

I won't be long

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ABSTRACT

My thesis is a weave of short stories, flash fiction and vignettes of prose-poetry. It uses lyrical, scenic and explorative modes to explore the stories of women, past, present and future, from all walks of life. These women, young and old, struggle to find their way within a 'world' characterised as *Salithambo* (the pink castle) whose structures and survival preys on their bodies. The stories explore the themes of girlhood and maturation, violence (specifically against women), animality, scatology, time, gender roles and expectations, and their rejection. I draw inspiration, stylistically, from Irenosen Okojie's depiction of beauty and terror in the same sentence; Selah Saterstrom's fragmented plot and directorial stroke; Taban Lo Liyong & Amos Tutuola's avant-gardism and amplification of language; Adania Shibli's sensorial and spare prose, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Lily Hoang & Carol Oates' normalized magic spell, Athena Villaverde & Espido Freire's imaginative overload of childhood; Shelley Jackson & Chevisa Woods' construction of body parts as bearing texts or as texts themselves.

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Salithambo, the pink castle

And so went the tale of Salithambo, the pink castle. One woman gone missing after the other. Another found as bone or ash or never found, and the found sporting a plastic nose, doll eyes, medical boots and sometimes a rechargeable larynx. Those investigating the crime will be caught pink-handed with an entry ticket to Salithambo and to every ear, it will be known that the body that had a leg missing is now missing two legs, a head, four fingers and other parts that only Salithambo can claim.

The sun will only rise mid-day when it's not waited for. When waited for, it will not rise at all. For why should the sun give up her radiance over Salithambo? Why shouldn't daisies tuck away their yellows from Salithambo's spiteful bees? And the big birds? Why shouldn't they pluck the wings of their younglings? What about the ants? Where have they gone for all four seasons?

Ahead is a stream of sugar water into which our chests are emptied. There are things heavier than what our chests were meant for. We carry them even when we are told not to. "Woman talk." What art in your chest? Talk! We carry them the way we do the babies we had against our will. The way we do with the husbands we stopped loving. The way we do with the life that has long stopped favouring us. We chest. Stomach. Womb. Aches, lumps, hiccups at the peak of every cry. All kinds of things. Don't ask me why. Even without chests, stomachs, wombs. We continue to do so. They say we were born for it. I ask: what is born for us?

Still wondering about the dead child over that cold sink? Wonder about my plastic eyes and rechargeable larynx. Wonder about Salithambo as you wonder about my plastic eyes and rechargeable larynx. Wonder about your unmissing parts. Wonder that they're already missing. Wonder about where they've all gone. Wonder if they'll ever be found when Salithambo is already thick with our skin. And his lights – crystal chandeliers – a downward spiral of our frozen tears. Wonder, when our natural hair, braids, weaves, sacral hairs have done his carpeting. When the doorbell of his main door is my larynx and his curtains the clothing we were last seen wearing. Wonder again. When our thin and fat fingers are cigars for tasting at your pink parties and our platforms, wedges, pumps, ankle strap heels are ashtrays. Wonder if his lounge suite is wide curves and backsides.

Still wondering.

They are sitting on our power. They are living in our castles. They are the aches. Lumps. Hiccups at the end of our cry. We chest. We stomach. We womb them. Don't ask me why we chest, stomach, womb them even without chests, stomachs, wombs. Tell those with parts unmissing to build us a

castle made out of our own strength and call it Zalithambo – a place where bone is spawned.
Because unlike Salithambo – a place where bone stays behind, we will never take from that which
we have given birth to.

The Walls He Keeps Painting

The top of our Dutch door hangs as wide as the two windows of our single room. An opening for all things to enter: flying insects to swarm the fluorescence of our kitchen light. Flies to take flight and retreat to the ditches of your wounds. Where nothing flows. Nothing heals. Even as you go under the water where his algae does not stand.

A mosquito I almost slap escapes the thinness of my fingers to a dark place, where your head will hit against something. A headboard. Sideboard. A wall. Your blood pressure will rise and fall. Between sleep and turning, where the tip of your scream is made to swallow a bag full of hot baby potatoes. An incisor is shoved down your throat like the hateful clutch of a nagmerrie.

There's always a blood spill, somewhere. On a blood-soaked nightdress, inside a fresh bruise, a stitched cut, a wound clotting non-stop, somewhere. Where the skin is too tough to tear and bleed. Where the veins which feed a streaming blood-well open and nothing flows. There's a dry blood spill at the back of your pillow. Beneath the bed cover, on your mattress. Behind the pink flower pin. On the walls. He keeps painting to say he's sorry.

The bat that enters through our Dutch door is always calm, up until the clock starts ticking west, and we've lost count of the right and left turns we've made in a single sleep – then the bat turns vile and starts pulling your front hairs from their roots. Where the pink flower is pinned. Where hair would never grow, even as you apply fresh guava leaves. Where the story behind an empty space on your forehead would be simply:

“It is early evening. My hair is not covered and out of nowhere, a flying thing, a bat, pulls on my front braids and takes off, can you believe it?”

The woman who adjusts your pink flower pin, and the one standing next to her, who compliments the pink flower for complementing your complexion, believes it. Meanwhile, the only thing pinned to my hair is the memory of a bat that did not fall far from the tree or dark sky to snatch at your head.

While thinking this through, I realise that the east side of the wall watch is covered in grey paint. If brother and I had been playing umaphicaphicane on a rounded man who is white on one side of the eye and grey on the other, brother would never have guessed him hanging on our walls. A rounded man in the dark sky, a half-moon, would have been a good attempt, but not close enough. This rounded man made a sound and did not extend its light around a woman and a child holding hands. It did not reach the back of the woman, the way a full moon, in its fullest and most outlying, seemed to. But were they? Near the horizon, were the woman and the child the centre of the rounded man?

Or was the image a mere bending of the light to produce a distant object? Distant or near, the rounded man on our walls has no light, no centre, and by night, we are fissured lights in his dark sky.

It was dark outside and inside the house; it was darker all the same. I kept on peering out the door, waiting for your heaving knock. A knock that knocks as it enters with a rustling plastic full of oorskiets, the every-day burnt tomato and cheese toasted sandwiches, hemmed to a note proclaiming “toesteming oorskiets.” The only thing I look out for in the dark is you. Otherwise, I wouldn’t mind if night ends soon after your arrival and day lingers, forever. Night is that uneasy feeling, between knowing that a loaded gun lies under your pillow and being forced to catch a peaceful sleep.

You enter the door, ducking a little lower, careful not to bump your head against the doorframe. Sometimes, the bat keeps you on your knees. Other times, lower than that. I make to soothe your feet, the way I do every night to relieve the bony bumps on your big toes. A bilious, heavy, grey smell first hits your sinuses and then, your light head, right across the forehead. You release a heavy sigh that forgets to ask, how was school today? It forgets to check if the homework was completed and the school shoes waxed.

You insert the first two toes of your right foot, the bunion protruding like a deep-fried baby potato, to feel the temperature of the salt water before I add the rest from the kettle. You only ask brother to check the sides of your bag for *Grandpa Powder*. Before I put a dry cloth inside the warm water, I see a reflection of the rounded man on the wall. Your *Home Choice* pot set is aligned at the top of your kitchen cabinet, but the shape of the pots looks hazy, as if no metal binds them except the flowing quicksilver they reflect.

Soon after I place a dry cloth to soothe where it hurts between your toes, this disappears. You look around, your eyes panning across the kitchen, at what your walls have become. Your walls have shifted from a papaya whip to a heavy grey, and like the reflection of the rounded man and your pots, our dirty fingerprints from playing outside – the brown soup that misses your face to land on the wall – have disappeared. The way everything that lands on our walls eventually does.

When the curtains are drawn, the doors locked and brother is looking for keys to set out, I wish our walls were like banana peels. I wish they could easily fall on their sides, when hulled. But they are made up of thick cement and vibrate many nights without a single crack. Once, I made a sound inside the walls and asked my friend to listen out from the outside and nothing of the *gu gu* sound I had been making gored these walls.

“Thought I should do some painting today.”

“...I see.”

“Ja. Bought the paint from Sugar. He was stranded and I figured out we needed to cover our walls.”

