This document consists of two (2) parts:

Part A: Thesis (Creative Work)
Part B: Portfolio

PART A

CROSSING SHADES

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by

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Abstract

This collection of stories draw on culture, history, memory, musings and imagination. The stories are set primarily in South Africa but includes travels to other countries. I explore journeys to different worlds and minds. I challenge the reader to see how place and time influence our ways of seeing, living and evolving. I use different forms and tones that resonate with the subjective nature of each creative piece. My writing includes formal prose as well as works that experiment with fragments, vignettes and flash fiction.

Contents

Rain Goat

A bleating goat arrives on the farm every second or third year, usually in late autumn. The children run out to feed it, stroke it and love it. They know what is at stake. They are accustomed to seeing chicken heads being chopped off since childhood. Nonetheless, goat bonding is always a delicate affair tinged with sadness and guilt. It might have something to do with the bleating that sounds like a human cry. Or the strange lovability of a not so pretty animal.

As the sun rises on the morning of expectation, the orchard is swept clean. Fallen leaves and rotten guavas that smell pungent disappear. Rosewater is sprinkled for scent and spiritual effect. Folded wooden chairs are opened and arranged in rows under the giant mango tree. By midmorning, farmers from the region begin arriving. Soon a pundit wearing a Nehru cap appears carrying his prayer bag and a hairy coconut. He is wearing a long white kurta over his khaki pants. Everyone stands up to greet him.

The priest slips a garland of fresh marigolds over the goat's neck. He begins reading passages in Sanskrit from yellowing pages in a fraying book. All eyes close, hands are clapped and heads bow. The ceremony is a prayer for rain as the leaves are turning brown and wilting. Several hard knocks with a hammer cracks open the coconut and the white flesh is scooped out, chopped into slivers and served. The women and children gather at the house for freshly baked scones and tea.

A tall muscular worker with a curled moustache turns up. His family comes from a region in Rajasthan where the name Gupta is common. He has brought his weapon in a leather sheath. He is a specialist who is known as the beheader. Years of killing have turned him into a bragger. He brags that he has never made a mistake. He brags that he killed more than fifty goats. The pundit talks to him in private. The beheader closes his eyes for a minute and takes deep breaths. With one swing of the sword, the deed is done.

The cook arrives with a large silver pot and his special blend of spices in a cloth string bag. The goat is skinned, diced and spiced. A worker claims the goat's skin while the testicles are wrapped in newspaper and reserved for the beheader. The farmers chat and argue about crops, family and errant children as the aroma of spiced meat sizzling arouses the salivary glands. After two hours the cook tests the tenderness of the meat and says it should be ready in another fifteen minutes.

Trestle tables are unfolded and banana leaves chopped to plate sizes and set alongside tall glasses and jugs of rain water from the tank. Goat curry is dished out with basmati rice. The community takes away the leftovers. If the rains do not start to pour within weeks the community blame it on the goat, or the pundit or the beheader.

Stanger in Colour

1. Shana grew up sporting fringed hair, chewing chappies bubble gum and climbing up windmills. The absence of television in her formative years did not deprive her of soap operas because they played out at dinner time around her family's imbuia dining room table. The kitchen was always open for visitors who would drop-in unannounced. And when they arrived in droves, the air thickened as community gossip and politics competed for airtime. Shana often wondered whether verbal diarrhoea and swollen egos could be cured in this small community where communalism was natural and metaphor was an alien word.

2. The nearby town of Stanger was quaint in those days when Albert Luthuli was still alive. One could safely allow children to walk the streets alone. Shana was a precocious child who broke boundaries. While her mother was shopping one morning, she wandered off to a dentist by herself. The dentist gave her a painkiller and told her to come back with her mother. She thought bugger that and made her way to another dentist at the edge of town. He took one look at her upper left canine and said the tooth had to go. It would cost R300 to extract it. She found her mother in the supermarket and asked for more cash. "What for?" her mother asked. "To remove my tooth," she said. Her mother was horrified. Since when do you go to the dentist by yourself, she shouted. You never complained about a toothache. When Dr Desai, the family dentist heard about it, he was horrified too. Shana heard Dr Desai whisper to her mother, "Those people treat us like second class citizens." He drilled into her tooth and sealed it with a filling. Forty years later, that tooth was still chewing lamb chops with ease.

3. There were two carpet-laden cinemas in Stanger Picture Palace and Raj Mahal. They provided color-coded seating. Cinnamon and clove filled up the seats on the left while a scattering of white sugar dotted the right side. When the seats on the left were sold out and the right was empty, customers had to be turned away. Though the owners of the cinemas were astute businessmen, they had no choice. They followed the rules of their trading licence that forbade mixing colours.

4. Picture Palace was at the top end of Cooper Street where all the main shops were. Opposite the road King Shaka's statue stood on his gravesite in a turfed garden with towering trees. Some lovers skipped the movie halfway and hung out in the garden kissing and doing whatever else they did. Shana believed it was here that Natasha and Ahmed's fate was sealed while *The Poseidon Adventure* played on the screen. Stanger was no town for a high school girl to have sex, let alone conceive a baby. Both Natasha and Ahmed came from families who counted on their children to become lawyers or doctors and then marry in the faith. Defying the tradition came with harsh consequences, as both Ahmed and Natasha would learn. Ahmed got the whipping of his life. When the wounds on his bottom healed he went back to school. He did

become a lawyer and family pride was restored. But Natasha had no chance at redemption. The shame she brought on her family was so unpalatable that her father didn't get out of bed for weeks. Her parents banished her to relatives in Ladysmith where her baby was born. She never got to see her child.

5. There were no limits to the cruelty of small minds in villages and farms. The one story that stayed with Shana forever was that of Duma's tragedy. Duma was a few years older than Shana. He lived with his grandparents on the farm. His family had high expectations of him to finish school and one day care of them. But Duma was no muscly farmer. He grew into a gentle feminine soul at a time when boys and pink should never cross paths. The teasing and bullying spread from the schoolroom to the community. Some people believed Duma was cursed and had to be fixed. It was during this undoing of the curse that Duma took his last breath. No one was arrested, though the suspected culprits were known.

6. Shana was too young to make sense of all the goings-on in her community and at home, but snippets of the past swirled in shades of blues and greys around her. Like the time when people in the neighbourhood gathered at her house. It was a scorching day. when a whole bottle of Oros was diluted with water and blocks of ice from the paraffin fridge. The adults were huddled around the radio which sat on the small table below the frame that held Gandhi's picture. People stayed till late that night. Something had happened but Shana did not know the details except that someone had stabbed a man in Parliament. She did not understand why everyone that evening was behaving like India had beaten Britain at cricket.

7. Shana learnt about Dimitri Tsafendas at high school – the mad man who had killed President Verwoerd in Parliament. Dimitri had a tapeworm that had driven him insane – it was what caused him to commit murder. Why did his mother not deworm him, Shana wondered. Her mother made sure that each child took a vial of worm killing medicine every year. Shana enjoyed doing her history project and spent a lot of time in the library reading newspaper articles. She got ninety-five percent – the highest mark she had received for any other subject, except spelling. Her teacher remarked that she had done thorough research.

8. Decades later when Shana discovered that her award-winning history project was based on fake news, she went back to her hometown hoping to meet her old history teacher, Mr Pillay. She wanted to tell him that he had been hoodwinked like everyone else, including journalists, historians and professors. She wanted to tell him that the writer, Harry Dousemetzis, had uncovered the true story of Dimitri Tsafendas after digging into the archives, intelligence reports, documents, hospital records and interviewing people who knew the man and family members. The writer discovered that Tsafendas was not insane. That tapeworm story was bullshit. It was a trick Tsafendas used to get him off navy duty under Portuguese rule in Mozambique. He used that same tapeworm story when he was arrested for Verwoerd's murder. Shana

wanted to tell her history teacher what Tsafendas told filmmaker Lisa Keys: “Every day you see a man committing a serious crime for which millions of people suffer. You cannot take him to a court or report him to the police …” Tsafendas died at Sterkfontein mental facility and was buried in an unmarked grave. But Shana’s history teacher had apparently passed away a few years ago.

9. One afternoon Shana was at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg when she saw a large black and white picture of Albert Luthuli standing, smiling in his small shop. The photograph had been taken by Ranjit Kally, a household name. Her late father’s voice echoed in her mind. Every time they would pass the Umvoti river bridge on the way to visit an aunt, as soon as Albert Luthuli’s house came into view, the words came out of his mouth like a recorded message: “Those bastards they killed him. He was such a great man.” Shana hung the picture in the dining room. Below the picture, she wrote on the wall in bold, “Those bastards they killed him.” When anyone asks about those words, she says, “Look at the history books. They said Ahmed Timol committed suicide by jumping off John Vorster Prison, Steve Biko died of a hunger strike and Dimitri Tsafendas was a mad man. Do you think Luthuli voluntarily stepped onto a track in front of an oncoming train or was he pushed?”

10. Shana enjoyed getting away from the incestuous small town. The only holidays she had were at her cousin’s house in Durban. They loved buying ice creams from the vendor on his rickety bicycle and walking around the golf course with her uncle. Her uncle used to talk about golf all the time, using terms like the sixteenth hole and par. Shana never understood much of what he said. But one golfing story stayed with her forever. Once there was a very poor man whose name was Papwa Sewgolam. He used to watch the pale figures playing golf from the roadside and wanted to learn to play the game. So, his father made him a club using a branch from a mango tree. Later Papwa worked as a caddy at a golf club and watched every golfer’s move and swivel. At the end of the day Papwa practiced his strokes. Some people saw his talent and sent him abroad to compete in competitions that were open to all irrespective of colour. At home he was not allowed to compete with the factor fifty sunscreen guys. At some point, the rules were relaxed and he was allowed to play at home and surprised everyone. He showed them what a self-taught man could do when he beat Gary Player. Sadly, his trophy was handed to him outside the club because he would not have been allowed inside.

11. Shana’s younger brother Kiran came back from town one day with his new white boxing shorts, gloves and a punching bag. “What’s that for? Isn’t karate enough?” their mother asked.” Kiran said: “Look Ma, I’m don’t think I’m going to another Bruce Lee.” “So, are you planning to fight Mohammed Ali then?” his mother asked. No, he said swinging his gloves “I’m Tap Tap,” Overnight Elijah Tap Tap Makhatini had replaced Bruce Lee as Kiran’s hero. He had a new scrapbook plastered with Tap Tap’s pictures from the *Daily News*, *The Leader* and Sunday papers and some were stuck on his wall. After school, he wore his boxing gear and went to practice. Often

the punch bag smashed into his face and he landed on the floor. He looked like an ill-trained dancing clown impersonating his hero. Still, everyone encouraged him and went along with his fantasy. In November 1976 everyone gathered around the TV to watch Tap Tap fight Jan Kies. It was a historic event irrespective of who won, because it was the first match to take place between a black South African boxer and a white counterpart for the national middle-weight supreme title. Tap Tap was our homeboy, Shana recalled. The women in the neighbourhood brought Tupperware containers of samoosas and drinks. A festive atmosphere filled the sitting room, crowded with cushions and mats covering every space available in front of the fifty-centimetre box. “Long night”, everyone kept on saying before the action began. Tap Tap and Kies entered the ring and touched gloves in greeting. The bell went off at the Rand Stadium in Durban. The sitting room exploded with fan anxiety and silly comments. “Hit him there! Punch him! Duck Tap Tap.” In the first round, Tap Tap took some heavy blows. But by round three he had knocked out Jan Kies three times before the referee called it. Emotions burst out into the roars and claps that filled the room. Tap Tap became the South African middleweight champion. A few years later, Kiran dropped his boxing gloves to pursue cricket. Tap Tap went on to win several matches, have several wives and eighteen children.

DNA

Disassociation slices like a stolen gene – an accident of biology. An embryo was formed, went full term and was birthed. The baby had no choice. She came into the world with a free-floating mind. The family could see she had strange ways from the day she walked. They were connected by DNA yet it felt like she was an inhabitant in a flying saucer. The baby never featured in early family photographs. She was a genetic disconnect. When she turned seventeen she found her voice and the silent strength her mother kept hidden. Escape was her way out. As time passed she saw genes as dangling threads that could be cut. When it was time to exit she gnashed the thread and latched onto poetry fuelled wings. She flapped over Atlantic waves and rocks, across the Indian Ocean, to the Mediterranean and the Adriatic. She floated on the dead sea and watched the full moon. Her travels took her to rooms of rotting lava, hurt, love, lust and fever that came and went. In a hospital room faraway a purposeful cut sliced a uterus. A screaming baby was pulled out hanging on a cord. It's a girl, the doctor sighed.

The Stranger

After hours of fruitless writing I capped my pen, put on my walking shoes and ambled downstairs to clear the cobwebs.

He had just stepped into entrance of the apartment block. Only one side of the double door was open. I should have moved out of the way but I was not thinking straight. I walked right into him, smacking into his shoulder and arms.

“Hoopla!” he exclaimed as he stumbled backwards into the street.

I felt stupid and said sorry over and over again.

“No problem! he kept on saying as he looked at me. “Are you okay?” he asked. I said I was distracted.

He was standing so close to me that I felt obliged to say something else. Stupidly, I blurted out: “I like your T-shirt.”

He touched the image of the globe resting on his chest.

“Ahh! You want it?” He laughed and lifted his T-shirt up fast as though he was about to take it off. That flash of skin was enough to reveal the image of a recessed scar with uneven stitching marks, which ran from his chest into his trousers. It looked stark and disturbing. There were bits of skin lumped around the sides of the scar.

His playful demeanour disarmed the awkwardness of the moment and left me feeling like a school girl. He was ravishing, with olive skin, hair tied back and he had a seductive smile.

“Where you come from?” he asked.

“South Africa.”

“Ah! Beautiful. I’m from Cuba.”

I was going to Havana in a month, I said.

“Fantastic. You will have a lot of fun.”

He lingered as though he wanted to chat. I asked if he would like to meet for a drink at the bar across the road around six.

“Sure,” he said, and walked back into the apartment block.

I felt like screaming. I had never had the guts to ask a man out at home. But here, in the cobbled narrow streets in Rome, not far from the Vatican, I had turned into Botticelli's Venus stepping out of her shell.

As I waited for him at Mario's, the bar across the road, I wondered what could have torn his body apart so badly that it had needed stitches. I remembered someone once saying that if you scratch the paint in cracked walls, you will find the rawness of truth. Was his scar as bad as it looked?

It was quarter past six and he had not arrived. I thought then that the man whose name I did not know, probably wouldn't come and so I ordered a beer. After all, he must have thought I was just a foreigner who had accidently bumped into him and was now trying to make up for the silly accident.

Then I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned.

"Did I scare you?" he asked.

"No, I was just thinking," I smiled.

He pulled out a chair opposite me and sat down. "You think a lot," he said and we both laughed. "I am Eduardo." He extended his hand. I reached out for it across the table and said, "I'm Nina."

He ordered red wine. "Here everything is about delicious food, family and life – no struggles except the Mafia," he said. I felt as though I was talking to an expat, as he knew so much about Africa and wanted to know more about what was happening in South Africa.
We left Mario's after a drink and strolled to Piazza Navona, the popular square where locals and tourists mingled, munched pizza and cooled down with gelato.

It must have been midnight when we came back to my bedsit. Our lips came together spontaneously. I nudged him down on the bed and sat on his thighs. My body wanted him. I was about to unzip his pants but my hands veered in another direction, under his T-shirt.
I felt lumps of tissue and stroked my finger in the recess of his scar from above his chest down to the left of his stomach. As I got closer to his trousers his body squirmed and he pulled my hand out.

His eyes welled up, his smile became melancholy and his desire was gone.
"Cuito Cuanavale," he whispered.

The Island of Rum

The dazzling azure waves sweep gently up to the cement barrier at the Malecón. This is a long stretch of esplanade that curves around Havana's shore. The islanders are hanging out to cool off on this Friday afternoon. I inhale whiffs of rum, coconut milk and soda. People are laughing, chatting, dancing salsa and singing. I walk alongside my new friend, whom I met at the Palacio de Turismo, where the staff spoke English. We bump into people he knows. He tells them, meet my friend from Africa. Their eyes light up. They pour generous helpings of rum and soda in plastic cups.

I don't know how much alcohol I have consumed from many different cups along many stops but I feel like I am a pink horse with a swishing tail. Women are dressed in low cut tops and shorts and revealing all manner of bellies, some as flat as washboards some flabby and jellylike and bulging. A granny is wearing what one back home would consider to be young people's clothes. I find this so liberating – this acceptance of the body in all shapes and sizes, dressed the way the people choose to. No one stares, no one cares. It is refreshingly natural. Their prima ballerina, Alicia Alonso is in her sixties and is still a hit on stage.

It is the year before Mandela becomes president of South Africa. They hand me a bundle of back copies of *Granma*, the daily Cuban newspaper, and piles of literature. My visit came about after I had joined a protest march in London to break the United States blockade against Cuba. The Cuban Embassy organised my itinerary. I am an ordinary person but here in Cuba, everyone makes me feel like I am a special guest.

In the morning I leave the guesthouse of swaying palms in my Che Guevara T-shirt and jeans and walk to the convention centre to attend the conference of the Alliance of Cuban and the Latin American and Caribbean States. I meet the friendliest people from Peru, Guatemala, Venezuela and other South American states. Using hand signals, smiles and basic words in English and Spanish we are able to connect. Speaker after speaker delivers long monologues in Spanish. I pick up a few words but that is all. I find it all rather boring, listening to the problems and issues that are specific to their geopolitical situation. None of it makes sense to me. All I feel like doing is walking in the streets, absorbing Cuban life and having a drink in the bar that was Hemingway's hangout.

I hear a buzz coming from the back of the hall and I stand up to see what the commotion is all about. There he is – the man who embarrassed Kennedy in 1961 when his small army booted out the Americans in the Bay of Pigs. Fidel Castro in his military uniform is making his way down the aisle. I feel goose bumps. He is randomly greeting people who are sitting on aisle seats. I am sitting on the aisle but he brushes past me. I leave the conference not understanding much, but feeling as elated as a witness to a special historic event.

Off the Cuff

“You can represent South Africa,” she said.

“But I am not here as part of any organisation,” I stressed. “It does not matter. You are South African; a friend of Cuba and you must have valuable input to share.”

So there I was on a plane to the city of Afro-Cuban jazz for an International Youth Conference.

I strolled the streets and soaked in the harmony of strings and other instruments on the pavements and small cafés. The city of Santiago de Cuba felt more authentic, more of the real Cuba than Havana. Lots of non-government organisations and activists from everywhere were arriving. Different languages, different dress, different colours and different accents – people trying to connect and deal with world problems and mostly finding out how they could support Cuba against the US blockade.

Several speakers came up to the podium to introduce themselves and talk about the challenges facing youth in their countries. I heard my name being called as the comrade from South Africa. I did not know whether to shrink in my chair or make a run for it. No one had told me I was to speak. But I heard loud claps so I had to get up there.

I walked up to the stage, and did the one thing I knew how to do well. I lifted my hand in a fist and shouted: “Viva South Africa! Viva Nelson Mandela!”

It was 1993 and Mandela was like as an international rock star then. Mentioning his name got everyone into the ‘Viva’ vibe. That gave me a few seconds to gather myself, like when people say in interviews, “That’s an interesting question.” It is a trick to give the mind time to think and respond.

I must have said our freedom was coming soon, and that’s because the world had supported us and that the people of South Africa who fought for liberation were standing behind Cuba. Somehow, I felt comfortable talking about South Africa and apartheid. I remember saying, “We will be one united country for the first time.”

It was off the cuff, but the applause was thunderous – all because of Mandela and South Africa now being in the international spotlight.

The last part of the conference was for people to break up into groups and talk about problem-solving. I was lumped in with the Basque Separatists and the Spanish. The Basque delegates were all over me. They wanted me as an independent voice in their group. “What!” I exclaimed and told the conference organiser I knew nothing about their troubles.

“It is complicated. I’m not the right person,” I insisted. “Don’t worry just talk about unity in South Africa and someone will translate. Maybe they will find a way to reconcile.”

Santeria

Regla is a short ferry ride from Havana. The small village is known as the place of the Black Madonna. I disembarked and went to see her. She was dressed in blue, like the sea, and was placed in humble surroundings, far from the polished cathedrals of Europe.

I was not here to see the Black Madonna but to meet a family who had kindly offered to put me up for three days, and show me ordinary life here. Julio, Ernesto and Maria lived in a small house with a backyard. As soon as I walked into the backyard, I began salivating. The giant mango tree was heavy with bunches of green and yellow fruit hanging from it. Julio got a stick with a hook and pulled down a bunch. I ate a mango the way the Cubans did. Sunk my teeth into it, slurped the pulp and let the juice drip down my chin. It was the most delicious mango that I had ever eaten. Nothing like the ones that grew at home.

I had a sparse room with a single bed and a mosquito net. The heat was intense enough for sheets to be wet after a night of sweating. Before leaving London, I had packed a box of toothbrushes, toothpaste, soaps and other toiletries. In my luggage, I carried cans of corned beef, canned meatballs, canned spaghetti and tomato sauce. Basic things that we take for granted were like gold here because of the senseless American blockade. When I opened the box, their faces beamed like kids getting candy.

“It is like Christmas,” Julio laughed. The canned foods were for them to eat after I left, I insisted. I wanted to eat what they ate every day.

With their limited conversational English and my smattering of Spanish we had interesting conversations, joked and laughed. Ernesto was learning English, so I had brought him an English dictionary. He looked up words sporadically as we chatted. We ate a lot of bread and jam. There was no butter. For dinner, we ate either *frijole negors* or *judias blancas* – black beans or white beans with rice. It was the staple diet that they obtained from the government shops that stocked only basic food items. One day we ate delicious fish fried in palm oil and boiled yucca, which is a variation of yam.

“Do you know about Santeria?” Ernesto asked. I was clueless. He explained that when the African slaves arrived in Regla, the Spanish tried to convert them to Christianity but they were not successful. They carried on practising their spiritual beliefs and an African-Cuban religion emerged. It was influenced by West African culture, especially Yoruba traditions. They adopted some elements of Catholicism with their beliefs and created Santeria, a syncretic religion. Voodoo was practiced widely. The spirits were an important element of Santeria. Ernesto said his family however, was not religious.

On my third day I took the ferry to Havana with Maria so that we could buy groceries from the supermarket. There were dollar shops aimed at tourists. I was talking to the assistant while Maria went in to get some provisions. I had to show the assistant my passport. When

Maria came to the counter with the basket packed, the assistant was shouting at Maria and demanding that she step outside the shop. Maria began crying. I went out to console her. I told the assistant she was with me, not realising that he saw me as a front for a local person. I had to explain that I was from South Africa, that I was staying with them and that I needed those things. That incident disturbed me so much, and reminded me of the apartheid days and being kicked out of whites-only areas.

Cubans were allowed to buy only the most basic provisions from the government shops that were subsidised, but the big wigs in the party and those with connections could get whatever they wanted from the tourist shops. That evening we had a delicious meal, and drank rum. Ernesto explained that the revolution had done many good things, but terrible things too. Their freedoms were curtailed. Their meals were limited, and censorship tight. I asked if they would escape to Miami as many others had done. They said never, this was their home.

Swings and Roundabouts

I found it hard to believe that medical check-ups that cost nothing were compulsory in Cuba. So, I popped into a doctor's room unannounced just to see what it was like. There were two patients there for check-ups. The doctor said it was like that most days. Preventative health meant less spending. Doctors were not getting rich, he laughed.

The health system outperformed many middle income countries and even some developed ones too. The country had a lower infant mortality rate than the US and similar life expectancy. But the big problem was HIV/ Aids. Anyone diagnosed with HIV had to go a sanatorium and stay there without their families. It was like they were in quarantine.

One guy, whose brother was in the sanatorium, said he was upset because he was not allowed to visit him. But he was sure his brother was given proper nutrition and treatment. As a small country with an economic blockade imposed by the United States, the Cubans felt the only way they could contain the virus was by locking people up in sanatoriums. At the same time, they distributed free condoms widely and educated people about safe sex.

This would have been a human rights issue in democratic countries. And the Cubans did come under fire for it from the West. I looked at it in the context of what was going on at home at the time. This was in 1993. HIV denialism was everywhere, while the virus was spreading like wildfire. Civil organisations were fighting to get treatment rolled out. People were dying every day. I did not like the quarantine stance of the Cubans, but what was happening in South Africa was a whole lot worse.

When I said goodbye to Cuba, I felt inspired and sad. Inspired because it was a country where people were not starving, had great health care and low mortality rates. Sad because the US had no reason at all to still impose a blockade on Cuba.

Nirvana

She lays down on the flat rock and gazes at the sky. She kicks and clamours. He holds her tight. He gives her the bottle with blue liquid on the mountain that sits like the stillness of death. Her mind drifts to the sea where she used to surf in waves that tumbled and tossed her off her sturdy board. Waves that drove her smoothly ashore. Shells that hissed in her ears. Seals that came to visit. Summer holidays that filled the days with frolicking fun.

A lizard wiggles past and settles near her feet. She sees its jaded leathery body and tries to touch it. She watches it dash off into the fynbos. She opens her ear flaps to suck in the sounds. The swishing of grass in the breeze, insects buzzing and a scurry now and again. Her head feels light. She turns to look at her him. Let's make a wish, she says. They close their eyes and hold onto their unshared wishes. She coughs and chokes. She sips from the bottle. The sun slips behind the sea.

Stars come out like yellow dots flickering. She stares at them and says they have giddy minds. In the far distance, lights move as ships travel. He reminds her of a time when she sailed on a boat to spot whales. She whispers big black beauties. He gives her the liquid mix again. Look up there, he says pulling her hand. Move your eyes to the left. Her eyes zoom to the maze in the bright lit sky. I think that's Jupiter waving. She staggers up and begins spinning around with arms as wide as airplane wings. She spins around and around and falls. Her eyes water. He picks her up and helps her down again. She is shivering. Her eyes become a well.

Her mind is adrift. Mother is waving again, she says. Mother is walking in the mist with the puppies behind her. Soon she'll be home with all of them. Together, she whispers. He says the mountain has spirits floating all around us. Floating within all of us. They hover, they feel, they come into you if you let them. She puts on her red woollen hat and closes her eyes. The moon smiles. The stars begin fading. Tell me about the spirits again, she whispers. They hover, they care, they take you to Nirvana.

The Hole

This ground must have been solid once. Now it feels like layers of shifting sand. Moving an inch, sometimes more, back and forth. Some days it slides. Other days it spins. Is it the ground or is it my head that is on a swivel? Or the other way around? It's like staring at a 3D puzzle after drinking a bottle of Merlot. Trying to work it out. Looking at it from different angles. Looking from a distance. Nothing makes sense.

He carries on walking dangerously close to what seems like the edge of a black hole. He staggers, as his mind feels the climate is playing tricks on him. One minute it's sunshine, the next rain, then thunder, followed by orange streaks in the sky. It feels like the earth is cracking. Someone's messing in his mind.

He sits outside at night and stares at the blinking in the sky. He does not he mind the insects buzzing. He respects their stamina, especially the crickets chirring, that adds to what he believes is a symphony of sounds. Yet his wife's voice, her laughs, her bedtime coughs and snoring sounds like an axe grinder in his ears.

It's no wonder she left. She talked and talked and tried to make sense of his behaviour but he made her feel like a broken record. Often he stared silently at her like she was a statue. She tried to reason with him – she told him that the man she had chosen twenty years ago to share her life with had turned into a sour fig. She said over and over again that he needed to see a doctor.

For a moment he blamed himself. Am I tuning into an insufferable sub-species that struggles to co-habit? Or live in my own skin for that matter? He had no answers.

She left him in quiet of the night. The bathroom is now sparse without her toiletries and the hangers in the cupboards empty. Did she leave a note? He looks on the fridge where she would stick bits of paper with annoying little magnets from travels abroad. There was nothing.

He consoles himself, saying it is a blessing – the absence of human voices and lungs breathing. Minimalism, solitary space – that's what he wanted. No one to accuse him of becoming a stereotype. No one to accuse him of having regressed to the early days of the species. No one to nag him to see a doctor. No one to tell him he is losing his mind.

