are my family. They are all I have. So you have to take very good care of them.”

“I promise, Aunt Libby.”

At home I try to find space for my new acquisitions, however temporary. I search the big bookcase against the wall opposite the balcony window, hoping that I will one day read all the books in my own collection. I am running out of space on the shelves. Books stand two deep on five of the shelves already. Maybe I should consider OPAC for myself. It works well for Aunt Libby, and it will sure as hell save me a lot of time. I end up putting them on my desk, next to each other so that I can see the front covers. Choices, choices. The Kindles and the Aunt Libbys. Only then do I spot the package on top of my closed laptop. I untie the crimson ribbon. Tear off the brown paper. I can smell the new book even before I see it: *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* by Robert McKee. I open the book. On the first page is a message written in my wife's handwriting:

*My one and only,  
Reader, I hope that this book will help you to  
reach your dreams of becoming a Writer.  
Yours forever*

## The oom

The Beetle backfires before the engine dies completely. Dead. Right there. I aim for the sandy strip next to Reinheidsfontein General Dealer and hope that the last bit of momentum will carry the car out of the road. The wheels get stuck in the sand and the car stops, nose aiming for the shop and backside still in the street. An inviting little whore! I throw open my door. What an arrival? With a bang. Everybody look, here I am. Come get me! Bloody Fokwagen! I grab my packet of Crowns, lighting up before I get out.

I fall back behind the wheel, a man towering above me just outside the door.

"Girly, what brings you to Reinheidsfontein with such a growl and a hiccup?"

It's not a man, it's an oom. There's a difference.

"My car has a problem, sir, I..."

"Oom Salie my child, Vannewesthuizen, in this town only the schoolmaster is called sir."

I knew it. I still know an oom when I see one. "I'm Julia, Oom, Julia Steyl," I say as I get out of the car.

"How is it that Julia Steyl drives into Reinheidsfontein of all places with such a little rust bucket today?"

"I am writing a piece for a magazine. I'm here for work. I was really hoping my old Volla would make it to the guesthouse."

"Guest house...", he snorts. "Girly, you will be staying with us then. Wait here in the shop while I get my bakkie to tow your car. I'll tell Alberta to get ready for you."

I want to protest, but stumble over my words.

"I know why you're here, it's about that other girl," I hear him say before he disappears around the corner.

Still no words. Just like my blank screen. Nothing.

I throw down my Crown in the sand, lock the car door (more out of habit than believing that something will happen here) and enter the store. It's a typical old-fashioned general dealer with a large counter that divides the whole room into two parts. There are shelves upon shelves full of anything imaginable behind the counter with just a Coke fridge and chips baskets at the front. Here you might find anything, from a bicycle to a dead policeman, my grandfather would

have said. In the middle of the counter is a partition and against the far wall the remains of a separation wall is still visible. To the right there is another door leading to the stoep. Mmmmm, the golden era of apartheid. It's a bloody monument, this is. The man standing to my right at the counter makes me think that it might just be a living monument. Very ironic that he is "right", I think, when I get a Coke from the fridge. The woman behind the counter only notices me when I put down the can on the counter.

"Oh my, you should have called for me to assist you." I smile at her, partly because of her discomfort, and partly because my thoughts were just confirmed.

"That's okay, you are busy. The gentleman was here first," I said and almost laughed out loud at the shocked expression on the woman's face. The man gives me a quick glance.

"There you go, Vuyo, now you've got everything," the woman says uncomfortably. The man nods and grumbles a furtive goodbye. I watch him go and for a moment our eyes meet as he looks back at us before exiting onto the porch. "What is wrong with your car, ma'am? I thought they were shooting at us just now. It's R9,00 please. And where is Salie, I thought he was helping you?"

"He went to fetch his bakkie to tow my Beetle..."

"Tow it where? De Aar is about 200 kilometers from here. There is no way you will get there before dark."

"No, I will be staying with them for a few days..."

"Stay with them? With Salie? Why, are you family?"

"No, no, no, I'm a writer. I am here to write..."

"My dear, some things should not even be talked about, never mind written about. Why Salie?"

"I had to find a place to stay, and the guesthouse..."

"My dear, we haven't had a guesthouse in Reinheidsfontein since Salie's wife, Alberta, died seven years ago."

## Seven sections from a novella

1.

Ek sit en staar na die aanhaling op my rekenaarskerm, my gedagtes vir die oomblik vergete. Niks.

Dan kom my brein, soos 'n ou masjien se ratwerk, weer in beweging, wiletjies tol, hefbome pomp heftig op en af en die herinneringe begin weer een na die ander deur my gedagtes maal.

"Fok hom," sê ek hardop, "Fok Chris Els en sy Honda wat hom hier aangebring het!"

Ek soek tussen die boeke en papiere op my lessenaar na die pakkie Crown-sigarette (Here, dat ek so laag moes daal!) en die World Cup Soccer 2010 aansteker. As ek net 'n glas wyn kon drink. Koue Sauvignon Blanc. Of 'n Chardonnay. Ek kon altyd so goed skryf op Chardonnay.

2.

Ek is 'n performer. 'n Presteedertjie. Nerd. Pyn-in-die-gat boekwurm. Akademie wrak. Ek dink oor dinge. Ek dink te veel. Here, maar ten minste dink ek. Ten minste kan ek vir myself dink!

In Sub A staan ek eerste en almal begin praat van die slim klein Steyltjie. In Sub B staan Sonia de Jager eerste. Ek kry dieselfde boekprys as sy, maar vir netheid. Niemand in my stander kry ooit weer 'n geleentheid om die eerste klasposisie te beklee nie. Dit bly my plek vir die res van my laerskoolloopbaan. Almal ken my as die slim klein Steyltjie en by elke prysuitdeling fluister tannies en ooms agter bak hande: "Daai slim klein Steyltjie sal seker maar weer alles kry." En ek het. Selfs sertifikate vir skoolbywoning. In Stander drie kry ek die titelrol in die skool se operette en almal skud net kop: "Daai slim klein Steyltjie darem..." Niemand kom agter dat daar geen sporttoekennings is nie. Niemand kom agter dat ek glad nie eers by sport betrokke is nie.

In die hoërskool presteer ek net meer met al die nuwe geleenthede om in te perform.

Debatsvoorsitter teen Stander agt, ATKV redenaarswenner in Stander nege. Ek speel toneel, skryf Taalbondeksamens en Wiskunde-olimpiades en word in Stander sewe reeds 'n ACSV kringleier.



## 3.

Daardie dag in Sub A toe Evi sonder 'n pantie skool toe gekom het, toe moes almal al geweet hier kom groot moeilikheid. Wydknieg het sy haar sakkie vye gesit en eet terwyl die klein seuntjies gekyk en gegiggel het en die groter seuns ook gekyk het. Maar hulle het nie gegiggel nie. Die dogtertjies het skaam aan hul skoolrokkies getrek en tussen "Sies!" en "Sjoe!" het Elbie die meeste moed gehad.

"Eviii! Die seuns sien jou...jou..."

"Wat?"

"Jou...jou..."

"Wat Elbie?"

"Jou muis, dêmmit!"

Evi het vooroor gebuk, onder haar rok ingekyk en met 'n ongeïnteresseerde "O" haar knieë teenmekaargesit en haar vy klaar geëet.

## 4.

Elna het vir Jaap Malan die tyd nog in die stad ontmoet. Hy't gekuier by familie en sy't gewerk by Star Roadhouse. 'n Vurige gevryery later en Elna was swanger voordat sy en Jaap twee maande later getroud is. En toe kom bly hulle op die dorp. Jaap het toe reeds sy plasie verkoop en die algemene handelaar in die dorp begin.

Elna se opgewondenheid het presies twee dae gehou. Toe verlang sy terug stad toe en haat almal wat haar heelyd so aanstaar. Nooit in die oë nie. Kyk net stip vir haar maag.

Elna karring en kerm, maar Jaap steek vas. Hy trek nie. Elna kerm en kla. Tot Jaap sy moer strip, haar tasse laai en sê: "Klim, ek vat jou weg!" Almal kyk grootoog toe Jaap se Granada die stofstraat afjaag. En dis laaste wat hulle vir Jaap sien. Net buite die dorp op Tol-se-Draai rol Jaap die Granada sewe keer. Aaklige storie.

Toe Elna na 'n paar weke weer bykom is Jaap reeds begrawe.

Skielik kyk die mense vir Elna in die oë. Almal is skielik nice met haar. Elna weet hulle weet nie waarheen die Granada oppad was nie. En sy huil saam met die tannies oor haar man wat sy nie wou gehad het nie wat nou weg is. En die babatjie wat sy nie regtig weet wat om mee te doen nie.

## 5.

In die Bos kry jy haar altyd by Café Nouveau, arty-farty weird met

Camel Lights en Jacky O shades. Tog so celeb. Celebspotting. "Jy weet, Laurinda, Valiant en Koos, selfs Antoinette en Dawid kom gereeld hier." So, op voornaamterme. Asof dit family is. Hulle was seker nog net een keer daar, dink ek. Laetitia is 'n groter celeb. Ongekunsteld. Groots. Fokken snaaks. Nouveau is Laetitia se shop. Laetitia is Nouveau.

## 6.

Ek kan sommer sien Janine is half moerig toe ek in haar kantoor instap. "Jules, what is wrong with you? That's the second article that has been rejected. Pull yourself together en kry daai donner uit jou kop uit. He's not worth it."

"Ek's fucked, Soutie. Ek is moeg en gatvol. I need a break. I need air. I need something new. Shit, I need to get laid!"

"Take a few days off, Babes. Go somewhere nice. Screw something nice. Maybe I should dump Graeme and come with you".

"'n Roadtrip deur die dorre Karoo, net ons twee. Ons noem dit Thelma and Louise Two – Spykerkaskenades..."

"That's it," gil Janine so hard dat ek my stil skrik.

"Ek maak net 'n grap. In elk geval, ek dog dan jy en Graeme begin dink aan trou?"

"Nee Babes, ek het jou antwoord. God, it's perfect." Janine is skielik so excited dat sy skaars kan praat. "Graeme told me about this girl at work. She went on holiday with this guy and they visited all these little dorpies and she's telling the story of this place they came upon. Everyone's wacked and it's this weird place and there's this woman building a wall full of statues or shit, like the owl woman. And she says this whole dorp is full of jagse mans. Some strange shit going on there." Janine is nou so opgewonde, haar wange gloei soos wanneer sy te veel Tas gedrink het. "Speak to Cara, go there. Make it your assignment and bring back a bloody earth-shattering article, Babes. God, take a sabbatical and write your book. Ek's seker met 'n lot jagse ouens sal jy genoeg inspiration kry om 'n bestseller te skryf."

"Soutie, is jy gesuip? What are you talking about?"

"Babes, I'm calling Graeme right now. I'm telling you, I am saving your gat here."

Janine is op haar selfoon nog voor ek behoorlik tot verhaal kan kom. Teen vyfuur weet ek soveel as wat 'n goeie joernalis nodig het om gat-oor-kop te pak en te jaag vir 'n storie. Teen half sewe ontmoet

ek Graeme se kollega, Hester, en teen elfuur Donderdagoggend stem Cara in dat dit die moeite werd is om die storie uit te check.

“Kry die storie, Julia. Gou. Maar vat jou tyd met jousef. I need you back, but only when you are ready. Gaan soek jousef in Reinheidsfontein, maar stuur intussen vir my iets wat hierdie tydskrif gaan verkoop.”

7.

Ta' Kraai bly onder in Paradysstraat. 'n Eiewillige vrou met 'n swaar Bolandse bry. Haar swaar swart hare altyd in 'n spaarwiel laag in haar vet nek. Haar man is reeds jare dood, maar Ta' Kraai dra nog altyd haar rouklere. 'n Enorme swart sirkulent met 'n wit kragie wat êrens tussen haar derde en vierde ken wegraak. Sy glo net in haarself. En bietjie in God.