I watch you staring at the many paint dribbles on the folded table, the cream-white bread bin, and the tray behind it, oozing heavily in dark grey. I pass a low whisper to brother, “let’s play umaphicaphicane. A four-walled woman newly painted in grey. What is it?” I expect him to say, “it’s this house” but he simply says I shouldn’t play like that and never say why.

“You could have at least covered my things, Den.”

“I did. I did shift your things, Nonto.”

“But everything swims in grey.”

You step on a dry towel as I make to empty a washing tub and deposit the blankets that brother is dressing on a sponge, where the table, surrounded by four chairs, stands during the day. When the elders are talking, you taught us not to hear. When it’s daytime, we leave the house. Now, it’s night time, brother and I lower our heads, careful not to bump them against the doorframe that you are always careful not to hit, just to show that we do not hear. Brother is always the first to sleep but when the *gu gu* sound I made for my friend to listen for from the outside comes up – when the weight of the bat is on your throat – he’s always the first to jump, to look for the key, or a way out, through a locked door, between the shafts of our burglar bars, through a key hole, through the eye of a needle, where the roof leaks.

“Spills are bound to happen, Nonto.”

“You call these spills?”

“Goddamnit! It’s water paint. Not permanent. You know, it’s evident. Nothing I do makes you happy...”

“Happy? I’m happy, Den. I’m happy to come home to this mess when I’m obviously tired. I’m happy you didn’t call to tell me you were painting the house. I’m happy you spent the money that was meant to buy bread for the kids on your stranded friend.”

In a class photo we took last week, Mistress Mabaso said that next time I should try my level best to show a happy face. If it’s not there, I must “look for it”. Every photograph I posed for thereafter caught me facing up or down, and sometimes to the sides, looking for a happy face. I’ve never been able to find it. In photos where I thought I had found it through the *cheese, brown bread or inkomazi* smiling tactics, if you look close enough, it was never there.

“I do good. I do bad. It’s the same shade of paint with you. You’d rather Isaac pleased you.”

“Isaac?”

Remember the long weekend visit in Uncle Isaac’s town house? The warm water you ran for brother and I to bathe in. The door you locked behind when brother’s soapy hands felt like a foam on the pupil of my eye. Before I touched my younger cousin brother with the same soapy hands. Before my older cousin brother learned that brother touches me with soapy hands, and took soapy touching turns with brother. Before many soapy touches befell me. I knew there was something wrong with these touches but hearing “we are family” at the end of every touch made it passable enough that even in the cold cold weather, being in a vest would not make me tremble. And so, upon turning the door handle and finding it locked, upon calling your name to say I was done bathing, I realised that Uncle Isaac’s song was too loud for you to hear a bang on the bathroom door. “Mama, I’m done bathing. Mama, I’m done bathing. Mama...” And so, I built a secret drawer and shelved this moment there.

The next morning, when you had gone to work, when we were supposed to catch the second taxi home, we did not. We walked thirty miles home. No lizard would have had the nerve to hide behind a rock that sunny day. Brother and I unzipped our wool jerseys and folded our sleeves. We couldn’t count the coins Uncle Isaac had given us the night before. We couldn’t stop the mouth-watering bells of the ice-cream man. We couldn’t stop to tie our shoe laces. We were only warned to pick up our pace.

Two days later, when the bat was not around to order our coins around, I must have made new friends and our friendship must have ended when my pockets were empty and my old friends must have forgiven me on a single promise, that when Uncle Isaac pays us a visit, I should call them so that when he orders me to go to the shops and says “keep the change,” we share it. But a promise would promise another, and another another, but Uncle Isaac would not come home to see us, and every one of your fights would be a daily storm that brews and never settles without the mention of Uncle Isaac.

“I know about it,” says the bat.

I hear the sound of a wardrobe door opening and never closing as I picture you wearing your night robe and taking off your skirt beneath the robe, the way I see you do sometimes when we are rubbing sleep of our eyes and you ask, how many times have we gone to pee? I try not to turn from the left to the right or make a sound. Something tells me that you can see the movement of my blinking eyes, but I continue to feed on an image of brother sitting at the back of a blue truck next to

a fridge that holds a family picture, the stove and kitchen cabinet solidly tied with a thick hemp rope while I sit on your lap in the front. The way it had been, a while back, when the bat fetched us in a yellow truck and drove us home. I hated being gone and back. Gone and back. Gone and back. I hated being asked by my schoolmates, “when are you coming back?” and when I was back “when are you leaving?” I want to be gone forever.

“He fooled me. Sends me to buy beer and fucks you in the presence of my kids.”

“That’s not true, Den. You know it,” you say.

He says, you’re pushing him and he doesn’t want to hit you. The sound of something hitting against something. The *gu gu* sound I made from the inside of our walls, when my friend stood outside listening, and could not hear the sound, comes up. The sound that a yellow truck made when it missed braking for a hump and the newspaper-wrapped teacups in the boxes suffered little cracks. Brother jumped first and I followed.

Between rubbing my eyes of sleep and withholding pee from running down, he hit you. You didn’t push him but he hit you with brother standing in the middle, holding his hands, trying to stop him from holding you. I let the pee run, the way my friends and I do sometimes when the rain has already beaten us. We push our panties on the side and let it run.

That pressing feeling of fear in the form of a pee would later revisit me – twenty years later. When I have come home for a university vacation and brother comes home to see me, and as I enter our street, I hear brother’s voice shouting. I hear your voice between his shouting and your shoutings rubbing against each other. I stop to think, should I let it run on me or should I run home? Choosing to run home, I discover that the fight is not between you and brother, the fight is between two women wanting to kill each other for a man outside our gate. Only then does the acid churning in my stomach cool down. “Thank God it’s not us again” – but even as it isn’t us, I ask myself, is brother a tree that that has rejected its own roots? Is he a bat that is turning against its nature?

Meanwhile, between the thin bars of our burglar doors, we mercifully escape. Starting with one arm, the head, the other arm, and then the other parts, as brother and I run to call a neighbour to remove the bat from your head, while we grab what we can of our school uniforms and the tomato and cheese sandwiches for school tomorrow. As we head for the hills and back to the pink castle.

Dear brotherly brother,

Remember when you caught me between the sheets with a guy your age and you threatened to tell mother and I said I was going to tell on you too and you said there was nothing to tell on you and I said you'd rather I be caught between the sheets with you and you said I can't say that and I said I have every right and you said mother won't believe me and I said I'll make her believe me and you asked how was I to do that and I said if you believed she wasn't going to believe me then why was how I was going to do it bothering you and you said what's that supposed to mean and I said mother will suppose its meaning and you said you're sorry I can date whoever I want but not a guy your age and I never told on you I never told on you I never told on you I never let mother disown you.

75/3

Matimela only had two slices of bread to butter. A six-year-old Manana and an eight-year-old Kgotso. This had been the twelfth if not twentieth family to rent 75/3. Matimela was very beautiful. That was not in question. We all wanted to grow up and be just like her. But that being her meant leaving your own children for many days without anyone to look after them, and that it meant changing hairstyles while every term Kgotso and Manana were sent home for not having paid school fees was something that I disliked once I came to know about it.

That thing that makes you wonder and wonder endlessly about someone or something was the very thing that curled itself around her feet. Like a passageway, that, having walked it for so long, would regardless not even lead us to her when she disappears for a night, or sometimes two. Never knowing, never caring, if Kgotso locked the door or left it open.

Whether Manana might casually tell a friend, who might tell another, that they're all by themselves. Whether the hot iron ignited a light sheet, the light sheet a thick one, the thick one a mattress, the mattress a lace-curtain, culminating in the explosion of a paraffin heater. Whether 75/3 caught fire while they were away at school or were about to go to school. Whether the neighbours, breaking into the house to extinguish the fire, caught other small fires: the kitchen door that is left open, the key left behind, and Big Ben's bank-card sitting on a chest of drawers.

Big Ben's wife, being amongst those who had gone to extinguish the fire, caught her own fire. And counting the nights they spent without Big Ben, wished, sincerely, that 75/3 could have been left to burn down, whether the kids came back from school to find smoked and cracked windows, and the springs that once held the mattress balanced against the wall outside, and the base of what was once a steam iron which started the fire which led to the other fires. Whether this or that happened. She only found out the next morning when Kgotso and I were struggling to make out the words on the right margins of his Life Skills textbook which was lost to the fire.