Then things begin to change and it bothers him. Why does he feel like there's a hole in his stomach, getting emptier by the minute? He misses the creaking of the floor when she walked at night. He misses her. He doesn't. He misses her. He doesn't. It is all getting too much like a simmering torment.. He wants to slumber. He wishes he could escape into his mother's womb. But his mother is long gone. He wishes he was in the grave with his mother. This loneliness, this madness, it's killing him.

His head is bursting. She always said he had a weak pain threshold. She gave him pills to treat him whenever there was pain. He thinks he is going to die. He regrets he did not listen to her. Now he is going crazy and stumbling all over the place.

The paramedic in the ambulance tries to calm him. “Dizziness does not necessarily mean imminent death,” he assures him. “There must be a cause. The doctors will fix you up in no time.”

The man’s voice is annoying him. He wishes he would shut up. The nurses wheel him into a waiting room smelling of ammonia and disinfectants. He hates hospitals because they are full of superbugs, babies crying and people dying. His cousin went in for minor surgery and left the hospital as a corpse.

When the doctor asks him questions, he feels like he is being hounded.

“Your temperature is high,” the doctor says, “and your blood pressure too. There’s an infection in your ears too.” An X-ray and some scans are needed to get to the bottom of the problem. You will be staying overnight. Can I let your family know you are here?” the doctor asks.

His brother arrives at the hospital and says he has managed to locate the man’s wife. Where? The man asks. His brother does not answer. ”She’ll be here tomorrow. Try to rest.”

He feels woozy and shuts his eyes. He has the most beautiful dream of his wife, set when they met thirty years ago. She had long flowing hair and magnetic eyes. Her body, her personality, her intellect and everything about her made him giddy. They were madly in love and so happy.

In the morning the doctors tells him that that he has labyrinthitis, an acute viral infection that makes a person feel off-balance.

“So, I have an illness, a diagnosis. I’m not verging on full-blown madness,” he says, with rare excitement.

“You can be treated,” the doctor says. “But I am going to refer you to a psychiatrist too. Only a psychiatrist can help with the other problems.” The doctor hands him a script for medicine and a referral note urging me to make an appointment with the psychiatrist.

He sees her entering the ward as the doctor leaves. His wife.

“You’re up,” she says. He wants to hold her. He want to atone. But she begins sermonising before he can even say hello.

“You should have listened. You should have seen a doctor when I said you needed to. I tried my best,” she says.

You’re right,” he says. “I should not have been such a pig-headed irritant.” He begins choking. She hands him a glass of water. He pauses. He loses his train of thought.

“I’m glad you’re going to be fine. Nothing too serious. The medications should sort you out,” she says. The man begins to talk again. “We could go on holiday,” he says.

“Sorry I have to go.” She walks to the door, waves at him and disappears.

Empathy Amiss

A man opened the wooden door, opening it just enough to peer out. He did not do the over eager estate agent thing and say, “Hi come in. I’ll show you around. This house has ample space, and don’t you just love the light streaming in?” Instead, he stood there staring at me.

“I guess I’m too late. You’ve probably had an offer.”

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

I felt rather stupid.

His face turned grey. “Bitch,” he said. These days I find myself emboldened by life’s disappointments that have revealed my courage hidden for years, and so I shot back. “How dare you! You must be a lunatic.”

I stepped away from the entrance area and headed for my car. He ran after me.

“Sorry! It’s our home. We lived together here for 30 years. She wants the cash for freedom,” he said.

“Not my problem. Just get rid of the fucking sign.” I walked across the road. The man remained on the pavement. His face was forlorn and his eyes heavy.

I’ve got my problems to deal with, I wanted to say. My sole mission was to go house hunting. Now I was standing in the street with a stranger who had watery eyes. What was I say to him? Maybe I should have said psychotherapy might work. Maybe I should have said I’m sorry it must be very painful. But I couldn’t bring myself to say anything at that moment.

I crossed the road again, moving past him and yanked the “For Sale” sign out of the ground and threw it against the concrete curb as hard as I could.

The man sat down on the pavement with his hands covering his face.

Wailing Whales

The sweet aroma of conifers and a briny smell of the Pacific Ocean greeted us as we stepped out of the car at Neah Bay, the Makah Indian tribe's headquarters.

The crescent-shaped bay was like a flat sheet of bluish-green glass carrying a sprinkling of fishing boats. Less than two thousand indigenous people lived in this reservation on the north-western-most tip of Washington State.

My colleague and I visited the local tavern that night. We wanted to know about the dispute over whale hunting that now pitted the Makah against the conservation group, Sea Shepard.

The dimly-lit rustic tavern had a spread of antler heads with dead eyes hung on one side of wall. On the other side dollar bills were pasted like wallpaper against the surface.

"What's that all about?" I asked the bearded barman, pointing to the paper money stuck on the wall. He said people from out of town wrote their names and where they came from on those dollar bills – it was like an alternative to a visitor's book.

I took out a note from my wallet, wrote on it and handed it to him. He looked at it and smiled. "This is a first. Never had a South African here before."

He stood up on a ladder and stuck my dollar next to the others. People here were curious about this brown girl with straight hair from Africa.

And I was curious about why they still called themselves Indians since many cultural critics had argued that the term had pejorative connotations, which played into Hollywood's shallow depictions of Red Indians. I remembered watching movies in my younger days when Red Indians were portrayed as savages who scalped westerners.

So, I asked a man named Bill, who was a self-termed Indian, whom I met at the tavern that night why the Makahs called themselves Indians and not Native American - the more politically correct term.

His answer came as a surprise: "I'm Indian. Always been Indian. They can call us what they damn well like. We are Indian."

"That's funny," I said, "because I am a third-generation South African and they call me Indian too – though I have never been to India."

He laughed and said, "Maybe we are related."

We made small talk and whale talk.

The Makah's flag showed an image of a thunderbird sitting on a whale. Bill told me that the thunderbird was a mythological figure in Makah culture. The thunderbird's power to cause seismic events such as lighting, and its ability to conquer a whale, was considered more relevant now since whales had been removed from the endangered species list.

The International Whaling Commission had allowed the Makahs to hunt a limited number of whales over five years. However, well-funded conservation groups, led by Sea Shepard, found this outrageous and began actively campaigning against it. Sea Shepard had its flotilla docked in the water ready to scupper any whale hunts. The boat was equipped with sound devices that would scare the whales away from hunting canoes.

The Makahs had lived off the sea for hundreds of years and hunted whales, otter, seals and other fish. A single whale could feed an entire community, the blubber tuned into oil and butter and the skeleton used to make instruments and utensils. It was a natural way of life for indigenous people and no one had had a problem with it until greed and commercialism took hold. Big American and European ships began trawling the Pacific Ocean and started whittling away at the whale population.

The Makah tribe had stopped whaling because they could see how their resources were being depleted. The International Whaling Commission banned whaling. Now, more than seventy years later, the Makah, who wanted to pass on their cultural heritage to new generations were allowed to take four whales per year over a five-year period.

But things were getting out of order, Bill said. He did not a copy of the pamphlet with him but he said it was being circulated in the reservation with the words: "For every whale killed a Makah would be killed." Tensions were running high in the reservation.

I was not sure what to make of this. The thought of seawater turning red made me sick. I loved whales and had never regarded them as a dining table offering. But here I was talking to people who were planning to hunt them.

They were involved in preparations like fasting, learning the songs and rituals of their ancestors and preparing mind and body to undertake the first hunts in more than seven decades. Across Seattle, there were outcries to save the whale.

Young people in Neah Bay had never seen a whale hunt, but they heard stories about their ancestors hunting whales for sustenance. They had heard the legends of the thunderbird's gigantic power, that made it possible for the Makahs to hunt whales. The thunderbird was seen as a deity of sorts, infused with the cultural and spiritual tradition of whaling.

No one knew exactly when the hunt would take place. The plan was to go out in a 32ft cedarwood canoe called the Hummingbird to harpoon a whale and then shoot it with a rifle. For conservationists, killing even one whale would be one too many. Some even suggested

that the Makahs' desire to hunt had nothing to with culture. It was a ploy to eventually trigger commercial whaling. Some suspected that the Japanese and other interests were waiting in the wings.

Those allegations were seen as loaded with racial undertones and disrespect for indigenous culture. Though the Makahs were allowed to hunt four to five whales a year, they were probably going to whale only what they needed – that could be one a year. The agreement was that this whale was not going to be sold on the open market – it was strictly for sustenance and cultural reasons.

The Makahs I spoke to were ordinary people who wanted their children to experience indigenous culture. This right was enshrined in an agreement in 1855 when they gave up vast tracts of land to the American authorities but retained the right to hunt for sustenance. They were going ahead with preparations and practicing daily. None of them had any experience of whale hunting.

One morning we went on a hike through the Hoi Rain Forest on the Makah side of the Olympic National Park. While walking in in this lush forest I thought about conservation versus cultural rights that were linked to sustenance. Hunting for subsistence would probably not have been an issue had big business, mostly driven by capitalism, not whittled away sea life and trampled on the indigenous people's way of life, which meant that they only ate what they needed.

While walking under the trees in the forest, I saw a light in the distances and as we got closer to it, I could smell the sea and hear the whooshing of waves. The rain forest opened up to a heavenly strip of shoreline at Shi Shi Beach where the pristine white sand. There were no footsteps in the sand, except ours.

Huge conical rock formations called sea stacks stood in the middle of the waves with trees growing on them. I picked up a starfish and held it in my hand and lay it down again.

I felt how beautiful life was that day as I stood among the innocence of unspoilt nature.

Flow

Let it come unfiltered and observe the chaos of rough-cut beauty as a revelation: that life is not life if the edge of a cliff lost in madness remains unseen just as the bubbling of a volcano is a reverberation that imperfection is natural just as the quest for perfection is a craziness of the mind strumming for the riff of harmony amidst broken chords just as the sniff of a rand can turn into cheating snorts just as the goal of sublimity is as unattainable as a needle piercing rock just as the dictionary of truth says the flow of happiness has nothing to do with wealth reeking of consumption in excess.

The Silence of Shame

Those who have experienced it know that the things they wish to forget comes back. I don't know why. They just do. Probably because what has happened in the past is still happening and these happenings are in the news every day. Ask your friends how many of them have been through these things and you might be surprised.

There were ten of us at a party when I asked the question and six said it happened to them too in different ways. Details were irrelevant. What mattered was that I spat out a question and broke an icy silence. One should write about it, some people say. But how does one write about the things one want to remain buried?

Should one give a minute by minute account – bare it all like a fearless corporeal writer that reveals every single nerve in the body and point to details of vaginal parts, penis and ejaculation? That sounds like the way some lawyers in court question women who dare to challenge their abuser. Or should one write about it in metaphors? But certain things cannot be reduced to metaphors, as Susan Sontag believed. Perhaps the best way is to follow no recipe, no premeditated trajectory – just let the voice flow and the story unfold in its natural course, as others say.

This particular story refuses to focus on the horrid event, how it happened, the pain, the shame and the silence. It is about the aftermath. It is about a young girl with a slight frame, an avid reader who devoured magazines, newspapers, books, comics, the works. This young girl was on the cusp of puberty and feeling confused. She felt uncomfortable about the things that were happening in her body.

It was pre-Google days, so the information she got was from amateurish sex advice columnists in newspapers.. The girl thought that the changes in her body must have been related to a horrid experience when she was younger. She decided to see a doctor on her own. She told the doctor she had acquired a sexually transmitted disease. Fortunately for her, the doctor was kind and spoke to her in a fatherly way. He told her that the albumin-like discharge in her underwear was normal. "You do not have a disease," he said. "Don't worry yourself about it, it's all just part of growing up. You might start getting tummy aches and if you see blood in your underwear, that too is normal."

The doctor said she should speak to her mother about what was going on in her body. In those days mothers didn't speak to their daughters about any of that. It was why the girl could not tell her mother what happened that day in the sugar cane field, an event that left a stain on her mind.

Once a fellow student she liked tried to gently kiss her after the matric dance. She shoved him as though he were attacking her.

In her twenties she met a man who was a lot older than her and they became close friends. He was gentle and patient and had no expectations of intimacy. Or, he probably did but had the maturity of patience. She told him everything that had happened to her. One day he asked her if that man was still alive. She said yes.

He said: “Do you think confronting him might help?”

She said that she had wanted to do that a long time ago but she was scared to do it alone.

She wanted to face him. She wanted to have his hands and legs tied and she wanted to kick him in the balls and watch him cry like a baby. Over and over again. Then she would demand that he donate a sizeable amount of his wealth to the Teddy Bear Clinic, and pay for her therapy sessions. That man had a family and children. He would not want to be outed on social media.

“Will that help to kill him in your mind?” the friend asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I think it would make me feel like I had completed a long-overdue job and can move onto something exciting.”

Beginnings

It was a pearl of day. I reached the top of Table Mountain before my botanist friends who took their time sniffing, touching and photographing every fynbos shrub.

I got out my kikoi and sat on it, admiring the bluest ocean on this sunny afternoon. Down below I could see the dots where the moneybags of Camps Bay lived. My drenched T-shirt stuck to my body. I guzzled water and lay down to rest and wait for Zinzi and Rashid to arrive.

There were not many people on the mountain today. I closed my eyes, and then heard movement a few metres behind me. A ruffling in the grass and then a dripping sound. I turned around. A towering figure was standing with his legs apart. His back was facing me. He was wearing hiking trousers and a white shirt.

I was flabbergasted. How dare he piss so close to me. I grabbed my kikoi and slipped on my backpack. He must be a lunatic. Had he seen me and unzipped anyway because he didn't care?

I began speed walking towards the path going downhill. This is just stupid, I thought. I should have walked with the others. The man began following me. The faster I walked the closer he got. I heard him breathing. Or maybe my mind was playing tricks.

I began running down the jagged path, avoiding holes in the ground. He was getting closer now. My heart began pounding.

"Don't be scared," his voice came. "I am not South African. I won't hurt you." Those few words had an ominous ring to them.

It's strange how events from the past spring to mind in situations of danger. It was not the man's voice or his accent that bothered me. It was his words and the oozing confidence when he said them. It took me back to when I a young girl travelling in London on a South African passport.

The girl they called Paki bitch. Drunken spiky-haired trash. The image of the florid Brit who had left scars came back to haunt me. Why the fuck is this happening amid beauty in my homeland? A stranger fucking with my mind.

I couldn't let this happen again. I couldn't allow toxic masculinity that thrives on xenophobia to football me. I don't know where my strength came from – maybe life had hardened me over the years and given me a voice.

I turned around and shouted. “I don’t give a fuck where you come from. Don’t for a minute think you can stereotype my people. That you can piss next to a woman lying on her blanket.”

His oversized leather hat cast a shadow over his face. He was looking down at me.

“*Woow Woow* sorry!” he said. He came closer. I moved back.

“I’m Phillipe. From Paris.” He pulled down his backpack and removed his hat. “You think qualifying your European status will make a woman feel safe.” I carried on ranting.

“Noo Noo! *S’il vous plait*! don’t say that..!” he pleaded. “You must think all Algerian immigrants in France are terrorists.”

The man was shaking his head and his hands. “*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!* I’m not bad…” he was pleading.

I did not see Rashid and Zinzi walking up behind me. Suddenly the man began smiling and opened his arms. I thought he must be losing his marbles if he thought he could hug me. Then Rashid squeezed past me. And Zinzi too. “*Bonjour Bonjour*!! Kisses and hugs all around.

“Such a surprise you’ve already met each other,” Rashid said. “We were going to introduce you two at dinner tonight.”

“Phillipe is big on adventure and social justice. He’s opening the conference on xenophobia tomorrow. You guys have so much in common,” Rashid said. I could not be bothered with explanations. I ran downhill seething. I got into the bath at home, lay there and let the flood of tears come.

Excluded

She was not the kind of girl to complain about every pinprick. She lived within herself most of the time. She was a good student who produced above-average grades. She took part in netball, and swam in the C team.

After matches, the other girls went home with parents who had formed a lift club. This girl always waited to be picked up later, after one of her parents had finished work. She'd sit on the steps alongside her bags like a lonely bird lost while her flock had flown away.

When the news broke everyone was shocked. Parents took their children home earlier than usual. Some of the parents got together later. What could have caused this terrible thing to happen? Someone said the girl had been in one of the friend groups and she left abruptly. No one had seen this coming.

The parents complained that they were clueless about what was going on in their children's heads. Teenagers responded in monosyllables when asked about their days, and how they were feeling. Yes! No! I'm fine. I'm not hungry. I need to be alone. Shut the door! Was there hurt, pain, bullying? There were no answers.

The psychologist and social worker sketches some scenarios to illustrate teenage school life and the impact on some children. Imagine yourself at a private high school today. All the girls in the class have probably tasted a boy's tongue and had their breasts stroked. Imagine that many have even gone as far as having sex. Imagine them boasting about their pursuits, whether or not, they are true.

Now imagine being the only girl who wasn't part of any of this, who stood alone outside the teen circles. The girl who was the youngest in her grade. The girl who wanted to wear a bra. The girl who wished every day that she would fine red in her panties. The girl who had no curves. The girl who wanted to be like the others because she believed that they had everything she didn't – popularity, true love.

Imagine you are that girl trying to fit in. You listen to the popular girls' conversations but you are unable to contribute much. When you are pushed to tell your story, you fake it.
You describe the time you first kissed your boyfriend. You tell them he was at another school far away. You create a name for him and you try to spin your fiction. But some of them laugh at you anyway.

Imagine that you force yourself to join the others on weekends, because you desperately want to belong to that group. But the moment you get to the mall, those girls' boyfriends arrive. You become the odd number in the groups but you go along with couples who smooch in front of you. You pretend you are catching up on messages on your phone. You go home feeling like shit. When your parents ask if you had fun, you say it was fine and go into your

room and shut the door. You lie on your bed feeling like an outcast, not womanly enough so you think about how to fix that problem.

You buy a push-up padded bra. Your grow your hair long, paint your nails and wear makeup. You join Instagram and obsessively post pictures of yourself. No one comments. That makes you feel worse.

You sob, and fall into a dark hole. You scratch around the shed and find a rope.

Killing Pain

Cement slabs lie like empty boxes across miles of death. Six feet under critters and bacteria are probably having a feast. A hearse arrives carrying an angelic man's body. A fresh hole has been excavated. She's here to accept life's end, of souls entrapped, of sorrow, of dread, of love gone by choice. Only she knows of his silent cries when the emptiness of a parched field bore no seeds. When the violation shamed and tortured and dug a dark hole into his psyche so deep that no medicine could heal the relentless piercing, tearing, shattering. He wanted no spectacle, no pity, no judgement. People arrive in droves, whispering blame, calling it a selfish act or worse still, a tragedy that could have been avoided. She feels like shouting his echo – peace is about choosing to fly freely into nothingness. Or, who knows for sure, it could be a revival – a renewed soul entering another vessel.

Forbidden Territory

Sounds were coming from outside. Angry voices, swearing voices. They were coming from the side street. Then they got closer and closer; they were in our street. The journalist who lived here peeked through the curtain and put her index finger vertically across her lips, and pointed to the light switch. We huddled on the floor in darkness.

It was a Friday evening and for a change we were not sweating over silkscreens making posters or arguing over class and race. The journalist suggested dinner at her lace and we all we all agreed. We were all similar in age and like-minded.

It was going to be a zoning out evening with friends over wine, food and music. The journalist lived in Mayfair, a place designated for only one race in those pre-freedom days. Spots of brown were beginning to illegally dot the area. Everyone was trying to cross the line to break the absurd borders of segregation in every facets of life.

The evening began with a wonderful vegetarian meal and wine. The journalist often lived on take-outs, but this evening she had made an effort with delicious lentils and butternut bake, cornbread and a salad. We ate and chatted about normal things. One of the students had brought his latest batch of photographs that he had just collected from the darkroom. Some of the pictures of families and kids playing were uplifting. Others photos demanded a different appreciation, especially those in black and white, of running kids in smoky scenes with fear in their eyes.

We began discussing these pictures - the day they had were taken and the events that led to what had been captured. One shot of a policeman's hat from the back was out of focus, yet it captured a sense of moving wrath.

It must have been about nine when we heard voices outside.

There were many of them, aggression-filled men in plain clothes. Some were carrying sticks. We sat in the bedroom with the door locked while our hearts pumped in our chests like drumbeats. We heard footsteps thumping upstairs. There was hard knock on the opposite door. The neighbour was a pale man who had a right to live there. There was a brief polite chat in Afrikaans and the door was shut.

They did not bother to knock gently on our door. They hammered it. Inside there were whispers about how to handle the situation.

"Ons wil die fokken deur af skop!" ," they shouted. The journalist was about to remove the security chain when they kicked the door open and entered.

There were bruises, bleeding and minor fractures, but all of that could heal. The filth that came out of their mouths could be erased. But the thing that could never be replaced was the student that they dragged out of the house and took away. He simply disappeared.

Mole in the Pocket

When the labour reporter joined the newsroom at a time when Robben Island was packed with prisoners, she was tipped off about the informer. He was a short guy with ginger hair that matched his sizeable moustache. In the newsroom he carried an air of importance around him – walking in an out and returning with stories that made the cops look like good guys.

A woman with long blonde hair was his friend. She wrote general news stories while he ruled the crime desk. The labour reporter warned her male friends who were fighting for liberation that the blonde woman who had ingratiated herself into their circle, flirting with them and fucking them –that her friend was a spy. A union guy confronted the blonde woman after several beers.

The next day the news editor summoned the labour reporter. It was not a formal disciplinary hearing, but he warned her that if she ever suggested that there was a spy in the newsroom, her job would be on the line.

The moustached man carried on peddling the narrative of the apartheid police and army while the blonde woman walked past the labour reporter with a look of victory on her face.

As it turned out a few months later the moustached man went to work for the apartheid era Law and Order Ministry. Several years after the ANC had taken charge, the moustached man opportunistically became a chameleon, serving as someone else's puppeteer.

He admittedly when by asked by another journalist about his past. He said: "I have long laid to rest the overemphasised images of the '*swart gevaar', 'rooi gevaar'* and 'ANC *gevaar*' If they were ever applicable, they are no longer applicable. I think democracy is safe in ANC hands."

The Alien

Her skin crawled when she walked milky pavements in Johannesburg for the first time. Rigid eyes stared at the brown blotch on a white sheet, like mud walking on the ground, where the glare pierced, corneas jutted out to see the alien crossing the line. An alien was worthy of whispers as humans passed and wondered whether they should call for protection, for who knows what disease or danger this alien might carry that could afflict their arum lily bodies and soil. She ate steel bars to keep her strong, to carry on walking, to find a space to live in the country of her birth.

Damaged Goods

This story is not about the blood storm in Botswana. It is not a story about the forces that went across the border and followed orders. It is a about the intangibles – the silent aftermath that festers like boil in the heart.

They said he was lucky that he survived the massacre. That he escaped to New York and had the chance to make a life there. But was he really lucky?

The glitz and glamour, the streets of yellow, the jazz and blues, the simplicity of freedom – all there for him to enjoy. He saw the Statue of Liberty and he could have smiled but he didn't. He could have revelled in late night clubs and strolled in Central Park. But he didn't.

He had a smidgeon of talent. He did try to become a jazz pianist and he fell in love with a woman who supported him. For a while, he seemed to be doing okay in Manhattan.

But he never really was okay after that day when he heard the gunshots and the screams as he hid under the bed. He abandoned everyone, his friends and his family back home. His mother worried about her son who, on scorching summer days mixed cool-aid in a large jug and served the family. The gentle one who was the darling of the girls who shielded him from the bully boys in Alexandra.

He looked like a normal person when he escaped, wearing his eldest brother's black pants and a blue shirt. His wounds were invisible –not of the kind that a band-aid or stitches could fix.

Did the sound of triggers corking and screams haunt him daily? He never said a word about it to his brother. Common psychology suggests that if a boil is not lanced it festers to the point of madness. For him, it began with the loss of sobriety. When alcohol was not enough, he began with one fix, then another, then another…When dope was not enough, he got sucked into the underbelly of the world of drugs, a world of needles and powder that dished out false reprieve.

One day his elder brother was a watching a documentary when a familiar image crossed the screen. At first, he thought he was hallucinating. But he rewound the clip and saw the image of the man with tattered clothes and doleful eyes. He was dragging his feet as he pushed a trolley laden with his belongings.

The documentary was about the homeless in New York. Why did this happen? Why did he not come back come to tell his story? Was there anything else going on in his head that had driven him mad? Was it guilt that he had survived, and they died? They never got the answers but they received his ashes in an urn.

Politics of the Hymen

The envelope was hand-delivered to our house. Several such envelopes had come over the years, so I could tell it was a wedding invitation from a family that flaunted wealth.

The last wedding I attended three years ago was a show of distasteful excess, and it got me thinking. The bride and groom looked like teenagers, though they were twenty-two and fresh out of university. They were clearly in love but looked somewhat overwhelmed to be in the limelight. Two years later they got divorced.

I wondered if they really wanted to get married at all, or if they had just wanted to have sex. But they couldn't, because in their culture sex before marriage is forbidden. Every time I go to a community wedding and sit on a plastic chair draped in a white cloth tied with a bow with people around me dripping in gold, I have uncomfortable thoughts.

In the society I grew up in, people are slaves to a culture that dictates a woman's virginity is sacred. The hymen is considered a jewel of purity that can only be touched after marriage, though a man can fuck around before the virgin bride arrives.

I remember stories about the mother-in-law checking the sheets for bloodstains to prove that the woman was pure. And if there was no blood, the poor woman would be seen as a slut and booted out. I am not sure how much of that is still happening, but what I know is that the emphasis on virginal tissue material was still a big deal in some societies. In one municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, "maiden bursaries" have been introduced, available to women who can prove they are virgins. No doubt, some invasive method is used to test virginity.

Even some progressive women, indoctrinated by religion and entrenched archaic cultural convictions, believe preservation of their virginity until marriage was the way things were meant to be. I wondered whether it has ever occurred to these educated women that their hymens were probably torn by the things they enjoyed doing, like riding horses or bicycles, or certain exercises, even masturbation? Every woman's hymen is different, and virginity and hymen are not the same thing.

One of my Muslim friends at university was deeply in love with her boyfriend, and both of them were desperate to take their relationship beyond kissing and cuddling.

"What's stopping you from jumping his bones?" I asked.

"We'll have to get married first. It's about commitment, and it must be special," she said.

I was not going to judge her choices – but was it really her *choice*? Why do I see things differently? Is it just because I find that women who pander to the rules of patriarchy are letting down the feminist cause? Or has it something to do with my own experience?

My mother had no choice in the matter when she married my father. It was all pre-arranged. Mother was a bright woman who came from a family of teachers – but it meant they weren't exactly rolling in it. She had to drop out of school and marry. My father, on the other hand, inherited money from his father, and was in those days, considered relatively well off. I don't think he had any choice either, because my forefathers had conservative notions of caste - hence my parents' surnames were the same.

Ever since I can recall, my parents slept in separate bedrooms. My mother used to read Mills & Boon novels and all sorts of magazines. She always asked who I was seeing.

She never said it, but I knew that she took a vicarious pleasure in my cosmopolitan life and ownership of my body.

Sticky Tales

I once knew a young girl who grew up on a farm. She never painted her nails or played netball. Flies invaded her house every summer because the stables were nearby. She complained about them often. Why not just kill them with Doom? I suggested. A whiff was enough to get rid of them.. But toxic aerosol sprays were banned in her house because they sparked allergies. Her family used yellowish sticky fly traps that hung from the ceiling. I saw the string of fly corpses hanging from them when we sat at the table to eat plates of chicken curry. I'm not sure if it was the sight of the corpses that had anything to do with it, but I lost my appetite. The girl whispered that her mother was quite stingy, so she only replaced the sticky trap when every bit of yellow was covered with black wings and bodies.

One day a new school friend from the posh side of town came to visit. It was her first time on the farm. The two girls were chatting and laughing over sandwiches and Fanta Orange, unaware that a domestic disaster was looming. The girl went to the kitchen to get some jelly from the fridge when a cry of terror and a scream made her dart back to the dining room. She thought that a harmless snake must have slithered into the house, as had happened several times before. Her eyeballs popped out like slippery marbles when she saw what had happened. The corpse-filled flytrap was on her friend's plate and part of it was stuck on her arm. Sorry, sorry, it's never happened before she said to her friend. She grabbed a cloth and ripped the tape off the friend's hand. Needless to say, that particular friend never visited again.