Sy dink die mense noem haar Ta' Kraai oor die swart. Die rok. Die hare. Die gemoed. Maar dis eintlik omdat sy so kan opgaan. Ta' Kraai gooi niks weg nie. Sy wil alles hê wat haar twee pienk ogies sien. Sy bêre alles. Botteltjies en blikkies. Proppies en plastiëksakke. Ou koerante, vuurhoutjies en gebruikte geskenkpapier. 'n Showcase vol doopkoeke en troukoeke van mense wie se kleinkinders al bejaard is. Oorskietkos. Afvalkos. Ander mense se rubbish wat hulle uitgooi. Plantjies. Alles. Ta' Kraai maak bymekaar. En die huis onder in Paradysstraat word voller. En voller.

Met die dat Evi se ma toe net so verdwyn besluit Ta' Kraai die kind kort sorg. Pak al haar goedjies in bokse en maak haar bly in die gangkamer wat stink na katpie. En wanneer Evi weg is skool toe gaan sit sy stil tussen al die bokse en droom dis alles hare.

Die simbiose is 'n aanpassing vir altwee. Ta' Kraai is skielik bekommerd oor al haar goedjies. Evi het nog nooit soveel stont op een plek gesien nie. Dit fassineer haar die eerste paar weke voor die magie plekmaak vir weersin. Evi soek spasie. Evi soek vryheid. Evi soek haarself.

# Adèle Thomas

## Chocolate cake

'I'm not sure how you think I can go on and on trying to make friends for you,' my mother rants. The sticky sugar icing drips down the sides of her hands. I want to lick it off and taste the sweetness filling my mouth. The entire kitchen feels like an oven. The fairy cakes rise and rise. They're perfect. Golden brown. Rich. I watch them grow through the glass window of the oven door. Soon the silky white icing that my mother is preparing will shower them and drip down their sides like snow.

'You're going to have to just get out there. Like other children. Go up to them and say you're coming for a swim. It's easy.'

'How long will they take to cool down?'

'Cool down?' My mother follows my gaze to the oven. 'Oh I thought you were talking about the swimming pool. Can you only think about yourself and food? No wonder you're becoming a little piggy.'

I pull my stomach in. My primary school teacher has a little pig. Do I look like it?

Pudgy, is what Hendrik next door called me the other day. And then he laughed and ran off to his new swimming pool.

'Are you listening to me?' My skinny mother is cross. She doesn't look like a pig. Rather like a dog – one of those long, tall ones that I would love to have. I'd call her Pansy or something like that. Not Sue. That's my mother's name.

'Is it because you think you're fat that you don't want to play next door? Just remember, you're clever. Can't have everything is what I always say. Clever can make up for lots of things. And you know how looks fade. Have you ever seen a beautiful 80-year-old? Look at granny, for example. Wouldn't matter now that she was beautiful in her day, would it?'

My grandmother's a witch. She's small and bent and lives in the flat that was built onto our house.

'Very expensive that was,' my dad always reminds us.

And she's fat.

Now if she was a dog, she'd be a bulldog. One of those with thousands of wrinkles on a mean looking face. Ready to snap at any moment. Or maybe she'd be a pig.

'Anyway, why don't you make an effort yourself to go swim next door? They can't eat you, you know,' continues my mother.

Eat – I look again at the rising fairy cakes.

'I'll try.'

'Don't just say you'll try. That's what you always say and what good does that do? What's wrong with you? Just do it! God you'd think that you have something to be embarrassed about the way you're so scared of talking to them. You should be pleased that you don't have their family, you know.'

I don't know.

They have a pool.

'Smitty Verschoor thinks he's a big deal with his new car and that fancy swimming pool. But I'd hate to be his wife. Know things about him that you're too young to hear. But just trust me, you're much better off! Shame, poor Marie.'

I keep thinking of their pool and am not sure how I'm better off.

'When can I have some?' My eyes bore a hole into the oven door.

'You can have *one* when I offer them to the Verschoor kids. It'll be an excuse to let you go over to swim with them. See what I do for you? Always having to make some plan to make friends for you. Why can't you just be outgoing like other children? They wouldn't think twice if they wanted to come over here and play? Nah. They'd just arrive.'

'Can't I just have one before you give them all away?'



The laughter next door comes through my thick net bedroom curtains. I hate these curtains. Yellow and heavy with dust. But they hide me. They don't see me watching them. But it's hard to feel like you're swimming when you're only watching them swim.

My mother approaches Hendrik. Can't hear what she's saying. He runs off with the plate and seems happy. The laughter starts up again. They're having some race and the winner gets a fairy cake.

'Well, I tried, darling,' says my mother. 'Perhaps we'll see if Daddy wants to go to the drive-in after the rugby's finished. That'd be nice wouldn't it? Maybe next Saturday I'll try chocolate cake.'

## Island networking

'So you say you walk every morning?' Gertrude enquired.

'Yeah. Trying to get fit. I do about two hours. My husband arrives next week and he wants to climb Mount Zas,' I explained. At 1001m, Mount Zas, named after the Greek god, Zeus, is the highest point on Naxos.

'Zas!' she looked askance. 'They tell me that when you get to the top there are lots of little bugs flying around.'

I took it that Gertrude had never been to the top of Zas herself. Somehow I didn't see this short, rotund woman, elegantly dressed amidst island casualness, as being someone who'd venture up a mountain. She did not strike me as the athletic type.

'Anyway,' she continued in her flawless English, in spite of the strong German accent, 'tomorrow I'll join you. I only need four hours of sleep a night so I'm up at 4am.'

I'd come to enjoy my early morning walks alone. I used the time to think, to reflect on anticipated activities for the day and to contemplate the novel I'm writing. I didn't welcome the intrusion. In fact, I resented it. I had nothing in common with Gertrude. And I hardly even knew her.

'Shall we say we meet at 6.30?' And with that she had closed the deal.

I opened my door at 6.15 the following morning and there was Gertrude waiting. I looked at the black patent leather shoes, the silk shawl twirled around her shoulders and the enormous brown leather bag. Sehr schick. I saw my brisk two hour walk mutating into a three hour plus meander. And my resentment grew stronger.

'You okay in those shoes?' I ventured, comparing them to my worn-in Nikes.

'They're fine,' she dismissed my question. 'Ready to go? When we get to the T-junction near the airport, I'll leave you there and continue into town. I'm having coffee with a friend.'

With some trepidation on my side, we set off. At the stop street some 500 metres from the house, I prepared to turn left down to the port of Agia Anna. The fishermen had returned with the night's catch and the pier was abuzz with taverna owners negotiating the best prices for their daily stock. Blue and red boats bobbed like corks

on the gentle sea. The sky was bright blue, even at this early hour. This was a beautiful stretch of the walk.

'If we go straight,' suggested Gertrude, 'then we come out at the Perama taverna. You know Anna who owns it?'

This route lopped some 3km off the walk. I looked at her shoes and felt that I should agree. I was not happy. Gertrude appeared to have her own agenda to progress. I felt manipulated into a compromise. But maybe it's only for today. This was a comforting thought.

We set forth on a muddy road, being careful to avoid donkey excrement. I marvelled at Gertrude's adeptness in this regard, particularly as she did not appear to be a walker of any sort.

'You know that Anna married a man about seven years younger than she is,' continued Gertrude, referring to the owner of the Perama taverna. 'No problem really – I've got nothing against these sorts of marriages. But she was too old to have a baby so they adopted a little boy.'

'Adopted?' I queried, somewhat astonished. This was certainly not an island tradition. However, I was relieved at this bit of information. Some years back I'd enquired after the new born baby, thinking it to be Anna's grandchild. In a tone that silenced any further questioning, she'd responded: 'My *son* is fine. My son is fine.' I'd wondered how I'd made that mistake, but now I understood. Thank you Gertrude. My *faux pas* had been a simple blunder, easily made.

'See that small house over there?' Gertrude pointed to a whitewashed hovel of sorts, buried in a large field occupied by donkeys and sheep and a dog. 'That's where Yannis stays. He's a fisherman and sometimes he fries us up some nice fish that he's just caught.'

I wondered where the eating of the nice fish took place. In the hovel? Somehow I didn't see Gertrude in there. But then she seemed to navigate this stretch of the road very well. Perhaps her visits to the modest house were not implausible.

'Yannis is my friend, and if you want, sometime, I can arrange for him to cook some fish for you as well. But I always pay him something, you know. He's very poor.' She continued: 'I love to cook and when you come here four or five times a year like I do, you get sick of Greek food. I cook Chinese and Spanish as well. I've got a friend from the village of Asiniosos coming over for dinner tonight. She doesn't have too many friends any more – they've all died, so she

looks forward to visiting us.'

Looking at the figure beside me I had no doubt about the qualities of Gertrude's dishes.

As if to underscore the point, she noted: 'I love my food.'

I was touched by her sentiment to both this friend and the fisherman.

By this time we had walked for about half an hour through farmlands with strong agricultural smells, wandering roosters and a donkey or two. Gertrude popped a throat lozenge into her mouth. Her voice had begun to strain. She stopped and looked around for a seat. Just what I expected, I thought. Probably the talking has tired her out more than the walk.

'Anyway,' she continued, to my surprise, beginning to move again and picking up on an earlier point, 'we don't go to Anna's taverna anymore. Anna's German and all the Germans who come to the island go there. And some are really quite stupid. If I want Germans, then I should stay in Germany!'

'I hear that German tourism is down by over 60% in Naxos this year,' I remarked. 'All this German-Greek Eurozone battle, I imagine.'

'Nah, that's rubbish,' she responded. 'Told my friends that once you're on the island you really don't know that all the trouble is going on. And so they're coming to Naxos the week after next. My two girlfriends. Renting my small apartment up the road.' And with that Gertrude had played her part in assisting the Greek economy. Case closed.

'Now talking about Germans,' she continued, somewhat on a roll when it came to the topic of her countrymen, 'Maria on the other side of you is Greek, but she's married to that Hans. He's German.'

I nodded. I knew Maria and Hans, not just as my neighbours but as endless cleaners of their house and tireless gardeners in their small allotment. Roses, geraniums and oleanders vied for space along with all the knick-knacks that they laid out.

'Now she never stops working. She's always cleaning her house and her ornaments,' remarked Gertrude with a definite note of disapproval in her voice.

'Don't forget the garden gnomes,' I added.

'Yeah,' said Gertrude, 'but she never stops. Comes here for a holiday and all she does is clean!'

I shared Gertrude's sentiments. Also, I felt relieved, somewhat, that I was not the only one critical of this endless exertion.

'I thought it was a European thing,' I joked. 'Sort of makes me feel a bit of a slob.'

'Awfully, awfully,' complained Gertrude, this slight grammatical irregularity glaring in its contrast to otherwise good English.

'Well, anyway, I'm polite to them, but we're not friends,' she said. 'They, especially Hans, speak a very, very bad dialect of German. Sometimes I can't even understand him. That's what happened when the Berlin wall fell. Awfully.'

I was somewhat surprised at this tone of prejudice that emerged from her. Her friendship with island folk such as the fisherman suggested someone at ease with cultural transition.

'And,' she added, as if to have the last word on the subject, 'they really drink when they're celebrating!'

We continued for a few moments in silence.

'Talking about Berlin,' said Gertrude. 'I have a daughter living there. My only child, Nana. I miss her so much. I only see her about once a year. She's *very* clever and works all over the world making films. You've met her on Naxos?'

I shook my head. Sometimes there were so many different people in and out of Gertrude's house, the one next to ours, that I suspected she ran some sort of rental business.

'Anyway,' she continued, 'Nana's over forty now but doesn't tell anyone. She looks about twenty-eight. Has the same colouring as you. Now me, how old do you think I look?'

I glanced at Gertrude's round, unlined face and the head of auburn curls that surrounded it. I found myself smiling at her blatant need for affirmation. 'Not a day over twenty-one,' I said.