That night, Grandmother's suspicions about Manana and Kgotso being uncared for were proven right. And when a woman with wide nostrils said that she mothers only three kids and will not babysit another woman's children while she's going everywhere behaving like a teenager, Grandmother said children need our love and care and she took them in. She didn't fuss about it the way some neighbours, pretending to be affected but unwilling to take them in, had done.

By way of the curt three lines on Grandmother's forehead, I knew she was full of it. That Matimela had gone too far: beyond the three lines that anyone who knows Grandmother really well would not dare cross.

A frosty morning announced one of Grandmother's off days. She sent me to 75/3 to call Matimela for help with filling in her retirement forms. Because I knew more than what my books warranted me to know, I thought I could help Grandmother better than Matimela would and I was right. I knocked. I thought I made a gentle knock, but their zinc door made it an exacting police knock.

Kgotso who was, thirty minutes before school, still in pyjamas, opened the door. Could grandmother have left me all by myself to prepare for school? Could she have left me to rip my lunch bread with cold, hard butter? Could she have trusted that I know how to move the iron around my collar? Between the crimps of my skirt? Not my grandmother. Not while she was still alive. I looked around pretending not to be looking, while I looked for what we had that they didn't have.

Kgotso was sharpening an already dwarfish pencil with a knife. Manana cried for homework that was incomplete. And it was almost time. Time to cross Maseko, Khumalo, Mosea, and before the bridge, Sekoto Street. Time to present five empty cans at the school gate or risk getting three hot morning lashes for having not brought any. Time to run for the assembly and sing Ntate'wa rona yama hodimong.

When I asked to see their mother, their eyes met and pointed together to a room whose door was slightly open. For a fly. For a mouse to sneak in and out. I wasn't too sure if their eyes meant I should go where they directed or if the fact of my being there was already announced through the movement of their eyes. And so I stood behind the door, thinking about a short comprehension test we were to write in the first period, the blue pen I had lost the day before, and the cockroaches they had that we didn't have.

This reminded me of a flying cockroach that came with a textbook of one of my group members. When we all looked at each other and didn't want to be associated with it. When we resolved to let it move around the table, and decided that the person it went to had been a sibling to the cockroach. We were all ready to deny it being our sibling and were so happy when it decided to fly away.

I looked for a wall watch and realised it was an hour behind. While Kgotso, almost cutting himself, continued to sharpen the pencil, I estimated that we had about twenty minutes left. Maybe I should go back with the form. While I decided what to do, a voice coming from the other room said, "What do you want, so early in the morning?"

I took two steps toward where the voice was coming from. While I took the third into the bedroom, I was told to wait right there! I recited Grandmother's message swiftly. Hadn't I seen someone? Someone who doesn't live there? Grandmother said peering in other people's business would both

land me in trouble and make me go blind. And indeed, upon passing through the bedroom door without an invitation, I must have lost my sight the minute I saw Big Ben snoring in there. Was he the big fat mouse that, Grandmother and Sis'Thandi remarked, disappeared, meticulously, in our street for a piece of cheese? That same day I also saw Big Ben enter Sis'Thandi's yard in the early hours of the evening, and the next day in class when we played 'story' during a free period, I drew three houses: 75/3, 75/2, and 75/1. I narrated the story of a father who fathered two families. And it became a famous story, one that some of my class-mates stole and made it their own.

I looked through Manana's open book, an empty table of living things and non-living things, and said, "Living things are things that live and non-living things are that don't live. Kgotso, you, and I live. But this house does not." I told her that if she had asked a little earlier I would have given her my Grade 3 exercise book to copy answers from.

It must have been the last day of term, the sun must have fallen, when Kgotso and Manana came to our house and called me out to play. They stayed until Grandmother called me in and dinner was served. As usual, they ate their food hot, like gulping water, without breaks in between, on a hot Sports day. When Grandmother asked if their mother was home that night they lied to Grandmother and said she was home. This was also the night Kgotso knocked on our bedroom window, screaming because Manana had eaten mouse poison while he had gone to his classmate to borrow a Life Skills textbook. Grandmother took them in that night too.

I was very happy and at the same time unhappy when they came to our house. I was most happy during cold afternoons, after school, when we would steal sachets of Huletts white sugar from the top top top shelf of our kitchen cabinet, and chew them with their paper. I liked it when we would bet on cards and hide them whenever Grandmother approached. When I would give Kgotso some of my food to swallow on my behalf while Grandmother had gone to pray in the bedroom. Sometimes, we looked at each other and giggled at the empty air. Other times, we stared at each other until each of us let out a tear, and from there on used those tears to act out the moment of discovering that one of us had died. I liked those moments.

But, I didn't like it when they ate faster than me to take seconds and thirds. When they giggled when Grandmother told me we didn't have a dog to finish my food and when Grandmother said that in no time my pyjama pants will reach my knees, but Manana will fit them well. Or, "share your pencils with Kgotso." And when I did, in my little heart I sang, "tsimi tsimi tsamaya, heno ke thotheng," and followed it with a look that reminded them whose home this was.

In the early hours of the morning there was a knock. *Ko-ko ko-ko*. "It's Matimela. Are the kids here?" Kgotso and I were readying for school, and Grandmother had called in sick at work in order to take Manana to the clinic. She didn't open the door until the next day when the police came knocking at our door. I didn't like the fact that the entire street was going to know that a police van was parked outside our house. But I liked the exchange of words between Grandmother and Matimela, and the police uniform trying to break the words.

After those words, Kgotso and Manana stopped coming to our house. After those words, Mistress Mabaso's sky blue *Chrysler* was parked outside 75/3. After those words, I would only bump into Kgotso and Manana at school. After those words, Matimela disappeared forever and new tenants moved in at 75/3. I learned years later that before her death, my mother was pestered by those same words.

Siswana

It was a Monday morning. A village hen clucked at the assembly, looking for its youngling. The school principal, Mister Rakobo, went off with the hen, leaving the assembly divided into several assemblies. The Mocking Birds choral conductor raised a hand, calming the sopranos and tenors that were going this way and that. "Whose mother is that?" inquired some. "Someone must have stolen money or something," speculated some. "A family death? A bullying case?" Some concluded that this was not the case.

"This is not a choir!" said Mude Mude Sbam'Senyoni, the tallest of all the assembly of short people.

Ending his chat with the hen, Mister Rakobo took the stand, tucking in a shirt that was already tucked. For Mister Rakobo, the air tucking business broke the ice of what was to follow, which often dragged like Mtshilibe's Maths calculations. Without the hand of The Mocking Birds' choral conductor, the wandering sopranos and tenors died down.

"This morning, on my way here, I accidentally knocked a bird," said Mister Rakobo, making to tuck the air.

"Where I come from-"

Eish, eish, eish. Just teeeellaaaaaas," said Mude Mude Sbam'Senyoni, leaving half of the assembly in deep stitches of laughter.

"Order!" said the Mocking Birds' choral conductor. And order did not prevail.

Mister Rakobo made to tuck air. This time fixing his sharp belt – the eater. The one that ate *gandaganda* to scream *mamayooooohhhh*. The one that swiftly restores order.

"Where I come from..." proceeded Mister Rakobo.

"Eiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiish," whispered Mude Mude Sbam'Senyoni at the back. Soft giggles spreading between the assembly lines.

"When one accidentally hits a bird, err... you must know, there's trouble coming," said Mister Rakobo, looking at the hen. "And here we are faced with that trouble".

"Eiiiiiiii. Haaai!" said Mude Mude again, bending his knees to match everyone else's height.

"The woman standing next to me is Siswana Mlotha's mother, a Grade 7b learner."

The assembly fell silent.

"Siswana has gone missing, my children."

“Hhhhhhhuuuuuhhhh! Yoooooh!” sounded the assembly.

“She was last seen on Friday,” continued Mister Rakobo.

“Iiiyooooooooohhhhhh,” sounded the Grade 7b row.

“I saw her. It must have been early in the morning when I saw her,” said the girl who doesn’t polish her shoes.

“Her eyes were red. She looked like she had been crying,” said the one who always forgets that what you do on the left hand side is also what you do on the right hand side in Mtshilibe’s Maths class.

“I asked her why her eyes were red and she said she had been fighting with her sister over a slice of bread,” said the one who always colours her exercise books but never finishes her work.

“I offered to share my bread with her during lunch time,” said the bread and butter girl.

“I didn’t see her,” said the forever-clueless one.