The girl's hatred for flies grew by the day. One day she spotted fly swatters at Checkers and bought a few. She began hitting the flies one by one. Striking them mid-air took some practice. But within weeks she felt like she was Serena Williams on the tennis court. I cannot remember how many she killed, but it must have been in the hundreds. She loved swatting them and watching them fall lifelessly on the floor. Her younger brother would pick up each corpse with a tweezer. He would count them and record the number she killed. That's how she began running the fly championship of Hellingdale.

The girl invited children in the neighbourhood to take part. They all came with fancy swatters, stronger than the ones she had. On competition days swatters would be flying all over the place. There were a few accidents when they vied for the same fly. Like when one swatter hit the face of a boy and he began crying. The corpses would be lined up in rows of ten for easy counting. Whoever killed the most flies was the winner of gold chocolate money. The girl's mother worried about the amount of chocolate she was eating.

I found the whole thing disgusting, I told the girl. She said I should be the last person to say anything nasty. Your family kills animals every day. Don't they chop off chicken and sheep necks? Don't they butcher animals and sell them? That was true, but it was for food, I said. She rambled on like a preacher. Did you know that every time a fly lands on a surface – suppose it is your food– that fly vomits the contents from its stomach, she said. Then it sticks

out its tongue and sucks up the same vomit. And if it gets a taste of nutrition a fly will sit in one spot, feed, lay eggs, and shit there too? Flies spread diseases. Then why fiddle with them in a competition, I asked. Just throw them in the dustbin. She said if only I would take part, I would know how much fun it was.

One summer the stables were moved far away from the house and the flies followed the horses. The girl had lost her entertainment. She spent her days bored and grumpy, until she spotted a tick while fooling around with her dog. It was on the dog's neck. She yanked it out with her bare hands and squashed it on the floor with her foot. She came over to our house and asked to check our dog. She found a fat one and squashed it into a bloody mess. That freaked me out. She took to squashing ticks in the neighbourhood. I stayed away from her for years. We reconnected briefly when we went to university. Something happened to her. She could never eat animal flesh. She would balk at the sight of my steak on a plate. I noticed she used to wash her hands a lot. I wondered whether she saw a psychologist about her killing games.

I dropped out in my first year of university and went to work at a flower shop. Several years later I met an old school friend and we wondered what had happened to the fly killer. Probably ended up in jail for murder, we sniggered, until we tracked her on Facebook. She was the chief pathologist at the South African Medical Research Council.

Albumin Blues

Long before organic became fashionable, people at the farm were eating chemical-free vegetables from the garden, fruit from the orchard and grain-fed chickens that roamed freely. Sometime the hens sneaked out of their side of the garden and hid under the tin house on stilts and laid eggs in the warm, soft mud. The eggs were collected and then served as omelettes, poached or fried. The youngest child could not bring herself to eat any of them because she saw yellow chicklets in every yolk. But there was another reason why she was put off eggs for life. Her friend did something she thought was so disgusting that it wanted to make her vomit. Every day on the way to school they walked past a pile of stinky blackish-green manure that let off smoke in the mornings. One afternoon, the girl's friend sprinted ahead of her and ran toward the pile of horse shit. He left his bag on the gravel road and stuck his hand in the manure and was fiddling in it when the girl caught up with him. He pulled out an egg and wiped it with his hanky. The girl spat and said it was the yuckiest thing ever. It got worse when the friend cracked and shelled the egg and gulped it down in two or three big bites. He said it tasted the same as if it had come from boiling water in a pot.

Unnatural

The owl's shiny black eyes in the picture which hangs above my desk reminds me of the strange things that have happened in my area. Like the day a young boy from the village took his fishing rod and tackle and walked to Nonoti river. He was hoping to catch fish for dinner. It was the first time this twelve-year-old was allowed to go on his own. His father was going to join him later. The boy felt big. He carried his rod with pride.

The river was a short walk from home through a forest of singing insects and woolly-necked storks, yellow-throated longclaw and bee-eaters. The forest opened out to pristine dunes and the winding river. The water was brown and placid. There was not a soul in sight, it was just him and the earthworms that he carried in a plastic container. He sat on the bank and opened the tub. He grabbed a wriggling worm and held it tight in his fingers. There was an art to doing this that he had mastered after much practice. He threaded the worm onto a sturdy hook and secured it. He stood close to the edge of the river, erect as his father had taught him, and then he swung his body and arms, casting the rod. The line landed far into the water.

Nonoti river was known as the place to catch shad and eels. The boy held his rod gently, patiently, hoping for the slightest tug on the line. Out of the blue, the tranquil river began to shiver with rolling ripples. They were not the kind of ripples that came from the wind. They were not the kind of ripples that speed boats make. It seemed that the ripples were coming from something unknown. From where the boy was standing, he saw a mass of silver moving downstream.

The boy wound his reel and staked the rod in the sand. He stood and stared. Could it possibly be a sardine rush? His father had taken him to one last year. It was the most exciting things he had ever experienced. But that had been in the sea, and the sardines were jumping. What he saw now looked like a moving sheet of silver on the surface of the river which was flowing toward him. He smelled something putrid. His shaded his eyes from the sunlight to see what was going on as the silver passed him. He could not believe what he saw and he began jumping up and down. He wished his father were here to see this this spectacle of thousands of fish huddled together, going downstream. There was a terrible stench coming from the river, but he did not mind. He was about to get into the river to grab some fish when he heard a voice shouting.

"Stop! Get out of there now. Stay away from the river."

He turned around and saw his father running towards him with an umbrella and a picnic basket.

"Get away from the river," his father shouted as he reached him. He dropped everything he was carrying and threw his arms around his son. He hugged him and held him tight. When he

let him go, the boy wondered what had possessed his father to do that. He had never hugged him like that before.

“This is evil. They’re all dead,” his father said.

The boy was puzzled. “What are you saying, Dad?”

“I warned them,” he said. “Now everything in the river is toxic.”

The boy had a dozen questions for his father that could not be answered immediately. The father held his son’s face and looked directly into his eyes.

“I want you to do something important, very important,” he repeated. “Run home fast. Get some rubber gloves, a bucket and a bottle with a lid.”

The boy asked “What for, Dad?” His father just said, “Run along now. I will explain later. It is for evidence.” The boy did not understand, but he sprinted home.

When he returned, he was surprised to see the river mouth open. It usually takes a while before this happens. But the river was gushing into the sea like someone unlocked the sluice gates of a dam. The fish corpses were spewing out into the sea. The umbrella was up. A towel was spread on the sand, and the picnic basket was lying next to it. The boy looked around. His dad was nowhere. He must have gone into the bushes to relieve himself.

The boy put on the large gloves and picked up two of the fish. He dropped them into the bucket. He filled the bottle with water and closed the lid. All that running back and forth had made him hungry. He opened the picnic basket and ate cheese sandwiches and drank half a litre of orange juice. He lay on the towel in the warm glow and fell asleep. The sun was sliding behind the trees and shrubs that bordered the river.

At home, the boy’s mother was getting annoyed that the father and son had not returned. She was planning a surprise for the father’s birthday. Friends and family had arrived. The mother sent an uncle to find them at their regular fishing spot. He found the boy asleep and nudged him awake.

“Come on let’s go home. Where’s your father?”

The boy said he had gone into the bushes. The uncle opened the bucket and almost puked.

“Dammit! Throw them out now. Rotting fish!”

“No!” the boy grabbed the bucket and guarded it with both hands.

By now all the dead fish had disappeared into the sea. The boy told his uncle about the river mouth opening and swallowing up the dead fish.

“What an imagination you have,” the uncle said. They hollered for his father in the bushes but heard nothing. “He will come home when he sees you have left,” said the uncle.

They walked back carrying everything including the decaying fish and contaminated water.

There were tracks in the sand as if a Land Rover had driven there.

“Did you see anyone driving here?” the uncle asked.

“No” the boy said. “Someone must have come when I went home to get the bucket. It could have been my Dad’s boss, he has a land rover. Maybe he fetched Dad because there was an emergency at the plant.”

When the boy got home he went straight to his room and hid the bucket. He thought his father would be home soon and be proud of him for collecting the fish.

He waited and waited.

Vilanculos

It is a factor 50 mid-summer afternoon. The family arrives by boat, on a pristine paradise. Whoever discovered this place first named it fittingly, Paradise Island.

Powdery white sand is strewn with shells. Black and stone-coloured pebbles and starfish line the shore. Starving bellies push us to get the coals ready. Icy beer and chilled wine cool the body.

After mouthfuls of fish and prawns on a sizzling fire, a volleyball net goes up on two planted poles. Some get active while others stroll along the snaky beach.

She prefers solitary time and strolls on her own in the opposite direction of the others until her eyes spot a cosy spot under a tree where the sound of human voices have faded. In her basket are two gems she found at a second-hand bookshop in Johannesburg: Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire*, in hardcover and Arundhati Roy's latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.*

She picks up the latter, lies down on a stripy towel, her head resting on an inflatable cushion. In between the chunks of pages, she dozes on and off. She sips from her water bottle and gazes across miles of moving swells and pictures dolphins dancing and waving at her to join them. She packs her basket and ambles into the sea for her last swim.

There's a gentle wind. Her distracted mind is oblivious to the rising tide until the waves begin to pound her. The pleasurable African sea, which earlier felt like marine therapy is suddenly dangerous. She's not a strong swimmer. She turns her body towards the shore but the cross-current force pushes her deeper into the ocean.

She fights, kicking and slapping at the waves. Her hair flops around her face like seaweed. She shouts, "Help! Help! Somebody, please! The current is dragging her deeper into the water. Her screams dissipate in the wind.

On the shore, the volleyball game continues undisturbed. Some of her family are lying on the towels unaware of her absence, while she chokes on salty water and coughs in fits. Her throat is hurting. Her arms and legs are losing their might. Still, she fights like a fish caught in a net.

Her head bumps into something – a piece of driftwood. Her fingers grab it. She hangs onto it trying to keep afloat. Within seconds a ferocious wave pummels her body and the wood is flung out of sight.

The shore is moving further away from her and the family members shrink into dots in the broader landscape. She cries for help again, knowing her voice is a whisper. She prays, even though she is an atheist.

Sharks are lurking. A fin from a dead fish scratches her. She's going to die in this vast Mozambican ocean. She's delirious with questions. Will a shark devour every part of her, leaving behind no evidence of death? Will she become a missing person? How will her mother cope with losing her youngest child?

The water is icy as the sea turns green. She sees her face in the local newspapers and television. They will report her disappearance. They will speculate that she went into the bushes to change and was kidnapped or abducted. There were two other cases of women going missing from this area. One was kidnapped and despite the family paying the ransom, she was killed. In the case of the other woman, police have been following leads that point to a human trafficking racket.

Her brother will give a journalist the latest photograph of he took of her, an action shot taken two days earlier. Her body is suspended in mid-jump close to hitting the volleyball over the net. Her face and body show innate determination and strength, the journalist would say. She looks like a fighter.

Social media will be awash with pictures and messages of support and hope. Old friends will post childhood memories on Facebook. Her mother will be sobbing while her sister talks to the police who will want any information that can help locate her. Her sister will tell the police about the ex-boyfriend who behaved like a psycho when the sister ended that relationship. He had threatened revenge on her, because he suspected she had left him for a secret lover. He was spying on her. Who knows, he could have kidnapped Nina, she tells the police.

The wind has turned into a gale. "We're leaving now," her brother shouts. "I could do with another pair of hands. Everyone should carry something back!' He shouts like a Scout leader. They start packing the boat. A hat is flying into the sea. "That's Nina's hat!" he shouts. "Where's Nina?" he asks.

They look far and wide. They break up into two groups and depart in opposite directions calling out her name. They find her basket packed and her towel laid out on the sand. They look towards the sea. A helicopter whirrs above it. A phone rings. The captain of the boat answers the call.

Hurtling In Nairobi

I felt a fierce tug and a pull as and before I knew it, he was gone. It happened in the flick of thumb. He had claimed my backpack for himself.

It had my passport, foreign currency, plane tickets, phone and other bits and bobs. How stupid I had been to assume the streets of Nairobi were safer than Johannesburg city centre. I should have tied the backpack with straps around my body as in danger zones.

I shouted and gave chase as the Kenyan heat punished my mind and body. He was young and nimble. Snaking around throngs of people on their weekend shopping, I pushed and shoved and shouted: "Help! That man in the red shirt. He stole my bag! Stop him!"

A young woman wearing sports gear sprinted past me. She knew how to manoeuvre through the busy streets. Within minutes she was onto him. She tripped him from behind as a soccer player does in foul play. The man fell with his face flat on the pavement. While he was down the athletic woman kicked him and grabbed my backpack. She was swearing at him in Swahili when I got there. I could not stop thanking her.

"No problem, watch out for these thugs," she warned and disappeared into the afternoon buzz.

I put on my backpack, tied the strap in front and turned to walk away when I heard grunting. The man was staggering as he tried to get up and he fell again. His face had a bruise and he was bleeding. But there was something else going on. He was shivering like he was having a seizure. There were people crowding around. "No police! No police please," he said and passed out. I promised him I wouldn't call the police. I'm not sure if he heard me.

One woman said the man was drunk. "No! He's ill," I said in his defence. Someone helped turn the man around, so that he was lying on his back. We need an ambulance, I shouted. I was kneeling on the pavement. Some people tried to talk to him in Swahili.

He could have been having a heart attack for all I knew. It might have been that kick that caused him to collapse, I thought. The local paramedics acted fast, and got him on oxygen and a drip. He was laid out on a stretcher, looking frail and vulnerable in the back of the closed van.

"Does anyone know this man?" the paramedic asked. No one answered.

"I know him. I'll go with him," I said. The people gathered around us thought I was mad. The paramedics thought so too, after having heard that the man had attempted to rob me, but they let me in hop in anyway. I have no idea what possessed me to do that.

Anyway, it was too late to change course now. With my backpack at my side, I was sitting at in a van in Nairobi, hurtling to the nearest hospital.

I was holding a thief's hand and feeling strangely calm. I was asking, "Do you have a family?" as though he could hear me. His hand was rough, as though he did manual work.

In the twenty minutes it took to get to the hospital I mapped out every blemish and hidden vein on his almond face and forehead. His skin was dark and shiny. I imagined he must have dimples when he smiled. He must have been in his early twenties or late teens.

His face had the sadness of a helpless person. I could see an innocence in that face. Why did he want to steal? He could have hurt me but he didn't. Was this his only way of surviving?

Losing It

He looks for his keys. Have you checked in your car, she says. He goes to the garage and finds the car doors locked. They must be inside the house, he says. They look everywhere until her bladder is about to burst. She goes to the toilet. As she sits on the pan she picks up a magazine. She spots the keys jutting out amongst the pages in the magazine rack. She hands them to him. Where's my wallet, he says. He shuffles in his jacket pockets. He shuffles in his pants. It must be in your car, she says. He goes to the car. It's not there. She looks in the bathroom. It's not there. They look in the kitchen, in the bedrooms, in the dining room, in the lounge, in the bathrooms, in the garden, in the patio and the pocket of the jacket he wore yesterday. She phones his daughter. Your father has lost his wallet, she says. What am I supposed to do about it, the daughter says. Go to the bank and have his cards cancelled and replaced. She tells him what the daughter says. Wait a minute, he says. They must be in her car because she fetched him for breakfast yesterday. She phones the daughter again. The daughter says she last saw him on his birthday a month ago.

Neuron Troubles

I was scratching my head, trying to think of a word when my computer pinged.

Someone from my writing group had emailed me; he said he liked my vignettes. *That* was the word I was looking for! How annoying that words don't spring to mind as they used to. It feels like the vocabulary I have acquired over my sixty-seven years is a blur in my pre-frontal cortex. It's the same with authors' names, movie names, actors' names, places and events – all gone into permanent hiding.

Strangely though, I remember several things from childhood like *The Three Little Pigs*, *The Cat in the Hat*. Doctor Seuss and Enid Blyton. Fond memories of playing hopscotch, climbing the jackfruit tree and riding my tricycle. Even the things from the past that I hated and shoved into an iron vault to die, pop out whenever I read about another child molested.

It all begins with loss of short-term memory, they say. The bitch of dementia sends signals as years go by. But I'm not that old – this should not be happening. What is old anyway? Seventy, eighty, ninety? Who knows since some people make it past a hundred years old and can still tell right from left.

What about that seventy-year-old woman who was a surrogate for her daughter and delivered twins? And that sixty-one-year-old woman in the US who was inseminated with her daughter's egg and the sperm of her son's boyfriend? She carried the baby and gave birth by C-section. A grandchild was created for her gay son and his partner. I won't be surprised if in the future men are pumped with hormones, and will be able to carry an embryo to full term.

It's all getting too much to handle – memory lapses while a technological revolution is taking place under my nose. I must do what it takes to keep my brain in good shape. I used to be good at Trivial Pursuit. Maybe I should start playing that again. "What's the point of it?" my friend Kate asks. "It's just useless information that is being outdated as we speak."

Perhaps she has a point. "What about Bridge, is it too late to learn?" I wonder.

Kate says I am over thinking everything. "You know I do crossword puzzles everyday – I think that helps. You're also not reading enough," she says, with an air of smugness.

So, I go to the new library in Pretoria last week and guess who is behind the counter? A shiny white plastic thing – a robot with a human voice, speaking English.

It says to me: "My name is Libby. How can I help you?" No greetings or niceties.

"I am looking for a book called *Overcoming Anxiety*," I say.

"Can you tap it into the screen? It would be helpful if you know the author," Libby says.

Luckily I had it written it down so I tap the letters onto Libby's body screen.

A slip of paper comes out of Libby's mouth with a code and location of the book on the third floor.

I tell Kate about my experience.

"Why do you bother going there? My local library has real people," she says.

The book I got from the library bores me. I feel restless. So I take a big leap and go to the nearest iStore and tell the young assistant I would like to look at an iPad.

"Which version?" the young woman asks.

I say anyone is fine as long as it has games on it.
"Have you used an iPad before?"
I say no, but I use a computer.

"Well, the iPad is easier and better especially if you have arthritis because all you do is use your index finger when you play games and read books too, because you can download the Kindle app. You can also watch movies."

I say I read books from the bookshop and the library and my VCR works fine.

The kind woman takes me to a room in the back and asks someone to show me how to use the iPad and download some games.

"Come back anytime if you get stuck," she says.

I am surprised how patient she is. Youngsters tend to be less tolerant of those of us who remember Elvis and black and white TV.

That evening I discover a new world, a world my grandson knows. I play Candy Crush and Bingo on my iPad, which is a lot more exciting than going to the community hall and trying to compete with the big egos there. I find a game called Cutie Pie. You tap on a box and an image appears, you tap the next box and another image appears. The trick is to remember where the image was so that when it comes up in another space you can match the two.

Kate phoned and asked if I would like to go to the movies. "I'm busy with Angry Birds and then I'm going onto Minecraft to build my dream house." Kate pauses and says "what are you talking about – what is Angry Birds - are you losing you mind?"

Void

Dimpled smiles, stroking hands, kissing, feeling, laughing. Images swirl as the breeze scatters ashes from my open palm. They fly over the waves, into the waves and float away. I gaze at the vast unknown feeling lost. There's no one else at the beach today. The sea pushes white froth onto the shore. A black crab scampers into a tiny hole.

My feet are tangled in seaweed stuck between my toes. We loved being on this shore together watching the rhythm of sea life, finding shells that hissed in our ears and wading into the tide if we felt like it. Or lazing on the rocks like seals.

Here we ate from a picnic basket – brisket, mustard and pickles packed between slices of rye. Here we laughed and sang. Here we counted the swallows as they fluttered high above us, migrating north. Here we watched little ones running into the water and sprinting back screaming when the waves smacked the shore.

It seems like my mind has snatched photographs of cherished moments and the film is unrolling. The best of times come first, but then ones that taste of acid too, appear. They taunt with echoes of regret. The things I should have done and didn't. The absence when you needed me. The phone calls I ignored. The celebrations I forgot. The times I kept you waiting and worrying.

We were like opposites drawn together by Eros. We revelled in the wonder of love for a while, before time scraped off the veneer. We bared our flaws as the naked truth came out. Minor arguments turned into tornadoes. We took it for granted that our togetherness was for eternity.

I feel alone and afraid. Will I ever be able to move forward? They say time heals but all I feel is blood pumping in my body like melted ice cubes. In this stupor, I trip over a jellyfish carcass. You would have laughed at my body tumbling like a klutz. You would have grabbed my hand and pulled me up. We would have walked together.

I want to hear a voice saying it will be okay. But what I hear are waves whooshing in a void.

Spirits of the Mamba

She woke up at the flush of dawn to feed the chickens. A greenish grey creased object lay on the shrubs below the veranda. She thought it must have been a strip of fabric that had flown in from somewhere; the wind had howled all of last night. She went to the coop, scattered the grains and watched the hungry chickens peck away. The nesting robins on the syringa tree sang. It was the sounds of nature breaking the silence that she loved about this place.

The gate opened and Thembi the domestic worker came in, shouting: "*Haaibo! Haaibo*!"

"What's the matter, Thembi?"

"Mamba! Mamba!" she screamed, pointing to the object on the shrubs. It was a snake skin.

"Oh, the snake must have shed it and left. They do shed skins. Throw it in the dustbin."

"You don't understand," Thembi said, and dashed out.

She came back with the gardener. He picked up the skin with a stick and took it down the garden. He poured paraffin over it set it alight. We watched the skin burn, it let out a cloying smell. Then a sangoma arrived.

"Don't worry he will sort out the problem," said Thembi.

"What problem? The mamba won't come here again," I said.

The sangoma uttered something as he sprinkled herby stuff around the shrubs.

She went to the back veranda and lay on the swing chair near the lavender hedge with her murder mystery. She was midway through when the neighbours arrived.

An old couple were jabbering with Thembi in the kitchen. They said black mambas were bad luck and urged Thembi to go to the local spiritual healer. She said the sangoma had been. That's not enough they insisted. She did not understand because she said in her Hindu religion snakes were revered. She saw pictures of Shiva with snakes coiled around his body in different configurations. One was with a cobra around his neck.

"That is different," the couple said.

They were shuttled to a house where a large brown woman, draped in a frayed red sari, came out to see them. The neighbours narrated the story of the black mamba as though they had seen it shed its skin and slither away.

They all followed the woman spiritualist into a dimly lit room inside the house replete with gods on the walls. The smell of strong incense permeated the air. The woman lit a lamp. The neighbours told her that a relative of theirs had recently seen a mamba skin. He died the next day.

They sat on the floor cross-legged in a half-moon circle. They faced this supposed real-life spirit of the gods. The woman let her hair hang loose. She lit a small block of camphor and placed it on the floor in front of her feet. She closed her eyes and began humming and shaking her head around until she entered a trance state.

The woman began droning. She said the very mamba that left its skin on the shrub must be killed or mamba babies would follow the woman everywhere. The woman thought this was ridiculous and she stood up to leave when the neighbour pulled her to sit down again.

It's not finished, the neighbour said. With her trance over, the spiritualist took the burning camphor and gulped it down in one swoop, with a glass of water.

Out of Joint

I am fidgeting with vowels, consonants and a blank tile, hoping to come up with seven-letter when my phone rings. I ignore it. It rings again and I sprint to the kitchen to switch it off but my worst impulse takes over and I answer.

“Hi, are you Maya’s cousin?” a woman asks softly. I say yes. “You probably don’t remember me, I came to your house once.” I vaguely recall Maya dropping in with a nondescript woman, a long time ago. “I’m sorry to call you so late but I had to let you know that Maya is not in a good space.”

I tell the woman to hold on for a second as the stinky water of menopause streams down my chest. I remove my eyeglasses, strip off pieces perforated paper towels from the holder and my partner hands me a jug of cold water from the fridge.

“What’s happened to her?” I ask.

“Maya’s been admitted to a mental health hospital. She tried to commit suicide,” the woman says.

“What! She tried to kill herself,” I shriek.

“Yes, she cut her wrists badly. Luckily I came home early and found her in the bath.”

I cannot make sense of this. Was it drugs, money problems, boyfriend problems or what?

My partner is making hand signals, wanting to know what’s going on. The woman pauses and says Maya was very depressed. “I don’t know if she told you about us. We are lovers. We live together.”

I am thrilled for a moment and say how happy I am that Maya has someone who will take care of her.

Then my heart sinks when I hear the words: “But you see, I have two young children. It’s not going to work out. Me and Maya. I can’t take her back.”

I ask whether she has contacted Maya’s mother. “No, Maya and her mother are not on talking terms. You are the only family I could contact.” I thank the woman for contacting me and silently curse her too.

I have held so many wounded hands over the years but now I have my own problems to deal with. I don’t think I can bring out my Mother Teresa traits again. My partner agrees I have too much on my plate. Let someone else get involved instead.

I lie in bed contemplating life with my hormones in trampoline mode. Maya's mother never answers her phone. She frequently changes jobs, moves homes and gets involved with all sorts of dodgy characters.

The last time Maya visited was a year ago. She had just bought a new car, loved her job at the bank and had an active social life. She was in her twenties, independent and thriving. What could have driven her to the brink?

I toss and turn and eventually fall asleep. When I wake up I am feeling disturbed and exhausted. I recall a strange dream of frantically searching for lost gems in the sand, sucking stones and getting frustrated like Samuel Beckett's Molloy going around in circles.

My partner brings me coffee and we walk in the garden and sit on the bench in front of showers of pink bougainvillea. He looks at me and says, "I know you're going to see her." Later, he hands me a batch of old magazines that I can take to the hospital. I think how lucky I am that if anything happens to me I have support. I Google the hospital and within fifteen minutes I see the sign at the gate: Akeso. I realise that is name of the Greek goddess of healing.

I sit at the reception waiting for Maya. What am I going to say to her? I've been there for people during loss, poverty, illness, breakups and hard times. But this is different. I barely scraped through Psychology 101 and do not have the skills to deal with suicide. As I am sitting deep in thought Maya comes out, hunched in on herself, wearing black track pants and a T-shirt. Her left wrist is bandaged. The shadows under her eyes speak of a million tears.

I hug Maya. She stays in the hug, as though she never wants it to end.

"Sorry!" she says.

"Don't worry about anything Maya. Are you feeling any better?" I ask.

"I am fine I suppose. I'm alive. I have some stitches." Given the rawness of it all, I do not expect her to say much. Anyway, there is so little time for a proper conversation because her therapy schedule is packed and she must go soon.

I sit opposite her and listen. She fidgets as she speaks. "I'm taking medication and I am seeing a psychiatrist. I'll be here for six weeks." I wonder if she can sense my awkwardness, my forced compassion. I ask if she would like some water. She looks down at the table and crosses her hands. She avoids eye contact.

"I'm bipolar," she says. "I'm glad I have a diagnosis. I had no idea what was happening to me. I was falling further and further into a dark cave." I know nothing about bipolar disorder except that it has something to do with depression.

“Has your mother been to visit?” I ask. Maya places her elbows apart on the table, lifts her arms and lets her face rest on her fisted hands. Her eyes well up. “You know what it’s like with my mum. She knows what happened, but I don’t expect to see her.” When I think about it, there were times I suspected Maya’s mother was deranged. She dragged her kids from one place to another as though she was on a caravanning holiday.

Back at home question after question goes through my mind. What drove Maya to cut her wrists? And what the hell is bipolar disorder anyway? Were there other things at play? My partner suggests I consult a psychologist to see how to deal with this. I stare at the ceiling for hours that night, restless.

In my troubled state I slide out of bed, gently pick up my laptop and tip-toe past the whirring fridge towards the study. For a moment I am tempted to open the fridge door and pour a gin and tonic, but my eyes spot the clock ticking on the wall. It is just after two am. I never understood depression, beyond assuming that it is a middle-class problem that affects urbanites whose tender hearts cannot bear the daily stabs of life.

I too have been through the emotional grinder of life, from breakups, losing my job, multiple family deaths, and going into hiding while taking care of the only survivor of a heinous crime. But there had been no time to mourn then. I just had to get on with life and survive. I did not need a diagnosis.

I play out scenarios in my head. Was Maya struggling with her sexuality? That would be a major thing in anyone’s life. Maybe she told her mother she was lesbian and her mother freaked out. Perhaps her relationship with her partner was on shaky ground and that could have upset her. How severe do these problems have to be to drive one to suicide? If the problems are of a societal construct, then they must be dealt with externally, through therapy and other coping mechanisms.