'No, I'm sixty-six. Had my birthday here on Naxos on 21 April. Sixty-six. Don't think I look it.'

I had to agree although, by now, with the rising heat, the auburn curls were beginning to lose their earlier buoyancy.

As if picking up on my observation, Gertrude continued: 'I go to Mary for my hair once a week. It's my only real luxury. I don't smoke, I don't... umm, anyway, I don't smoke, so it's my little treat. She charges me 15 euros if I bring my own colour and 30 if I don't. She's on the main road, on the *paralia*, and she's my friend. If you ever want your hair done, I'll arrange a special price for you. I like

doing that sort of thing for my friends.'

By this stage I realised that my walk, as I had come to know it and guard it each day, had taken a very different turn. By the time we hit the tar road, Gertrude's black patent leather shoes were brown; her auburn curls matted and stuck to her face. I wondered why she had put herself through all this strain. Certainly, walking such distances was not part of her usual repertoire. She seemed eager to be my friend. Was this perhaps her motivation?

'Let's sit a while,' I suggested, noticing her discomfort. What difference, after all, did another fifteen minutes make?

'But won't that hold you up?' Gertrude seemed oblivious to the fact that the whole walk had held me up, but I was touched by this sudden sense of connection she'd made.

Later we reached the T-junction. Gertrude was to turn to the left and make her way into the 'capital' of Naxos, Chora; I was going to step up my walking pace in the other direction and make up lost time.

'You look hot,' I remarked.

'No matter,' said Gertrude with her usual optimism. 'I've got so many friends on the island that someone's sure to come by and give me a lift. And anyway, if the school bus passes by I'll just put up my hand and the driver, Felis – I know him well – will stop for me.' The thought of Gertrude on a bus with ten or twenty six-year-olds was amusing.

'Now just remember,' she continued. 'If you need any good price for anything, just let me know. SMS me. I've got all these connections. I've had my house here for over twenty years so I know lots of people.'

'Well, Gertrude,' I ventured, 'maybe I need a photo of you so that when you're not here I can flash your pic and probably get a whole bunch of discounts.'

'Of course,' she said. 'Friends always keep photos of each other. And now we are friends.' She smiled broadly at me and gave my hand a squeeze.

The next morning Gertrude left for a brief visit to the island of Milos where I was sure she intended to cultivate a new set of friends. But before she departed, she knocked on my door and handed me a picture of herself.

'Just in case,' she added.

Pitso Tsibolane

## The hands of time

I'll never forget Mauritius nightclub in Phuthaditjhaba. You and I, my friend, never missed the Ladies Night every last Friday of the month. I was the first one who brought the news that DJ Thulas seemed attracted to me.

"DJs are nothing but heartbreakers, Gladys," you said to me persistently.

"But I like him, Queen," I would remind you.

Thulas and I hit it off nevertheless and we instantly became "the royal couple of Mauritius Inn". Everyone at college envied me.

"Surely you know that Thulas must have other girlfriends all over town," you would bug me. "Jealousy is a sin my friend," I remember snapping back at you.

I guess something had to give. Our friendship fizzled.

You moved out in the middle of our second year at the teachers' college. "I cannot watch my friend waste her best years like this," you apparently told anyone who bothered to listen on campus. But I held on to my Thulas. Our love was strong and you, my friend, were simply too jealous to see that I was making a real man out of the lover boy DJ you despised.

I knew our friendship was over when you simply did not report back to campus at the beginning of our third year. Even though we were not so close anymore, you would have never disappeared like that without at least making me aware somehow. Well, I simply made peace with the fact and just shrugged off the oddity. I actually remember Thulas encouraging me to let you go.

While I was wondering about a possible life as a teacher in Bloemfontein without Thulas and coming to terms with the fact that you and I may never meet again, our lives took a turn for the worse. Did you really have to do that Queen? It still feels like a dream, one that simply haunts me.

I still remember that night, the fifteenth of September, 1994. It was another glorious Ladies Night night. Weed and whisky flowed, just like old times. I was dressed to kill and DJ Thulas was at his showboating best. I was not just the princess of the VIP lounge; I towered over the rest of the entire Mauritius crowd. Something, I always suspected, you envied badly.



A heavily pregnant woman entered the club. She seemed to be sure about her way around. She headed straight into the VIP lounge. The guard at the VIP entrance, strangely enough, let the woman through. I was too high to care, really.

“Why would anyone so pregnant come into this room?” I whispered to Thulas.

“Only a crazy woman would,” he said while caressing me.

Then I was horrified to realise that the woman was you. I froze as you launched a tirade against my man: “I am carrying your baby! But you are still with her.”

Those words kept ringing in my head. I was high and I should have known not to make any decisions at that moment. But I could not help myself. Your betrayal was too much to handle.

I could only think of the wasted times, and how you two laughed behind my back, taking me for a fool. I watched in slow-motion as Thulas tried to walk you out of the club. Perhaps it was his way to avoid a confrontation between us. It did not work.

I remember finishing up my glass of wine and walking towards both of you. Nothing in the world mattered more than the betrayal I felt. I still do not know how that champagne bottle sliced through his throat. I know that I took away the father of your child, but I took the life of my lover too.

## Township funerals

The life of a township is its people. They make it unique. The people of Kutloanong live life as it comes. Like many other South African townships, we do not have famous journalists, politicians or singers like Soweto. Besides the ugly mine dumps that children mistake for mountains, there is nothing physically attractive about the mining town. There are, however, special events that bring the locals together and give them a sense of belonging. Funerals, ancestral feasts and local soccer games provide the glue that keeps them together.

A township funeral has six distinct parts; the preparation, the Friday night vigil, the home farewell session on Saturday morning, the church service, the graveyard session and the “after-tears” session which lasts until Sunday morning.

In the preparation phase, all the family members and friends, near and afar, are informed about the passing away of their beloved. In a mining town this can be a laborious process. Letters have to be sent to the rural areas and outside of South Africa. Messages to these remote parts are relayed through travelling friends and the police sometimes. The preparation stage determines how big the funeral is going to be. The bigger the network of the deceased, the bigger the funeral. Small funerals are a shame.

Those who do not attend church regularly or at least make an appearance during Easter or Christmas, or those who do not pay their annual church offerings, are in deep trouble. They are guaranteed to have a funeral without a man of the cloth. And worse, they can forget about a church service. Another shame. The lucky ones have families that can either rent a pastor or appeal to some non-denominational minister, usually some un-established charismatic novice, to at least conduct the service at home before the procession heads straight to the graveyard. It is an embarrassing thing when that happens, better that than no pastor at all though. Paying your church offering at the least is thus a serious matter, especially for the elderly and mine workers, who are prone to kicking the bucket with regularity.

At the night vigil, there is usually a slot for the caregiver of the deceased, especially for those who die from long illnesses. The caregiver, or simply the nurse, is the one who has the task of relating

the journey of the deceased from the moment they were sick until death. The mourners listen attentively to this speech, it brings them some kind of a closure.

There is a local doctor in Kutloanong who runs the only medical practice in the township, Dr. Shepherd Morake. Dr. Morake tends to give the speeches at most funerals because he usually is the one who has the full health record of most locals, but most importantly, he understands the value of free marketing. Patients usually share their deepest fears and joys with him especially when they are about to die. He knows all the medical histories of the township residents, and inevitably, some of their deep dark secrets.

He studied at Natal University, and he is the first doctor to come out of our township. He is one of the wealthiest locals, only coming second to the mayor and his politician friends. He drives the only E-class Mercedes Benz in the township. If he has the time, or depending on the size of the funeral, Dr. Morake would usually speak before the preaching starts at the night vigil or he simply gets his slot at the church service the following day. He gets more freedom and time at the night vigil.

He towers above most men in the township in stature. He has a way of lifting his chin when he speaks, it gives him authority. He sports a grey beard, but he is not that old. It must be a wisdom thing. When he starts speaking everyone keeps quiet, even the usually theatrical family members who compete for attention near the coffin under the tent. Everyone stops mourning and they listen when he starts speaking. Dr. Morake's words should never be wasted.

"Once again we have been robbed of one of our own, through a preventable chronic disease," he would say in a polished English accent that adds to his aura. "When I first diagnosed the deceased with an elevated systemic arterial blood pressure about five years ago, I got to spend time with him while I continuously managed his condition through medication. A few months ago he was evidently showing symptoms of hypertensive encephalopathy which could not be reversed due to the patient's small blood vessels."

The family and the mourners look bewildered, they are concerned about this complicated thing that Dr. Morake is talking about, perhaps they also need to go see him on Monday, just in case. Those that pretend to understand the sophisticated language keep oo-ing and aa-ing from the back. "Hey, it must have been gruesome to die

like that!" Mokoena says in a hushed tone to Skosana, during one of the doctor's numerous animated pauses.

Skosana looks like he is in meditation of sorts, perhaps a little nervous about the closing prayer which he has to offer once Dr. Morake leaves the stage, he has to be at his best. He does this regularly, but it is still nerve-racking to utter a word after Dr. Morake, or even just a prayer. One of the old ladies starts to hum a hymn, she can sense the doctor is going to deliver the last harrowing detail of the deceased's life on earth. "Eh hhe hmmm, hhe hmm, eh hmm, hmm hm eh hmm"... the mourners join.

The doctor takes a step forward, just for maximum impact: "When the family brought the deceased in last week on Sunday, he had suffered what we call a severe myocardial infarction, unfortunately there was nothing that neither science nor even I could do, God had taken away that which he had given to us." The family goes hysterical at this point, the screaming begins once again. "Damn you myocardial, damn you hypertense for taking away our loved one," one of the older folks can be heard saying.

## Silence

“May she rest peacefully amongst the gods,” a mourner sobbed.

“Lerato my child, watch over your mother from the sacred heights,” entreated another.

“Brothers and sisters, we are looking forward to that great day, when cancer shall be swallowed up by the grave and our loved ones like our dear Lerato shall rise up to live eternally,” screamed the preacher as the rest of the mourners shouted AMEN in response.

Mourner after mourner spoke about cancer being the deadly disease that *stole* Lerato’s life. This disturbed Mokoena. Even though MaMokoena refused to divulge the true cause of their daughter’s death to even her closest family and friends, he knew that the truth would soon come out. All he could do was to keep silent; that was the least he could give her in this dark period of their lives.

Mokoena walked out of the church hall for a smoke.

“How I wish our young ones chose to live like they will surely die someday. Lying about this disease is deadlier than this virus,” he thought. He stood outside until the last prayer was offered. The place where men were allowed to smoke at the back of the church was next to the parking lot.

He observed a sticker at the back of the priest’s brown Datsun bakkie:

*John 14:1-4 “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me.”*

He wondered if God took his own advice. He wondered if God was not troubled when his son Jesus was killed for the sins of mankind. Or did the priests simply make up these words to seek to comfort men who have lost their stubborn daughters to HIV and AIDS?

He threw away the cigarette butt and went back to join the mourners who were now getting ready to proceed to the graveyard.

“Where were you Mokoena? Even at this moment of our lives you still find a way to run away from me,” his wife whispered as they entered into the family hearse.

“I could not stand the speeches; they are all in the dark, just like you wanted it.” She looked down and covered her face with her black mourning shawl.

“It is better this way. No one would have come if they knew our

daughter died of AIDS. Would you have rather had our daughter buried in shame Mokoena?” He looked upwards. Tears filled his eyes. He remained silent.

At the graveyard he observed the shiny marble tombstones that were scattered across the dusty graveyard. He wondered if there was life after death like the priest always taught. He wondered if perhaps life simply ended at this graveyard. He wondered how long it took those who lived lives of lies and denials to gain all the wisdom to be gods worthy of worship and prayer. Would Lerato lose her stubborn streak as a god? Or would she be a stubborn god? Do the older gods teach the younger gods how to perform their godly duties? Would he have to worship her own daughter now that she had made the transition into the world of the gods?