“We are going to need your help,” proceeded Mister Rakobo. He tucked the air so that he could announce that those who saw Siswana on Friday should report to his office and that there was a reward involved.

“Mmmmmmmhhhhhhhhh,” sounded the assembly.

Singing *We Are Marching In The Light of God*, the assembly dispersed. And from then on, Thabeng Primary would be filled with many stories about Siswana’s whereabouts. Some would suspect the green taxi that transports pupils in the morning and after school. An uncle who sells cup-cakes would be said to have used sweet flour to snatch the clueless one. The road leading to school would be said to have led the one who forgets that what you do on the left hand side is also what you do on the right hand side nowhere. A piece of chalk, inanimate, would be said to have solved x. A pink house nearby would be said to have a fridge with Siswana’s ear. But Siswana’s body would be found, months later, inside a pit latrine – at the back of the school. And from that day on, Thabeng Primary would have their first flushing toilet.

A Kind Man Who Just Looked Ugly

Grandmother always told scary stories about a lone cannibal-man who the community was afraid of, and warned their children never to go near his house. But the children would go against their parents' instructions and play near his house. He would invite them over to his house and they would find out that he was a kind man who just looked ugly.

The Man and the Old Woman

Once upon a time, an old woman stopped a man. The old woman asked the man to remove a green sticky thing from her eye. The man snubbed her, and from that day onwards, every time the man went to the bush to relieve himself, his faeces followed him relentlessly. That was the end of the story of an old woman and a man, but the beginning of tale of that man, as Tshomo and his shit:

*

Tshomo and His Faeces

There once lived, Tshomo, his wife and his mother. Tshomo was a glutton. His wife served and served him and when he was full, he went to the toilet and released the loooooooooonnnngest shit. When he made to flush the toilet, it didn't go away. Then, he left and went to a Stokvel. His shit followed him and said:

Tshomo we Tshomo

Ong se elang, Tshomo?

Ha o ya le beng, Tshomo

Keya le wena Tshomo

Tshomo we Tshomo

Ong se elang, Tshomo?

Ha o ya le beng, Tshomo

Keya le wena Tshomo

(Tshomo oh Tshomo

Why do you leave me, Tshomo?

When you go to a drinking hole, Tshomo

I'll follow you, Tshomo)

Tshomo stopped and squashed and squashed it. When he was done, he continued to walk to the Stokvel. His shit, spreading out, trailed behind him.

Tshomo we Tshomo

Ong se elang, Tshomo?

Ha o ya le beng, Tshomo

Keya le wena Tshomo

Tshomo we Tshomo

Ong se elang, Tshomo?

Ha o ya le beng, Tshomo

Keya le wena Tshomo

Tshomo ran, ran, ran, and then fell. When he was flat on the ground, his shit laughed aloud. Then he waited for it, tucked it inside his pocket, and carried it down to the Stokvel. When he got there, he bought himself beer and drank it. His shit peered and said, "Tshomo, Tshomo, feed me. If you don't, I'll embarrass you in front of everyone." Tshomo fed it. Then he bought himself Coke and drank it. His shit peered out again, "Tshomo, Tshomo, feed me. If you don't I'll embarrass you in front of people."

Tshomo fed it, and when he had fed it, the members of the Stokvel said, "mmmmh, we smell shit here." Tshomo took his shit from his pocket and hid it under a bowl. Tshomo's shit pushed at the bowl and ran away. The Stokvel members chased Tshomo out of the Stokvel.

Then, on their way home, Tshomo and his shit met an old man who held a bag containing a lot of money. Tshomo instructed his shit to jump inside the old man's bag and steal some money. His shit did as instructed and that was the end of this story, but the beginning of another Tshomo tale:

*

Tshomo and His Shit

There once lived, and surely still does, a hoggish man called Tshomo. One day, after having dinner with friends, he excused himself and went to the restroom. He sat on the toilet seat for a very long time, such that the person who had been queuing after him went to a restroom in another building, and came back to find him still there, moaning out a thick, long, long shit.

He wiped his cleft, flushed, and the shit would not go away. He waited for the water to fill up the cistern – to flush again – and it still would not go away. Then he decided to leave it laying there like that, but when he reached for the door-handle, it sang:

Tshomo we Tshomo

Ong se elang, Tshomo?

Mo o yang, Tshomo

Keya le wena Tshomo

(Tshomo oh Tshomo

Why do you leave me, Tshomo?

Wherever you go, Tshomo

I'll follow you, Tshomo)

Tshomo kicked and squashed it, and then proceeded to walk – a lot faster this time. But it tripped him, and when he fell, landing on his back, it sang again:

Tshomo we Tshomo

Ong se elang, Tshomo?

Mo o yang, Tshomo

Keya le wena Tshomo

Tshomo pleaded with it, promising to wear it proudly the next time. And, nose turned, it continued to sing until he decided to tuck it in his side pocket. He washed his hands and applied huge gobs of cologne before going back in.

A few minutes later, a beautiful young woman walked across to where Tshomo and his friends were seated. Tshomo made to approach her, but when he stood up, his shit made a slight movement. Holding on to his side pocket, he went to the restroom again. "I thought we agreed that you will stay inside my pocket until we get home," said Tshomo. His shit asked how it would have felt if it had been Tshomo in the side-pocket. "Ok, fine. I won't be long," said Tshomo, spreading a few drops of cologne to silence his shit.

He fiddled with his wristwatch, before telling his friends that he needed to go somewhere urgently. His friends begged him to stay for one more beer, but when he had finished it, and had forgotten about lay hidden inside his pocket, he asked for a refill. His shit started to jump up and down, down and up, inside his pocket and Tshomo's friend asked, "What's that smell?"

"I thought I was the only one picking it up," said another, and Tshomo, directing their attention to something else, spoke about the beautiful young girl who had walked past them. Even as they asked the waiter to shift them to another table, the smell lingered. It hung about as they looked at each other and under their shoes, resolving that it couldn't have been from one of them.

They left the place at last. Most proceeded to another drinking place while Tshomo went far away, to where he was going to desert his long long shit for good. He managed to, but only for a short while. For when he went home, he found it coiled outside the door, singing:

Tshomo we Tshomo

Ong se elang, Tshomo?

Mo o yang, Tshomo

Keya le wena Tshomo

Things had changed. Tshomo's shit was no longer trailing behind, but leading him. What else could he do to get rid of it? The disgruntled Tshomo held his head, out of options. Then, the following day, the same girl who had passed their table – on the night of the dinner with his friends – walked past him and could not smell his shit, but instead a balm of roses.

At first, the girl refused his lift and to give him her number.

Weeks later, when they saw each other again, she turned him down all the same, but at least this time took his number.

Three weeks later, they had already gone out on many dates.

A month later: inseparable!

Tshomo's shit was silent then. For, months later, the girl's rosy balm clung to Tshomo's collar and Tshomo's shit to the girl's diadem.

A year later, the girl washed up several times, with scented baths oils and salts, to enshroud that noisomeness, which wafted grimly the moment she got to it.

A year and some months later, the man started going out late at night with other rosy-balmed girls, leaving the girl behind.

A year and some more months later, the girl stopped going home. Stopped seeing anyone.

Two years later, Tshomo told the girl how no man in the entire universe could put up with a stinky for a girlfriend.

Two years and some months later, the girl left Tshomo and went back home.

Two years and some more months later, Tshomo moved in with another girl, with a doubly rosy smell.

Three years later, when the girl had heard that Tshomo was with another girl, it broke her to know that she had lost the essence of her scent to a man who had a lot to take and nothing to give in return.

Three years later, Tshomo was still living with the doubly-rosey girl but on the side, seeing a triply-rosey smelling girl.

Three years and some months later, the first rosy-smelling girl to take Tshomo's shit met an old woman, a fairy, who upon seeing her in a busy market said, "That shit wearing you down will soon return to its owner! Learn better, next time, what you are after, and what or who is after what from you, and also for what reasons." Pressing a small bottle onto the palm of her hand, the fairy disappeared among the winding market avenues. Doing as instructed by the bottle, what Tshomo had left her with soon became nothing but a frowsy memory. Even as it infiltrated her mind, it could no longer be hers.