I Google bipolar and the screen fills with entries. The first site to come up is The National Institute of Mental Health. It says bipolar is “a brain disorder”, also known as “manic depressive illness”. It causes unusual shifts in mood, energy levels and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks. I think this could also fit my moody profile when sweat runs down my body on the coldest days. But as I read further, I feel stupid.

All along I have been making incorrect assumptions. Like that of the difference between the depression that we all go through to from time to time and serious clinical depression. As I read the medical literature and real-life stories, I discover another world that people do not talk about because, like that of HIV/Aids, they hide it out of fear of being stigmatised.

I learn that there is a strong link between clinical depression and suicide. I learn that bipolar is like a harrowing bitch of mood swings, that can leave a person swerving and sway from the top of the mountain to the bottom of the cliff. One loses all hope and control and cannot get

out of this space. I learn that there are support groups where people can go. I learn that medication is necessary to treat bipolar and those who are clinically depressed.

That's as far as I get until my eyes begin to droop. I get off my high horse of judgment and creep back under the duvet just before the flapping hadeda squawks, landing on the patio to peck at leftovers in the puppy's bowl.

Fallible Father

She is lounging on the massage chair when I arrive in his bedroom. I've never seen her before and he had never mentioned her. This relationship must have happened recently and it seems they are already fucking.

Her fluffy bedroom slippers are lying on the floor and her scarf is casually thrown on the bed. She could be at least forty years younger than him. Powdered up and immaculately Botoxed. He is eighty-four. Several women have come and gone since he began his dalliances. All his lovers have been beautiful, independent and manicured. He, too, carries himself like a bottle of aged wine, walks with the gait of a man half his age.

He hugs me as always. He says, "I forgot we were supposed to go out to lunch. You haven't met Sumaya, have you?"

The woman stands up and we greet each other.

"Wait a few minutes. I'll get ready," he says. I go to the kitchen, and asked Lydia, the domestic worker, if she has seen this woman before. She nods.

I know his routine. He will go into the bathroom and roll a joint. Then he will take a few hits while he talks to the woman. If she is a smoker too, it could take longer. Then he will gargle a few times with mouth freshener. He will brush the sparse grey crop on his head. He will spray some aftershave on him. He will come out with a smile, and feeling like Bob Marley is a God.

This was meant to be our special monthly lunch – just me and my father. It is a regular arrangement, a time when we catch up on politics, newspaper reports and the latest gossip. He complains about the business and rants like a scratched record about the younger generation losing their values.

Before we walk out of the house, I say, "I have something important to talk to you about," hoping he won't bring her along. But she has followed us out. She gets into my car, uninvited.

Dad quit driving two years ago when the police stopped him at a roadblock. He was on their database like many of his contemporaries who believed their zig-zagging and cruising on the roads posed no danger. A final warning that he would go straight to jail forced him to lay down his keys. Now he has to be lifted everywhere.

We get into my VW Tiguan. The woman, Sumaya, sits in the back seat. I eye her from the review mirror, She is not naturally beautiful, but pretty in a cosmetic way. Her hair is tinted. Her eyebrows are plucked to perfection.

I feel a mix of pity and annoyance when I looked at Sumaya. Pity, because her eyes are innocent. She has an earthiness about her that does not sit well with her polished exterior. She will probably fall in love with this silver-haired man, my father the womaniser. And then when her allure has faded, she too will disappear, like the others.

My parents got divorced after my mother had completed her mothering duties. She birthed and raised three children, took care of all my dad's needs while he built his business empire. She fed, clothed and shuttled us everywhere. She put up with our teenage rages and she nursed our pain. When the last of us left home, Mom's job was done. She left to live in a flat of her own. For the first time, she had freedom.

Her marriage to my father was arranged. They fell in love after the wedding. That was how the tradition deemed it. Neither the teenage boy nor girl had a say in the matter. I could not imagine my own life playing out in a similar scenario.

I park outside Donnio, an Italian restaurant that Dad goes to regularly. Even if the restaurant is packed, they somehow find a table for him. It is his safe place where he can publicly drink alcohol and not be judged by what he calls "the Taliban".

Sumaya gets out of the car first and opens the front passenger door. He latches onto her arm and they walk in together. That is *my* job. Since Dad's hip replacement he has struggled to get out of the car on his own.

"We've not seen you in a while, Mr Patel," the waiter says and leads us to the corner table.

I feel a bit awkward sitting next to Sumaya. Dad asks about my work and my partner. "Is he still working like a dog? That's good, he knows what hard work is." The waiter arrives again and hands us each a menu.

"Sumaya is a vegetarian," Dad says.

She orders melanzane. I choose the spaghetti Bolognese and Dad asks for his regular chicken piccata. His rants begin. My siblings, who are running the business he built from scratch are not efficient. The quality of furniture they are importing is like plastic.

"What happened to the carpenter? In my days the factory was buzzing all the time. Now they import everything," he complains.

We talk about politics and how the country is being looted. Dad hoped he will still be around to see many of the corrupt officials go to jail. We talk about the petrol price hikes and the coming elections. Sumaya sits silently.

I order a glass of white wine and sparkling water for the table. Out of the blue Dad mentions that Sumaya is from Pakistan.

That gives me an inroad into starting a conversation with her. “How do you feel about Imraan Khan as the new Prime Minister?” I ask.

She smiles. “I think he was a better cricketer than a politician,” she says.

Dad laughs and says “Now his playboy days will be over.”

When will your playboy days end Dad? I wonder. His reputation embarrasses us but we can’t talk to him about it. He has never gone for women in his age group, always much younger women.

My brother and I were chatting about this once.

“It’s just about sex, don’t you get it?” my bother said. “Younger women make old men feel like boys again.”

Maybe so, but why do older women not go for younger men? Which planet are you living on my brother? “Look at French President Emmanuel Macron.” That’s the exception, I say.

“Men also have the added advantage of science. You know Dad gets testosterone shots whenever he needs it,” my brother revealed. That was a surprise. I thought it was Viagra.

“Well maybe Viagra too, as a top-up,” my brother said.

I look at Sumaya and wonder how long she will last.

“So are you here on holiday?” I ask.

Dad answers before she can open her mouth. “No, she’s here to stay.”

An awkward veil of silence hangs over the lunch table. The waiter brings our meals. We begin eating.

Sumaya is an observant Muslim woman. I wonder how she feels about us indulging in alcohol and food that is not halaal. It is like double trouble.

We drive home quietly after lunch. I drop them off at his house. Usually, he takes a nap after his midday meal. But I look at Sumaya and suspect his routine might change today. Dad's hug lingers much longer than usual. He watches me drive out and says "Please come and visit in the week."

Oddly, he never likes having visitors during the week.

I drive to Mom's house not far away. "Dad's got a new lover," I tell her.

She's used to it after so many years of their life together. "Yes, Zumaya is your uncle's friend," Mum says. "She is what your father needs at the moment." Somehow, Mum seems to know everything about Dad's life. "How can you be so blasé about it, Ma? Surely it must bother you, even in a small way?"

I broach the subject of divorce for the first time. "It must have hurt you, Ma, to be married to him. Why did you stay so long?"

She says: "We were a family. All of us together – we were happy. How could I give up on that? It was the best times of my life – you all of you around me."

"But he cheated on you Mum, repeatedly," I say.

"Your generation fail to understand," she explains. Your father was a good husband, a good father, but he was not perfect. He made me laugh and we loved each other for years."

Throughout our life together as a family, she hid emotional troubles from us. But as teenagers were could tell that this image of the perfect family was a façade. Behind the walls, inside their bedroom, the arguments got more robust by the day.

I hated Dad for a while. I hated it that he was sexist and driven by lust. Though Mum aged beautifully, she could never again be the young sex machine he wanted. His virility, propped up by science, continued unabated.

My father's infidelity did affect me subliminally and then it played itself out later. When my first love cheated on me, I gave him the boot as soon as I found out. But he had the nerve to ask why if I forgave my father, I couldn't forgive him. I never forgave my father. I just put his bad behaviour aside.

My two brothers arrive while I am visiting Mum. I switch the kettle on.

"Good! Now I have all of you together, I have something to say," Mum says.

My younger brother cut in. "If it is about your will, I just want to say that I want the signed Tretchikoff hanging in your bedroom."

My older brother butts in too. “Well, then I want the…” He doesn’t finish his sentence as Mum shouts angrily, “Shut up everyone!”

Her cheeks have turned red. “All you ever think of are material things,” she says. “This is not a time to be frivolous.”

We are taken aback. This is out of character since Mum has always indulged us. “There’s something your father asked me to tell you because he did not know how to do it himself.”

“It’s come back. He’s very ill,” Mum said. I freeze for a minute. “What? His cancer came back and he’s going to have chemotherapy again?” Dad had colon cancer many years ago. The treatment nearly killed him, but it got rid of cancer and gave him a new lease on life.

This time the cancer has spread to his vital organs. “We just have to be strong,” Mum says.

“How long?” my brother asks.

“Maybe months.”

My eldest brother punches his fist into the table. Mum holds me and my younger brother. “Sumaya is here to care for him. She’s a trained hospice nurse,” Mum says. “I asked her to come over.”

These words feel like a deep knife stab in my heart.

“No! he’s my father. I’ll take care of him.”

I run out of the house, into the street, and keep on running.

Brother Leader

None of us had been there before. It was like going through an iron curtain in Africa. I had a headscarf in my handbag in case I needed it. We disembarked from the Safair Cargo plane with a mix of trepidation and excitement.

It was four year after democracy in South Africa and the African Connection Rally was travelling across the continent to promote digital connectivity. Apart from the obvious lack of liberal values like freedom of expression and that a single dictatorship ruled the country more than three decades, we were given little information as to what to expect when we arrived in Libya.

To my surprise we were greeted by a sizeable group of open-armed people and music and dancing at the entrance to Tripoli. Musicians were blowing flute-like instruments called zokra, which sounded like the overpowering droning sound of bagpipes. Some were stringing the ouds with fiery fingers, and others were beating drums in North African rhythms.

As we drove through the streets, we noticed Gadaffi stared down from photographs on the walls. His curly-haired portrait was all over, looking like huge advertisements plastered on buildings. There were different configurations of his portrait everywhere like wallpaper. In the scorching African heat, men were sitting at tables in the streets smoking hookah pipes.

Despite talk that Gadaffi's efforts to liberate women, there were less than a handful of them when we briefly met a Libyan delegation. Journalists had handed in their passports and were told not photograph this building or that. It felt like we were in a dystopian world of cement and totalitarianism.

I asked the translator where all the women were, he said they were doing other jobs. He tried to explain that women were very involved in the leadership of the country. He pointed out that Brother Leader trusted women so much that he had only women body guards. These fifteen young women were called the Amazonian Guards and travelled with Gadaffi everywhere.

We waited at a government building because Gadaffi was scheduled to meet the South African delegation. Half an hour passed as we waited, and we asked what was going on. You have to wait was the standard answer. "Brother Leader might come or he might not come." That was our introduction to Libya where the leader's own people were either clueless or took us to be idiots. Gadaffi never came, probably never intended to come and did not care.

A Pair of Boots and a Bicycle

The tombstones stood in several neat rows in the hot earth. The cemetery was impeccably clean, ordered and silent. It was a scorching day in the North African harbour town of Tobruk where blood once soaked into parched soil.

Thoughts of World War II lingered as I walked in the humid air. I walked past arid graves the images of damaged bodies, bombs exploding and death echoing in my mind. I saw Zulu names, Xhosa names, Afrikaans names, Indian names, European names. Many were unnamed. There were about three hundred graves of South African men who fought in Tobruk. They were amongst the Commonwealth countries headed by Britain.

As my feet passed the sombre stone structures, the spectre of apartheid came back to me. History lessons at school focused on the story of the South Africa's involvement in World War 11 in the limited way that stories were told then. I never once heard the name Job Maseko. So much was unsaid that it bothered me.

I did not know until now that only white and coloured soldiers were allowed to carry guns during the war. I would never have learnt of Job Maseko had I not visited Tobruk because school history books left many blank spaces.

Job Maseko was one of the thousands of black South Africans who joined the war effort. He was a prisoner of war, held in the Italian camp. He was an ordinary worker from Springs, outside Johannesburg. With no training at all in making weapons, he somehow managed to make a home-made bomb and placed it in a German freight ship. When the bomb went off the ship when down immediately. It sank in Tobruk harbour. Job then escaped from the camp.

For his involvement in the war effort, he got a pair of boots and a bicycle, as did all the other black soldiers who were lucky enough to return home. White soldiers, on the other hand, were handsomely rewarded.

Obsession

The maid arrived an hour earlier that ominous icy morning. It just so happened that her boyfriend had slept over that night and her a lift, saving her a long bus ride to work. She opened the front door with deft silence. Everyone was still asleep. She tiptoed into the hallway where she hung up her coat and hat. A whiff of gas teased her nostrils. She tried to open the kitchen door, but it was jammed. Cloths were stuffed in the gaps between the door and the floorboards from inside the kitchen. Using her bony fingers, she managed to dislodge the cloths and pushed the door open. Nothing prepared her for the scene she was about to confront. The mistress was slumped with her head in the oven. The gas was on. She ran to the stove and switched it off. She used every muscle in her petite body to drag the mistress by her legs to the entrance hall. She opened the door. She felt the mistress's pulse and thanked God. Within minutes the ambulance arrived. The mistress was taken to the hospital. She survived.

It could have been a day when the fortuitous arrival of a maid had affected events. But sadly, it was wasn't. No one arrived in time to save the dying woman. Miriam was trying to write fiction and had created this fragment of a story after reading Sylvia Plath. Fantasy had swept her into what if scenarios. She could not bear a tragic ending.

As she paged through Plath's writings Miriam felt like she had entered the mind of a genius who painted and sang every word she wrote. If only she could get a few drops from Plath's ink in her pen. She watched YouTube recitals, interviews, and documentaries and learned that Plath's adult son, a scientist, killed himself and her daughter struggled with a form of yuppie flu, as debilitating as the depression Plath suffered from. She wondered if mental illness was genetic.

The doorbell rang. Her friend, Lara, the only one who felt free to pop in for a drink unannounced, walked in. Lara was an old school friend, a books editor at a weekend paper. She sunk into the reading chair and picked up the book of Plath's letters lying on the side table.

"I see you are going retro. Somewhat bleak, don't you think?" Lara says.

"I did find is sad – she was so gifted and ended her life so young. The way she poured her energy into her writing. Sometimes I wonder if such creativity is fuelled by a troubled state of mind?"

"What do you mean? That you have to depressed to produce great art?"

"Well, I was thinking of the others too –Ingrid Jonker, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Anne Sexton …"

“If you believe that Miriam, then you must believe that an intellectual gift comes with madness. Come on – that debate had been going on for years and there’s no conclusion. It’s like saying you have to be a drunken ass to create a masterpiece.”

I shrugged, changed the subject. “Anyway, how’s your writing coming along. Are you enjoying it Miriam?"

Miriam did not answer. She turned again to the topic of Sylvia Plath. “Did you know that Sylvia Plath took physics as a subject at university because she thought it was useful? She hated it but struggled and pushed herself so hard it made her ill.”

“You’re avoiding my question, Miriam. Is fiction going to be your new thing?”

“To be honest, Miriam, I feel like I am chewing on a celery stick when what I desire is a juicy strawberry. But then again, I’m not a quitter. Just wish there was more time to read and write.”

“And how are the kids doing?”

“Constantly busy. School is a pressure cooker, not like in our days. Endless homework and projects and everything is about competition, about career, rather than passion.”

“Are you going to push them to learn physics and robotics like everyone else is doing today, the techno revolution and all that?”

“No. It must be about passion or they will lose their minds.”

“I suppose reading Plath’s experience with physics was an eye-opener then.”

“It’s not easy,” I say. They’re going into a world where the arts, poetry, theatre and music are becoming devalued and that really worries me.”

Miriam why don’t you put Sylvia Plath to sleep and find the stories that are all around us now. Use your own voice, like she did. Dig inside.”

Incredible Nanda

The Valley of a Thousand Hills rolls up and down in different shades of green and brown with a line of black snaking around as the Umgeni River flows from its source in Durban.

Nanda was born on one of those hills. He howled when he was born. He was tinier than tiny and so fragile you thought he could break. His came into the world six weeks too early. Nanda's father believed his birth was a blessing, a gift from God.

Nanda grew slower than the other children who had spent a good nine months in their mothers' wombs. But he began catching up to those on the normal growth percentile. When he gained weight Nanda's wrinkled skin tightened, revealing his facial features. It was around this time when his father began looking at Nanda like he was a specimen of sorts, studying his face, his arms and his body to see if there was a mole, a birthmark or a smile - something familiar.

He saw no paternal resemblance in the child. Neither did he have any features resembling his siblings and his mother. Was Nanda legitimate, his father started to wonder. Was he the product of an affair – conceived when someone else had taken his place in the bed while he was at work? He was a migrant worker and was away from home for long periods of time. Those thoughts were driving him crazy. He accused his wife of cheating and lashed out at her. She said it was a figment of his overactive imagination. He shouted and stormed out of the house.

Nanda must have been about a year and a half when his father changed his mind – the child was not a gift from God, but a thorn from a traitor. While the storm was going on around him, Nanda remained unaffected, crawling and putting things in his mouth that he shouldn't. The family did not have much, but at least they were not starving. His father came and went, and the acrimony between the parents continued until one day his father lost his sanity.

Nanda's mother was preparing a bath for him when his father arrived unexpectedly. The boiling water had been poured into the plastic bath. Nanda was in his mother's arms when his father angrily grabbed him from her an was seconds away from dumping him into scalding water. His mother wrestled him back and ran out of the house shouting for help. Nanda began bawling.

The family thought the father would cool off and return as he ordinarily did after arguments. But he never did. Gusts of wind were blowing when a few men from the nearest town arrived the next day. They said they needed someone to identify the body of a man who jumped off a tall building.

Antiquity

She swung open the door of her red mini. Both her feet touch the pavement simultaneously. She steps into the mid-morning sun and sashays into Rick's Antiques.

Amin is seated on a barstool, managing the till at the coffee shop opposite Rick's.

Who is this woman with a beehive on her head, wearing a short crimplene dress? Who is this goddess on dainty heels? She is not a glossy magazine pretty. She is like a work of art.

"She's more double expresso than a latte," he tells Leela, the waitress. She laughs. "You're wasting your time Amin. She could be your grandmother." Amin is eighteen and desperately wants to overcome his disastrous sexual encounters.

The first time he tried to have sex it was with a student in his matric year. Every time he walked past her, his legs wobbled. When he did get to date her, he believed he had found love. A few dates later, she invited him to her house when her parents were away.

In her bedroom, she opened her shirt buttons and began kissing him. He touched her breasts and felt like he was in heaven. She moaned and unzipped his pants. She lay over his erection. He began fumbling, not knowing what to do. His stiff penis shrivelled. He pushed her away, zipped his pants and left with his stomach in knots. It happened again when he fell for another student too.

"Look, Leela, girls my age, scare me. I don't know what it is, but everything happens so fast, I just can't do it." Leela is a mother of two boys aged five and seven. She feels empathy for him, but the thought of a teenager, and a woman who could be in her fifties – that makes her cringe.

Amin wonders why the woman in the shop is taking so long. The average time that a customer spends at Rick's vary from ten minutes to twenty minutes. Amin knows this. He is a keen watcher of village life. After customers have had enough of poring over dead people's things, they usually stop off at the coffee shop.

He begs Leela to stand in at the till for him. He crosses the street. He stares at the red mini. He looks through the windows. He takes note of the number plate. Then he disappears inside Rick's Antiques. He walks through dust and history to find his raspberry lips woman. He describes the woman to the temporary shop assistant who looks like he could be someone's grandfather. She could be in any one of the nooks and crannies. "I don't recall anyone with that description."

Leela watches from the till across the road. She feels like getting Amin a book about sex and anxiety. She listened to his outpourings of failed encounters for months and felt helpless, except to advise him relationships don't happen as they do in the movies.

Leela phones Amin to come back. She must have an honest chat and get him the book and suggest he speaks to a psychologist.

Amin says he will be there in a few minutes, he's been helping someone in the shop who had to return his costumes. He walks out ten minutes later, together with a man at his side, and he's looking quite happy. He tells Leela he has found his calling. He wants to be a drag queen.

Patient Mr Floppy

The guy with a floppy like mop appeared everywhere she went, from Bob's Bar to Michael Kerr's parties to Elaine's. Places where bodies brushed against one another in the few grey areas where colour or creed did not matter.

Rania thought he was a big boozer and talked too much though she had never had a single conversation with him. It was just an impression she had. She had never found him attractive. He was just another face in the crowd and he was not her type at all. Not that he noticed her, either.

He always wore suits that hung over his shoulders like they needed to be taken in. She knew about oversized clothing, since her mother had bought nothing but clothes that were two sizes bigger until she was twelve years old. Surely he could do better. She saw him debating on television sometimes, and she agreed with his views, but he had no sense of brevity. Always overstating the point.

He was a lawyer and very active on issues like press freedom and having an independent broadcaster. He was helping musicians with copyright issues and so forth. Still, she saw him as one of those privileged liberals who do things to ease their conscience. Rania was a Marxist then, and all for the working-class hero.

She read in a newspaper that the floppy hair guy's father was a big shot and his mother a fashionista and model who graced the pages of glossy magazines. He must be a silver spoon kid, probably a brat, as many of the entitled ones are, she thought.

He visited her upstairs neighbour one evening with his short-haired blonde girlfriend when she was having coffee there. They drank and overstayed their welcome. She hated people who overstayed like they had nothing else going on in their lives. There was something about him that bothered her. Probably his sense of over-confidence or the way he dominated the conversation.

One day, Rania was rushing to the office because a big mining magnate – who was later killed – threatened to sue over a story that she had written. It was raining and her car hit a pothole, spun out of control and crashed onto the pavement. Her one eyeglass cracked. She was in a terrible state when she went to the next door neighbour.

"Thank goodness you're not hurt. Why didn't you call? What about the car?" The neighbour hugged her and poured her a stiff whiskey. As they were chatting, the bathroom door opened and there he emerged - Mr Floppy Hair.

The neighbour was about to introduce him when he said, "We are sort of acquainted."

“Rania’s just had an accident,” the neighbour said, “and her glasses have cracked.”

“Sello tape helps,” he said.

Rania lay down on the couch hoping he would leave. But he stayed. He said he read her articles and referred to some of them. He gave her a number for a physiotherapist. “You could have whiplash,” he said. And then out of the blue, he asked for her telephone number. Whether it was the whisky combined with paracetamol that possessed her, she didn’t know, but Rania obliged.

He phoned the next day and asked if she was okay. He invited her to go out to dinner on Saturday. She was on deadline when he called and unthinkingly said yes to fob him off. But on Saturday morning she realised it was a mistake –she had no desire to go out with him – he really was not her type. She found some lame excuse, apologised and cancelled.

The next week there was another message from Mr Floppy Hair. She did not hesitate to call him back because she had a legitimate excuse to say she was busy. Some months ago she had applied for a year-long US journalism fellowship and had just got news that she had accepted. That meant renting out her flat, visiting her mother, getting her papers sorted out and lots of things to do. There was no time to see him. She would be leaving in a few weeks. He congratulated her and that was the end of that.

When she returned from the US, the most horrendous thing happened to Rania’s family and turned her life upside down. All of her family in their farmhouse were killed by a warlord in a brutal attack, except for one who had escaped with wounds only. Just as her star was rising, Rania had to put life on hold, move to a safe flat and live undercover.

She became an insomniac and her mind shut out so many things she assumed about life and the world. Most evening she stared at the TV – not really interested until Mr Floppy’s image flashed. He was being interviewed about regulations and radio licences. He was still wearing oversized suits and his hair was floppier and hanging over his eyes. For some reason she began laughing.

Six months later when it was safe for her to get out again, she began working. But she was a changed person. One day a friend from work dragged her to a party in Brixton. It was the first party since her life had turned upside down. As the entered the venue there he was –standing at the bar, this man who was not her type. Funnily enough, he had lost the mop, was looking healthier and for a change was dressed in clothes that fit him.

He had heard about her tragedy, came over and said how sorry he was about what had happened. He spoke with real empathy, like he understood what she was going through. She did not stay long at the party, but as she was leaving he reminded her that she owed him dinner, since she had cancelled on him two years ago. “But no pressure. Can I call you?”

The following week he fetched her in his red Toyota Corolla, with that unnecessary piece of metal contraption that looked like wings on the boot. His car was messy. There was an ashtray on the floor. Thank goodness for the perfume and aftershave. The car smelled of stale cigarettes stubs. He could have cleaned his car, she thought.

To his credit though, he chose a great restaurant –Super Bon Bon in Auckland Park, run by an amazing food writer and chef who made unpretentious delicious meals. They drank raki and he talked a lot, as usual. He told her about his mother who ran a video shop and that his parents were divorced. She felt stupid because she had mistakenly thought his mother was a model. That was his stepmother, he said.

He told her he was divorced. He told her about his family. He told her about his position on the Palestinian issue and where he stood politically. He told her he was an Arsenal fan. As she listened she wondered about all this information being given out, even before the starters arrived. It felt a bit like he was applying for a job, like he was selling himself.

Rania did not know whether this was a date or what, but she saw a side of him that changed the perception of him she had once held. He had a great sense of humour and had her in stitches at times. He came across as caring, funny and interesting. The evening turned out to be unexpectedly delightful.

A friendship began developing between them, she could see this was becoming something more though, and that scared her. She did stupid things like invite him to a friend's party and then uninvite him. He felt insulted.

"No one had ever uninvited me for anything before. Do I embarrass you," he asked.

"No! "I'm just not sure – we come from different worlds and I am cautious about our worlds clashing."

He laughed. "You took that line from Seinfeld, didn't you?"

She laughed.

"Look I'm not sure. My emotions are all over the place," she said.

So, he backed off and they resorted to emailing each other. It became a regular thing and she looked forward to his messages and phone calls. An affection was brewing between them slowly. She invited him once to a concert by Susana Baca, a Peruvian artist. He had loved the CD playing in her car. It was during that concert that something happened. An incredible spark of desire took over her body and she let herself go.

Mix and Match

Every Saturday I looked forward to lunch with an old codger who had become like a father figure who adopted me as part of his family. He was not a traditional man, but in some ways he was stuck in old school mores.

So when I told him that I was going to bring someone for lunch, he said he knew something was going one.

“Now who is this Yiddisher boy you’re going to bring? You know about the apple falling not far from the tree. What’s his family name?” he asked. He was protective in a well-meaning way.

I had decided to introduce my man to family and friends since he kept on asking when he would meet them. And things were getting pretty serious between us. The table was set when we arrived and the usual crowd was seated. We took the two empty seats opposite the codger and two close friends – they were like the inquisitors. They asked all sorts of questions and after much digging, the old codger breathed a sigh of relief.

”I see you like Indian food. That's a good sign,” he said. My man had helped himself to seconds and could easily have polished off a third round, until I nudged him. He had never eaten *Khuri kitchree*, masala fish and *aloo* before. It was the regular Saturday meal. Over the next few weeks my man had become a much-loved part of the family.

Shiksa in Camps Bay

When the plane landed at Cape Town Airport, I felt like I could do with a tranquiliser. I had the stereotypical vision of meeting my Jewish boyfriend's mother and family. It wasn't that I was a shiksa, but even worse – I was a brown one.

It's not that they had a problem with it – they were liberals after all – but my nerves were still in overdrive. I thought only his mother and siblings would be at an intimate dinner, but it turned out that his entire family was there. His father, stepmother, step-siblings, and his grandfather too.

I was a bit freaked out because his grandfather was once a chairman of the Orthodox Garden Synagogue. My experience at having been a journalist attending an Orthodox shul years ago, when Iraq had launched scud missiles into Israel, was one the one most unpleasant experiences. They treated me like I was a terrorist and stood behind me holding guns. In protest I didn't report on the discussion in the synagogue that evening.

When we arrived at the house in Camps Bay they were all waiting at the door. I felt exposed as I walked up the stairs into the dining room. But everyone was warm and laid back and I began to relax. I was relieved that no one brought up the Palestinian issue at the dinner table, because that would have got me started on a prickly path of discussion.