A week later, after the mourners and the hangers-on had left, MaMokoena decided to clean Lerato’s house. She needed to clean the house to finally pack her daughter’s private belongings. Perhaps this could help her move on.

Inside one of Lerato’s handbags she found an old booklet by Ellen White that had been scribbled on. As she opened it a piece of paper fell to the ground. It fell from page 51 where it was carefully placed. Her attention was drawn to an underlined paragraph:

“In like manner you are a sinner. You cannot atone for your past sins, you cannot change your heart and make yourself Holy.”

She was relieved to see that he daughter had been reading Christian books before she died. Maybe she surrendered her life to the Lord before she died. Perhaps her prayers were answered and the Lord softened the heart of her strong-willed daughter.

She picked up the piece of paper that fell down and started reading it:

Prof. Makgona Tsohle  
HE CURES AIDS  
HE CAN ENLARGE YOUR PENIS  
HE CAN TIGHTEN YOUR VAGINA

Anger filled her being at the realisation that her daughter’s untimely death could be somehow related to the claims of this man. Was this man to blame for her daughter’s increased stubborn behaviour in her last few months leading to her death?

She quickly dialled the number at the bottom of the page.

“Hallo Lerato, what can Professor do for you today?” a coarse voice answered.

She dropped the phone without saying a word. She would not call Mokoena this time. This, she had to personally take care of. The following morning she took a taxi to the town centre to go to the professor’s consultation room.

She traced the address to a block of unkempt offices in the centre of town. She knocked on the door and no one answered. She pushed the door open. It was not a difficult task. Pamphlets similar to the one she found in her daughter’s bag were strewn on the floor and on the makeshift reception desk. The door leading to the consultation room was slightly open.

She walked in. A pungent smell welcomed her. There was no one in the room. Whoever was here left recently and must have been in a rush, she thought as she looked at the scattered files on the floor.

She opened one of the drawers and found an animal skin. After hesitating to touch it, she finally gathered the courage to pull it off. Underneath laid scattered pieces of bones and sea shells. An inyanga was here, she thought. Under the table, at the corner of the room, lay an empty champagne bottle and a cork. An inyanga with a penchant for spirits, lies and filthy lucre, she surmised. He’s got away to wreak more havoc elsewhere.

## Change

“Maybe we should start our own welding company,” says Mokoena without raising his head as he tucks into his plate of mala-mogodu and steam bread. Skosana keeps chewing, avoiding to be too excited by yet another bright idea from his friend. “I tell you Skosana, the two of us are the only welders with experience in this township; it will be much easier to build burglar doors and security gates for homes and schools, it’s much easier than working underground, competing with rats and earthworms like we currently do. And... we can make good money for ourselves, lots of it.”

“Well, why don’t we just stay where we are Mokoena, we are doing just fine working here at Goldfields Mines, besides, you know all these township schools and council buildings only give business to the mayor’s son. And he does a reasonably good job anyway,” says Skosana in resignation.

“Ag, that one can’t weld to save his fat tummy, he sub-contracts everything to Siphoh. We can negotiate with Siphoh to join us; he will make more money working with us, those fat-cats pay horribly I heard?” Mokoena says persuasively.

“I don’t know my friend, what if we fail?” Skosana says, as he picks at the last piece of the sheep’s delicacy in the bowl.

As they walk back home, Mokoena starts thinking of a different way to sell his idea to Skosana. “How does an eagle learn to fly? Surely at some point it has to take that first step from the nest, to stand right at the edge of a rocky mountain and take to the skies in faith.” Mokoena refuses to let Skosana’s silence betray the energy of his dream.

“This is a good dream to dream Skosana, even you know it in your heart.” Skosana asks Mokoena before they part ways. “How do you know that this is the right path to take, Mokoena?”

Yet another morning comes, yet another walk to catch the bus to Goldfields Shaft 1. It is very early in the morning, groups of mine-workers walk together singing songs of men. The cold and thick air complements the melody to their humming tunes. They walk with purpose, sticks in their hands, blankets wrapped around their bodies and their black gumboots make gentle noises as they walk. They walk like trained soldiers to a war, some whistling, some shouting,

but there is an unmistakable air of unity that betrays the bitterness of this dark winter morning.

“I don’t like the fact that the mine manager’s son is now the team leader.” Mokoena protests as they settle into the bus.

“Didn’t the pikinini start only about 6 months ago?” asked one of the men.

“Oh ja, kleinbaas can’t even fokken operate a drilling machine, I doubt if he even knows why we are underground.”

Skosana settles into a seat in front of Mokoena, he looks ahead, avoiding eye contact as he speaks: “Hold on, I heard that Gerrit’s son has an engineering degree from university. They teach computers and all sorts of new things over there, not simple gold digging like we’ve been doing for decades; he is the future of Goldfields.”

“Computers? – go to hell man, since when does blasting rocks and shovelling require typing skills, Skosana?” The men laugh at Mokoena’s retort.

“When will our children be like their children?” another man asks. “Like I told my dear friend Skosana the other day, we should quit and start our own businesses. That’s the only way.”

**Tim van Niekerk**

## For hours at a time

Melvil Dewey was a driven man, tense, complicated, concentrated, hounded by the fear of death. His dreams and projects were superhuman.

*Melvil Dewey: the Man and the Classification*

I'm in a hurry, trying to slow down. When last have I walked this stretch of Dewey's line? I step in between the bookshelves at 823.91, remembered from my student days (823 for English Fiction, 9 is Modern Period, 1 means 20th Century, which I lived in at that time). I'm looking for something in an adjacent neighbourhood, need to get out of the 823s. I move along the shelf as quick as I can manage, just keeping my feet from outpacing my eye. The eye slides close over the white stream of labels, blurring together, a billowing ticker-tape.

Suddenly the decimals start clocking over in their thumbnail frames. With single giddy steps I'm spanning whole integers of English Essays (824), Speeches (825), Letters (826) and in no time I'm at 828, English Miscellaneous Writings, remote location of the African Writers Series. I linger there, scooping out samples of story, dialogue, images. Some volumes come with me for further exploration. Marechera's *Black Sunlight*, so trenchant, abusive, unrestrained (audacious, too, trying to set fire to his Oxford college). Not the Isegawa that opens with Serenity down the jaws of a crocodile (too much, too soon). I look for *The House Next Door to Africa*. Why isn't it here? It should be.

I wouldn't be here either, flapping my booklist annotated with call numbers, playing the mercenary reader, were it not for *To Hell with Cronjé*. Long story. Another time.

"I don't want to tell a story," Ingrid said to me, "but if you have a story you can do things." She leaned off the director's chair, hands working the air in black, child-sized fingerless gloves. On the back of the hand the blue design of a skull, mock-horrific, a woollen memento mori.

I've found another copy to replace the one I first borrowed. That one was returned to Daly half read when, in the middle of my

reading, our own abraded stories finally split, disentwined.

And here's *Dispatches* again, the book he suggested in a decade past. Always I demurred, passing it on the shelf, not wanting to read about war. War. Vietnam. The human atrocities.

Then war was all there was, the deadly war of stories, his story of me against mine. My stories were Foot Forces (356), sitting with their backs to him. His were Mounted Forces (357), looming, never staying still.

399, Customs of War & Diplomacy.

Float me to Origin & Destiny of Human Souls (129). Airlift me to Spiritual Renewal (269). Some days you could have airdropped me at the last station – 999, Extraterrestrial Worlds – and I'd have boarded any ship, stepped through any portal.

"Yes, *Perdido Street Station!*" I said to Graham when he mentioned China Miéville.

"*The City & the City*, his latest, is even better."

He tells me how the book is about language, how it changed his view of the world.

I myself am reading DeLillo. I ask the officials charged with identifying Prohibited Works, Forgeries & Hoaxes (098) if I can put *Underworld* on my reading list. Their decision is quick, unanimous. Fine, they say, that will do. They must have known the page count because I stop in at 813.54 DEL and see that I've chosen by far his longest work. Three or four of his others would stack up next to this.

*More haste, less... hoisted by my own...*

The scores of abbreviations... were devised for the purpose of saving the seconds that made up the minutes and hours of life.

*Melvil Dewey: the Man and the Classification*

I'm descending the library stairs with a stack of books under my elbow and that shopping mall fatigue. All the disappointments. All the shelves I reached, poised to consume, primed for awe, only to find an empty space where my wishlist item was. Sometimes the adjacent volume leaned across the narrow little void, to touch the distant neighbour.

Only one of the Experimental Fiction titles was in its place –

*Molloy; Malone Dies; The Unnamable*. Of the Science/Weird Fiction, none, though I reserved the Miéville.

Paul was the man to see. He gave me lots of things, a Rosny, a Farmer, a look of envy: "I wish I was doing the course."

Sam brought several others to our lunch in the gardens. Saramago, De Beauvoir, James Ellroy. Lorna Sage's *Bad Blood*. Vladislavić.

"You've taken three bites of your sandwich," she laughed when my hour was nearly up. My thoughts were in a verbal relay, always another reaching for the mic.

"These clear skies," she had said when we sat down. When there were still silences.

These are the skies we see in autumn. It won't be summer for much longer.

535, Light & Infrared & Ultraviolet Phenomena.

Hazel is doing her light skip-walk up the library steps, notices me coming down.

"Hi!"

"Hi!" I'm pleased to see her, want to ask her things, but no time now.

"How are you," she says, already past me.

"Fine and you," I'm already a few steps down.

His organisational talents and powers of persuasion were truly formidable. With every tick of the clock, life grew shorter for Melvil Dewey, and more earnest.

*Melvil Dewey: the Man and the Classification*

The prologue to *Underworld* is titled The Triumph of Death. Bruegel. More grim humour? I mention it to Robert.

"Death," he says, "is the biggest cliché in literature."

Can this, too, become a toy, a plaything? The end of all stories. The last of the endings. The long haul of loss for the living left behind.

Space (114). Time (115). Change (116).

At the Lake Placid Club... Dewey once fiercely scolded a new reception clerk

because the clerk consumed valuable time  
by saying “Good morning, Mr Dewey.”

*Melvil Dewey: the Man and the Classification*

It’s DeLillo’s baseball game that grabbed me. His crowd of 35 000, his October 1951. The gatecrashers, the peanut seller. Frank Sinatra is there watching the game. J. Edgar Hoover and the A-bomb too.

*The sun’s own heat that swallows cities.*

“As a little boy I whiled away most of my time pretending to be a baseball announcer on the radio,” DeLillo says in an interview. “I could think up games for hours at a time.”

Little boy. Hours at a time.

796 (Athletic & Outdoor Sports & Games).



Melvil Dewey, Linnaeus of human knowledge, ultimate man of projects and efficiencies, and stranger things besides – I understand. Outpaced at birth by whole histories of books; stepping all too slowly through the ever-unfolding world. All that there is to know and love, in but the one life.

I’ll say goodbye for now and greet you with your birth name, full and wastefully unabbreviated: Melville Lewis Kossuth Dewey. (It’s OK, I have the time.)

I’ll come back. I know where to find you: three decimals down from Library Operations, at 025.431 DEW.

## Fingertip

The boy will not stop staring. When I look over the top of my newspaper, all I see is his staring eyes. His mother hasn’t noticed it, or if she has she is hiding it well. No she hasn’t noticed. If she had noticed my finger, she would have looked away, but surely not without noticing that he was staring at it. It’s rude to stare, she should be saying to him, staring is rude, that’s what I hear her saying to her son, that’s how it should be, but the world is not as it should be and instead she continues reading the magazine in front of her, oblivious to her son’s rudeness, while I try to read my newspaper and drink my tea and glance up for an occasional view of the mountain, seeing nothing but his staring eyes. I have flown right across the country and driven several hours to sit at this table on the balcony of the Giant’s Castle restaurant in the Drakensberg for one of my favourite mountain views, and yet I see no mountain. Instead of a mountain all I see is the eyes of a child which themselves see nothing but the fingertip on my small finger, the fingertip that is gone.