That night it rained, and when the bolt of lightning struck, it hit Tshomo's stomach and he rose, in the middle of the night, and ran to the toilet, to let out his longest shit yet, and it sang *Tshomo we Tshomo, Tshomo we Tshomo* until it stopped raining. But even as the rain stopped, whenever Tshomo would leave it behind, it continued to sing.

Three years and some months later, the balm of the doubly-rosy girl would become single and that of the triply-rosy girl, double.

Three years and some more months later, when Tshomo could be seen spending more time with the doubly-rosy girl and less time with the singly-rosy girl, the singly-rosy girl would meet another Tshomo and leave him.

Four years later, the doubly-rosy girl was only left with half of what was once a resilient balm.

Four years and some months later, when she awoke in the middle of the night she followed the trail of shit, in every drawer, under every shoe, behind doors, in the wardrobe, inside a side pocket of a hanged coat, to where Tshomo had hidden his shit. When the girl confronted him about it, he denied it.

Four years and some more months later, she confronted Tshomo about it and he denied it.

Five years later, she left because nothing changed.

Five years and some months later, Tshomo was back to his same old shit, still unwilling to deal with it himself, still looking for someone to pass it on to or a place to ditch it, forever.

I won't be long

JNC's office has a sound to it. The sound of Made's yell.

"Jiggers are howling down there."

"Jiggers are howling down there?"

"We are getting closer, Made. We are getting closer." was the only promise I could make to ease her pain, after many months of: Mister Kenneth is on study leave. On sick leave. Attending a conference. On his way from a meeting. On an important phone call. Having lunch. Not in a position to see people. On sabbatical leave. And other times, a note stuck on a glass door would say "Sorry, we are closed today, register your name and address, we'll assist you in due time." Due time? Not today, thought Kime. This had to be the day. The crossing of her middle and index fingers had to work a miracle for her today.

"What's the number on your card?" asked a young lady behind the desk, who could have been Kime's age-mate.

"Eighteen," replied Kime.

"Mister Kenneth will be leaving in the next five minutes, so I would advise you to--"

"Oh no. Please. We've been coming here for months on end without any help. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now," wept Kime.

"What's your case, again?" she clicked on the computer as if her case was somehow going to pop up on the screen.

"Jiggers."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. You'll have to come early morning tomorrow. We've already given enough for the day."

Where was the lady's heart? Behind the desk? Between the tiny spaces on the keyboard? Drowning inside the teapot on the table or flooded by the dial tones of the office space? How could Made's sharp cry have done nothing to her? How was she moving on to the next number when the issues of the previous number had not been resolved? Realizing that sympathy was not a given for some people, she uncrossed her fingers.

Even this day had not been the day. Made kept yelling, “Jiggers are howling down there.” I only said, “We’ll be back tomorrow, Made. We’ll be back,” even as my words held no hope. I helped her balance on my right shoulder as we walked and when we were about to exit the gate, she yelled again – this time, quietly. Like there was no use crying. And that was it. Like Muthambu, Khikhambu, Sita, Khongi, Thisali and little Manda, there was no coming back. No early morning tomorrow. Her body was already cold.

Mister Kenneth only arrived an hour later on the scene. What could cloak his mess worse than scrounging a few notes to pass on condolences, assuring me he was going to help out with the planning of the funeral? For the likes of Mister Kenneth it was that simple. And even as I knew this I was still surprised.

I went home silently that night. Longing terribly for Made to yell. To wake me up. Wake everybody up. Turn night into day. To sleep wakeful. I opened the oven where the cat – hunger – sleeps. Its dismembered head was almost brittle. I flipped it over to burn it on the other side. The smell no longer makes me want to contract my face. I’m used to it now. While there are many ways to kick the cat out of the oven, there’s only one way to kick it hard, and that is to knock it on the head, where its curiosity lives. That’s exactly where Mister Kenneth and his pals knocked us. I took a copy of *book without a cover, without the title or author’s name* – and fed my hungry stomach. Books and books alone, with or without covers, had helped me escape many problems.

For days, I waited for my sister or brother to walk in or simply call back but they didn’t. Were they too not well? Could it have been the poor network or something? Was it because Made was a sister to a brother – our father – who had tried to burn us alive? I hadn’t seen or heard from them in ten months. If I do not hear from them in two days, I’ll go to Mister Kenneth and bury Made on my own.

A week passed and there was still nothing. The day I went to see Mister Kenneth, her PA – Idah – arrived at midday, when people had gone out and back to the queue, in search of something to chew on, to quell thirst with, or tobacco. Even as I queued I still fed on *book without a cover, without the title or author’s name*, until a woman who had been sitting next to me insisted on sharing her lunch with me.

She said, “When you have gathered some strength, you’ll tell me about the book you’re reading.” We ate from the tin box and licked our fingertips, taking turns to drink water, while those queuing in front

of us went in, one by one. My turn came to write, for the first time, 'appointment with Mister Kenneth', and while paging through the registration, I realised that the issues at Nambili village were all the same. 1. Jigger treatment. 2. Joblessness. 3. The cat. The cat sleeping in the oven.

"Please, have a seat," said Mister Kenneth, sluggishly rotating his leather seat. "I hope you know that this solely out of my pocket. The funding we get from the state is only for the treatment of jiggers and food parcels. Any adults at home?"

"Yes, Mister Kenneth. I have an elder brother and sister. They work outside Nambili and will be coming soon."

"Alright. Idah will arrange a coffin for you."

"Mister Kenneth, I really don't know how to thank you."

"It's my pleasure, Kime. Will you come over to tell us when the date and time has been set?"

"Yes, Mister Kenneth. Thank you."

I walked out a little more feathery than when I had walked in. "Were you helped?" asked the woman who had shared her lunch with me. "Yes, I was."

"They were right. He's such a kind man." The woman's number was called out, but before going in, she said: "Once your aunt's funeral has been arranged, go to Montana village and look for Sister Beatrice."

The anger I had longed for the night before was suddenly there, probing. Why had I allowed a man who had failed Made to buy her a coffin? What's growing tired inside myself that I want – at this point – nothing but to bury Made peacefully and get used to living without her? The pap and spinach I had had from Sister Beatrice that day still held my stomach. Because it had been difficult to sleep during the past nights, I only read two paragraphs from *book without a cover, without the title or author's name* and dimmed the lights.

The following day, brother arrived. A lorry that had been transporting a herd of cows hit a cable truck and turned over and my brother – being among the group that witnessed the incident – came with a wodge of beef they prepared for the mourners. Made's body was brought later on by the Khamba mortuary Mister Kenneth had an arrangement with. Neighbours made all kinds of contributions. Candles, salt, cooking oil, small and big knives – and helping hands. Apart from the fact that the

Khamba's hearse couldn't reverse into the yard due to its height and bumpiness, things were suddenly coming together.

Sita, Khongi and Thisalinge had been buried without a coffin. I blew burnt charcoal onto the wood to start a ground fire. Made's yell kept probing. Why was Made refusing to enter the yard? The wood finally caught that fire. Made's body was marshalled inside. The singing had already begun. I filled a three-foot pot with water and only went inside for a prayer. Idah and Mister Kenneth were there. At least, for now, his 'meetings' could wait. He gave a lengthy speech to which I only heard, "Your pleas are mine. We are doing all within our means to ensure that, come next term, when you vote us in, we will no longer witness such death cases." Between the topsy-turvy moments of being sent around to fetch this or that, I thought about Mister Kenneth before Made's death, after her death, and how – if elected again – he'd pull another of the faces we didn't know he had. I wrote:

We only know how to deliver the body when it's already cold. A coffin is also cold.

The day of the funeral was very windy. My brother had to return to work the next day. My sister hadn't said anything. Hadn't showed up. Sister Beatrice was there. She helped me with tidying up – returning what had been borrowed from the neighbours for the funeral. We stayed together for a couple of days, her sickly boy's harrowing, dying breaths against her back. The morning she left she said, "I'm just around the corner if you need anything, okay?" That night I recalled what Sister Beatrice, opening up about her son's illness, had said, "Sometimes he dies. Other times, he wakes up. These days I don't know which is which but I'm a mother, and no matter what, I can't give up hope. I can't." Thinking about it now, Made's yell asked:

What does it mean for one to help another bury theirs when their own is dying? Why do you say he's alive when he's already dead?