When the main course arrived, I realised this was no ordinary 'in the box' Jewish family. They were definitely 'out of the box' like Muslims who drank alcohol. The lobsters were laid on a huge platter and there were prawns too. This was the first Jewish family that I came across who devoured crustaceans.

He whispered to me that dessert was going to be floating islands. What the hell is that? I asked. My mother makes it only on very special occasions, he said.

It looked like meringues floating in what I learned later was crème anglaise.

After dinner we sat outside. The grandfather, who needed help walking, put his arm on mine and sat next to me. He held my hand throughout. I was not sure whether he thought that this brown girl was a Yemenite Jew. Or maybe he thought it was a relief that his grandson had fallen in love again after his divorce yonks ago.

No Children Allowed

“What's brought this on? No one’s ever asked me this before” you said.

You were surprised when I raised the subject. I just want to know so that we call it quits now instead of investing more love in something that holds no promise.

If you have *any* paternal desire then I'm not the one for you. I had been anxious about this baby thing ever since our best friend fell pregnant. You said you had never thought about it. I said I needed to know soon.

One evening you came home and said you had thought about it. You said it was me you wanted to grow old with, no one else. You said you had told your mother we would not be having children and she said you would be neurotic with children anyway.

We bought a house for two. Our careers were intense and we each travelled a lot for work, independently of each other. I took comfort in knowing that sex was safe on the contraceptive pill. My life was full and work satisfying.

I’m not sure when I decided to be childless. But I recall first reading a book when I worked at a newspaper in Seattle. One of the journalists passed it on to me. It was called *Pride and Joy: The lives and Passions of Women Without Children* by Terri Casey. It was a collection of real-life stories. I could see myself in so many of those women. My life was like theirs, and I did not want it to change.

But there were other reasons too. I saw how my friends lost themselves in parenthood when they had children. Maybe a large measure of selfishness contributed to it too. Maybe I was scared of responsibility. Maybe I feared that I was not cut out for motherhood. Then there’s another reason that a therapist pointed out. That when one suffers from trauma, disappointment and deep loss, that fear and loss of confidence is heightened. Whatever the reason was, I cannot tell for sure. Maybe it was all of the above.

You said you were fine with my choice. I felt relieved that we had settled on our twosome future. We bought a bought a home for two.

The Dot

The regular doctor said I was safe, I could bin the blue swirl of tablets marked Monday to Sunday. Like snails in a shell we lived, we fucked, we ate. Inside my body a silent war waged.

Hormones squabbled for dominance while outside the jacaranda petals bloomed. I munched plates full of crispy chicken and chips and carbs galore. My appetite had ballooned, probably because of the Vitamin B tablets I was taking.

I went to the gynaecologist for a routine pap smear and sonar to monitor a small fibroid I had. The doctor checked my breasts for lumps first. All fine. Then he did the sonar and said the fibroid had not grown.

Nothing to worry about that he said as he moved the probe over my jelly-smeared tummy and then he paused. Wait a minute, he said. I need you to do a urine test. The little dot that I thought was a fibroid turned out to be a humanoid – growing inside me unbeknown.

It can't be, I told the gynaecologist since the previous check up with another doctor showed it was impossible. Well, just as well you dumped that doctor and came to me, he said. I looked at the dot in awe, yet still unsure. The doctor asked, do you want to keep it? I need to think about it. I said. I went home and picked up a book off my bookshelf that was being circulating amongst my friends. It was about life after forty.

Black Fizz

Knit, purl, knit, purl, that's what the doula said she should do to keep her mind off any worries. She tried that and knew, after only managing to tie the wool into knots, that this was not for her. She did some breathing exercises. But everything she learned about switching off, about letting the breath take the stress, did not work. Her life was about adrenaline and at the best of times, she found it hard to keep calm. The pains began. The first few were okay and then it became excruciating. The worst pains ever. She was writhing and screaming, get the doula here right now. It's coming, she screamed. The contractions came and went and got closer and closer. The doula placed her contraptions on the table. She wiped sweat off her forehead. Her husband kept on saying it's going to be okay. He was repeating it. It will be okay, breathe. He had come to the birth classes and was trying his best. But she just wanted him to shut up and hold her hand tight so that she could use it as a stress ball. Nearly there, the doula said, push, push, nearly there. She was doing all the pushing she could as she screamed. The head was jutting out, with a fizz of black. I fucking hate you, she screamed. He could not tell whether she hated the doula, the child that wants to come into the world, or him. Or that her vagina was refusing to inflate like a balloon. One more time, one more time. Then she slipped out, with the most gorgeous black fizz crowning her head.

The Dog

I am walking my Jack Russell in the new neighbourhood. It is before sunrise. The tarmac is spotless. The street is silent. No early risers here, I suspect. Not a single jogger in sight. Not a single car revving. I am new here. Arrived two days ago. I am hoping to bump into people in this suburb of jacaranda trees and towering walls. A private security vehicle drives past me. Then it comes back. It must have driven around the block. It is moving at the pace of training. I feel my nerves tighten because it is following me. Must be my fucking brown skin of suspicion. We are not dog-loving people, as the stereotype goes. I turn around and the vehicle stops. I look at the two men in their seats. One opens the window. Is that your dog? I say yes, this is my Otto. Where's your bag, he says. What bag? The plastic one to pick up dog shit.

The Parks

The tarmac turns purple in summer. Trumpet-shaped petals fall onto your head as you walk past walls that are higher than a person on stilts. Electric fences line the outer perimeter. Dogs bark. Pavements smell of beautification. This is the northern suburbs of Johannesburg where private is *the* buzz word. Private schooling, private security, private medical aid and private trainers. Membership drives life in this world of privilege. We are the kind of people who scorned at the sterility of it all. But now we are here, and we feel like misfits.

We move to this green belt called The Parks after years of living in flats. It was a different kind of life there though. I could borrow a bottle of red from anyone in my small building if my rack was empty. We lived in cosmopolitan harmony then, a mixed bag of creatives and suits who gathered in the courtyard for multi-cultural celebrations. I lean on that treasured memory as I struggle to blend into this sheltered landscape where brown is so rare that it invites a stare. There are three churches in this suburb. All within a three-kilometre radius. On the border sits an Orthodox synagogue.

The pealing church bells are simply enchanting. But I never hear the call to prayer over the speakers, as in my home town. I understand there is a mosque in the adjoining suburb. The loudspeakers were stopped because people complained. Silenced because the call to prayer was considered noise. So, they resorted to using beepers and later cell phones.

These suburbs were designed for a single hue. All part of the Verwoerd's four nations strategy. The same for high-density places like Hillbrow and Yeoville, with their high rise apartments. Young activists managed to smuggle their way in there. All it took was a white signature and a lie to spread inter-racial living, all at one's own risk. There were evictions from time to time. There were a few scars from that. But the infiltration of colour was unstoppable.

Here in the suburbs, it seems like time has stood still. There has been no hint here that a rainbow would come soon. It is ten years since freedom came, but in my new street, I see people staring at me as they drive past. Or maybe they weren't staring, but still, I feel their eyes on my face.

A few people walk past the truck while our furniture is being offloaded. They peek at us and carry on walking and minding their own business. By evening the truck leaves empty. I am deeply disappointed that no one knocked on the door with cake or flowers or wine to welcome us, the new neighbours. It was a tradition wherever we lived previously. Maybe that was just a last century thing.

I can see our house transforming into a home as the furniture is set in place. Books on bookshelves. Spices on the rack. Beds covered with white linen and odds and sods on the shelves adding to the comfortable clutter of living. We have a small triangular dunking pool.

A fish pond full of orange, yellow and silvery tails wiggling. I love how things are shaping up.

The street lights work. The area is suitably quiet. Private security keeps a close watch. The suburb has a delicate charm. We have everything that we need. So why do I feel a strange kind of alienation, like the absence of warmth in a cold room?

I begin complaining to Monty, my partner, that this is not the kind of place I would like to raise a child. There's a kind of isolation that is hard to explain. Suffice to say that in the place where I grew up one did not have to wait for a Red Cross emergency to get people out in the streets. The concept of 'it takes a village' was normal practice. Here it seems nuclear families are taking privacy a step too far into the desert. Or it is this just a cultural thing?

Maybe this is normal suburban life where friends do not just drop in. Maybe I am projecting my communal experiences as the only normal way of living. I don't know. But something about living here for nearly a month and not knowing anyone in the street unsettles me. We don't even know who lives right next door to us, but we hear their voices behind the wall every day.

I phone a friend who also moved to the northern suburbs and ask how she is doing. I love my house and a small garden. Still, have to get some furniture, she says. Have you met your neighbours? No! Does that not bother you? It's different here, people keep to themselves, she says with a tone of acceptance. I suppose she was raised in these kinds of suburbs, so it probably feels like going back home.

We moved here for a myriad of reasons but mostly because we and had to come to terms with age passing and that it was time that we lived like grownups. One gets older, one climbs the career ladder, social status changes, upward mobility follows and families settle down. A sort of predictability governs human behaviour. We sucked it all up. We could afford to upscale and found a suburb close to work. We were happy when we got the bond from the bank and were ready to embrace the next stage of life.

So why am I be complaining about my privilege? Is it just the electric fences and high walls? Is it a case of the discomfort of new shoes? The more I think about this the more troubled I feel. I cannot help thinking that our historical baggage has something to do with the niggling thoughts. That our spatial separation – divided along colour lines is so entrenched that it has fucked up our minds. That the cultural diversity that we should be enjoying with the onset of democracy feels like it is light years away. We remain in four nations.

I moved from one nation and smuggled into another one where colours blended. Got evicted and smuggled in again, and so it went. I did not have to sneak into this suburb. Freedom gave me the latitude to live anywhere I chose. But I feel like I am in a one-nation suburb again. A privileged person ought not to complain about little things. Am I just being petty?

My partner Monty, is an uncomplicated man who seems to be adaptable to any situation. He came from a mix-it relationship so he has light skin tone, straight hair and an English name that allowed him privileges and flexibility back in apartheid days. Unless someone looked at his identity card. Monty says he understands how I feel. But does he really, because I haven't heard a peep of disquiet from him.

On a Tuesday evening, after coming home late after putting the magazine that I sub-edit to bed that I tell Monty that I am going to do something to change the status quo. What are you talking about he asks. I'm going to reach out to them, it say. I tell him that all we need is a fold-up trestle table, some wine glasses, an urn and cups and saucers. Like in the days when we were young activists on a campaign to sign up members.

I make the invitations that evening, print copies and slip them into every post box the next morning. On Saturday afternoon we put the trestle table on the tarmac outside our house. Fortunately, this is a quiet street and we are situated towards the end of a cul-de-sac so that traffic is not a problem. But by two-thirty there was not a single person in sight.

Monty looks at the invitation for the first time. It read: We are new in the suburb and would love to introduce ourselves to our neighbours. Please join us for tea/drinks.

It had our names, address and telephone numbers. Look it was short notice. I'm sure someone will come, Monty says. Small comfort, I think as I see time ticking away. I begin to feel like an ass. Twenty minutes have passed and still no one has come by.

I pour myself a glass of wine and sit in the fold-up chair that we bought from Makro. Monty jokes that perhaps we should get a blaring boom blaster to get people rushing out to see where the noise is coming from, so they can get the cops here.

We hear a garage door screech open and another and another. Fifteen people come. I would have been happy with five. It turned out that most of them are meeting one other in this small cul-de-sac for the first time.

We expended this to last an hour, or at most two. Now hours later the sun's peachy glow is disappearing. I nudge Monty to pack up. I take the list of phone numbers go inside.

Life in Three Days

Monday: The phone rings on a clammy Johannesburg morning. Nina is on the fifth floor of a private hospital, comforting her baby lying on her sickbed. The paediatrician feeds the baby paracetamol in a dropper. Her temperature is dangerously high. A wet towel is placed over the baby's body as she screams. Nina's phone rings. She ignores it. She does not check the voice message. Minutes later the phone rings again. A panicky voice screeches down the line. "Where are you, Nina? The cover story needs to go to subs."

Nina says she'll be there shortly. She apologises to the doctor and says she has to keep the phone on. It rings again. "What the fuck do you expect me to do. My baby is very ill. I'll be there as soon as I can," she switches off the phone and shoves it in her bag. The doctor says the baby has streptococcus virus and she is worried that a bacterial infection has also invaded her little body. Nina wraps her crying baby in her blanket and holds her tight. She straps her in the car seat and drives home in haste. She scribbles instructions for medications, kisses the baby and leaves her with the nanny. She speeds to the office.

Nina knows the cover story is not up to standard. She needed more time slice it, shape it, to fact check, spell check and toy around with endings. She had not factored in an emergency that robbed her of hours. She is panicking. Her eyes are glued to the computer but her mind is elsewhere. The secretary taps her on the shoulder. The nanny is on the other line. "I just want to make sure it is 5ml for the antibiotics," the nanny says. The baby's temperature was stabilised, but it is rising again. Nina ends the call and watches a colleague walking outside to smoke. Damn! I should never have given up, she thinks. She takes deep breaths, grabs her second cup of coffee and asks her colleague to help with fact-checking.

By nine that evening the proof pages come out. Nina goes through them quickly. She spots errors. There are just too many of them today. It's all a bit rushed, she apologises to the sub-editor. A few things in the piece bother her, but it is too late to do anything about fixing the story now. She signs off on the final pages and drives home. The baby is asleep in the cot. The nanny is snoring in the spare bed. The father is out of town on a work trip. She pours herself a gin and tonic, switches on the TV and catches up on international news. The baby recovers days later and all is well.

Tuesday: Nina drives the child and the nanny to Mums and Tots group where middle-class mothers go with their babies to bond together over music, fun and games. She drops the two of them at the gate and rushes to work to make the morning conference. An hour later, she fetches the baby and the nanny and drops them off at home. She kisses the baby, who by then is asleep in the car seat. At the Arcadia Building in Pretoria, sixty kilometres from Johannesburg, she waits for the Minister of Public Enterprises to arrive. He is running late, as he often is. He finally arrives and trots out the same story that he does year after year, that the national airline is in the throes of a turnaround. The new CEO is cutting costs, negotiating a new fleet and things look bright. Hogwash! Nina thinks as she gets back into her car and

drives back to Johannesburg. After an early dinner of pizza, she transcribes the interview and tries to find an angle for the story. She pours herself a gin and tonic and begins writing. The child's father phones from Heathrow Airport saying he'll be boarding soon.

Nina wishes she could just lie in bed reading. She often dreams of a loft somewhere with a view of canopies of trees, Frida Kahlo paintings on the walls and the smell of freshly sanded wooden floors. A place where she could read and write. Her older child, the teenager interrupts her – she wants to talk about moving schools. The desperation to move school surfaces again and again. There are long explanations or excuses one might say. There is pattern to teenager behaviour, if one parent does not agree, it is easy to get the other to soft peddle. Nina tells her to wait until her father get back. She rages at her. "If I turn into a psychopath, it will be because of you," she storms into her room.

Nina retreats to the bathroom and tries to hold her sobs in. The teen comes running after her. "I am so sorry Mom. I never meant to say that. You know I'm getting my periods again this week." There's no use jotting danger zone in the calendar because the periods are a fairly new disruptor. She pours herself a gin and tonic and tries deep breathing.

Wednesday: After a long day of listening to boring speeches and lies at the African Airlines Association Conference in Pretoria, Nina gets home as the skyline turns orange. She bathes and feeds the baby and sings her to sleep. The father is out of town again. She is exhausted. It's pizza again. She pours a gin and tonic. She picks up a back copy of *Granta* from the pile of magazines scattered in the basket and nestles in the couch. She looks at the cover that has a headline: Parents, they fuck you up. Is this coincidental or was something else at play when she randomly picked up this title from the basket? She laughs. But it's no laughing matter as she flips the pages. The stories are about the consequences of failed parenting.

She thinks she could be one of those. What constitutes a bad parent? Shouting, beating, insulting, swearing. She is guilting of swearing – the word fuck is part of her vocabulary. Sometimes she shouts. What about outsourcing parenting? What about never being present when needed? The phone rings. It's the baby father phoning to tell her he'll be late. Nina remembers how those mothers look at her whenever she fetches her baby and nanny from Mums and Tots. All the babies go with their mothers. Hers is the only one with the nanny. Is it a case of pure economics that she rushed back to work, or ambition? Nina wonders about this. She continues reading narratives on murder, insanity and emotional torture. She wonders, am I one of the characters – the parent who fucks up a child? Did my parents fuck me up and the cycle of parental fucking up is set to continue? What about the father's parents. The thought bothers her so much she tops up her glass.

The Stepford Wife

You are not alone. This a modern-day phenomenon that afflicts many new mothers.

He checks her blood pressure. It is slightly elevated, but nothing to worry about. He opens his doctor's handbook and flips through the pages. After a minute or so he puts on his gold-rimmed reading glasses. It appears he has found a solution. He writes a script and say it will take a few weeks to kick in.

She drives to the first pharmacy, on the way to work. It looks like a supermarket, with aisles of merchandise: there are shoes, washing power and tons of makeup occupying more floor space than the dispensary. There is a long queue. Counter five flashes on the screen. A grey-haired pharmacist with a salt and pepper moustache is standing in front of a computer. She hands him the script.

"Are you familiar with this medication. Any reviews from customers?" she asks him.

He says, "Sure. It is one of the more popular ones."

He walks to the shelves in the back and returns with a small rectangular box. "My daughter has been on it for a year. Not many side effects. It has stabilised her."

This extra information makes her smile.

Later at work she looks inside the box: there are two slabs covered in plastic bubbles with a promise yet to be revealed. She tells her editor that she is pissed off about working fifteen hours a day, and she is losing her mind. The woman editor says it will pass.

In the evening she takes the first pill and hopes that in a few weeks she will be smiling tulips. Until now she had relied on gin and tonic and wine to take away the blues. But she replaced wine with ginger tea, while rooibos tea with a slice of lemon took over from gin. She tries to bin the coffee but her hands wouldn't let it go.

As she edged into the fourth week, she felt something that could best be described as a sort of lagging of the synapses.

It must have been around the sixth week when she began feeling the flatness of perfection. As though she had become the ideal daughter that her mother had hoped for, the trophy mommy to her young children and the lovable one in the household. Just as the pharmacist had described his daughter, she too was "stabilised".

Gone were the complaints about being the only one dirtying her hands in the kitchen. She even picked up after the pigs who lived in her house without a murmur. She stopped saying fuck this, I'm not your servant. She became what one would call nice. Not interesting, not

jovial – just nice. As she popped her daily pill, she felt like she was ingesting a screw that twisted and tightened her brain for efficiency, for productivity, for great service to all.

She had morphed into a doting darling, a Stepford wife and mother with ten arms. A workhorse who churned out page after page of written words and multi-tasked with ease. There was no doubt about it. Her investment in the monthly box of Cipra had lived up to its promise.

Like a robot she felt neither joy nor anger nor sadness. The words desire and sex held no meaning. Not that fucking was a blaze of orange flames after twenty years of coupling. Still, she had enjoyed the warmth and intimacy of bodies connecting. Now she might as well be an ice cube in the fridge. The term "stabilised" began annoying her. What exactly had the pharmacist meant by that? She had envisaged a mood that came with the onset of spring. Instead, her days felt like flat champagne.

Should she go back to the doctor, she wondered, as she pushed her trolley laded with groceries in the shopping mall, when she heard her name being called. It was a mother from her son's school at a book launch. "Look who has come out of the woodwork!" that mother exclaimed. There were several of them there latching onto wine glasses. "We haven't seen you in a while, where have you been?" They insisted she join them.

She wanted to say she was too busy at work, but accidentally the wrong words slipped out of her mouth. "I'm not myself. I've been taking Cipra and it has changed me," she blurted out. Before she could take it back, the flood gates had opened. "It's amazing. I can get so much more done thanks to Cipra," one mother said.

Another mother whose child was on the autism spectrum said Cipra was "a lifesaver". The head of the parent body said she was on Prozac. Every one of those mothers began singing the praises of their chemical fix. It worked like magic, as far as she understood.

Strangely, no one mentioned the downside of serotonin-based anti-depressants. Was it possible that they were experiencing only the sweetness without the sour aftertaste? Was her brain not responding to the medication as it should? Maybe she was on the wrong medication and should go back to the doctor. It was past midnight when she began making a list and ticking off boxes. Edginess has gone, irritability has gone, moodiness too. I deliver, I don't complain. That's good stuff. But what about those senses that make life splendid? Happiness, anger, joy, excitement, laughter, desire and enough sleep? All of that had disappeared when Cipra arrived.

Maybe none of that matters in this the new world were servitude is necessary above all else, she thought. She tossed and turned and wrestled with her thoughts. It was like playing a zero-sum game until she decided what to do. Over the next few weeks, she began tapering off the medication though she worried that she could go crazy. But she did not like the deadening of

some of her senses, the loss of creativity and the robotic feel of those pills that work like magic for some.

As she began ditching Cipra she looked out for alternatives. The first thing she looked at that would cost nothing because it was one of the perks of the medical aid that fleeced her every month. It was but a five-minute drive from her house and was a proven stress reliever. She went to check it out on a Thursday afternoon. As she stepped into the gym, she felt like turning around and leaving. It was a body-obsessed environment with people of all genders, sizes and hues sweating like factory workers on a tight production target. The place smelled of muscle and suffocating skin-hugging Lycra. The Lycra bods pranced like they owned the place.

After a short tour, she was about to leave when she saw the health café. It was the only thing in this large place full of sweaty bodies that she liked. She sat down on a comfortable sofa at the corner and ordered fresh apple and ginger juice. As she sipped, she wondered what else she could try. Maybe go to a proper psychiatrist – the guys trained in giving the correct medication. The gym was not her thing she decided. Until they arrived. Two unassuming brown women whizzed past her. Each had a water bottle and a towel.

They were dressed in loose tracksuits and wore the traditional hijab. Her eyes followed them. They looked like they were in the age of hot flushes too. They walked downstairs. They got onto the treadmill. They plugged in their headphones and set off. Their arms, legs and bodies moved like Caster Semenya training on a rainy day.

Then others arrived. They represented a side of the gym that she hadn’t seen before. People who didn’t give two hoots about their difference.

She got off her lazy bum and went to the nearest sports shop, bought some gear did what those women in the hijab did and discovered that sweat could turn into the smell of sweet perfume. And an icy shower on a sauna hot body felt like a tequila shot to the head.

Out of Focus

The door is closed because that is how I like it. He opens it and comes in looking for the stapler. I wanted to jot something down, but he's interrupted my train of thought. He shuffles around, finds the stapler and closes the door. I can't recall now what I was thinking. The cat meows and purrs around my leg. I stroke her. The child hollers because she cannot find the mayonnaise in the fridge. I go downstairs and find it behind the cheese. The doorbell rings. It is the meter reader. I cannot let him in without shutting the dog inside. The man reads the meter and leaves. I let the dog out again. I go back upstairs. The pool guys arrive. I go downstairs again. I take the dog inside again. I wait for pool guys to clean the muck floating on blue water. I let them out. I let the dog out and I go upstairs. The page is still blank.

Nimble Fingers

The mercury slid to levels demanding polo necks and a crackling fire. They huddled inside their fifty square meter home and turned the pages of the big *I Spy* book for an hour before boredom set in.

Then they dumped the entire toybox on the floor and played shop-shop for half an hour. They wanted to go outside and run around but dark clouds hung ominously low. Electronic devices would have nipped their restlessness but the damn transformer box had been struck by lightning yesterday. It could be days before the power was restored.

Let's play snakes and ladders, the sister said. No! How about playing monopoly? No! Let's make a house. No! The only thing that the boy could think of doing was cutting and tearing things. Their mother laid out papers and scissors. They drew and painted, cut and pasted, made a mess and began fighting. Their mother had to separate them.

When they were friends again the boy whispered into the girl's ear. She put on her naughty smile. They tiptoed into their parent's room while their father was having a whisky nap. The boy opened the cupboard and got out a white shirt and a black one.

Each took a shirt and dashed into the boy's bedroom. They snipped off the buttons and laughed when they were done. The sister cut the white shirt in two halves. The brother did the same with the black shirt. Let's remake the shirt and mix the colours the brother said.

The girl grabbed a reel of cotton and a pack of needles from her mother's sewing box. She had sharp eyes for threading. She sucked the tip of the cotton till it was pointy thin. She shoved it through the eye of the biggest needle. You can sew now, she ordered. Like this, she said waving her fingers in a weaving motion.

Clumsily, the boy, who was two years older than the girl, tacked wide loose stitches and created something that resembled a two-toned shirt without buttons. I'm a tailor, the boy shouted gleefully. You're not, the sister said. I did all the threading. And I showed you how to do it. They began arguing over taking the credit for the strange-looking garment when the needle accidentally pierced his finger. He began screaming.

The mother rushed into the room. She was used to rushing around like a single parent because the father slept a lot. She plastered the boy's finger before she lost her cool. They knew they would be in trouble when their father looked for his shirts. They said they would never do it again. But as much as they promised, they could not stop doing what they started on that freezing winter day.

Clothing was stolen from cupboards and destroyed several times. Many drops of blood were shed. The mother's bottle of blue pills emptied faster than ever as the madness continued. They were unstoppable, no matter what the punishment was.

Those were hellish days, the mother remembered. It aged her by more than ten years. But now she feels young again, sitting in the VIP seats in the front row. The lights come on, the music begins and the models strut their slinky bodies on the ramp at the Johannesburg Fashion Show. Her eyes well up.

The Insanity of News

A misguided blink, a puff of a cigarette and a speeding car is all it takes to run him over. Blame it on carelessness, distracted eyes, not holding tight enough to his tiny hand. He could die anytime. Then there will be no child and no one to extend the gene pool. The others died of natural causes, of old age. But little Nono – his time on earth is only beginning when the world goes mad. There are mean bastards everywhere. He has to be protected from lunatics, kidnappers, rapists, murderers and paedophiles. He could die of incurable diseases, or he could be hit by a hockey ball on his head that would damage his brain. A lightning strike. Or a roof could fall on his head while walking on a pavement. Those thoughts are real, the mother says. They surface whenever Nono is out with a relative, a friend or his father. Something's are beyond her control, she knows. But she lives with impending loss. She spends most of her time reading daily and weekly newspapers, even the community ones. She follows local and international news on TV and when driving she listens to news and talk shows.

Skin

She woke up as the plane headed towards the runway. She yawned with a hiss and said "Foefie, smells like rotten eggs." At the top of her voice she said accusingly: "You farted, mum." I had to explain it was the smell of Mumbai.

"Now be patient when we get out, there will be long queues," I tell her. She would be turning two digits this year and we had decided to visit the land of her maternal ancestors. It was my first time in this massive place, with people a sea of resemblance to me, with black hair and shades of brown – dark, light, caramel, cinnamon and cocoa. They looked like they could be family but that was as far as our common identity ended.

There was nothing subtle about India. The full gambit of senses and emotions – smells of spices, bright colours, millions of gods, temples and mosques, hooting cars, crowded streets, voices in different languages and accents, music and singing and dancing – hits one at the same time. Men on bicycles were delivering lunch in tiffin containers to office employers. Cows walked in the streets and vehicles drove around them.

We visited palaces where maharajahs lived in opulence. Whenever my daughter saw the name Singh at the palaces, she asked, "Mum are they our family, they look like the old pictures you have." I had to break it to her that she had no semblance of royal blood. Her ancestors came to South Africa as indentured labourers, or at best farm managers. They probably came from a very poor village. I never knew any of them because they died before I was born. "But that man looks like great grandfather Cassi – he has the same moustache," she insisted. I decided to let her dabble in this royal fantasy.

Parts of India blew me away – the magnificence, creativity, cultural and culinary feast on display were like none other I have experienced in all my ears of travelling. Yet the glaring poverty and decay alongside excessive wealth left a sour taste. Another thing that felt more like a stab in stomach was a disturbing encounter at a traffic light.

One day a little girl who must have been four or five with matted hair, a dirty dress and sad blank eyes came to the window. Several others followed her. The taxi driver said they were pimped by gangs and drugged. The city was full of them, as Mira Nair had revealed in her gritty movie, *Salaam Bombay*. I tried to shield my daughter from seeing some of the painful things, but there is so much of it, that it was impossible.