He has not seen that I have noticed him, he is so fascinated by the grip of my hand round the edge of the newspaper that he fails to notice that he himself is being observed. Usually when small girls see it they look down or away or sometimes they squeal and run, but not so for boys, not for this specific type of boy before me. He is the boy who gapes, the gawper, the starrer.

The mother turns the page of her magazine, it is a baby magazine, there’s a photograph of a baby on the front. She is smiling. She must be smiling at more babies inside, more staring babies.

I look back at the boy, he must be four or five years old, four if he’s big for his age, five if he’s small and my guess is he’s small, he looks like a small shrewd boy. Why else would he continue staring silently instead of pointing and turning to his mother and shouting look mommy no finger, that would be the obvious thing to do, then it would all be over, his slow and oblivious mother would be mortified, any good mother would be so absolutely mortified, as they say, that she would apologise profusely and with any luck she would be so embarrassed she would get up and remove the offending child, the source of the embarrassment, leaving me before the entirety of the mountain, me and the mountain restored.



Finish your sausage, says his mother softly while glancing from her baby magazine to the food on his plate and back at the baby magazine, finish that now, she says patiently, looking again at the finger-length sausage and at him and then back at the baby magazine, always back to the babies, with a smile of such personal warmth. It is that small thin type of sausage no doubt reserved for the children's menu, small wots or thin wots or whatever they call it, I never buy the stuff, I don't know what it's called. He makes no move to consume the remaining sausage, can she really not have noticed his preoccupation with me at the other table, with my hand at the newspaper's edge, can she be so unaware, these mothers who are so deeply attuned, especially to their children's silences, to their inevitable suspicious silences, but all I can do now is ignore the boy.

Let me cut it for you then, she says, lowering the baby magazine and taking up the knife, the blunt knife with its token edge and the edge with its token serrations prescribed no doubt for items from the children's menu, a knife which not so much slices through the miniature sausage as drives its way down through it like a blunt chisel along its progressively diminishing length. No doubt she feels the weight of my eyes on these stumps of sausage, what is the meaning of this sausage, this performance of reducing the sausage to stumps before my eyes? Surely she cannot mean what I think she means, as she completes this piece of butchery. There now you don't have to cut it, she says to the boy, just use your spoon and eat them, she continues, with a glance and a smile for me, the man in the hat at the other table. Surely she felt my eyes on her and on the sausage which she reduced to grotesque little stumps before my eyes, before then smiling right at me and lifting her magazine again and returning to the babies that stare and smile blandly in complete ignorance of what awaits them in their impending lives. What could she have meant, smiling at me, why look up at me, straight into my eyes and yet avoiding so studiously the sight of my hand? Surely it is natural to allow one's gaze to travel across the hand of the man at the next table if one is going to go to the trouble of looking into his eyes and smiling.

There is something strange about the boy, more than a hint of strangeness. This morning I saw him walking with his mother along the pavement, staring at the paving stones with his shoulders hunched as he took shuffling steps mostly forward but sometimes

at abrupt diagonals. I watched all this take place some way ahead of me, and by the time I came abreast of the two of them standing at the edge of the road at the entrance to the parking lot, the cars had stopped passing but he refused to cross the road. We can go now, she kept saying to him, we can go now it's all clear Philip, but he wouldn't move, she with her head bent smiling over him, somehow reluctant to touch his shoulder, he with his arms folded looking at the ground, a tuft of hair standing up from the crown of his head at the base of the sidepath. There is something the matter with this boy, I decided then. I will simply ignore this boy. And such a patient mother – where is the father, I wonder – such a patient softly-spoken mother even contemplating another child, I will have to ignore the boy.

As she continues to page through the baby faces, more people arrive on the deck, this elevated deck affording one of the best mountain views, and as they sit down to lunch the boy scoops up each piece of sausage with his spoon and chews each individual piece with slow ostentation. He holds his spoon like a shovel and shovel-wise he spoons them in, each of the little stumps piece by piece into his mouth with its revolving lower jaw. I order another glass of wine from the waiter as he passes. I drank the remainder too quickly, to distract and defend myself from the shameless staring and now from this vulgar display, but I cannot leave. I came to lunch early for the express purpose of sitting at one of the popular deck tables with the best view of the mountain, why should I leave because of a staring boy whose eye is fixated on my little finger. His eye does wander away occasionally as it is caught by the movements of waiters or diners or even of passing birds – at least the boy does look at birds – but he keeps returning after each momentary distraction to my small finger.

An elderly couple passes between us and they sit down at the table next to us, but the boy's eyes fall back again on my left hand small finger.

I turn the page of my newspaper and snap it open again, lowering it a little to look over the top straight back into his eyes, but all I do is attract the attention of the new diners at the next table. I see the woman's eyes flit across the aberration of my little finger and watch her nose swing out across the deck over the mountain and into the sky, what a wonderful view, she says to the man beside her,

what a wonderful idea to bring us here for the weekend, to the no doubt long-suffering man beside her, and the waiter has seen me snap my newspaper, he comes to ask if anything is wrong. Would I like another newspaper, he asks inanely, he can bring my next glass of wine that is what he can do, I say to him somewhat sharply, and remove this staring boy, I want to say to him very sharply, but his fixed smile betrays him, the smile and the concerted effort to look me straight in the eye and not to let his eye pass over my hand, that is what I begin to suspect, when he turns and leaves quickly and instead of going to the bar to retrieve my glass of wine he walks in the direction of the kitchen.

I decide to go and get the wine myself. I walk to the bar weaving between the now occupied tables, all but one of the circular tables has become a centre of conversation and gesture, lips moving and hands waving, flaunting the entirety of those hands and their natural full-length fingers, tea is being poured into teacups and the teacups are being raised to expectant lips with such delicacy, always the problem of the little finger, how does one place the little finger when raising the teacup, how does the finger find the appropriate attitude. I myself have stopped drinking tea, I can no longer be bothered with teacups or with tea.

At the bar I am asked for my table number. I don't know my table number, I say to the barman, there is no number on my table and I am not in the habit of inspecting furniture for numbers. No matter, says the smiling barman, he will find my waiter and see the glass of wine is added to my bill. Make it a large glass, I say, and he obliges me with a large, inordinately long-stemmed glass filled right up to the very brim so that I spill some as I turn to leave, but I keep walking, dripping droplets of wine as I move between the tables out onto the deck, all of them full now except my own table at what was the deck's far secluded corner when I first arrived, the table with the best mountain view. The wine continues to streak down the long stem of the top-heavy glass and then over my fingers before it drips to the ground, one especially large droplet falling onto my shoe so that I quickly take out my handkerchief, bend down and dab at the top of the wine-splattered suede. I mop the wine from my right hand as I straighten up again, all this is due to a waiter's incompetence, and to the barman's added incompetence, switching the glass to my left hand and the handkerchief to my right while I mop and wipe,

keeping my feet out of the way of falling drops. In my distracted state I have used a white handkerchief to clean red wine from my shoe, and wineglass. The handkerchief is ruined, this wine-stained handkerchief can now be thrown away, it certainly cannot be put back into my pocket in this condition, it will only spread the stain to the pocket lining.

Then I notice the sidelong glances. In my doubly distracted state I am carrying the glass with my left hand, the spoiled wet handkerchief in my right, of course the handkerchief is not what is drawing their attention. Yes, I feel like saying to the guests with their eyes averted, their eyes looking in all directions but one, the human hand contains fourteen phalanges or finger-bones, three phalanges for each of the prehensile fingers, two phalanges for each thumb, that is the usual arrangement, but of course what you see before you is not the usual arrangement. Something is missing from the hand wrapped around the glass, something here is very wrong. What's wrong, what's missing is the distal phalanx, you would not know that term in the normal course of events, but this hand has not followed the normal course of events, you have fourteen phalanges and I have thirteen, you are fourteeners and I am a thirteener, my distal phalanx, my little finger's fingertip is gone.

When I reach my table the woman and her son are getting up to leave. He has eaten all his sausage and he glances at my hand as they go, at my right hand this time as it passes before his face, drawing back from the handkerchief when it nears him, his mother's hand cupping the crown of his head, flattening the tuft of hair with her palm as she steers him gently back in the direction from which I have just come. It is only as I approach my table from that side that I see the number mounted on a little block of wood set on my table. The number thirteen.

Soon after I sit down again the waiter arrives with another glass of wine, a third glass of wine now for table thirteen. Obviously I have confused matters by going to the bar myself and three glasses is certainly more than I would normally drink at any one time, but I tell him to leave it on the table, it doesn't matter just leave it here, I'll have it, I'll drink it eventually, I say to the waiter just to be rid of him and to be rid of his smiling eyes. I resume reading my newspaper but I am so agitated that before long I have drunk the second glass I fetched from the bar. All I feel is the unstarving eyes

of the other diners, all the eyes not looking directly at me and not looking directly at my finger.

I should not have drunk the second glass of wine so quickly, I can already feel the effects. Neither should I be sipping the third. The house red was what I asked for. This foul, stomach-churning red was what I received. I should not be sipping this wine.

This is precisely what I came here to escape, the eyes of the city, the gawpers and starers. Every day in the city my fingertip is noticed but never looked at for more than the instant it takes to recognise its absence. And then there are those who would ask me *what happened to your finger?* as though they are entitled to some explanation of facts which have nothing to do with them, or worse, those people who feel it is their duty to be deeply perplexed on my behalf and who ask me with their deep empathic voices, *what happened to your finger?* while frowning in perplexity, these people so convinced of their own sincerity and so oblivious of their own mendacity, as though by asking for the story of my finger they are giving me something instead of trying to take something away. This man I met the other day, they will say to their mendacious friends and acquaintances who find it uplifting to hear of the plights of others, he was a flautist and he lost one of his fingertips, they will say in voices overloaded with emotion and perhaps even feeling this same emotional overload. You see you can't play the flute after losing a fingertip, they will continue, not even the tip of the left small finger, the least significant fingertip on the least significant hand, they will say with their empathic inflections, feeling better about themselves already for the depths of empathy they have just displayed and which they will challenge their friends and acquaintances to display. Just a little fingertip, they will repeat looking downwards, shaking their heads in renewed astonishment and disbelief, imagine your life could change so drastically just by the slamming of a door, the sliding door of a minibus at an airport drop-off point, where you have held the door-pillar a moment longer than you should have done, and another passenger has rammed the door closed a moment earlier than he should have done, so that your finger is crushed and cannot be salvaged, your career is crushed and cannot be salvaged, because your career depends on a *fingertip*.

Your musical sense of touch is gone from that indispensable fingertip. There is a concentration of nerves in each of the fingertips,

there is no such concentration at the end of a fingerstump. The fingerstump is where a note has been expunged from the music. The fingerstump ends where the ghost of the fingertip begins. Within the span of a fingertip there has opened a desolate expanse.

Computer keyboards remind you of the ghost of the fingertip. When you clip your fingernails the ghost nail never needs clipping. When you place your hand on a shoulder it is never the left hand. When you wave from a distance it is always with the right hand. When you talk animatedly with your hands the left hand talks from under the table or inside your pocket or has simply ceased to talk, and all in all the animation of the right hand is lately somewhat subdued. That is what I want to say when I am asked the question *what happened to your finger?* That is the answer I never give, that I want to forget. I want to forget most of all that last attempt to breathe into the mouthpiece of the flute which had always transformed my breath to music, to mercurial trills or exuberant blasts or that music that haunts the silence after the long fade of the final note. But instead the silence came early, repeatedly, in ugly jarring thumps of absence. The hateful stump, it scraped at the side of the perfect flute.