The food that remained after the funeral lasted for only a month and the cat, the cat sleeping in the oven, lingered thereafter. Since the death of my parents, I had become Made's burden and when Made became sickly, she became mine. Clearly my sister and brother lived comfortably enough in the city that what I ate, wore, and did with my life after school didn't cross their minds. The only thing my sister said was, "find a man. It'll make a huge difference." And my brother? He didn't even have socks and he'd hitch-hiked to the funeral. Yet what he kept telling me was that once he had his home, I would join them in the city. Two full years would pass without a single brick of its foundation being laid. At some point, against my will, I had accepted that our lives had been that very foundation: only begun, but going nowhere.

While walking on the road-side to clear my mind, I saw a poster:

VOTE SON OF NAMBILI FOR MAYOR. Come in all your numbers 12pm tomorrow at Manzoni hall. Food parcels to be given.

Museka? How had I not known or at least heard about him if he was from Nambili? Living all alone was hard, and even though Sister Beatrice lived around the corner, I didn't want to burden her. After all, she had burdens of her own.

I wore chocolate wooden earrings that held the African continent at the centre – the ones I got as a gift from my former English teacher – and made my way there early. Many people had already gathered. I sat under the shade of the Kudala tree, re-read a paragraph from *book without a cover, without the title or author's name*, not quite hearing it because of the singing and the chanting of ZB songs around me. The face on the poster hovered next to a black Audi A5, on a phone call. I kept on looking at him and when he looked my way, I covered my whole face with *book without a cover, without the title or author's name*. Maybe that was the thread which drew Museka towards me.

"Hello."

"Hi."

"My name is Museka," said Museka, reaching for a handshake. "Are you a student?"

"No. I finished my matric two and a half years ago, and after that there was no money for me to go to school."

"Oh. I'm sorry about that. So now... do you work?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, please don't call me sir."

"Sorry. I don't work."

"ZB needs volunteers, if you're interesting in becoming one. For now, we'll provide you with monthly groceries, and as time progresses you'll get payment."

I was immediately interested. Museka took me to a beautiful woman who said her name was Moon. She registered my name and asked me to hand out ZB T-shirts and caps. Museka continued taking phone calls and greeting the ZB supporters, until the man – who was last seen campaigning for Mister

Kenneth – stood on the podium and said, “ZB ZB ZB! ZB ZB ZB! And now I would like to call upon the son of Nambili to address you.”

“Yesterday I woke up with a dream and in it I saw Mister Kenneth planting a dozen jigger eggs on our feet and we were barefoot and the edges our soles had been turned into jigger-plantations and when I called for help every egg cracked open and when I tried not to step on their yolk it still caught up with me and the eggshells under our feet were no longer eggshells but Khikhambu amputated legs and the many others who had suffered a similar death and there was corn scattered everywhere – your corn, our corn – and Mister Kenneth was wearing cotton morning slippers while we stood bare foot and for many nights I tried to stop this nightmare but I was haunted by it consistently and it was this haunting which led me here to speak to you and as one of you.”

I got home late that night, and after discarding many pages of what I had been writing, only this paragraph remained:

Even when she keeps away from such nightmares, they come alive. She opens the oven to find a cat still sleeping. She has gotten so used to this smell that she no longer makes funny faces. Hunger makes a man gullible. That somehow beef will gloss empty pots or hunger will be stitched up by way of paging through a food catalogue. They didn't skip three meals per day. They simply had no meals. They turned jigger because their children were without shoes, but when election time came, you paid them to hide their jigger menace. We refuse. We refuse to bend to your jigger-mandate because when it's time for you to cement our sandy floors, you are gone to a conference. Now that we are six-feet-jiggered, what will your press release be? That our jiggeredness is our doing? That our feet grew bees and no honey came out of them? We are watching. Watching. And this is all we see.

I read it and liked it. I re-read it, wondering whether it was complete. *Is it worth sharing with Museka tomorrow during lunch-time?* I read it again for the last time and decided it wasn't complete. I dimmed the lights, and recalled how the day had unfolded, from the moment Museka came to greet me, to the passion with which he spoke to the people of Nambili, to what he did with his hands when he spoke, and how his charisma swathed us all.

Morning came and Museka's Audi hooted outside my home. How had I missed the time? I rose immediately and wrapped myself with a ketenge.

"I'm sorry, I woke up late. I'll join the team tomorrow."

"No. Do what you need to do. I'll wait for you."

Museka waited in his car while I prepared myself. We visited about five villages that day. I didn't quite understand the working relationship between Museka and Moon. They kissed on the mouth, looked each other in the eyes when they greeted, often held hands, and sometimes left home together. They were so familiar with each other that the line between Commander-in-chief and PA seemed like it was passed ages ago.

Though I had been volunteering, it was not clear what my daily task was. At one point I was making coffee, at another photocopies, then note-taking and arranging Museka's files. But when I told Museka about Made and how she had died, he said that on the last day of campaigning I was the right person to speak to the people of Nambili. Because I do not only know their plight, but I have seen it close. The next day, as they undertook to campaign in Mphepha village, I was given an opportunity to share a little about Made and her suffering under Mister Kenneth's watch.

The campaigning went on for six weeks, which led to many sleepless nights and heavy drinking on the road. I stuck to fruit juice. But the day Museka dropped off the ZB comrades who had been driving with us, with only myself left to be dropped off at home, Museka's car would not start. After calling in vain for someone to haul us back home, we decided to sleep on the road. We shared what remained of our lunch, and when Museka said "A glass of red wine won't kill you. Besides, its heart healthy," I decided to give it a try, which led to another try, and another. And our eyes locked and we were on each other's lips and he said "you are beautiful and very smart" and I said "I know" and he said "I know you know" and he said "I'm not going to lie. I want you" and I said "I want you too" and we fucked on top of the ZB flag.

Despite the fact that Museka often stressed that in the revolution there was no room for lodging, we took a day off that day, drove to the filling station and stopped in open fields to kiss and toast to the land that Museka said belonged to us. I believed every picture he painted and not quite knowing that I could paint my own, I chased every stroke of his brush.

Even after some revolutionary lodging, I still slept at Museka's cottage. We devoured records by Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Letta Mbulu and Caiphus Semenya, Billie Holiday, Cesária Évora, and

Nina Simone, while Museka spoke passionately about Biko, Foucault, Fanon, Derrida and Nietzsche and the others whose names I cannot remember now. Delighting in fried, fresh rolls and Pinotage South Africa, we also talked about growing up in Nambili: the pink ghost that used to haunt girls' toilets in Nambili primary and the chain-man myth – the story of a long chain that would often be heard dragging a body in the early hours of the morning.

Suddenly, it was the next morning. I looked for Museka in bed, and then all over his cottage, and discovered he was outside on a phone call, smoking his special tobacco from a wooden pipe. I was looking for a pen and piece of paper to write on when I found pine-shaped gold earrings – the ones that Moon wore at Manzoni hall when we first met. I saw the earrings first, before I admired that fulgent smile. Museka and Moon? Why was I surprised? They'd always held hands. Kissed each other on the lips when they greeted. Had their own stories and own language, and when they spoke it none of us knew what they were talking about.

But if there had been something between Moon and him, why had he not told me? Does Moon even know about me? What would happen if she were to walk in? Suddenly my stomach was full and the breakfast Museka had prepared for me grew cold and unappetizing. I was shaken. I wanted to ask who they belonged to and why they were here. I wanted to hear it from his mouth. But Museka, having a way with words and events, would have probably said they belonged to his helper or sister or mother. And what if they did?

That night, Museka – after asking me if 'carrot' was spelled with a double r – said, "I have an urgent meeting to go to and I hate leaving you here all alone. Let me drop you off at home. I'll fetch you tomorrow." I didn't sleep, nor did I write that night, and ruefully wished I hadn't opened his drawer for a piece of paper or pen. Thinking about what I thought was happening, I no longer wanted to be a part of ZB's dream, even though deep inside I knew it had been for the betterment of Nambili. The love-making on top of the ZB flag when Museka's car wouldn't start was far from being revolutionary, the way Museka had said it was.