Everywhere we went, people noticed how adorable and cute my daughter was. But they were drawn to her for another reason too, and that irked me to no end. So many people said she was "so fair, so beautiful". The colour of her skin – much lighter than mine because of her mixed genes – was reflective of the discriminatory notion of what constituted beauty there. Light skin colour carried more value and privileges. This was also apparent in some of

Bollywood films I watched decades ago. I doubt anyone would have taken notice of her if her skin had been dark in colour.

The discrimination around colour and caste were the worst things about India. The most downtrodden caste, the Harijans, or Dalits, were treated as untouchables. It was the stark contradictions in the country of my ancestors that made me feel how different my life was to theirs.

Neville Alexander and Charles Darwin's theories influenced my thinking about the issues of racial categorisation. For years many of us as activists used the term "so-called Indian" instead of "Indian". It was during the height of apartheid when the struggle for freedom was one – equality for all. It was black and white then. We rejected divisions of the based of ethnicity and colour. Yet here I was, feeling a sense of awe mixed with a measure of discomfort.

When I left India, I knew that I no longer had to tussle with issues of identity. It is not about definitions, it is about who I am - foremost South African who embraces pluralism and, additionally, a citizen of the world. My daughter would have been classified Coloured under apartheid – now she is just a South African loving the freedom of diversity.

The Horizon

Flying insects weave in and out of the swarm. A bird avoids it, just swoops and disappears past an overgrown bush. The only sound I hear is buzzing. I am on the veranda of a mountain lodge. Time does not exist here, or if it does, it clicks by in slow motion.

In the far distance, a fire burns in a line of orange. The flames look small from where I sit but I know enough about fires to tell they are probably a metre high. I pour myself a glass of red wine and watch. Two figures appear from the valley and walk up the hill towards the fire. They are bending down and doing something, I assume they are making fire breaks. A stallion in the paddock snorts. A waiter begins laying the tables for dinner. I ask him about the fire. Was it lightning? No, he says. “We burn the grass every few years for green shoots. The guys are watching it, don’t worry.”

Burning vegetation to spark new life was done during my grandfather’s time. I thought the practice was outdated since we have so much new information about the things we do that hurt the planet. The fire emits a grey of pollution.

I hear a cough. She appears at my side sipping a fizzy drink. She is eleven. I put my arms around her. We say nothing to each other. She looks ahead too. I hope she will grow up to appreciate the earth, explore its hidden beauty and protect it.

I want to tell her so much about living in the present because life is so fragile. I want to tell her to slurp every bit of nature before Instagram and screen addiction sets in. I want to tell her everything I wished my mother said to me. Don’t be afraid to climb mountains. You might get hurt, you might break a bone or two and you might end up on a stretcher but there is glory in waking up from a coma and seeing the world anew.

But my thoughts remain unsaid because nothing can beat this treasured moment of togetherness in dignified stillness. Our hearts beat. The insects scatter as the light begins to change.

She snuggles into me as the mountain air hits our bones. I open my jacket to envelope her. I ask, “What do you see?”

She says, “Over there I see cows grazing.”

“Where?”

“On the other side of the fire near that big tree.”

My eyes didn’t see what those growing eyes did.

Cutting the Cord

She gets dropped off at home at noon. She walks in with a hangdog look. She used to come home after school excited and smiling. Not anymore. Before I can ask, “How was your day my angel,” she says, “I don't feel like talking.”

She makes a swift exit and goes to her room. The sign goes up. Do not disturb! It seems to get worse by the day. Now there also is a wide blue sticky tape stuck on the floor outside her door. Anyone knocking on the door is expected to stand behind the tape. I don’t remember exactly when it all began but I think it was when Harry Potter came into her life.

He came with wizardry so wise, so clever, so addictive that she devoured sequel after sequel. The fat books crowded the overburdened bookshelf and some older books had to go. She lost herself in a world that became an obsession. After lights out, she read under the duvet with a torch. It was like she lived at Hogwarts and become Hermione Granger, brave and bold and a know-it-all. Her parents became last century bumkins to her. She shoved Julia Donaldson off the shelf. Oliver Jeffers too. The same with Dr Seuss and the other children’s books. Eva Ibbotson disappeared too. Cuddling in bed and reading together, the most treasure mother and child time – that too went into the grave.

Mother’s Day

Her dead skin cells turn flaky and fall in bits like rust dusted off. Her joints refuse to move. The bed appears to have sucked her into the mattress and clamped her in like a cold sheet of steel. There’s a heart beating. Eyes open and close. Sometimes the silence breaks when she clears her throat or hiccups come and go. The cat hops onto the bed and purrs and licks her body clean. It purrs its way to the girl’s head. She shoves it away. The feline cowers. It claws into the fleecy blanket touching the girl’s feet and curls into a bundle. Ants nibble on bread crusts on the bedside table. The mug is empty. She ate a slice of bread at midday and drank coffee. That was a good sign, the mother reported to the others. The door opens. The mother picks up the girl’s left hand from under the blanket, holds it and kisses it. The mother removes the bandage on the girl’s left wrist. The mother takes out a small tub from her apron pocket, opens it and empties out two pills into her palm. The mother puts her arms around the girl’s shoulder and helps her sit up. The mother gives her a glass of water and hands her the pills. The girl sips and slides back under the blanket. The mother leaves. SHUT THE DOOR!! the girl shouts. The mother obeys. The father was great at raising a princess. But when the princess turns into a monster, the father’s workload suddenly piles up and he has to stay at work till late midnight and leave again when the birds sing. The mother walks to the kitchen. Fuck this! I never had this in mind when she was an embryo.

Mending Cracks

They were forced to listen to each other. He hurled accusations at her and she folded her arms, gritted her teeth and sucked it up. When her turn came, she did the same to him and he squirmed in his seat.

This false sense of civility was not something they were accustomed to. After years of bickering and bitching over the tiniest of things they were in therapy trying to stitch together the strands of their fraying marriage.

They sat at opposite ends of a navy-blue couch in the room that held promise of healing. They spewed out problem after problem, and hoped for salvation. There was a lot of ground to cover in the forty years since they had said “I do” to each other.

The therapist was experienced in marriage fixing and separation management. She absorbed every word they said and took notes every time. If one tried to interrupt while the other was talking, she would intervene had her cork ready. Most of her clients sought help when either one was caught fucking someone else. But this was different. Neither had contemplated extra-marital sex, though they had not touched each other in months.

The therapist offered survival tips, behavioural problem-solving techniques and how to communicate without provocative language. Tone and pitch mattered. Body language mattered.

Week after week they left the therapist’s consulting room feeling like they were dirty linen that had been washed and ironed. But within days there was mud-slinging again. As hard as they tried to keep it together, they kept on stumbling.

The therapist was concerned about how this was playing itself out at home with their son. The son had been accidentally conceived months before their twin daughters had graduated from high school and left home.

At every session, the therapist asked about the boy. They said he was an ordinary teenager who spent a lot of time in his room.

She asked: “How does he react when you argue?”

“He does not take notice. He goes to his room and shuts the door.” they said They looked at each other, agreeing..

“In situations such as yours, children can get caught in the crossfire. Have you considered that your son might need someone to talk to? I could recommend a therapist who works with kids his age.”

That was not necessary, both parents insisted. The boy was happy. Quiet and independent. His grades were consistent. Like most teenagers, he suffered from acne and screen addiction. Nothing to worry about really.

The therapist was puzzled. Perhaps their son was especially resilient, able to fend of the thunderstorms under his roof. She tried to reassure herself. Nonetheless, she continued to try and look out for him in every session his parents attended.

She told the parents that some children tend to carry their troubles silently and it festers inside. “Do you speak to one another at the dinner table?” she asked.

“The boy prefers to eat in his room,” they said “We all eat at different times anyway.”

”Does he have a social life?” she asked them.

“He used to have lots of friends but lately he has begun focusing on his studies. He has become diligent,” the father smiled.

“He’s driven to succeed,” the mother said. “He might have an interest in technology.”

After six months of therapy, they were finding more order in the chaos of their lives together. The tumults had subsided. They thought they were making progress. They agreed they should go on a long holiday, just the two of them. Their son was nearly sixteen and capable of staying on his own. It would be their first holiday alone in twenty years. The therapist was proud of them, and herself too.

They went home that evening eager to plan their trip. They were debating Morocco or Turkey when the phone rang.

“Ignore it,” she said. “It must be someone selling insurance.”

It kept on ringing. When the father answered it a parent from their sons school was shouting on the other end.

The mother saw the look on the father's face and put the phone on speaker mode.

The phone calls continued. The school principal called. Their daughters called. Messages full of profanity loaded messages came through on WhatsApp.

The mother went into the bedroom and opened her laptop. She got up, slammed the door and began sobbing.

The father switched on his computer in the study. He began walking around the dining roomlike a mad man, holding his head in his hands, saying, “Why now, when there is hope.

Watching the Future

Their heads are buried in the menu when we arrive at Rustica, a casual eatery near the Zoo Lake in Johannesburg. An elegant couple, much older than us. The man is wearing a dinner jacket. The woman has a cashmere shawl wrapped around her shoulders. We are dressed so casually by comparison that I suddenly feel half-naked. The man looks at the wine list. He orders something without consulting the woman.

I take off my cotton scarf and denim jacket and sit down at the table adjacent to theirs. My husband makes himself comfortable opposite me. He begins talking about his eventful day. His work amid rooting out corruption gives him enough material for dinner time conversation. I listen to him and simultaneously keep an eye on their table.

Something about this couple piques my attention but I cannot say exactly what it is. Except they look familiar, as though I've seen them before. Perhaps they remind me of characters in a story I must have read. It seems rather stupid, but I cannot take my eyes off them.

She has her fingers around the ruby-coloured beads of her necklace. She rolls them at times. She also fiddles with the rock on her ring. The man's eyes stare blankly over her head. The waiter brings them two glasses of red wine. They both look up, smile and say thanks. As the waiter leaves, their lips settle into a downward curve again.

The waiter takes our order. We choose salad greens with avocado for the table. I order pasta Bolognese for mains and my husband orders fillet. I tell my husband about my writing and the challenge of meeting deadlines. He listens and says obvious things like you need to draft a schedule and just stick to it.

Their meals arrive. Her plate is laden with something that looks like chicken breasts with a creamy sauce. On his plate, I see a sizeable reddish fish and veggies on the side. They smile their sweet smiles again and thank the waiter. They begin eating. There's no conversation at all.

The waiter brings our wine. I tell my husband that I am concerned about the amount of time our daughter spends on her iPad and phone. He agrees. We talk about possible ground rules. We argue about whether Instagram is good or bad at this age. He takes a sip of my wine and says he should have ordered red too.

Their plates are half empty. The man wipes his beard with the serviette. The woman chews. His wine glass is nearly empty. Hers is half full. She takes a sip of wine. She forks some food and opens her mouth.

My husband says, are you okay? You seem distracted. It's nothing I say. The waiter brings our salad. I dig in. Leave some avocado for me, he says. He picks the olives on his plate and puts them on mine. I pass him the balsamic vinegar. We carry on talking.

Their plates are clean. They wipe their hands on their serviettes. Her wine glass is empty. She drinks water. The man looks over her head again. He's so much taller than her that he probably misses her face when he looks ahead. She fiddles in her handbag. She applies hand cream. He pulls out his wallet from his pocket. He waves at the waiter.

The waiter brings our mains. I twirl some pasta onto my fork and start chewing. Any good? My husband asks. Great, but I need some chilli. His fillet is a bit too rare, he says. Call the waiter, I say. Nah! It's not too bad. Both our wine glasses are empty. Shall we get another glass and share it. Might as well, he says. Do you think Cyril will survive? I read an interesting piece on *Daily Maverick*, I say. We have a lot to say about that.

The man is tapping his fingers on the table. The waiter arrives with the bill and the card machine. He hands over his credit card. He enters his code. The couple smiles at the waiter again. Since we arrived about an hour ago, not a word was spoken between them. The only words I have heard up from each of them has been thank you, to the waiter.

The man gets up. She follows. They leave the restaurant. Their silent dinner is over. As they get to the door, he holds her hand and they walk out into the parking lot. My head is full of thoughts.

My husband says you've been watching those people all evening. I look at him across the table. A doleful shadow appears. Is this the future, I wonder.

The Send-Off

It is a conversation we must have, but I am at a loss as to how to start. How does one begin talking about the ending? I tried to broach the subject once, but I stopped in mid-sentence. “What were you saying?” he asked.

“I lost my train of thought,” I said, and left the room.

We’ve been together for five years and covered a lot of ground except this one thing. It was never an issue before. It began after my first baby, Lola died. Lola was stripy grey and white, cotton wool soft kitten. She was six weeks old. I had just cuddled her and left her on the blanket. But the little thing crawled out of the basket and silently followed me. I was shutting the door when I heard her death cry. She was still breathing when I carried her into the car. By the time we got to the vet, it was too late.

I suggested we bury Lola in the garden. He got the shovel. It was over quickly. After the last scoop of earth covered the grave, I scattered cosmos wildflower seeds over the ground. We placed stones around the grave. We went inside without saying a word to each other. We washed our hands and walked to the edge of the crib in the room. Our three-month-old child was asleep. I stood watching her and drops rolled down my cheeks. I escaped into the bathroom.

There were four of us when we moved into our new home. Lola’s death triggered an awareness of things that had never crossed my mind. Or maybe those thoughts did surface before, and I shoved them aside. I had lost parents, friends and family. I understood the inevitability of death, though we are expected to believe in the illusion that everything will be okay. I know it is unhealthy to dwell on certain things because it borders on neurosis, but I cannot stop myself.

What happens if I drop dead tomorrow? In practical terms, we have done the paperwork so that the family is taken care of financially. Wills, bequests, insurance policies and everything about material aspects. No problems there. But what happens to the body? Disposing of Lola’s body was easy. There were no cat parents to intervene. No traditional expectations. It was just the two of us and we made a call. The burial was over in minutes. I visited the grave every morning with my cup of coffee and watered the cosmos. I looked forward to the arrival of new life in long stalks with wispy white petals.

Atheism has been a comforting journey in my life. I envisage dying as a light bulb going off. My body as a spent object of last breath. But the silent body must have rights too. I know that sounds insane, but I must express them. When the time comes, I want to go with silence and dignity. Increase the morphine when there is no hope. Let me go when my brain leaves my body. No religious rituals, no crowds around, no major send-off, so to speak. Scented candles and incense sticks in the house to create a zen atmosphere would be lovely.

My body must become ash. But before it goes into a flaming oven, my worthy organs must be removed and go to those I can save. Let it be a quiet departure. Then, by all means, do whatever it takes to wash away the tears. I must make it easy for him. I'll have a special box packed with my most precious things. A big file with names of reliable places for catering; options for good schools, a feeding plan, useful parenting tips, vaccination reminders and so forth.

Am I overthinking this? Looking out for him, trying to provide emotional nursing for him when I'm gone? But what if he goes first? That's something that I have never given much thought to. But now that it has come up, I have to ponder it. Though he is not religious, he has a traditional family and rituals matter. He comes from a faith that stamps identity at birth by maternal lineage and it is sacrosanct. The only thing I know I could manage would be covering the mirrors. I am still puzzled about the explanation of why the mirrors must be covered after death except that it is a time-honoured tradition.

There has to be kaddish, sitting shiva for several days and so forth. I know that is what he would like, but I must ask him to write it down. I must assure him that my atheism and minimalist take on life will take a back seat when he goes. His family tradition will prevail. In the same way that I cover my head with a scarf when I go to a Muslim funeral. In the same way that I take off my shoes when I walk into a Hindu home after death. In the same way that I bow my head in church for Christian prayer. And in the same way that I sit in a synagogue for a bar mitzvah, though I do feel like a brown dot in a sea of white.

PART B: PORTFOLIO

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Creative Writing
of
Rhodes University

by

Shareen Singh

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Introduction

This Portfolio begins with a Reflective Journal that covers the learning experience during my two-year journey that involved intensive course work, seminars, assignments, and thesis. I have segmented the Reflective Journal into four parts.

Part one and part two have sub-headings and focus on course work.

Parts three and four focus on preparing for thesis, thesis copy, feedback and a readers report.

The next section of the portfolio comprises short book reviews, a short report on the Community in Writing Project and an Essay on Poetics and Narrativity.

CONTENTS

Reflective Journal

Part 1

When I enrolled for the Creative Writing MA at Rhodes University as part-time student I had no preconceived idea of what was at stake, except that I would be learn to be a better writer, beyond writing as a journalist.
At the first contact week in March 2018, it became apparent that the course was going to be more intense than I had envisaged it would be. From the reading material dished out I could tell that there was going to be a lot of out of the box thinking and writing. That experimental writing was very much part of the course. No Dickens or Austen here. I loved it that the literature from all the continents were being used and that the diversity of students - both English and Xhosa speakers were interacting and learning side by side.
Amongst the new cohort of students were English and Drama honours graduates and published poets – some who themselves ran creative writing courses. Having not studied English at University level, I felt like I was going to be out of my depth. I accepted that I was going to begin at grade nought in this literary world and would see how far it takes me.

Politics of Punctuation
The first seminar that I found fascinating was Stacy Hardy's on punctuation. My mind drifted to primary school when one of the teachers took away marks if a student had not begun a sentence with a capital letter and ended with a full stop. The idea that punctuation could be political intrigued me. I discovered that the way one used punctuation or deviated from it was an indication of how radical or conservative the writing was.

In *Tram 83* by *Fistan Mujila*, an entire passage was capitalised and some long passages had no punctuation. I did not see the point of it until I learned that the objective was to illustrate movement, energy and rhythm. The author used language in an unrestrained way. It was only when it was read aloud that I understood it was a way of creating a piece that lent itself to a sense of musicality. *Plain Song* by *Peter Gizzi* had no punctuation at all because it would have altered the flow of rhythm.

My first written assignment on showing movement through punctuation was a challenge. I looked at some of my older writings and tried to tinker with them but failed. I could not get my head around rupturing old school formalism. So I wrote a new piece – my first fiction, Marcus and Me. The idea came from a real-life experience that I deftly turned into fiction with over the top "freshly botoxed" characters and tantrums. I played with that piece. "I heard my heart beating faster …faster …faster…" and stretched words "b-r-e-a-t-h-e". I capitalised one part of the prose into something that resembled a poem. Here's the thing – I really did not quite get this punctuation revolution.

Later in the course I found the techniques worked better in shorter pieces. I used it in a vignette called **Flow** in my thesis collection, where the word "just" used repeatedly served as

a pause while adding rhythm to the six lines. Here the absence of commas worked well. When I understood politics of punctuation I was able to play with it.

Free Hand Writing

My first introduction to free-hand writing was awful yet memorable. One could choose from four writing prompts. I have no idea why I picked the most challenging prompt when there were ordinary ones. "A rat wants to have sex with an old woman." I heard someone saying, that's brave. "You have two minutes. Don't think. Just write. Keep that pencil on the page."

I felt as though my brain was so rusty that forcing it to perform was like trying to lift a heavy rock. I wrote a few lines and was stuck. The worst part was having to read the drivel I had written about a lonely old woman who felt jiggly feelings and thought she was dreaming. Thank goodness no one was expected to comment on the work.

I was thrown in the deep end but it taught me two pivotal lessons. Having a thick skin was a prerequisite to this MA and more importantly, embrace the value of free hand writing. I got hold of *Ordinary Genius* by *Kim* Addonizio, a book packed with exercises that showed me the beauty of unfettered thoughts. Several pieces in my thesis were rough cuts from free-hand writing practice such as **Void, DNA** and **Killing Pain.**

Poetry

This art form had eluded me at high school but I could not shy away from it here because it was compulsory in the first few months. I found some of the poetry quite abstract. What I saw as melancholy in a stanza, someone else saw a ray of hope. I loved the discussions on the meaning of the poem, scrutinising every stanza and making assumptions. We could have spent hours on analysis but the tutor had to rein in this bubbly enthusiasm because poetry sessions were not about finding meanings but about observation and feeling. The essence of a poem was the appreciation that every line or stanza had a cadence. It required training to focus the ear and eye on the writing, structure, metaphors, sounds, rhythm and pattern. One poet I particularly liked was *Du Fu*, whose work was clean and comprehensible. "I was stubborn by nature and addicted to perfect lines, fought to the death to find words that startle. Now in old age my poems flow out freely, the way flowers and birds forget deep sorrow in spring."

I kept an open mind about poetry though I knew my limitations. After a poetry seminar on *Hawk Roosting* by *Ted Hughes*, one had the choice between writing a poem or prose. I braved a poem. I wrote Praying Prey. It was a fitting title with a play on words – a sequential account of a mantis's mating ritual on a lavender bush. It seemed to work within the confines of the structure with little movement.

I used words like "proteined out, spermed out". Naturally this was not in keeping with Ted Hughes, but I loved the idea of experimenting with words that spilled out spontaneously. The poets in my group pointed out tone inconsistency - beginning with "beautiful elements of writing" then "muddied by portrayal of cannibalism". Someone said, "there is a poem

somewhere in there." There was a lot of encouragement from all sides. I was proud that I gave poetry a shot. As my writing developed poetic language began creeping into my prose.

Reading

Reading held equal place with writing throughout the course. The first two books I chose from the reading list was *Franz Kafka's* short stories written a century ago and *Zinzi Clemmons* contemporary novel, *What we Lose.* I noticed a stark difference in language and style in their work.

I admired Kafka's clean prose and the depth of his subject matter. He was a serious writer who tackled hefty issues of despair in ways that I did not always understand. Clemmons's writing had an experimental slant. She used innovation in structure with a mix of collage and vignettes. Her story was about loss and identity in contemporary life. It was clear in Clemmons writing that her character and the story was closely aligned to her life. That was not overt in Kafka's writing until I read about his life. I realised that Kafka's brilliance was in the way that he used characters and metaphors to convey his own trauma.

Both readings raised questions about the blurring of lines between real life and fiction. It was an issue that swirled in my mind often. My grounding in journalism and politics had wired my brain for real life writing, but I had no intention of tapping into life for material. I was keen to stretch my imagination and hoped to create stories that had no association with my lived experience. The idea of pure fiction appealed to me though I knew it would be like trying to get water from a rock.

Samuel Beckett

Just when I thought I was enjoying the course, Samuel Beckett hit me in the face. This was Paul Mason's seminar and he said clearly that we were expected to eat, breathe, and feel Beckett. "Get into his head."

I did not see the point of reading *The Sucking Stones*, a repetitive monologue. It was tedious and annoying. There was a tome of Beckett's writing that came with this seminar. It was the first time that the concept of close reading came into play. Grudgingly I sucked it up. The assignment was to write a piece from Beckett's perspective.

The only way I could write anything Beckettish was to begin with free hand writing. The word splodge came to me alongside an artist in despair. I wrote a piece about a photographer in a sorry state who was ruminating about his bleakness. I had to get rid of the word splodge because it was not the kind of language Beckett used.

Mason pointed to smidgeons of externalities in my writing. Beckett was not about judgement - the writer's own voice had no place. Once I did the minor edits I believed I had nailed the Beckett assignment.

I'm glad I had a chance to plod through Beckett whose quirkiness, dark humour and existential slant I finally came to appreciate. Later when I started producing work for my thesis I turned to Beckett for inspiration for a short story. I called it **Hole**. It was amongst the first batch of writings that I sent to my supervisor and received great feedback. Though I did not stick rigidly to Beckett's style I drew on the ruminating and questioning technique. What I really liked about Beckett was that were no answers but the world was full of questions.

The Narrative Arc

This was Mason's course again - but unlike Beckett, it was more formalistic, based on the traditional narrative arc in writing novels. I had a sense from the start that using a template was going to be tricky because I was not good with dialogue and making up characters.

A short story by *Anton Krueger* that had all the technical literary elements served as a guide. I found this challenging compared to the first piece of fiction I wrote, titled Marcus and Me, during Stacy Hardy's seminar on punctuation. Marcus and Me was fun to write because it had something to do with a randomness of the writing process and the material I used.

Mason said we should get prompts from a friend and use the narrative template. Mine were: Scene – Hillbrow; character – single woman; Incident – crime; Theme – love. I stared at the blank screen for ages because I had no ideas and no story to tell. I had to make it up from scratch like the stuff of pure fiction - it drove me crazy.

I thought about Hillbrow in the 1980s and what it looked like then. There was a synagogue, perhaps my character could be Jewish. Maybe A Rabbi could come into the picture. I remembered Rose Taxis. A taxi driver could be one of the characters. What about the suspense? I toyed around with ideas while making dinner. The first two drafts were rubbish. The plot with the Rabbi getting involved in the crime was not plausible and mafia gang boss's hand in the story also fell flat.

The plot got a bit easier when I settled on two main characters, Lily a lonely white woman and a black Taxi Driver. Themba – a love story across colour lines. The taxi driver would become the hero after saving the woman's life when she was attacked. There were many holes in the story and the writer's voice was consciously driving the narrative rather than letting the characters speak.

Making up stuff was much harder than I had envisaged. It was my first shot at using the narrative arc and I struggled with plotting and letting the characters speak for themselves. Nonetheless, the feedback was interesting. One person said that my the combination of journalism and narrative worked well in "telling untold stories". The vivid description of Hillbrow worked. I found the best part of that writing exercise was to go experimental with one piece. That was when I probably began leaning towards experimental writing.

Writers and Possibilities

The exposure to different ways of writing was such a treat. I discovered *Steve Tomasula's* story, *In the Beginning* from *The Book of Portraitures*. It was a visual and linguistic feast with grey pages and enlarged fonts and page-long sentences punctuated by commas. The stunning layout – almost like in advertising – using double spacing, some hieroglyphs alongside poetic prose, was unique. The story was narrated by a slave who escaped from Egypt and travelled the Sinai making a living by telling real stories mixed with folk tales.

I explored *Extreme Fiction: Fabulists and Formalists,* a collection by *Martone & Hemley.* One of the stories, *Cat's eye* by *Luisa Velenzuela,* introduced me to metafiction. The author used metafiction to write about the Tango.

American Poets in the Twentieth Century also broke the conventions of traditional literature. I regret not having had spent more time understanding those writings especially the poetics aspects. It could have been helpful with my essay and learning to critique work.

Susan Steinberg's ISLA looked like a shopping list of everyday things, emotions and actions but it told a powerful story of a dictatorial relationship that a mother and father had with their daughter. A tale of helicopter parenting that stifled children into neurosis. Then there was *Diane Stewart's* sparse, no frills pieces that hung in the air, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps. "I had a bad day of food poisoning. All in all, it was a good Christmas." I learned that this type of writing forestalls rather than foregrounds, by skipping conversations.

The reading material kept on coming and I found it hard to keep up since it was expected of MA students to read at least twenty book from reading list. Besides the reading material for assignments, we also had reading sessions at group level where each person could choose a piece of writing.

The exposure to books from across the globe opened up the possibilities of telling stories in different ways and to experiment. I found this to be a refreshing departure from the Canon.

Eros

Finally a sliver of Greek influence came into my literary space by way of Eros. The seminar was about desire with reference to the Greek god of sexual love and beauty. The reading material included excerpts from *Sappho.* My understanding of Eros during the seminar was it felt like a fleeting moment in life that does not last long. A sense of desire at the beginning of a relationship that is fleeting as reminiscent in real life.

I wrote four short pieces covering desire, fulfilment, lack of desire and love. It was about infatuation, sex, the absence of desire and love. The stories did not have to connected and could be a mix of prose and poetry. Writing in the first person "I" felt too close to home. I wondered whether this was the first nudge into writing about personal experience. I was adamant that I was not going to use myself and my life experience as material. Anyway, there was enough room here for fiction.

To represent Eros, I wrote Wanting - a page-long story by a woman character who had seen a man in the library a few times. I tried to show that moment of infatuation when the man had his arm stretched out to reach for a book high up. “I felt delirious watching you. How silly I thought it was getting a high from your underarm...How I desperately want to be with you – to feel you – to be my first.” This was not the kind of mushy writing I was used to but there it was. I can laugh at it today.

After this first piece I felt compelled to link the thread of the stories. I read the piece in my prose group they suggested some editing. I was surprised that someone liked the humour. The next piece was about finding the edge. I used New York as a setting. The character who had developed a relationship with the man she met in the library and had gone to visit him.