After lunch on my way back to my room, I see the boy and his mother ahead of me waiting at the edge of the road. She is bending over him trying to convince him to cross. We can go now Philip, I hear her saying to him, come let's walk quickly while there are no cars, but he is standing still with his arms folded and his feet planted and he stares down, determined not to cross, the tuft of hair curling up from the crown of his stubborn head. His mother straightens up as she sees a car approach, another opportunity lost. When it passes she will resume her efforts, except that another car appears behind that one as I come past. I do not stand too close, but in order to cross the road to reach my room, I must stand abreast of the boy to my left, though I wait some distance away. I smile at the woman who seems so patient for someone hiding exasperation, but I make the smile brief and formal and look forward again. I avoid looking at the boy who I notice out of the corner of my eye has turned his head towards me, he must be looking at my hand and I feel his eyes on my small finger again, the boy is relentless, will there never be a moment's respite from his eyes?

The first car passes before me and the second is still some way off, should I dash across the road before it reaches us, but somehow I cannot break from my position at the kerb, the weight of his eyes are like the weight of some unshakeable spell. Some part of me fears that he is so obsessed with the fingertip that now that it has come again before his eyes he might run after me, ignoring the approaching vehicle, he might be crushed under its wheels, his whole life crushed as my fingertip was crushed, leaving me responsible for the death of a boy whose fear of crossing roads was overcome by his obsession with a missing fingertip – death from a missing fingertip. So I stand there with my hands hanging at my sides hoping the moment will be over quickly, as soon as this second vehicle passes I can make my escape, but as the car is in the act of crossing before us I half perceive the blur of his movement and the quick emphatic steps which bring him right up against me, with my partially amputated finger suddenly enveloped in the grip of his hand. He is holding my finger in his hand.

I don't know where to look. I look straight forward. He is looking forward, facing the silent empty road, standing there squeezing my finger.

It is as though an unseen stranger has come from behind and slipped a hand down the front of my shirt, the hand is hot but my skin is chilled. No-one has touched my finger since the doctors. The stump of the finger has touched no-one else since the doctors.

When at last I am able to turn my head down to him, I stare at him in astonishment while I stand held in this most private and enveloping of embraces, but his head is raised and looking over the road, he is not looking at me, he gives the finger a light jerk and takes half a step forward. His mother is also frozen for a different reason, she looks uncertainly into my face as though trying to read my expression. I am so sorry, she seems on the point of saying, she is absolutely mortified and would I accept her humblest apology for the rudeness of her son, except she lingers there, while I stand feeling the sweat begin to form between the boy's skin and the skin of my small finger, is it his sweat or mine, I wonder, probably mine. I look away from the woman and over the road and he jerks my finger again and we begin to walk. The boy walks with me as though it is the most natural thing in the world.



The following morning they are not at the breakfast table. I am able to look at the mountain in peace, but instead of seeing the mountain I keep seeing the wide innocent eyes of the boy. I see him as he stood yesterday at the kerbside, staring down, unable to cross, his mother powerless to help him cross.

His father normally helps him over the road, she explained to me after we all made the crossing together, he normally holds one of his father's fingers but his father was called away from their holiday, to perform an emergency operation, she tells me, his father is an ophthalmic surgeon. The boy recently witnessed an accident from the pavement and since then only his father has managed to coax him across the road, leading him by a finger as he had done when he was smaller.

When I have finished eating I decide to take the short circular walking route to the Main Caves where there are rock paintings. There is a tour of the caves which starts each hour on the hour. The path leads downwards from the complex of chalets, shop and restaurant. As I walk alone I swing my hands beside me through the open air and admire the view of the surrounding mountains looming higher as I descend into the valley. It is a simple pleasingly modular landscape, with the long sills of dolerite, as I was reading, superimposed on steep slopes of summer grass. The green of these sloping grasses is broken decisively by the line of the river – such neat components – the river is at once blue like the sky and black like the underwater stones, the water froths here and there as the river turns. I descend the path to the riverside. The path is solid under my feet, it is paved neatly and thickly all the way down with concrete, such a thoughtful facility, nobody likes mud under their shoes, it is not only the mess but the additional weight under one's feet, the sensation of a dragging weight, of something superfluous, something which does not belong.

When I reach the bottom of the valley and the river is beside me and its purl is in my ears, I follow the concrete path round a pile of boulders and there ahead of me is the woman and her son.

He is standing with his arms folded on the concrete where it ends and the mud begins, a few metres before a wooden footbridge, with muddy half-footprints trailing across its boards. His mother is

bending over him, hands behind her back and speaking close to his ear. Philip, she is saying brightly, why don't you try just taking a step off and then back on again, she is saying encouragingly, with hardly a trace of impatience. Just one step forward and one back, let's just see what it's like, we've come all this way. I can see from behind that his gaze is averted, he is standing at the squared-off edge of the concrete, but he might as well be at the edge of the world, that much I can see from his folded arms and the set of his shoulders and the stubborn tilt of his head. I watch her straighten abruptly and then bend down.

*Oh come on Philip*, she says, suddenly exasperated as she brings a hand forward and gives him a soft nudge between the shoulder-blades, but at the touch of her hand he screams half in warning and half in unmistakable distress while putting his hands over his ears. She jerks her own hand back and speaks convulsively, I'm sorry Philip, I shouldn't have, as she struggles to keep both her hands back now from his clenched shoulders and his bent head, I won't push you again, she continues, you don't have to go anywhere that you don't want to go.

She turns when she hears my footsteps and gives me a warm pained smile from under her floral hat, a smile of recognition. I look from her eyes and her thin-lipped mouth to the back of the boy's head with the tuft of hair standing erect at the base of the sidepath, he is lowering his hands again and standing with his feet planted and his head tilted as though looking at something a long way down. He turns and sees me and she puts a hand out in front of him. She seems somewhere between being about to speak and allowing me to pass, or perhaps she is simply on the point of turning back and giving up on the whole sorry idea of the walk to the caves, a short walk no doubt intended for the benefit of her son, but one fraught with pitfalls for a boy who cannot cross roads or step from concrete onto mud or from there over who knows what other obstacles lying ahead of him.

I take a step just past him and pause at the edge of the concrete and wait there a moment as his eyes fall on my left hand. I move the hand a little further from my side and stand there. He reaches up and grasps it and I wait a little. I look down at the dark hair on his head and wait for him to move. When he moves I move.

We walk off the concrete path onto the mud and over the bridge

as I look over my shoulder at his mother following close behind. The boy does not see us looking at each other. At the other side of the bridge he pauses and we turn to take in the view of the river. Then we move ahead again and I stand with him at the edge of the forest canopy and look up to see the rest of the path. It ascends with a series of transitions from mud to stone and back to mud again threading its way between boulders and the trunks of trees. For a moment I stand and watch him looking up under the forest canopy until it seems as though he is on the point of having looked too long, and I give a gentle tug with my hand that he is grasping by the stump of the small finger.

When we get through the section of forest the path changes again to concrete and he releases my hand and walks ahead onto it. I slow down and his mother slows down and she thanks me again as she did the day before. Her husband rejoins them this afternoon, she says, as I see the boy pause and hesitate some distance ahead and then step from the concrete onto a section of mud and loose stones. It was an appalling accident he witnessed, she says behind me, he was always reluctant to step on the cracks between bricks and paving stones, but now it is worse, he is more reluctant than ever, and he will not let me help him cross the road. He will not let me touch him. You see I could have prevented it, he tried to warn me and I wouldn't listen, it was me there beside him when we saw the whole thing from the side of the road.



We talk a little more on the way to the caves. Her name is Louisa Verreaux. She is an illustrator of children's books. Her current illustrations are mostly of babies. Her husband's name is Cyril and would I like to join her and Philip and Cyril for dinner in the restaurant that evening. So she asks me, at the end of the eleven o'clock two-minute tour of rock paintings, conducted every hour on the hour by a young man who looks as though he has just woken up.

Philip stands before us staring apprehensively at a series of ochre figures depicted in more or less horizontal positions across the face of the rock. Possibly they are swimming, they could even be flying, the final intent of the painter is altogether unclear, but if they are running it is at a highly improbable tilt, and if one is to expect some sort of prehistoric hunting scene one would also expect some sign

of prehistoric prey, and for the figures to be bearing arms, whereas there is evidence of none of these things, not even a faded line suggesting a bow or a spear. I don't think I'll join them for dinner, I'll find some polite way to decline, I would only be distracted by the surgeon's handling of his steak knife, surgeons invariably order steak, all in all I have had my share of surgeons whether ophthalmic or otherwise, and neither would I normally be overeager to meet a man named Cyril.

At the end of the rock face looms a huge solitary figure, that is the shaman, the tour guide told us, as though he would really know, it balloons up over the surface of the stone like a shadow arising in a dream, it has hands and feet but there is no sign of fingers or toes, not in the large figure and neither in those smaller ones portrayed in a horizontal stream to one side. They fell, I hear Philip say from where I'm standing behind him as he faces the rock, they all fell down, he repeats quietly, but not that one, says his mother pointing towards the larger figure, that is the magician, he has not fallen down, at which the boy looks across at the shaman for a long moment and turns around glancing at his mother before standing squarely before me looking upwards into my face. As a child I suffered badly with dreams, such harmless images as these figures painted across stone might easily have returned to disturb my sleep after some always unpredictable interval, their meanings rustling through the silence toward me, revealed to no-one but me. As he looks upwards with his large eyes and his face so wide and expressive in proportion to his small, child's body, the face of a boy looking up into the face of a man, I become acutely aware of my hands hanging at my sides, I want suddenly to put them in my pockets, but I stand my ground resisting the compulsion to turn aside and follow the guide who has started to lead everyone from the cave, with Louisa already beginning to walk out after him. I remain there with my hands in the open glancing from the boy's one eye to the other in search of some clue, some clearly discernible emotion, seeing only their clarity despite the hint of uncertainty or perhaps expectation, despite his perhaps not knowing what to say or do next he does not avert his gaze or bow his head. He looks like a boy in need of a musical instrument, a boy who has probably not played one before. For a moment he waits there looking at me and letting me look at him. I find I am unable to prevent myself. I stand there, openly staring.

## Elmé Vivier

## Twilight turning

The morning fog was lifting as they neared town. They set up, as usual, on the fringes. Shelters, pens, kitchen, booths, menagerie. The Grand Tent came last. This was Scarlett's favourite part. She marvelled from her pen as it came to life, a giant red and yellow tarantula. Wobbly legs jutting forty metres out.

"Give me a break, Scarlett, they're just putting up the tent," said Thomas from behind her. He was sitting in the back of the pen picking bits of grass out of his hair.

"I know, but look at it!"

"I've seen it a million times and so have you."

"I just wonder what it's like inside..."

"Probably grassy."

"No, I mean at night, with all those people. The stunts, the music, the magic..."

"Uh," he bleat-snorted at her. "Just please don't break into song else I'm going to be sick."

She turned towards him with a restless heart.

"I'm getting tired of these kids trying to make us eat their shoelaces. And corndogs. I hate corndogs. They make me fat. I'm bored, aren't you bored?"

"I don't mind it really" he replied. "Except when they mess up my hair."

She laughed, kicking sand and grass in his direction.

"Hey!" he feigned offence. She laughed again, stretched out next to him and watched the troupe fill the Grand Tent with oversized boxes of things she would never know.

"Thomas, I've got a plan," Scarlett announced some days later. "We're going to sneak in."

"Sneak in where?" he asked, suspiciously.

"The Grand Tent."

"Are you mad? And how do you plan on doing that seeing as you're nothing more than a goat?"

She didn't appreciate the remark.

"Look, I'm going to get in there, and you can either come with me or you can stay here and be nothing but a goat in a pen for the rest of your life." He looked at her, wounded.

"I'm sorry, Thomas. You know you're more than just a goat to me. But come on, hear me out. It's a good plan. We'll be back before morning and no one will ever know." She nuzzled him, a playful pleading.

He looked around. Strongman was busy trying to ride a unicycle. Beardedette and the boys were mocking him. Everyone was busy. Sigh. "OK, how?"