When Museka fetched me the next morning, I feigned a sickness and asked to be excused from work. The day after, we had a briefing in which Museka kissed me in Moon's presence, and asked how I was feeling. I no longer thought that the pine-shaped gold earrings in his drawer belonged to Moon but rather to his helper, sister or mother. I burnt the oil that night – my mind free from Museka – and wrote:

Lick the pus of their toil Mister Jigger-Kenneth. Swallow them the way I do my pain. When it pains you Mister Jigger-Kenneth mine is ten times more. When you change your face, mine changes all the time. How did you turn me jigger while I watched? You turn my feet into convenient jigger-motels and I am without shoes. Where have you kept my legs? I don't feel them. Your jiggers have feasted on them. You promised to cement our sandy grounds but when you took office, I turned jigger and I am still shoeless. Your jigger-cabinet spoke large about the jigger-epidemic and the expensive jigger-therapy. Of how when elected again we will become a jigger-free society. I will not be your jigger statistic or arse-crawl to your nearest pinhole. My feet are no fertile ground for your eggs to grow.

Your business fell right into my eyes and my eyes went straight for my foot. I dream you are planting a dozen eggs under my feet and my dream is barefoot – the edges of its soles are jigger-plantations. I scream for help. Every egg cracks open but I can't reach for their yolk. Everything around me is bloody, my dress too. The eggshells in my dream are not eggshells. They are people's amputated legs and scattered bandiat. They are the pure cotton morning slippers you wear when I am without shoes. Are you going to say something? Because I don't expect you to. Are you going to say something about the fragile soles you've converted into brooding frames?

Because I don't expect you to know what it is you have done. I only asked you to cement our sandy grounds. Not ceramic tiles or your pure cotton morning slippers. I do not know how to walk in them. I am without simple shoes. You sent your jigger-cabinet to cement our sandy floors. They delivered two cement bags and never returned. You sent your anti-jigger team and when they were done drilling my feet, your eggs multiplied. The sun of Nambili will one day jigger on you Mister Kenneth and I won't be without shoes. It will uncloak your jiggered ways. Nambili will tell of your jigger-mentality. No rooting of your eggs will occur beneath our soles. Take your jiggered promises elsewhere. I am not your brooding cell and I will not have you jigger about my mind.

Despite the many villages we had been to that day, under a very hot sun, I was surprised that I had written this much. I read the three paragraphs three or four times and decided that even if they sounded incomplete I was going to share them with Museka anyways. Upon reading them for the first time he was pleased and asked me to share them on the last day of our campaigning, a week before

the municipal elections. What could have made me happier than the day I shared my writing with thousands of ZB followers? It was also the day a beautiful woman – who could have been seven or eight years older than me – joined Museka on the podium, and was introduced as his wife. His wife?

Unable to reach any further, my world came to a sudden halt. Museka had a wife he never spoke of. I ran to the bathroom trying to sit on what wanted to get out. I decided that I couldn't allow my little world to end in front of everyone. And so I put myself back together, returned to the shelter where the ZB executive were seated, and continued to wave a ZB flag. Nomali – a beautiful paean written for Letta Mbulu by Caiphus Semanya from Hugh Masekela's record we both liked, the open fields we claimed as belonging to us, the ZB dream, Made's yelling, and the cat asleep in the oven. Something inside me was on the verge of failing, but I kept on pushing it back: "Not now. Not here, surrounded by people."

I missed every word of Museka's address and have since stopped hearing myself. I was too weak to believe what I had seen – that the right hand Museka held firmly at the podium had been his wife's – to accept that it had happened in front of my eyes. The venue emptied but there was a small function thereafter. Moon excused herself. It would have been better had I followed her but a gab of two people would have been enough to tell that something was not right. So I stayed. "ZBians, this is the love of my life – Timma" said Museka, kissing her on the forehead. I didn't hear what he said after that because I was looking at what Timma was wearing, how she smiled and spoke eloquently, and her missing wedding ring.

Everything Timma was and had was also my dream. It belonged to her as much as it belonged to me. But what use was putting up a fight with a beautiful and powerful woman like that? What use was it telling everyone that I had slept with Museka many times and that it meant nothing? To hate and hurt Timma for something she knew nothing about? Whose fault was it anyway, that I had allowed Museka to fool me? That according to me the land we wanted to own was already ours, and the ZB dream fully realised? I was already looking forward to meeting his grandmother, mother and sister – I was already connected to them, even before meeting them, and saw myself on many podiums by Museka's side. I had not only stretched this picture but prayed for it and claimed it as mine. How had I prayed for what Timma already had? Had I been outside Museka's picture and not known it? Made's yell probed me:

What can I trust? Why can't I trust it to do for me what I have done for it?

Against the force of my will, I continued to work for ZB, calling Museka 'Mister Mayor' the way others did, and his wife 'Ma'am'. Moon resigned, and not having hired anyone in her position, Museka asked

me to take it on for a couple of months. The pay envelope was good: I could afford to buy groceries for myself and for Sister Beatrice, pay for Sam's medication, and still look good every now and then, but the working environment was hostile. Museka hadn't said a word to me about his wife. The day we worked late together he only said:

"It's complicated."

"That's why I didn't tell you."

"I'm sorry."

"Come here, I miss you."

I was angry with him but I didn't show it. I was keeping my job. Even when he pressed his hardness on my pudenda. I kept my job. When Timma comes to see Museka and I am invited to join them for coffee in Museka's office, knowing that an hour ago Museka and I fucked there, I wasn't so sorry for her for not seeing who Museka really was. I continued to stay with him when he was working at night, wanting more of him for myself. And for many nights, he was mine. Timma never found out. When Museka disappeared on some days, when she came to see him in the office the next morning she didn't look troubled in any way. Didn't it hurt to have a husband who lives most of his life in his office, going home only to take a shower and eat last night's supper? It did. But I was not sorry because no one was sorry for me.

Having been a victim of so many things, I no longer wanted anything to do with frail nests. I read and re-read every book in Museka's office and also bought my own. I interacted with powerful men and women outside and within Museka's circle. I worked on my writing at night, and when there wasn't much to do at the office, I applied for jobs. Observing the change in the way I dressed and looked, Museka pressed me into the corner and said, "Are you fucking someone behind my back?" his veins were full. He was shaking. I thought he was going to smother me.

Things were no longer the same thereafter. He returned every paper I typed for a missed comma or a misspelled word, thundered at every delay even when the delay had not been my fault, and left every cup of coffee I made to grow cold. Even when he was wrong his word was always last. It was during this time that I learned that his weakness lay behind a 'no' or an 'I can't' – a rejection. When he touched me and I removed his hand and said "I can't do this anymore. I'm sorry," he said, "I've never said no to you, have I?" Like Moon, I no longer wanted to keep my job, and so I resigned.

I then worked as an assistant researcher for Mister Bravo, and when I learnt that he had been Museka's high-school mate and that they were still in contact – when I found out from the lady who cleans Museka's office that Moon had miscarried Museka's baby in the passages of the ZB offices when Museka was outside the village – when I discovered, four months into the new job, that the smell of ground coffee had not made me puke because of the coffee breaks I used to take with Museka and Timma, but because I carried Museka's baby, I made up my mind. I was going to resign first thing in the morning and go to Sister Beatrice. But what was I going to say to her? Where was I going to start? I had only told her about leaving ZB, and that the leader of ZB had been a generous and respected man.

How was I going to tell her that the generous and respected man was the man I had fallen in love with – and was still in love with – that he had a wife who I found out about months later – that the lady who introduced herself as Moon the night she dropped me off at Sister Beatrice's house had miscarried the baby of the man whose baby I was now carrying – that I had quit my second job the minute I knew that Mister Bravo was Museka's long-standing acquaintance – and that I hid all of this from her? It had gotten to this point.

A month and a couple of weeks later, when my meagre savings were exhausted and I had no food, I decided that instead of telling Museka about the pregnancy and asking him to help me with money, I was going to break into the ZB storeroom – where food parcels were stored – and grab whatever I could. If I was found I would then be forced to explain my conduct. I survived in that way for a while, until one day when I had gone to the ZB storeroom for a packet of rice and tin of baked beans, I heard noises coming from Museka's office. When I moved a little further from the office building to the other side, I saw Museka's Bentley and a BMW that looked exactly like Idah's – Mister Kenneth's PA.

That was the last time I went there, and the first time I went to Sister Beatrice and pretended all had been well with me. Sister Beatrice's son, Sam, had gotten worse and was now staying at the Red Cross, where he was getting good medical care. After telling Beatrice about leaving ZB and the new job, she asked, "How long?"

"How long?"

"Yes, how many months until you deliver the baby?"