I felt confident when I wrote the piece. The subliminal poetic language and rhythm spilled out. “We needed no alcohol, no white powder, no green grass, no magic mushrooms…We danced to the music, deep, slow, oozing rhythms…The streets screamed with yellow on wheels and glitz and glamour - jazz and junkies and a whole lot more. We screamed exploding Eros in flames and first love ablaze.” I think the introduction to poetry helped in this vivid portrayal of New York and everyone in the group loved it. One person said the descriptions were “too much”. I did pare it down a bit without taking away the sense of vibrancy and freedom of New York. I enjoyed writing that piece.

The third story captured the mundanity of ordinary life when Eros had disappeared, and children arrived. It sounded familiar. I thought about the earlier assignment on movement and wrote. “Escalator going up, escalator going down, trolley gets filled, tills ring, cash is paid…” It needed some editing, but it worked as an experimental piece.

The last piece was about the couple, now married with children and in a rut and had gone away to rekindle their love. The ending was contrived in the sort of Hollywood way. Kerry Hammerton who delivered the Eros seminar challenged me to go dark - as in smelly socks or something unpredictable. I reworked the ending. There was an accident on the way back and I left the story hanging in the air. I found it difficult to end stories. Endings became an ongoing challenge.

I was fortunate to have a strong prose group that included a poet, an honours literature graduate, a drama honours graduate and a doctor who was teaching creative writing. They were schooled in literary language and could offer useful feedback. They pointed to clichés in my work – something that I was never aware of because they were freely used in journalism. I strived to use more original metaphors and similes and I could see that my writing was gradually starting to become more evocative.

The Psychology of Writing

If Eros was a nudge to venture into the personal, the push came in a seminar on writing as therapy. The assignment suggested dredging up a past painful experience and writing about

it. I hated the idea of having to open a tomb again since I had dealt with horror and did want to visit that place again. The psychology of writing seminar had an important place in literature and it could be beneficial. But I realised one had to be in the right frame of mind to write and share trauma.

Luckily, I happened to listen to an interview with the poet *Derek Walcott* while I was stressing about what to write. Walcott said that when one of his students had lost her father and was going through a difficult time, he advised her to write about it with dignity. Look at the beauty that surrounded your father – the trees, the plants and the flowers and reflect on the setting where they spent so much time together. I wrote a piece about dealing with pain through the prism of nature.

Later, during my thesis writing I produced a piece called **Excluded**, written after a twelve year old girl had killed herself. It was not an easy piece to write and I stayed away from details about the dreadful act, though I wrote about the issues confronting teenagers today. I looked to Carmen Machado's writings for guidance. I came across one of her short pieces during one of the contact sessions at Rhodes where she drew the readers in by using "imagine this" and image that" and expect this to happen and that to happen. She was looking at how Hollywood portrays sex scenes. I used that style. "Imagine yourself at high school today…" 'Now Imagine being the only girl who wasn't part of any of this…" I think the piece tried to debunk the stereotype and portray the issues realistically.

When I wrote **The Shame of Silence** about abuse, I tried again not to delve into the actual abuse. The way I approached that story was to raise the question: "How does one write about the thing they want buried forever?"
"Should one give a minute my minute account…bare it all like a corporeal writer that reveals every nerve in the body …point to vaginal parts, penis…" That was how some lawyers question victims of abuse in court. I wrote in a way that I felt comfortable going into a story about abuse - an implicit way.

Sense
As the seminars progressed it became apparent that we were venturing into the personal and looking inwards for stories. Using the senses to write was an interesting way of bringing out visceral images. An excerpt from the *Goldfinch* and a YouTube clip was used to show the senses at play over an art work.
I wrote an experimental prose poem –or at least what I thought was a prose poem with juxtaposing senses relating to beauty and horror. I wrote it without any consideration of technicality, tone or cadence. It was as raw as free hand writing.
There were valid comments suggesting that brutality and pain alternating with the beauty of tantalising smells and sights did not work as a collective piece. However, each stanza had visceral impact on its own and could stand alone as vignettes. The other piece, *Love* was too short I thought, at just under ten lines. It used the sense of touching and feeling my baby. Surprisingly, this little piece was seen as a nugget. The course facilitator commented: "Your writing has a musicality to it. Reminds me of Dylan Thomas." Poetic influences were

somehow finding their way in my writing. This was apparent in some of my pieces in the thesis like Flow that played on rhythm and in Killing Pain I wrote: “She’s here to accept life’s end - of souls entrapped, of sorrow, of dread, of bloodshed, ...” I tend to use phrases like: “The owl’s eyes are telling me…” That is acceptable in poetry but apparently not in prose. But as far as I could see – language was not static and could go against established norms. Isn’t that what experimental writing is all about?

Experiment/Risk

I was not sure whether the assignment was about risk or risqué. I thought that anything risqué had to involve sex or drugs. I settled on the latter. So I took to google to see what it was like to take heroin - film images helped. I created two polar opposite characters, a vivacious and daring artist, Leila and straight-laced bean counter, Mira. They were friends. I plotted as I wrote. This random way of writing led to several versions and lots of deleting and tinkering until I got a sense of how the story could unfold. I turned Leila into a secret druggie who never had problems finding lovers, while Mira was desperate for a boyfriend. I followed some aspects of the narrative arc and wrote a conventional story about friendship and betrayal.

There was nothing experimental about it. So I took to freehand writing and came up with a jerky pierce that broke the rules of punctuation to illustrate the effect that heroin was having as the syringe emptied into Mira’s vein. It was fast-paced and rhythmic. Everyone loved the experimental piece because it was visceral and raw while the conventional story came across as mediocre. It was another example that making up stories with plot and characters did not produce my best work.

The Body

The seminar on the body encouraged me to break out of a mould I was locked into - the archaic Victorian prissiness with language around sex and body. But a great teacher, Stacy Hardy had a way of bringing the body into perspective. Reading the Body collection in Granta was also instructive.

I followed the suggestion of examining the body and how the body responded in space. The Body Exhibition served as a hanger for my story. I could write descriptively about cadavers and organs on display. I felt a sense of liberation when I wrote this piece using evocative language and raising questions around mortality. I had no qualms about describing “shrivelled penis” and “breasts hanging”.

The title Bodying Bodies worked well and there was great feedback. I was advised to remove the tangential parts like a reference to *Lydia Yuknavitch*. The piece was strong enough to stand on its own feet. The teacher advised editing the piece to take away the journalistic feel of reportage. I enjoyed writing this as a first-person narrator without characters.

This marked a slight departure in the way I looked at the “I” as narrator. In my essay I wrote about trying to figure out issues around fact and fiction and depiction of the body. (Essay on Poetics and Narrativity)

Reflective Journal

Part 2

Feedback

After four months of writing I was keen to get additional feedback from others outside my immediate prose group. In the next contact week I read **Boding Body** again in the broader group. It was pointed out the tense was consistent, but the piece was bold and well written. Paul Wessels, who became my thesis supervisor, said the real story was hidden in the middle of the piece. He suggested I move a paragraph to the top and refocus the piece on the protagonist leading the story. It made a lot of sense because the story placed the narrator at the forefront and turned the focus on emotions around aging while the body parts served as illustrative tools. The story flowed better and elevated the essence of the protagonist's concerns about aging and mortality. I reworked this piece, shortened it and included it in my thesis collection but eventually deleted it because I wrote new pieces.

Writing in fragments

I never thought that short pieces were worth much until a talk by a visiting professor from Columbia University who introduced us to writing in fragments. I looked at his own work and was impressed. "Do you sometimes get an inkling to write, only to stop yourself by thinking, *Nah, it won't be any good?* There is no answer to "Will it be good?" The very question is not good. Adopt Miles Davis's attitude: "I never think about not being able to do anything. I just pick up my horn and play the hell out of it." That was one of *Alan Ziegler's* ten short pieces as writing tips. He showed how fragments could have punch.

I played around with crafting short pieces that could stand on their own. Or collectively they could tell a longer story. *Eduardo Galeano* wrote about events and experiences in fragments. Each fragment was crafted beautifully. "The lichens, born of the sea made meadows. They invaded the kingdom of stone, conquered it, turned it green." This could be meandering around nature, an observation or could also be a metaphor for reclaiming the earth from reckless and selfish property development. I loved that writing style.

Claudia Rankin's writing in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, wrote in vignettes as well as longer prose. She was subtle in her writings. "Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel, you have already settled into you window seat on United Airlines, when the girl and her mother arrive at your row. The girl, looking over at you, tells her mother, these are our seats, but this is not what I expected. The mother's response is barely audible-I see, she says. I'll sit in the middle." A few lines but such a powerful piece.

I liked the flexibility of writing short pieces mixed with longer pieces and used it in my I thesis – a mix of fragments, vignettes and page length short stories and longer ones too. I did not think at all about themes, I just wrote stories.

Synchronous Writing
I thought I understood the concept of synchronous writing but when I began writing my mind drifted in different directions. The reading material was Laura Watermeyer's piece Bardo that created a light impressionistic, almost surreal portrayal of a scene and events. The other piece was *Noy Holland's Rooster, Pollard, Cricket, Goose* that played on rhythmically repetitive sentences.

I began writing with Watermeyer's impressionism in mind with limited use of repetition. I endeavoured to write something abstract and use repetition as Holland did with pronouns. With two aspects from the assignment schematic, I began writing in my usual unplanned way, tapping the buttons as the thoughts came. I thought the sense of reluctance and resolution before euthanasia might work. My character had a horrid incurable disease and she could not bear the thought of her body slowly perishing while living in pain for the rest of her years. The title was Finding Nirvana.

The first part of the story did have a synchronous feel and according to feedback created a dreamlike scene by weaving together "poetic, image-driven" elements of nature and spirits. "You achieved a sense of expectancy, newness, freshness and beauty in nature and relationship." I was on a roll with imagery and at times went over the top. The piece could have worked on its own but a madness entered and ruined it.

I let the story go one and divert off track. That was a mistake. The second part of the story was overwritten and conflicted with the theme and tone of the first part. Perhaps it had something to do with my misunderstanding of parallelism then. I went back to that piece months later, slashed half of it. **Nirvana** was included in my thesis.

Memoir
When I signed up for this MA, I told myself I would not write a memoir – certainly not mine. I also believed that memoir was frivolous unless it was the life of a highly accomplished or a fascinating person whose story was compelling enough to inspire readers or make them laugh.
That was my view until Stacy Hardy's seminar on memoir when I discovered different ways of looking at it, particularly from a philosophical perspective. I found the question of multiple personalities and the unreliability of memory fascinating and it answered some of my questions about blurring lines between fact and fiction.

If one went with the assumption that since everything one writes in the past is questionable, and since life itself influences writing, there was enough room to write fiction – drawing on life. But how much of ones' private goes into fiction. I recalled *Zinzi Clemmons* book how much we lose – it looked like it was mostly personal.

I found *Eduardo Galeano's* approach to memoir as a reflection of collective life and action interesting. *Etel Adnan's* writing on mundane things in life that one takes for granted while wars ravage was yet another innovative way of writing about life.

I had to think of how much of my life I wanted to divulge. Then with trepidation, I opened myself to write a short piece about the time when I lost my family. I found it hard to read it aloud without feeling emotional. It was apparent that I was not ready to write that story without the detachment it needed. I simply could not let my guard down.

However, I enjoyed writing the other pieces - snippets of memory from childhood in a list. It felt good going back in time. From the list, I took one item and got the idea to write The Fly Trap - a macabre tale with humour. It was written in fragments. The feedback encouraged me to revisit that piece. I revised it and gave it a more appropriate title, **Sticky Tales.**

The seminar on memoir did not persuade me to adopt that form but it was pivotal when it came to writing stories for my thesis. I felt like it had freed me from my obsessive reliance on the imagination - making up stories from scratch. Though I still never gave up on that aspiration, I began writing from experiences in my life and others - alongside imaginative pieces. I was able to fuse memory with fiction. This was an issue that I explored in my essay – the debates on form, especially in the novel that experimental writers challenged. I was trying to find the middle ground and I think I might have found it in this seminar. (See essay on Poetics and Narrativity)

Brevity

I came across a book called Brevity by David Galef – a handbook for short fiction or flash fiction. “Don’t say Alex is a good cook; say that his veal piccata has just the right amount of lemon.” It had useful writing tips. Instead of saying Elizabet is tall, find another way of describer her like ‘she can dust the top of the refrigerator without reaching for that step stool’. The chapter on characterisation was also brilliant in pointing out the physicality and psychology of characters – like how they fidget or move. Showing rather than telling and writing with fewer words. This book introduced me to flash fiction and I began exploring the style of writing and learning to cut out the excess in stories. It was easier said than done. There is an art to writing flash fiction and Lydia Davis had mastered it and her collection of stories that won the International Booker Prize in 2013 and several others.

Even Ernest Hemingway could have been considered a flash fiction writer. One the shortest stories was his. “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” One could deduce so many things from just six words. The baby died at birth, or the mother miscarried, or the baby was born without feet, the baby was born a giant or growing faster than expected. Or simply that his parents wished he walk bare feet, which many believe is a healthy choice for growing feet. That little nugget could have been the roots of flash fiction.

Bruno Schulz

Just as I had settled on writing shorter pieces the final assignment came as a shocker. Another Paul Mason seminar. He asked for four to six pages, plot-driven by a dream-like presentation of narrator-protagonist in motion. Close observation of objects and environment and the crucial change in the narrative voice from objective to transcendence.

The primary reading during that seminar was *Bruno Shulz.* It was a tough ask to follow in the heels of that last century genius. I loved Shulz's beautiful and somewhat surreal writings but a long piece in this vein while trying to be experimental, dark and weird at the same time, was a big ask. It took ages to make up a story. I thought contrasting a protagonist's ordinary life with an encounter with the macabre would work. I created a character who inherited a property and found herself in a strange place. I thought dead maggots and rats would add to a sense of weirdness. The imagery was creepy. I tried several endings and figured that an empty grave was perfect to represent darkness.

The writing did stretch my imagination and I thought I had written a half-decent piece called Curious Trouble. Mason liked the opening paragraph because it positioned the character at the beginning. He liked the generalised musing and philosophizing and had I stuck to that stream, the piece would probably have worked. But it didn't for various reasons.

The story was over-written with similes and metaphors. I did resort to overwriting as I tried to meet the word count. The work lacked the required weirdness and the ending. The empty grave, though much loved in feedback, was seen by Mason as Gothic. It lacked originality.

The pressure to write to length had stumped me. What I thought was weird was not weird enough. The last assignment confirmed that long plot-driven made up stories with characters to fit a particular genre mixed with weirdness was not the kind of writing that I would be pursuing in future.

Reflective Journal

Part 3

With the seminars and assignments out of the way, I had to apply my mind to the thesis. I was getting anxious and thought the easiest thing for me was to write non-fiction. Twisting the imagination to get drops of water from a rock was getting harder. Not impossible because I did write several pieces that was not in any way related to my life. But it was it pretty hard.

Mental Health

I thought about the Life Esidemeni had tragedy that had really moved me. Perhaps I could look at mental health and use the tragedy as a peg. There was so much material that I could use so I began exploring the issue and reading books on mental health. The interconnectedness between mind and body interested me. *The Shaking Woman* by *Siri Hustvedt* was a great source. I read *Theatres of the Mind* by *Joyce McDougall.* I spent a lot of time reading about Life Esidemeni and chatting to Section 27, the organisation that worked with the victim's families. I was not sure whether existing material and conducting interviews with the families as in Svetlana Alexivich's work on Chernobyl, could be another way of presenting those stories. But the more I delved into it the more I realised that it would turn into a larger writing project that would consume me. I flagged it as a potential after I completed the MA.

Reading for the Thesis

I revisited a few authors from earlier readings this year like Samuel Beckett and Edgar Allen Poe. Then I read Sylvia Plath and was blown away. Her lyrical style and subject matter was so powerful that I wanted to read more. I read her collected letters and found that her writings mirrored her life and emotions. I could not emulate Plath's style of writing but I saw the author as material for a story. "I'm dead on the inside, so how bad can dying be," Plath wrote. Her mental health problems and suicide moved me. I loved the way both Beckett and Plath in though in different ways wrote about their inner storm, confusion and questions bombarding their minds. I began reading more pleasant offerings like *Gardening in the Dark* by *Denis Hirson.* A collection of poetry about a time in South Africa that I could relate to. Hirson's writing style was beautiful and accessible. His work evoked memories from my past. I read Ann Carson's Men in the Off Hours, an experimental piece and I tried to emulate it but it was a flop.

Writing Process

My daily writing was coming along in snorts and snippets. I created a file called random writing – thoughts that came from free handwriting that I dipped into whenever I was stuck and found something I could turn into a story. I felt like I needed another year of intense reading and writing assignments before going it alone. I missed the group feedback and found that I was working in a vacuum. That sense of fumbling in the dark pervaded. There was no plan, no plot, no clear idea of where I was going.

Stories were being made up randomly. I wrote a story called **Vilanculos** about a woman fighting to save her life in the ocean and the thoughts that swirled drove much of the narrative. The piece emerged from free hand writing exercises.

With Beckett drummed into my head, I developed **The Hole** in a ruminating and circular style. The narrator was ranting about life and it drove his wife nuts. This was made up from scratch. Both Vilanculos and **The Hole** had nothing to do with my life or experience.

I wrote a story about the challenges of balancing work and being a parent of small children. I called it Blessing and the Curse and changed it to **Three Days in A Life**. I experimented with a prose poem **Memory in Metaphors** as a way of writing about living under the Group Areas Act. I sent the four pieces to my supervisor Paul Wessels and waited with bated breath.

Feedback

The bad news was that the prose poem was a flop. What was I thinking - I had not mastered poetry but I was playing around with prose poems? Three pages were binned. I was advised to give poetry a miss. My draft proposal was deliberately open - a hybrid of different forms including poetry.

Thankfully, the other three prose pieces, **The Hole, Vilanculos** and **Three Days in a Life**, survived. All three pieces have energy in their flat journalistic mode because the emotions were being allowed to come and go exactly as we experience them in our daily lives, Wessels said. He liked the swirling of intensity. “The stories captured the essence of life as we try to force ourselves to adapt to its torque,” he said.

Vilanculos was a great short piece but the ending had to go. To have the main character waking up after all that action only to find out that it was just a dream, was lame. “You cannot get away with such endings,” Wessels said. I found that my random style of writing carried on endlessly and I struggled to find endings that worked. I appreciated the comments because I spent an enormous amount of time toying with different ways of writing and found myself floating in a cloud of ambivalence. It became clear that my writing style worked.

Reading

One of the books I read, *Self Helplessness* by *Rebecca Davis,* had an immediacy that absorbed the reader. It was an immensely readable book that told an interesting life story, written with brevity. I explored different tenses in some of my pieces and found that changing to the present worked better in some cases, like **The Hole**. On the third stab, I changed to present tense and found the tone and fluidity worked.

So many writers have influenced my work. I loved pared-down writing, but I also liked the idea of lush beautiful prose and syntax with rhythm. I drew on Davis’s book to write a story

about my protagonist's struggle with dealing with depression. **The Stepford wife** raised issues around serotonin based anti-depressants, the promise and after taste. I thought the title was a perfect fit for the story because the narrator turned into a compliant doting person, the opposite of her natural bubbly self.

Wessels liked the "blistering pace "and killer lines" in that piece and the interweaving of the emotions of the narrator and her relationship with her husband and kids. "The power of the internal as it interacts with the external is wonderful, and so the narration hurtles forward …" It was all good, but again the ending did not work – it was "slick and platitudinal." The ending he referred to was, "Though her life was never going to be a Bach symphony she found the right elixir to cope with living in a pressure cooker." I had to delete the line.

The use of imagery in narrating stories by suggestion was one of the things I picked up from *David Galef's* book *Brevity*. In Stepford Wife, the pharmacist "mumbled under his overgrown salt and pepper moustache." "…she swallowed her pill knowing she was ingesting a screw that twisted and tightened her brain… "She morphed into a robot." All of this worked.

Lesson in Cutting Back

Continuing in the mental health stream, I wrote **Out of Joint** a piece focussing on bipolar. My inspiration came after reading *Sylvia Plath*. In the initial draft, the narrator's cousin attempted suicide and was subsequently admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The narrator struggled to understand. Her position reflected the ignorant and judgemental way that depression was perceived in society. The idea was good, the words kept on coming and I wrote the longest piece of around 5000 words.

When I read the piece it sounded chaotic with three characters trying to interlink their stories. The first-person narrator's backstory became muddled in the cousin's story. I began cutting back and still the story did not work in the way it was structured. It lacked the pace of my other pieces that kept the reader invested.

I toyed around with ways of tweaking the story and none of it worked. When I slashed the piece to half I could breathe. The radical drop in word count did not matter. Still, the density bothered me. When I broke the text into fragments, the story came alive again. Some of the material I cut out was used in another story. The feedback was great. The dialogue and narrative were "excellent". The construction, telling and pace worked very well. I provided just enough information for the story to be well rounded. The suggestion that the last paragraph could be deleted, was spot one.

Another piece **Antiquity** was too long. I thought a shorter version worked. But Wessels commented that the I had "wrapped the story up when the story itself is all about something not being wrapped up." The final comment on Antiquity was encouraging. "I think the piece's brevity is what makes it work, and the fact that you never belabour anything in the piece." He suggested that I let it stew and revisit it again. I did so months later.

Reflective Journal

Part 4

Reading/Writing

Flash fiction offered no room for backstories, myriad characters, frills and forests of scene-setting. If you want to master flash fiction, get onto twitter, someone said. The limit on twitter was 280 words. I understood Flash Fiction was typically anything from 100 – 1000 words. I did a lot of free handwriting during this time. **The Stranger** and **Empathy Amiss** in my thesis could be considered flash fiction.

I read *Pen America Best Debut Short Stories 2018*. One story from that anthology, *Six Months* by *Celeste Mohammed,* appealed to me. The main character was an immigrant who arrived in the US to seek work. His shenanigans and struggle to straddle his two worlds was fascinating – it gave me an idea to explore writing pieces about trying to fit into two worlds during apartheid. *Candidates*, by *Megan Tucker,* began with, "The television is on, but no one is watching." It was a simple opening, but it said a lot about what happens in people's home, issues of class and culture. It was a lovely story with a tight narrative with political undertones.

I liked the idea of writing with political undertones. I tried that with **Stanger in Colour.** Stanger was my childhood town. I wanted to write about life there during apartheid but not about apartheid itself. I thought the best way to make this work would be to revisit Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano's work.

He wrote snippets capturing simple events and experiences of those who lived around him. He painted a portrait of a community in the mix of politics, culture, tradition and love. In a way his writings were more like social commentary. I loved the way he used satire to bring out the ridiculous.

Though I found writing satire and using humour quite difficult I decided to give it a shot. So I began writing about aspects that came from memory. The pieces magnified to add humour and contradiction during a difficult time. I resisted using the term apartheid. Metaphors were a great substitute. Lilies were whites and blacks and "Indians" were cinnamon and clove. I thought it sounded a bit simplistic but it was what came to mind and I liked it.
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting by *Milan Kundera* also inspired me. He wrote about the Prague Spring in fragments. I numbered the Stanger vignettes.

My writing style was random and I could not box myself into one particular style, emulating one author or structure. I believed writing a variety of different stories served me better since I was able to bring flexibility in my work. I found that I produced short fiction with more ease than longer pieces.

The only way I could write a half-decent long piece was through fragmented paragraphs. I went back to my random writing file, took out scraps and built on stories bit by bit. **Hurtling in Nairobi,** emerged from this. Wessels had advised that with a piece like that I had to be careful not to succumb to "traps of cliché. I hoped I pulled it off.

I latched onto the power of observation from Lydia Davis who found stories while in a queue overhearing conversations. The power of observation of ordinary life inspired **The Future**. It reminded me of the seminar on Eros and life carrying on when desire ended, and the nest was empty too. I juxtaposed the experiences of two contrasting couples at a restaurant – one young and having much to talk about and another much older who really had not much to say to each other. I had no idea how it would end. But it became a piece about the evolution of adult relationships. I felt this was a sad piece about aging though I'm not sure if it came across to the reader. I began writing it in a café. The idea came to me as I saw two people who struck me as lonely individuals killing time. It was I suppose a story about time passing. Wessels saw the piece as a beautiful love letter.

George Saunders's Lincoln in the Bardo, was the most unusual work of fiction I had come across. The style and setting deviated from the traditional novel. The text was structured like a patchwork from beginning to end. When I began writing a piece called Lion's Head, I remembered something that Saunders had said in an interview. He tried to get the positive and the negative aspects of the novel into a compelling mix, but in a way that the positive messages do not come across as "corny".

I wanted to illustrate how experiences of discrimination and abuse could shape one's perception. How language could be misinterpreted. How nationality could be seen as stereotype. My character Nadia's memories of an incident in London as a young immigrant, were dormant for years until another incident in her own country brought them back. When I started writing this piece, it began slanting towards rape. But I thought that would be a bit too obvious. So I struggled to find an ending with something of a clincher. I'm not sure if the happy outcome worked. I changed the title to **The Beginning**.

The feedback was mixed. Some said the dialogue was contrived. Wessels said it was an "affecting piece". The suddenness also carried the story. It "forces the reader to experience the kind of uncertainty and ambiguity of certain precise situations."

I wrote **The Send-Off** with a sense of detachment about the body after death. I was inspired after reading a wonderful short story *Fire* by *Mia Couta*. A story about an old couple living alone and pondering death – not in the emotional sense but about the practicalities of the aftermath. Wessels like the ending of my story. It was about resolution to respect different cultural norms after death.

During group feedback, everyone loved **Rain Goat** though one person commented that using the name Gupta was not relevant. "Who will remember them in years to come." I liked it so I

left it in. I accepted that Mamba needed some work. It was shorted and renamed **Spirit of the Mamba.**

When I began this MA, comments during feedback pointed to my happy endings. I was told happy endings do not work – reconciliations were boring. It was an interesting challenge. So I stated to work on darker pieces. **Unnatural** was one of those made up stories. Dead fish floating like a silver cover on a river. I wanted to raise issues about dumped toxic waste making its way into the river. I thought about it when I wrote. The feedback I received said it was "wonderfully disturbing". I was not sure what to make of that oxymoron. That piece went into my thesis collection, so did **The Hole** the piece that ended with a break up and several others.

It was getting to crunch-time, but I was still reading. I read Jo-Ann Bekker's Asleep Awake Asleep short stories. I identified with her writing in some ways. Her work was not guided by the narrative arc – plot, character development. In many of her pieces her protagonists did not have names. She used pronouns like he, she, the boy the mother and so forth. I did the same in several of my pieces. Bekker's work inspired to write the story on Mayfair, "**Forbidden Territory"** and a story called **Mole in the Pocket**, about a spy in a newsroom.

I read *Paul Bowles* anthology *Collected Stories & Later Writings* for my stories on Cuba. Though my memory of Cuba remains vivid, I drew on Bowles travel writings. He had a keen eye for observation. I loved his pieces on Morocco. Initially I had written one long piece on Cuba but decided to break them up because they worked better as shorter pieces. I also wrote two pieces on my trip to Libya.

The draft abstract that I sent last year had changed from a focus on mental health to general stories that traversed many issues. I saw a common thread of place and time in influencing the subject matter. My abstract had been amended accordingly. I was glad that I gave myself the flexibility to do that.
I began to draw on life experience in the last few stories and reflected on my travels. I was conscious that this could be seen as reportage using literary devices of introspection and composition. I questioned whether this would fit in a body of work that leaned a lot on imagination than life.
Throughout my writing when life served as material, it was mostly infracted. I was concerned with the lines blurring between fiction and non-fiction. But infraction came with a lot of flexibility to make a dull life story more interesting.

Over months of plodding, I came to appreciate the iterative process of writing regularly. It boosted my confidence to be more imaginative and bolder. When I compared my early wirings in the first year of the course to the pieces I began producing in my second year, I could tell that I had moved up from grade nought. How far up the ladder I cannot tell.

It would have been easier for me to write non-fiction but I wanted to get out of my comfort zone and try something new. So, I made it hard for myself because I wanted to imagine

everything. I thought making up stuff was the thing to do. And I did make up stuff beyond my expectations and saw that as my biggest accomplishment.
As the draft thesis deadline loomed, I began to explore my own experience of travel and discovery, cultural fusion and the complexities of real-life with the liberty of infraction.