She jumped excitedly then proceeded with hooved lines in the sand to explain her plan. It was really quite simple. They agreed. They would leave at dusk.

They stood together on the outside of the pen, staring back at their empty patch of grass. It had been an easy caper over the gate. Behind them the space from where they stood to the Grand Tent surged with humans and beasts of assorted sizes, masked and loud, near ethereal.

"Let's go" Scarlett whispered. They snuck into the crowd.

They say crowds throng. This crowd thronged as if by a reason unto itself. The whole more than the sum of its parts. Once Thomas and Scarlett were in it, they had no choice but to follow its ebb and flow towards the door. A large woman wearing a peacock was jostling the man next to her. Another was gesticulating something about a tree. Thomas trod nervously between a garbed horse and a clown, beckoning Scarlett, enraptured, to follow. Except for the occasional knee in the side or horn in the thigh, they were hardly noticed.

At the door was a lady with long, yellow fingers collecting tickets. They glanced at one another mischievously. Hide! They edged their way behind skirts and legs to the far side of the door, each choosing an unsuspecting human to accompany inside. It worked. Once inside they had hardly time enough to exchange even a breath about their mission in when they were overcome by the scene inside. There were benches encircling a platform, but no one was sitting. Bodies teemed over bodies. A man was swinging in the ceiling falling beads. A clown stacking toppling boxes masks with blue-rimmed eyes came towards them. A hand grabbed Scarlett's horn pulled she away but slight throbbing orangutan whooping with girls whip-strapped cotton candy dripping Thomas and Scarlett squeezed against each other fear fetching bile feeding a sympathetic ganglion "Scarlett!" turning lyrical maelstrom bodies painted wet against him turning an elephant farting fire tuxedos turning a seal swimming in the

folds of an orca turning scarlett stumbling another direction time another scarlett turning unseeing away from him a dark skirt stops him straight "your palm, love" he retreating she bends face dented to face "no palm no story love" in another space Scarlett licking from the palm of Helios she turning fear turned ecstatic turning back into another "hey watch it" the call of the other in the face of the other repeating "watch it sorry cannot hear then follow me" she follows the echo of his follow me leaving the din of the tent behind into the raw night breathing more deeply chaos lingering

"Sorry I nearly knocked you over." An orange-spotted goat was facing her.

"Um, it's fine." Her words sputtered, her mind swayed. "Who are you?"

"Jack."

A local. She could feel his eyes over her, his shadow inside of her.

"You all alone here tonight?"

"Yea...no..." She looked around her unsurely. Chaos lingering.

"You ever been to this town before?"

"No."

"Well there's this field not too far from here. I'm going there now. You want to come with me?"

She hesitated.

"Without all these lights it's a lot easier to see the stars. And on a night like tonight..."

He smelled strange. She felt a star burning.

"We'll be back before dawn. I promise." He smiled. Reason blinked. And they were gone.

She followed him down an errant street, the tent lights fading to a flicker and then gone. Their cement path turned brick their steps clop clapping until it became gravel. Eventually they abandoned the shelter of the high walls and stepped into a small grassy field. She felt exposed in the twilight anxious following still. They stopped by a berry tree.

Thomas stumbled outside, disturbed by all that he had seen, but more worried about the fact that he hadn't been able to find Scarlett. He hoped she had also decided to leave. He looked around. There were fewer people outside now. Here and there were small groups coming and going. He ran towards their pen. Surely if she had left she would have gone straight there. Empty. He called her name softly.



Ran back to the Grand Tent, to the door where they had entered, he wasn't sure how long ago. The ticket lady was gone. He went left, all along the side of the tent. Maybe she came out somewhere else. Or maybe she was looking for him. Every few metres he stopped and called her name. *Dammit Scarlett*. He knew this had been a bad idea. They didn't belong in – he didn't even know how to think about it – places like that. He reached the main entrance again. She must still be inside. He decided to wait, out of sight but close enough to see her when she came out.

The tent was already down. Thomas had watched the process in panic from his pen. They were busy with the Ferris Wheel now, bucket for bucket, bolts and pins. Where was she? He never saw her come out. Never saw her leave. Saw mattresses folded, boxes carried by half-painted faces back and forth. He watched as they started loading the carriages, the largest first. He knew the process all too well. Elephants, horses, cats. Why were they moving so quickly? Soon it would be their turn. Maybe if they saw that she was missing, they would look for her. Yes, he thought. Of course. They wouldn't leave her behind. They would send a search party, probably find her sleeping under a bench somewhere. It was a reasonable expectation, and he relaxed. A man opened the gate – *he would now see she's gone* – put a rope around his neck started pulling him Thomas resisted – *no we can't!* – thrust his hooves into the ground the man too strong dragged him choking through the gate leaving only tracks behind. He struggled, bleated, his eyes searched frantically for hers. *Where was she?*

She was falling a fury of legs around him in her berries crushed beneath them. *His eyes searched frantically for hers*. She bleated madness her back – an arched doorway of self-transcendence. *He thought he heard her, but she wasn't there*. The bent velvet light enfolding lips. He waited. Her perforated soul with Pan fleeing. Liminality. *He waited*. Twilight turning. The Goathead roared. *They finished loading the carriages. The Goathead roared*.

At dawn she found herself alone. Rapture wrecked. Her head ached. She felt a guilty fragility she had never known before. And yet, and yet. She had no words for what had happened. She considered waiting around for, for, she couldn't even remember his name. Doubt sunk into her bones. She ran, suddenly pen-sick, away from the memory, away from herself. She followed the imbricated

patterns of the street, strange in the morning light, until she came upon a large grassy lot. Empty. She carried on. He would be hurt. Deeply, she knew. Disappointed too. What could she say? Guilt constricted her thoughts like an avenging frostbite. She came upon the empty lot again. She was going in circles. But this was definitely the place, she was sure of it. She bleated softly. No one answered.

**spoon**

you can blame the drugs  
     but not for everything  
 everything didn't make sense  
     like now  
 repeat after me  
     I love you  
 you don't have to  
     mean it     just for me  
 me and you we were  
     really something  
 but something doesn't add up  
     here         you can use my spoon  
     but not for everything

**likkewaan**

Again I take the single track.  
 A lopsided loop that rises and dips  
 over the back of the city.  
 Again I stumble on the steep  
 with winter waiting in the shade.

Once, I came upon a likkewaan.  
 The afternoon sun slanted across his scaled black tail  
 as we sized each other up, eye to dragoneye  
 while the leaves between us fell into obscurity.

**The first time**

The first time I heard the word 'disconcerting' there was a fat lady  
 on the wall fondling herself in 3-D. I remember 'oblivion' too. I was  
 in love. He was black. The way she twirled those curls. Maybe I  
 should've taken up botany. Or haberdashery. I could've stitched  
 the world in pastels. I tried ballet but my points couldn't keep the  
 blood in. Red was never my favourite colour anyway. Let's park it he  
 says, as if we're just out for a jol-ride and the dryness in our throats  
 is nothing more than thirst. My god the world is flat. We find the  
 desert and all we want to do is cruise and booze. Admire the view.  
 We lost the car and the straight line spiralled like a topographical  
 map on acid. Where the hell did all this sand come from? People  
 always want to talk about 'their' generation but at the end of the  
 day everyone's fucking everyone. Continental drift. Inter-species  
 erotica. I know I told you ticks don't jump, but check your crevices  
 anyway.

**Pencil sketch**

I imagine your house  
 in lines  
 and semi-arches for doorways  
 two bedrooms  
 no stairs  
 except maybe  
 to the front door  
 I imagine a fireplace  
 there  
 across from the kitchen  
 the hallway  
 opening  
 leading to the counter  
 some windows here  
 and there  
 some furniture  
 just the big stuff  
 a couch  
 a bed  
 a desk  
 and shelves and shelves  
 of books  
 I imagine you  
 standing in the kitchen  
 or maybe sitting at the desk  
 where a single lamp colours  
 everything yellow

**All I've ever done**

I've only ever taken trains away from home.  
 There's hope in the places where I don't belong –  
 in small gardens that hug warm houses,  
 in streets that curve and curl like smoke.

We think we move of our own volition  
 yet the landscape pulls me like a finger  
 through an endless field of yellow grass.

Among the floating villages of Ha Long Bay  
 a woman rows her spaza shop from house to house.  
 And once a year the dogs leap off their decks  
 and swim ashore to mate.

I've only ever loved you once  
 but in between those limestone cliffs and now  
 that might be all I've ever done.

**Snow falling**

he said to keep your eye on the person not the canvas  
 then he held up a small fist  
 and with an ink-stained thumb started smudging the air

it snowed yesterday  
 it never does that here  
 I phoned to tell you but you weren't there  
 I stood outside  
 the snow melting in my hair

not enough that I could cry  
 not enough that I could feel warm inside

the artist  
 he was still drawing his invisible lines  
 but he had stopped explaining  
 said he could only show what he meant  
 he meant  
 likeness  
 as if to capture something

but I could see the grey sky  
 I wanted to be outside  
 I wanted to be  
 not standing there looking through  
 the likeness of the dark shadow under the eye  
 I wanted

with the wind in my face

the snow falling

**sometimes I think of you**

you didn't kiss me on our first date  
 even though I wanted you to  
 in the dim light coming through the door  
 your unassuming smile and the way you didn't lean  
 straight talking with your hands  
 about those damn Republicans and the war  
 you were so tall  
 I didn't mind the way the dishes piled up  
 and where we were  
 sitting in the window smoking talking shit  
 with Pat going off about Tiananmen Square  
 when it was still new I loved your smell  
 you took me home to meet your mother  
 and played Big L on repeat  
 that was before Benji found God  
 but even then he was beautiful  
 sitting at her dresser his large brown eyes  
 soft and round as he divided our lines  
 I stopped swimming in the ocean then  
 and somewhere we moved in together  
 somewhere I kissed someone else  
 and somewhere there was Henry just Henry  
 stinging our brains for weeks or was it months or years  
 and your mother phoned  
 she sold the house on her way to California  
 all the furniture strung out and empty  
 calling strangers at midnight begging for truth

On our teachers

## Robert Berold

Generous, magnanimous man!  
 Spirit of the bear  
 you embrace the world  
 and keep your distance.  
 I have never been  
 so endeared  
 or puzzled  
 at the ambiguity  
 of a grunt.

*Hailey Gaunt*

“Hi Patricia. It’s Robert. Your tutor. Teacher. It’s Robert, your friend... What am I?”

*Patricia Crain*

I’m checking out Robert’s bookshelf in the lounge of his farm house, taking out one book at a time, flipping through pages, reading in small chunks and putting them back on the shelf afterwards. On this cold day my fellow classmates merrily chat around the table. Others hog the fireplace. Robert notices me. Eyes twinkling and a smile on his face, he says: “Wanna see more books?” No way I could refuse. I follow him to his home office, a few paces from the lounge. I look to one side of the sun-drenched room. My jaw drops.

*Phakama Mbonambi*

“Why,” I wail to Robert, “do I feel I have to explain everything twenty times.”

“It’s because you weren’t heard as a child.” It is said with a brown twinkle, in the full knowledge of my fear of appearing as a certain-aged woman looking for cheap therapy.

But he’s right. Bloody hell.

*Jayne Morgan*

“What is important,” Robert said, “is the magic – the explosion of magic, as Rampolokeng puts it. The real energising force of the universe cannot be put into language. This is what poets try to do. Can only do it sideways.”

*Marike Beyers*

Commenting on my first attempts at poetry: “The first one sounds a bit like the Apocalypse but the second one’s a little better.”

*Adèle Thomas*

## Hazel Crampton

On her involvement as teacher in the course: “We do this, I think, because it is wonderful to be among people who care about writing.”

*Marike Beyers*

“You’re having a shit week, aren’t you?” Hazel said as I walked up the drive before a supervision meeting.

“Yes,” I replied, and then all was right.

*Aslam Seedat*

Hazel, I used your hair in my story. Only problem is I sort of “fictionalised”. And I know you don’t really like that. You’re going to hate me. You see I made some really tiny changes. But otherwise it’s the same hair. Now I see I’ve been a fool. I thought I was doing something so new at the time, insinuating myself into the cracks between fact and fiction, but it’s clear now it was all a big mistake. Because one day – sorry to mention it – your hair won’t be here to defend itself. People might not know the difference. What then?

*Tim van Niekerk*

**Silke Heiss**

The voice I hear when I'm thinking up excuses not to write is Silke's, from her seminar: "You need neither inspiration nor confidence to write."

*Hailey Gaunt*

I turn up at a feedback session on our long projects drowning in a sea of half-formed ideas. I publicly flounder around for bit until Silke slaps the table and says "what is the problem and whose problem is it?" and my feet find a sandbar that holds.

*Jayne Morgan*

After my mother passed away during the course: "Remember you're a person first and then a writer... and also remember to appreciate the goddess within you and to breathe."

*Adèle Thomas*

Responding to a vexing question I returned to at the end of a feedback session: "I think you should just tie that to your helium balloon and let it float away..."

*Tim van Niekerk*

**Joanne Hichens**

"In your head your story is a movie in glorious Technicolor," says Joanne, "all complete. But a novel is written word by word." The hair shirt gets a little bit less scratchy each time I remember that. Which is as often as possible.

*Jayne Morgan*

In response to a bad patch and extreme writer's block: "Just remember to develop a thick skin and keep writing... you're doing it!"

*Adèle Thomas*

**Anton Krueger**

In a seminar:

"Everybody else knows what you look like, but... you're headless, to yourself you're headless, this floating, perceiving machine."

"Novel writing is all about counting words... 'a novelist is someone who counts words' (quoting John Braine)..."



## Rian Malan

After reading the piece I brought to our very first workshopping session (having laboured over it the previous night because, not only was it the first session, but Rian Malan was to be in my group) Rian's only comments were: " 'Hailey Gaunt' hmm – I'm still thinking about it – it's a nice name."

*Hailey Gaunt*

Long project supervision feedback: "You've got to do it, man! You've got to do it."

*Phakama Mbonambi*

Long project supervision feedback: "I like your shit because it reeks of experience in the real SA. Also because you don't bother to wipe the toilet seat before sitting down. Some of us are terrified of offending the high priests of PC, which makes their writing insufferable."

*Anirood Singh*

Posting on RUConnected, Tuesday, 26 June 2012, 09:41 AM: "This is rian malan... trying to work out how the eff this works.... I have not smoked a cigarette for 21 days and 40 minutes. My instinct is to murder anything that irritates me."

Overheard: "I can assure you, Officer, fiction is not my genre."

## Paul Mason

Coming across Paul Mason on a Friday afternoon at Pick n Pay, carrying bags:

Paul: Groceries for Lesego, that he'll have some basic stuff when he arrives.

Marike: That's kind of you.

Paul: Robert's like a sheepdog, trying to get everyone somewhere where they'll be happy.

Marike: Did you remember toilet paper?

Paul:...!!!

*Marike Beyers*

February 9, 2012. This is my first morning in Grahamstown. It feels good to be here. We meet, students and teachers, at St Peter's Building and the introductions are delayed, except that teachers had to tell us who they are. Paul Mason introduces himself as wearing a couple of caps, including being a 'transport manager'. He had an easy smile. His hair made him look like a free spirit. I interacted with him during one of the writing exercises and he had a gentle way of guiding instead of crushing one's work when it's not up to scratch. Months later he became my supervisor. Ha!

*Sabata-mpbo Mokae*

Oh Sabata, he cut his hair! Very short! He says it is to inspire him to finish his PhD before it grows that long again...

*Marike Beyers*

Paul Mason has had a haircut.  
 A feeling of loss.  
 An undeniable sense of betrayal.

*Tim van Niekerk*

Paul Mason and I are the same age almost to the day, twins very much of the non-identical variety.  
 All his grey wavy proof that I am clearly wearing terribly well (even if I do have bit of help from Salon Gavroche)?  
 Gone.

*Jayne Morgan*

My reflective journal sessions with Paul were very valuable for all kinds of reasons. The one moment that I see most often in my memory is when we were discussing poetry and the fact that I felt I was too literal and too much in my head to read it or write it with any degree of success. So next time he turns up clutching the collected works of Philip Larkin. His aim was to illustrate that neither of those things precluded Larkin from poetry so they probably shouldn't preclude me. He proceeds to read me "Whitsun Weddings" saying, "When he's being philosophical and existential, I'll raise my finger." And I remember thinking, 'I'm sitting here with a real writer reading me Larkin in order to give me – me – something I don't have and to take me somewhere I haven't been. Do things actually get any better?'

*Jayne Morgan*

## Godfrey Meintjes

During Godfrey's assignment the peer group feedback caused some anxiety, until he came in and declared us all to be geniuses. What enthusiasm! And I thought, the scary thing is that he probably knew all those quotes he starred us with from narratology texts without even looking them up!

*Marike Beyers*

In his first seminar: "I have calculated that you are all spending an enormous sum of money taking this course. You must have a very good reason for doing so."

## Joan Metelerkamp

From Joan I remember the clarity moment by moment – to not be certain, to read and speak from that with, well – us. Some phrases I remember:

“It’s the sitting and writing and finding a position to write in, always this difficulty in it. This free-writing isn’t working for me!”  
 “There’s the musicality of the line, the rhythm that is music not meter.”

“I do this to have access to a university library.”

*Marike Beyers*

Joan Metelerkamp on taking criticism and gaining confidence as a poet: “Really it’s a matter of experience and being in the poem. Experience? Now I’m not sure about that – because every poem is new; but gradually you come to feel how it’s also a repetition and that that doesn’t matter...”

*Hailey Gaunt*

## Mxolisi Nyezwa

*Blanket against the wind*

Nyezwa won a national poetry prize a few years ago,  
 The heavyweight poetry professor from New Brighton whispers:  
 “Bila, I used that cash to pay *lobola!*”

He giggles, his face glowing with a permanent smile  
 Because when night falls and the wind blows,  
 It’s never cold, never dry in Madala Street,  
 But jazz strings and the saxophone hum in the kitchen.

*Vonani Bila*

The more Mxolisi says ‘you know’, the less I know at all. But then I think it isn’t a question and I listen through them all and in the end I hear something else that’s not so much about knowing.

*Marike Beyers*

In our first week, Mxolisi read from *Malikhanye*, which contains his poetry about his dead son. I can picture exactly the moment he read the lines: “*in the dense forests I follow the black traces of your lashes, in the empty memory of lost time, my feet tumble against cold hope.*” It was the first time that I had ever been moved to tears by someone reading out loud from a book.

*Jayne Morgan*

## Lesego Rampolokeng

I scribbled the following quote in my notebook during one of Lesego's public lectures as a reminder of a fundamental prerogative of writers and human beings alike: "I've got the right to disagree or, I've got the right to be wrong."

*Hailey Gaunt*

Two things I remember Lesego saying:  
 "I don't have to have degrees sprouting out of my arse – I have a perfectly functional brain."  
 "These days it's all about POP politics. The power of pussy."

*Patricia Crain*

Lesego and Paul Mason during a feedback session:

Lesego: Man, I was so bored! I wanted to get up and leave!  
 Paul: I thought it was great. You see, Lesego comes from a generation of lazy readers.

*Aslam Seedat*

## Brian Walter

After a feedback session in July: "It's good to have time with people who care about things such as spaces in lines and where a comma is placed." Receiving feedback from Brian is a dynamic process: he edits and adjusts his own reading as we discuss a poem.

*Marike Beyers*

Our very first feedback session ever. Brian says: "A stanza break, a line break, a full stop, a comma, a dash, a space – all have a different value, they are the breathing of the poem. When I write poetry I hear it first." For all my dreary essays on onomatopoeia and assonance, I have never realized that poetry is music. Not till now.

*Jayne Morgan*

Brian has shown me how to appreciate poetry and how this can help a prose writer. After my brother's house burned down: "Think about the smells as you looked at the ruins, close your eyes and try to hear the sounds you heard, the feelings that criss-crossed your heart. If you can get these descriptions down, you'll start evoking them for the reader."

*Anirood Singh*

**Paul Wessels**

The Festival is in full swing, Grahamstown is crowded. I see Paul walking towards me and I wait for his greeting, but he ducks his head and swerves to the other side of the pavement. I shout, “Paul, are you ignoring me?”

I can barely make out his muttered, “I’m in a hurry,” as he dashes past, not looking at me.

It might be the face painting that startled him. Or perhaps the fairy crown. Or maybe the wings.

*Patricia Crain*

Feedback: “Your reader understands everything.”

*Jayne Morgan*

Feedback: “Your second piece of writing was a little less terrible than the first.”

*Aslam Seedat*

On the farm in February, I’m approaching the dam wall, Paul is coming down it.

“Tim.”

“Paul.” Looks like he’s just tasted something foul.

“There are people back there... skinny-dipping...”

I laugh at him. But I also turn around.

*Tim van Niekerk*

**Ingrid Winterbach**

Combines strictness and mischievousness. Delighted when she finds cake.

*Marike Beyers*

Likes strong tea. Pulls extra tea bags from a handbag when having tea in public, and surreptitiously adds them to the pot.

*Tim van Niekerk*

Reading from her novel *The Book of Happenstance* in February, quoting the narrator: “I cannot afford to be intimidated by a turd...”

During a seminar, quoting Nabokov: “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style...”

## THE RHODES MA IN CREATIVE WRITING

The Rhodes MA got off to a good start in its 2011 inaugural year, with eight full time students. Seven of them graduated, and two have since had their MA manuscripts accepted by publishers.

For the 2012 course, nine full time and 12 part time students were accepted from many applicants, and the part timers will complete their two years at the end of 2013.

The teachers for 2012 were Robert Berold (coordinator), Joan Metelerkamp, Mxolisi Nyezwa, Brian Walter, Paul Wessels, Joanne Hichens, Silke Heiss, Anton Krueger, Ingrid Winterbach, Rian Malan, Godfrey Meintjes, Russell Kaschula, Hazel Crampton, Paul Mason, and Eben Venter.

The MA is built on a foundation of intensive coursework. Each of our fourteen writer-teachers has a week in which they present a seminar, set a creative assignment, and give feedback to students in small peer groups. The coursework introduces students to the many directions of contemporary literature, challenges their aesthetics, and requires them to practise writing in different styles and genres.

A third of the way into the course, students are matched up with a supervisor from among the teachers, after which they begin work on the book-length creative work that they will submit as their thesis. This can be written in English, isiXhosa, or Afrikaans, and may be a novel, non-fiction work, playscript, short story collection, or poetry collection.

Along with the writing is a strong emphasis on reading. We try to restore the joy of reading, and students are required to read and review a selection from a 100-book modular reading list.

Our first intake of part timers raised lots of questions. How were the students to take part in seminars, how were they and the teachers going to interact, how were we going to replicate the weekly interactive feedback that was so valuable for the full timers? After some experimentation, we decided on a combination of uploaded audio recordings, online postings of drafts and comments, and audio conferencing for small feedback groups.

A further boost to the course in 2012 was the Mellon Writer in Residence Fellowship initiated by the ISEA under the auspices of the university's Research Division. Under this scheme, the teachers on

the course nominate a writer to spend three months in Grahamstown, mainly to work on his/her own creative work, but also to do some teaching in the MA course. The first Mellon Fellow, in residence from mid-April to mid-July, was poet Lesego Rampolokeng, and from September to November we hosted Eben Venter, the Afrikaans novelist based in Australia. They gave exciting workshops, readings, and public lectures, both within the MA programme and in other university departments.

All the teachers and students came to Grahamstown for two week-long gatherings, in February and in July. These were intense and intensive, with readings, workshops, feedback groups, excursions to the countryside, movies, and much writing and discussion.