Margaret Atwood said a lot of her stories did happen – if not in her life, in other people's lives somewhere in the world. Lydia Davis too, though a very different type of writer, said the same thing. I took that approach and overcame the consciousness of using the first person "I" because it could be a fictious character. Certainly there were several pieces from memory, motherhood and love that helped, but the stories were not a true reflection of place and events. I crossed the line between fiction and non-fiction a lot.

Writing with brevity allowed me to pack in a lot into a story. I learnt about using language that shows in as much as it tells. I arrived at Rhodes with the hard-wired mind of a journalist and learnt that there were so many ways to tell stories and I plan using them in my work going forward. I intend to continue writing flash fiction – I had never even heard of it until I got to Rhodes.

Readers Report
I was very nervous about the readers report. It was my first experience of sending work to someone I did not know. I had sent around 40 000 words. Surprisingly the reader did not kill my work but understood it with all its imperfections and found it to be "an absorbing read". "*Crossing Shades* contain keenly observed, sometimes humorous, narratives, fragments and reflections on individuals, families, places and identity. The reader is left with a vivid sense of the voice of the writer and the visual world explored and imagined."

I was pleased with way the reader saw my work and found the title evocative and relevant to crossing geographical borders as well and cultural and racial borders. It was important that the work was seen in the context of a world "seen" and "imagined". Some of the stories were written from memory, travel, life and in equal measure, others were imagined and the characters fictious.

It was clear that the reader took great care to scrutinize my work and pointed out the strong elements and suggested points for revisions, including the deletion of some of the weaker stories. I accepted the readers recommendations, and I believe the revisions have added value to the work. Amongst the points for revision were some of the ending, titles, clarification of the narrator and possible ordering of the stories.

It was pointed out that some of the endings needed to be reviewed because they rounded off the stories, leaving nothing for the reader's imagination. Endings, as I pointed out earlier in the portfolio, had been my bug bear throughout the course. I tended to wrap up the stories neatly – a habit from years of being a journalist that I found hard to break. Nonetheless, I think I have made some progress.

For example, **Unnatural** the original ending was: “But he never saw his father again.” This sentence diluted the unfolding power and mystery. It was recommended that I remove the ending sentence. I revised the ending by saying the boy “waited and waited for his father”.

In the story originally called **Therapy**, the ending was “Fuck Facebook,” he screamed. I thought that ending added a contemporary angle to the story. Bringing in social media – but not saying it was pornography. I thought that had left room for deduction. However, I deleted that ending and left it with the previous line. Why now when there was hope”. It was definitely a better ending.

In terms of headings I changed **Therapy** to **Mending Cracks.** I changed several others, too, for example, one of the stories on Cuba had the title “Sanatorium”. That was changed to **Swings and Roundabouts** because it resonated with the mixed emotions around locking up HIV patients. I replaced “**The Fly**” with **Sticky Tales.** The Reluctant Pram Pusher was replaced with a punchy **No Children Allowed.**

There were suggestions about clarifying the narrator when it was obvious it was the same person. I was probably avoiding using the first person in some pieces. As a novice dabbling in fiction, getting out of the reporters had not been easy. I struggled with consistency using first person in some instances and third person in others. I believed the narrative voice and chronology of stories were related.

I tried to chronologically order the stories, but it turned out to be rather messy. It worked towards the end because the stories were sequential. I also decided not to have the travel stories together because they would have not worked thematically. For example, the story on India blended with the mixed family, the child growing up and issues of identity. I tried to mix the stories around theme and that helped to bring some consistency. It was easy to have a common narrator in the Stanger vignettes. Consistency using the character Shana worked.

Since my work was thematically diverse, I believed it gave the reader a varied rather than a linear experience.

Book Reviews

Extreme Fiction: Robin Hemley & Michael Martone

Edited by creative writing professors, this anthology transports one into the world of non-traditional fiction. I found gems of outstanding writing bubbling with humour, wit, irony and imagination that stretches far.
From realism to magical, absurd to whimsically fantastic, every story stands on its own merit. The book holds an elective mix of short stories written by US and international writers. It provides a good understanding of non-traditional form through excellent readers notes.
I found the stories in Extreme Fiction enormously helpful in exploring new forms of writing. Some noteworthy stories that come to mind are: George, Summer's Pasoraina, that bursts with humour and wit, Luiza Velenzuela's Cat's eye that uses metafiction to explore the tango and Flann O'Brien's excellent weaving of a tale with an Irish slant.

Voice from Chernobyl: Svetlana Alexievich

This book puts a human face on the Chernobyl nuclear disaster that killed 4000 people. Alexievich is first author to win a Nobel prize for literature (2015) for non-fiction since Winston Churchill.
She interviewed everyone from communist party bosses, clean-up workers to ordinary survivors. It took her 11 year to complete this book of first-hand accounts. I had never read anything like this before and was riveted.
It came across as oral history at its best - in print. The ordinariness of the narrative, raw from the heart, is what makes Voices of Chernobyl such a unique and powerful book. It goes behind the scenes to dig up the rot of uncaring bureaucracy, power and incompetence.

The sun and her flowers: Rupi kaur

This is the second of Rupi Kaur's, collection after Milk and Honey which sold over a million copies. The book is beautifully designed, with the poet's own sketches and written in a non-traditional form. Kaur who is 25 writes about ordinary issues like, love, betrayal, mental illness, race and identity, that resonate with young people globally.
Her meteoric rise on the poetry scene raised questions around accessibility vs oversimplification, amongst critics.
What I can say for certain, is that her writings have done wonders to bring poetry into the spotlight. At a time when poetry is considered by some as a dying art form, Kaur's work deserves credit. This book should not be ignored by anyone studying poetry or is considering making a living from writing.

City and the City: China Mieville

In my first exploration into what I thought was science-fiction, I picked up City and the City and discovered it did not fit the genre. However, it turned out to be a splendid read. It's a murder mystery with a plot that challenged me to go back a few pages to understand the story. Set in a fictionalised city Bezel the story expands into the adjoining city Ul Qoma. The borders between the two cities are almost invisible and citizens can see one another through a haze but authoritarian rules forbid actual seeing. It sounds ludicrous but seeing and unseeing defines the existence of people in both cities. Mieville's writing is elegant and the plot unfolded with a police investigation that kept me guessing.

What we Lose: Zinzi Clemmons

I enjoyed this debut novel from a young writer who tackles weighty issues of love, loss, identity and disease. The main protagonist Thandi has a South African mother and an American father but was born and raised in the US. Her story tugs at the heart strings when she loses her mother. She put the spotlight on cancer - the disease that ravaged her mum's body and killed her. Thandi also reflects on her black identity, the consequences of loss, explorations into sex, finding love and motherhood.
The book has fragments of poetry interspersed with prose. There's a biographical slant to this story since the author's life resonates with Thandi's life. At 200 pages, it is a short novel with beautiful prose.

Writing in Community

I chose to do my community in writing with high school children because I was interested in engaging with teenagers.
It related to my volunteer work in literacy at lower levels at Salvazione Primary where children had difficulty reading. Most of the children came from underprivileged backgrounds and their home language was Tswana. I wanted to see what it was like at a high school in a township and a school in a privileged area. How would my writing go down with children in grade ten, aged between15-16 years old or older at different schools?
I approached Inkamva Youth, a non-governmental organisation that offered after school tutoring. The closest branch in my province was just under an hour's drive from home. They were thrilled about the idea for the workshop. Greenside High, closer to home, in a leafy suburb in Johannesburg, needed authorisation from Rhodes to ensure that what I wanted to do was legitimate before they obliged.
It did not work out as I had envisaged. There were some disappointments over the number of children but the workshops that I did manage to do, as brief as they were, humbled me, raised questions and surprised me too.
When I arrived at Inkamva Youth premises, I had no idea what to expect other than that there would there be thirteen children. I had enough copies of the pieces I was going to read to them – two short pieces of my writing and one flash fiction. I took a variety of material because I had not met the children or knew at what level they were reading and comprehending.
I got there 45 minutes earlier and moved the desks in a circle. I laid out 13 copies of the reading material for each child and I had extra ones in my bag in case someone showed up unexpectedly. I wrote my name on the whiteboard marker. I practiced reading the pieces. I took out my notebook with writing prompts, sat on the chair and waited.
Neo Ramkoma, the head of the branch, came in and said they should be arriving soon. She went out and came back again and said the rain might be a factor. 'It's a norm here."
So I waited anxiously and was glad to see the first four arrive. A few minutes later another one came and half an hour later, the last one joined us. So, there were seven in total but only five took part from the beginning of the session.
Nonetheless, I found the interaction very interesting. I read one of my own pieces, "When the Music Ends". It was about a man who had fled SA during apartheid and lived in New York. The story was about the effects of trauma and dislocation. The man had refused to come to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to tell his story.
I asked if they understood the story written in plain prose with sentences numbered 1-14. They did not understand the word emaciated and percolate. One of the students said someone in his family had disappeared during apartheid. None of them knew about the TRC. I learned that perhaps the writing was not pitched at the right level.
With time running out I got to the freehand writing exercises. When I told them they did not have to worry about spelling and grammar, they were surprised. I used discretion when I chose the prompts – apple, my mother, I love art because…Most of them chose an apple and gave descriptions.

The one boy who wrote why I love art because…did not want to read. But after class left he told me art was his passion. He loved drawing animation and that was what he wanted to do in his life but his school did not offer art as a subject in matric. It was disheartening to hear that art was not offered at a government school while private schools, certainly the two I know, offered the subject combined with design. I thought about how the value of art as a discipline was being whittled out though it had a place in the future digital world. All I could tell that student was that he should carry on with his passion using the internet.

The workshop at Greenside High was organised by Mrs Porres on a Friday afternoon. The student arrived on time. I read "When the Music Ends" and a piece called "The Fly". The engagement was more robust than in Mamelodi. One student asked why I had written sentences in numbers. I explained that there were many ways of experimenting with writing. Some did not like "The Fly". One of the students was a rapper with his classmate and they were writing lyrics. He said they did not use words like "whore and swearing".

One of the girls said she was interested in pursuing creative writing. She asked if she could read a poem and I checked if everyone else was okay with that. She read a poem she wrote on her phone. It was a beautiful piece. I knew that with teenagers at that age, I had to be flexible and let them enjoy the session. So I did not comply with the recommended format around times.

They were familiar with free handwriting and were keen. I could see that the level here was higher than in Mamelodi and I could use more challenging writing prompts. One prompt was – I see in the distance. I gave them a minute.

The girl who said she was interested in creative writing wrote: *"At the end of the road is see…wait…it is a clown? Or bigfoot? Or is it a deer caught in headlights No. It's a lady just standing there in a white dress, not doing anything, just staring straight ahead. I don't know what to do, do"*

At the end of the session, Mrs Porres asked how it went. She said she encouraged the children who were leaning towards the creative arts to come. The rapper, I learned had great potential and the school uploaded his work on the website once. Those two students asked if I was going to come back. Would they be interested in doing this on a weekend? The needed to check with their parents. They gave me their telephone numbers. Like the children in Mamelodi, they too did not know about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The level of English literacy of the children at a former Model C school that was racially integrated and better resourced was higher than in children from Mamelodi who attended the two sessions. This was not a surprise.

My first Writing in Community workshop experience taught me that I would prefer to do such workshops with someone who has done it before and that the logistics of organising them needed better organisation.

Poetics and Narrativity

Exploration of Literary Form

by

Shareen Singh

Since the early 1900s writers and philosophers were speculating about the death of the novel in its traditional form, yet it still dominates the literary landscape today while experimental writers are trying to muscle in.

In this essay, I seek to understand the tenuous relationship between experimental writing and the conventional form and its relevance for writers entering a highly competitive environment. In trying to find my path, I shall explore the thinking of first world writers and subsequently, link the discourse with the SA context.

The problem for critics of the novel is its realism and integrity regarding truth. John Barth suspected nearly 30 years ago that the novel's time as an art form is up spent.[1] Others too, like RM Berry, maintain the novel's framing concept is exhausted. Fiction in the present never manages to tell us anything we don't already know immediately to tolerate it being told.[2]

This school of thought posits that critical fiction and the *avant-garde* fractures the conventional defamiliarizes language and challenges normative assumptions of the past and has more relevance today. Conversely, the novel sticks to old building blocks and representation than conforms to conservative thinking. [3]

When I began writing this essay I was ambivalent about the *avant-garde.* I remembered an assignment on Samuel Beckett, how it drove me nuts for days – wading through often abstract writing. But there was something about Beckett though, I have to admit, though torturous, brought a sense of flexibility to my writing.

Beckett was influenced by the *avant-garde* and his writings compared to the conventional novel are like hip hop is to a nursery rhyme. They sing from a different tune according to Ann Lauterback who asserts "experimenting falls between promise and fact, between new and approachable, known and unknown, the experimental is always in between like a hinge". The permeability of boundaries - the in-between space one discovers - is no longer limited by a constructed sense of coherence.[4]

[1] Barth John: The Literature of Exhaustion. From The Friday Book: Essays and other Non-Fiction. John Hopkins University

[2] Berry RM: Forms at war. FC2 1999-2009

[3] Lauterbach Ann: http: Use this Word in a Sentence: "Experimtenal'//www.poetryfoundation.org

[4] Williams Carlos Williams: https://poetryfoundation.org./articles/69393/the-poem-as-a-field-of action

I turned to Williams Carlos Williams for clarity. “We are in a different phase – a new language - we are making the mass in which some later Elliot will dig…“Our Poems are not subtly enough made.”[5]

The old style of “staid” poem does not allow the feeling to come through because it was so concerned with conforming to rules.”[6] Williams was referring to American English but urged the British to acknowledge the mobility of dialect as it changed from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dante and Rabelais. He proposed speech as a new form instead of the “rigidity of the poetic foot”. It would bring poetry to was closer to composition.[7]

The old Shakespearian sonnet, for example, used rhyme and standard division in three four-line quatrains and a final couplet that was the gold standard for poetry taught in schools. It was this hellish rigidity of poetry’s rules including the Iambic pentameter and syllables in a stanza, that ruined the appreciation and beauty of this art form as soon as students got to high school.

Williams approach and those of his ilk brought flexibility to writing. Take free verse for example. As a novice, I have been practicing it and what comes out is laughable, yet it takes away some of the hang-ups I had about poetry. For me, free verse is like learning to swim without the instructor saying don’t splash too much. It gives me hope to consider poetry as part of prose – the possibility of exploring hybrid writing.

So, I am getting closer to understanding the dynamics of stuffy rules. Getting to the novel, similar arguments around rules apply, though it is not just language that is at stake, it is about the integrity of the novel that has raised questions.

As pointed earlier, Berry contends that forms like the novel and story, as well as the framing concepts, have exhausted themselves. The framing concepts meaning “the inverted pyramid”, that has served as the gold standard – an accessible template for fiction for more than century.[8]

This mimetic model still dominates ideas about fiction. Brian Evenson points: “Even if you see fiction as a mirror for life, it is worth thinking about what mirrors do – they throw an image in reverse of what is present.” There’s a safety to it – “it’s not a question of what happened, but of using some aspect of life as a catalyst.” [9]

I am drawn to the idea of using fragments of life or one aspect of it, as Evenson does. I suppose the inevitable lived experience does sneak into the novel in some ways. The challenge for me is to allow my imagination to make up most of the story and not rely too much on my life. This appeals to me because I don’t have to bare my personal life, like in memoir, especially when privacy matters - not just for me but for the precious people in my life.

Yet the safety of the novel and question of timing have become contentious issues since they create an illusion that leads the writer to believe what is being said is in the present and is a

[5] Ibid
[6] Ibid
[7] Berry RM: Forms at war. FC2 1999-2009
[8] Evenson Brian: Cold War. Knowledge and Representation and the outside. Urbanomic. 2017
[9] Hemley R & Martonne M: Extreme Fiction. Pearson Education Inc. 2004

true reflection. Literary tools are used, ingeniously to camouflage time.[10] The argument goes like this – the story lacks authenticity, is manufactured to suit a prescribed plot and is cheating.

It's an interesting debate that author Zadie Smith has engaged with. Is the argument against the novel "just another literary genre or that realistic writing is always and everywhere unexamined and unconsidered – a form of philosophical naivety – is in itself somewhat over-stated." She cautions: "Polemics are temporal, good for shaking things up at a particular moment, but that they wilt and fade beside the incommensurable reality of individual books".[11]

Turning to other contemporary writers. Alissa Nutting takes an open book approach. Poetry and prose should be "accessible to me means voluntarily embarrassed," she contends. Her view of the avant-garde, is that it "lays the text, the author, the character so bare, so internalised, so unclothed far deep beneath any nude surface layer of victimhood, that readers and viewers, no matter how hard they might recoil, know that what they are looking at could be nothing, other than human."[12]

Similarly, Lidia Yuknavitch endorses corporeal writing. "I'm on a mission to bring language and the body back into the relationship, with one another. This writing is not about the market – it is not about reading as consuming. The traditional form does not work for the kind of stories she wants to tell – stories about the "well of warmth under each breast". [13]

Bettina Judd's view resonates with Yuknavitch but from a different perspective. "Writing is attached to the body. This statement is quite literal for me; it is my black woman, queer-identified, round bodies hand that puts pen to paper ... I don't find creative freedom in detaching these things." [14]

The body then ostensibly replaces the old literary form and the "I" replaces authorial focus. Emphasis is on the process of making art and the sense of honesty in it. The assumption is that the story is not manufactured to mislead. [15]

Let's look at Chris Kraus's contemporary style of writing. Kraus explanation that she uses 'I' because women were not represented as the literary 'I' except in " a kind of trashy, dirty, women's magazine kind of 'I'. It suggests she attempted to empower women's voices in writing. Perhaps that's a fair point but writing in the 'I' is not the only way of empowering women's voices.

In Kraus's Aliens & Anorexia, an excerpt written in a diary of Kraus's protagonist Simone Weil while fighting anorexia says "the body is salvation" …'But in what way? What is the right way to use it?" How would Weil have used her body had she lived, no one knows.[16]

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[10] Smith Zadie http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-zadie-smith/
[11] Nutting Allisa: Our wrong paths. PDF
[12] Yuknavitch Lidia: Fiction's Present: Situating contemporary narrative innovation. Ed. Berry & Leo. Suny. 2008
[13] Judd Bettina: Writing about Race: PDF: The Racial Imaginary
[14] Textual Practice Vol 31. 2008 Kraus Chris: In conversation with Jacqueline Krass.
[15] Kraus Chris: Hunger – Technology - Emotion. From Aliens & Anorexia. PDF
[16] Ibid

Feminist thinking that I understand relate considers ownership and celebration of the body as only one aspect of women's liberation in the broader struggle of equality and social justice. The challenge then is to find imaginative ways of using the body that refrains from objectifying it in a way that the market demands.

Could the body be exploited in ways that turn out to counterproductive? I suppose time will tell. Writing about sex is an art in itself. One can choose the route of exhibitionism, sadomasochism or subtle yet powerful ways. This is the approach many parents took, including mine. And it stuck like glue but nee generations are making it unstuck.

Kraus's reasoning on the concept of the present was to show the construction of narrative in real-time. Weil's thoughts came straight from her head to the page and the thoughts "fly-out" off the page to whoever is reading it – the reader, the audience. She justifies this approach as true to Weil's philosophy that in narrative or phone sex, it's not the only story we're hearing, it is the fact of an act of telling it. There's emotional transparency when someone else is listening to you.[17]

Perhaps it is the immediacy of the writing that appeals to the contemporary reader. That's something I can take from Kraus's writing. Experimenting has broadened the space for freer expression, failings of characters, sexuality, eroticism and breaking stereotype – in that sense, they represent this generation compared to the conventional novel that largely represented a pre-millennial generation.

As a writer, I would like my imagination to come first, then the craft, accessibility and consideration of representation in different contexts. I have no qualms about taking pockets of wisdom from writers like Yuknavitch and Kraus, despite my reservations about the subjective nature of their work that tends towards interiority as well as from writers using conventional form. It is not either-or but finding a way to blend both.

For now, at least, I maintain as Dambuzo Marachera's succinctly expresses it: "People never find their appearance quite convincing – they're constantly amazed at their ghastly reflection in the mirror." The "I" appeals to me in my private writings though I cannot see my personal story compelling enough to deliberate on – except in journals. I am more inclined to go with Evenson's approach of using a fragment of one's life in fiction.[18]

I accept that writing needs to be fluid and adaptable so I place a high dividend on reading too, expansively to embrace all forms and explore different cultures, particularly from the East and the Middle East, that one does not find easily in bookshops. However, the novels that I have read over the past few years have leaned towards the heterogeneous.

Zadie Smith and Arundhati Roy, both of whom I consider non-conformist amongst a host of others, do not fit in any literary category. The important point, however, is that alongside the younger writers, they confirm that traditional novel has been violated over the years. A stickler for the traditional novel would have restructured Roy's God of Small Things - perhaps brought the middle part to the beginning and cut off the incestuous relationship between a mother and her son.

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[17] Ibid

[18] Marachera Dambuso: 'Beneath reality there is always fantasy'. African Literature: Writers Speak out PDF

Perhaps after much introspection and engaging in the discourse, Smith accepted that the dream of writing pure form to be a kind of illusion, and perhaps just as large an illusion of the dream of perfect mimesis - believing your prose could be a pane of glass through which reality is "perfectly reflected."[19]

My journey in this literary forest shows that form used in the traditional way is in trouble but not entirely dying. It is adapting to contemporary writing of the 21st-century writing. Though long sweeping historical novels might still have a limited readership amongst the die-hard fans it is likely that the shorter contemporary novellas and short stories prove to be more attractive in a fast-paced technology-driven era. In so far as poetry goes, I am ambivalent about the need for form since free-verse has a rhythm of its own.

The South African context

So where does SA stand in this literary landscape? Writing in an accessible way became a clincher for me the day that a colleague commented on my writing. 'I understand your writing, what you are saying. I don't have to struggle with it," he said when I had read a piece of my writing.

It is a contextual matter – there are generations in SA that have a rich experience of speaking several languages and English probably comes second to the vernacular. This point reverberated when I worked with students whose first language was Tswana.

At the same time, however, the idea of abstraction in poetry and literature means that it challenges both writers and readers to get out of their comfort zone and get some brain gymnastics. In my experience, Shakespeare served that purpose. I had to plough through it at high school.

Our education authorities have decided recently that Shakespeare has no place in the schooling system. However, private schools are going to stick with it. What is the effect of this if any, is unclear, suffice to say that the privileged are more than likely to benefit in scrutinising complex literary texts that are unfamiliar. Is there a place then for critical fiction that is mind-bending?

In this regard, I lean on Bell Hook for inspiration. She argues that critical fiction cannot be reached by conventional ways of knowing and reading – it challenges dominant reading practices since the reader must learn "to see" the world differently to understand this form. Charles Bernstein acknowledges too, the existence of "the difficult poem". [20]

My understanding then is that to get readers to read complex works, access to appropriate textbooks in school is critical, unless we wish to remain an island in a world that is rapidly changing with more complexity on one level as well as simplicity on another. Should we be left behind on the complexity of literature? I am not sure but at the risk of being labelled a sucker for colonialism, I can see the cerebral benefits of engaging with thing that are too hard.

[19] Smith Zadie: http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-zadie-smith/
[20] Hooks Bell: Narratives of Struggle: Critical Fictions. Ed Mariani. Bay Press. 1991

It does not help that there are only a sprinkling of black writers in the avant-garde movement – their absence paves the way for this perception that it is elitist and dominated by white men. It's fair to say that Toni Morrison's, "The Bluest Eye" and Langston Hughes jazz poems that broke the norm in a significant way, do not fit into the tight definition of *avant-garde.* [21]

Perhaps the US collective, Black Free jazz under Amiri Baraka's experiment with what Charles Bernstein calls "audio text" might influence more black artists to embrace *avant-garde*. It would be a perfect blend of the sophistication of jazz with poetry's need to inspire feeling rather than meaning.[22] Nonetheless, the point is that there's a lot of out of the box thinking and South African writers too might consider spreading their wings. [23]

Perhaps, I am digressing, but this is a matter of literature and even though I might not at this stage in my life, have the capacity to write at an abstract level, I cannot help rooting for writers who endeavour to produce challenging work.

SA writer Lesego Rampoleng takes a dim view of local literature. "…in SA we seem to be bogged down in this need to celebrate mediocrity..". Art was killed because people were bogged down in the fight against apartheid and this history has dragged on. It's an "aesthetic cross" that local artists had to bear. [24]

I am inclined to agree with him, yet I cannot dismiss the writings of Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying, that had me in stitches with humour and wit. His "touch of magic to the grim realism more common in accounts of black SA life.", could serve as a form experimental writing, that is representative of a cultural realm of the majority of readers.[25]

There's an admirable element to Rampolokeng's work as well as those of Taban Liyong and Philip Zhuwao – brave enough to engage in experimentalism and remain on the margins.

What experimental writing has revealed is the increasing focus on the "I" as Zhuwao confirms. "Firstly the self. I'm much more interested in the self. I'm not interested in the ordinary man in the street." Is this selfish as Zhuwao said some people understand? It's such a subjective issue that could get one running in circles.[26] As I said earlier, writing in the "I" does not appeal to me – perhaps I might reconsider it later.

If someone's life story is so fascinating that it simply has to be shared with the world, then why not? Karl Ove Knausgaard has certainly made a success of it. He has written a chronology of six books on his life, family, loss and love and has become a sensation. He was frank in interviews with critics that he tried to write a novel and failed. So he chose to tell his own story as he remembered it.[27]

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[21] Zinzi Clemmons: Where is our Black Avant-Garde. https://lithub.com
[22] William J Harris: "How You Sound" Amiri Baraka Writes Free Jazz. PDF
[23] Zinzi Clemmons: Where is our Black Avant-Garde. https://lithub.com
[24] Rampolokeng Lesego: interviewed by Robert Berold. June 1999
[25] Fictions from South Africa. The Economist. 16 September 1999
[26] Zhuwao Phillip: From Bleksam. Interviewed by Alan Finlay. 1996
[27] Knausgaard Karl Ove: Interview by Sheila Heita. Chicago Humanities Festival. 9 May 2016

Perhaps it is ordinary human stories about real life that readers find solace in because it mirrors their own experience. Yet again it raises the questions of truth and untruth and ethical issues of privacy since Knausgard's family have questioned aspects of his story.

Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi is arguably Africa's best. She writes in conventional form, yet her prose is compelling. I have read all her novels and enjoy her sense of humour and how she takes a dig at the cultural peculiarities in Nigeria. Her writing sheds light on the impact of Colonialism and the Biafran war.

Perhaps one might say she is not representing the larger community because her characters are middle class- – yet why should she not write about educated people? Africa has no shortage of stereotyping the poor. And Adichie is young and who knows what she will produce in the future.

This journey through the literary forest has resolved in my mind - that form is not the most important thing. It is the craft of writing, attaining brilliance in it, that is more critical. Each story will dictate literary form.

For some writers, conventional form is easier. One has scaffolding and a ladder to climb. Others prefer to write about themselves, which is why memoir and biography have probably gained popularity. Others prefer the freedom to experiment and break old literary rules.

Camille Roy's assertion that mainstream narrative has largely ignored the plurality of society with the setting in white suburbs. "Containment and segregation." This is relevant in SA. Nearly all the literature that I read throughout my school years, had only white characters. Though this has changed to some extent, white characters still dominate as I peruse shelves in bookshops.[28]

The space to write stories within our broader context is no longer an issue and local publishers are beginning to wake up to the reality of our diverse country. The challenge for writers is to move away from didactic writing and eat and breathe imagination.

As Dambuzo Marachera said: "Beneath reality, there is fantasy: the writer's task is to open it out, to feel it, to experience it." I am tempted to explore this idea while also taking counsel from Derek Walcott who sought to "learn from the masters".[29]

So there's a thirst for out of the box writing because life itself is becoming out of the box. Time will tell whether new writing will outperform the tradition form. There's certainly so much scope to write - enough material in marginalised communities to makes their voices heard.

Despite my aspiration to explore fiction, I am not beholden to it. My approach is to look at different genres – short form, essays, creative non-fiction and poetry.

[28] Roy Camille: Biting The Error. Writers Explore Narratives. 2004

[29] Marachera Dambuso: 'Beneath reality there is always fantasy'. African Literature: Writers Speak Out