How had she known? What had revealed the belly? It wasn't showing. It was no use putting the cat inside the bag when it was already out.

"Seven months."

“Who is the father of the baby?”

I broke down and cried. Museka was known. It was also known that ‘Son of Nambili’ had a beautiful wife. I couldn’t say his name. I couldn’t. It made no sense that a generous and respected man like him would nibble my corn and wipe his mouth.

With the passing of time I grew weak. I couldn’t talk – couldn’t write – I was stuck in bed. Not knowing what to do with my gloom, Sister Beatrice said, “Be like a river – it keeps running. When mould gathers on the surface to interrupt its flow, beneath the surface it keeps running. Those who see the mould on the surface will think you have been swept away or are drowning. They are mistaken. They’ll meet you at the finish line.”

It was to the echo of these words that – a month later – I delivered a baby girl into the world. Sister Beatrice rose every morning to prepare a hot soft porridge for me. She taught me how to hold a baby. How to rub a baby’s back after feeding them. How to wrap the belly button until it dries and the cord falls off. What to say when burying the cord. Where to patch a piece of newspaper when a hiccup does not end. How to tuck a piece of sunlight soap into the baby’s bum when it’s constipated. How to place a baby in the sun when their skin turns yellowish and which beads to hang around the neck to deliver it from evil. I named her Mto – a river with no end. Sister Beatrice took care of her during the day when I did most of my reading and writing, and I took over at night. I tried the thing called luck and I entered a short story competition. I was awarded a generous prize which paid my varsity fees that year.

Every two weeks I went to Nambili to see Sister Beatrice and Mto. Mto fell sick. She often rubbed her nose, eyes and ears, crying all day and all night. The nurses and doctors said it was an allergic reaction. The prophetess said, “her people. She needs to see her people.” How was I going to face Museka? Where was I going to find him? ZB’s offices had moved from Nambili to the city and the only time I saw him was when he was being interviewed on television or when he held Timma’s hand at the state of the nation address’s red carpet, in newspapers, or on magazine covers. What was I going to say to him? Where was I going to start? “Two years ago, I fell pregnant with your child. It’s a baby girl and her name is Mto...”

Having got this far, it was clear that I could achieve anything I set my mind to, and looking for Museka meant I was failing. “If she doesn’t get to see her people, will it get worse?” I asked Beatrice to ask the prophetess, and she said, “it will kill her.” My roommate, Wendy, switching the television on to watch

a show with Museka on the panel, confessed her crush to me. This was not new to me. Inside the taxi – travelling to Nambili – he was the most talked about, and a hot subject in some of my lectures.

Even when Wendy found me buried under the pillow, how could I tell her without the inevitable follow-up question, “did it really happen?” Of course everyone would think I was an angry ex, trying to sully his name. And what would happen if, after opening up about it, I found my name dragged through a cheap newspaper: “Museka, ‘Son of Nambili’ and his baby mama drama!” What would happen if Museka denied Mto, even as she had his nose, eyes and ears? I wrote my final exam with all of this in mind. It was a PASS for my majors and a FAIL for the others, but I told Beatrice it was a PASS for them all. I spent the whole of December preparing for supplementary exams, and when January came, I wrote and PASSED everything.

Then it was Mister Avo – a bald man who delayed my funding because of the night he texted, “so, what are you wearing? Send me a picture.” I didn’t reply and since then, it’s been: “you have a missing document. Your bursary will not pay for the subjects you have failed. You are not on the list. You are on the waiting list. You didn’t sign your contract on time. Your bursary will not pay. You need to appeal.”

Then it was my writing lecturer, Prof Bernard Nyandu, who used to say “Kime. *Eagle* is publishing young writers, come see me in my office.” or “I’ve seen your latest essay – I’m impressed.” There were secret warnings by fellow female students who said, “you shouldn’t be studying this late. There’s a monster in this building.”

Then it was tiny writing right between the tiled walls of the female bathrooms: ‘Alex Vorster is a rapist.’

Then, I was always scared.

Half of the time, I didn’t hear what was being said by Prof Nyandu in his lectures, and little by little I stopped going to his seminars. I only went for tutorials and did most of my readings at res. Things were even better when I found out that my mid-year exam would be marked by an external examiner and

not Prof. Nyandu, and when I made it into the creative writing exchange programme in Germany, the panic attacks stopped and I continued to do what I loved the most.

But Mto continued to rub her itchy nose, eyes and ears, and Beatrice kept saying “Just give me the name of father, I’ll deal with it.”

“I want to, Sister Beat. It’s just more difficult than it seems,” I said, not knowing how else to explain the depth of the situation without describing it.

“Give me a couple of months. I’ll contact Mto’s father. I promise.”

“I hope you know it’s Mto’s life you are gambling with here,” said Sister Beatrice, hanging up the phone. This stayed with me all night as I made to text Museka. How likely was it that he had still been using the same number, or the same e-mail address? Maybe trying both would increase my chances of getting him. And if both didn’t work? Try Timma. And if hers didn’t work either, or if she saw the message and didn’t reply, and dropped the call the minute she heard Kime? But she didn’t know Museka and I had been sleeping together, did she? And what about Mister Bravo? Would he help me after resigning just like that? I no longer knew what to do any more. I first wrote on a piece of paper:

Hi Hello. Dear Museka, ~~how are you?~~ I hope you’re well. It’s been a while since we’ve last spoken or seen each other. This is hard for me but you have to know... I left ZB already pregnant with your child. She is two years old and her name is Mto. She’s been sick for the longest time now and elders in my family say that there are rituals her father’s side of the family should make for her. ~~Thank you.~~ Please, it’s urgent.

-Kime

Why was I begging him for the life of his own daughter? And thanking him? For what? After all, Museka was the one who owed me a sizable thank-you: for saving his marriage – if there was any marriage at all between Timma and him, for keeping Moon’s secret, and for not telling Timma about Idah’s red BMW parked on the other side of the ZB building when it was still in Nambili, after her resignation. I typed the unscratched bits on my phone and pressed send.

That feeling of hitting against the wall so hard and pretending you didn’t. The inner war between letting what needs to drop *drop*, and pushing it back again. The feeling I harboured when Museka introduced Timma as his wife to the whole of Nambili. It hit me again. It was not okay. Not okay for

my heart to wallow in deep water that even as I took *Rescue* panic tablets, threatened to take my life. I looked back at Sister Beatrice's words about the river and its flow: "Those who see the mould on the surface will think you have been swept away or are drowning. They are mistaken. They'll meet you at the finish line." They no longer held the same impact.

It was one thing to swim in your own river – but another to swim in another's. In your own river, you know where the starting point and finish line is. You know how deep or cold it is. Where big fish or crocodiles live. Even if these change, there is still an element of familiarity with one's own river. In another's river, you can drown at any point – find yourself where you've started or step on the tail of a mammoth river snake. I unlocked my cell-phone to check if Museka had replied to my email, but there was nothing. There's no guarantee of life in the river not your own.

Day and night, Mto continued to rub her itchy nose, eyes and ears.

Museka only called months later when I had just landed from Germany. "I thought you were on a pill." Was that his way of asking how I had fallen pregnant? "I was. But because you and I were on and off, I skipped certain months."

Now that he was in every TV channel and newspaper, I no longer knew how to talk to him. I needed to pick my words the way I do red olives on a Greek salad, or call him Muse, when it was just the two of us – or 'Son of Nambili', as the people had dubbed him. I had no language to address the body Museka was now.

"Look, I'm really sorry if this is hard for you. I don't mean to cause any trouble between you and your wife. All I am asking is for you to please speak to the elders in your family to come see the child."

There I was doing the very thing I had vowed never to ever do again – begging him.

"Why? Why have you kept quiet about this?"

"You have a beautiful wife and a great career. I didn't want to get in the way of that."

There was a long silence from Museka. I wasn't breathing. He ended the phone call.

I received a text message a month later: "My uncles and I are coming to see the child this weekend." Two weeks' notice would have been better. Now I had to borrow some money to paint the walls Mto had written on. I had to renew the vinyl PVC flooring that was cracking bit by bit. Wash the fawn suede couches, curtains, fix the bathroom door and toilet seat, buy groceries and new clothing for Mto, do my hair, and get Sister Beatrice and myself some nice clothing.

When I called Sister Beatrice to tell her about the coming of Museka's family and the preparations that needed to be done, she said, "Oh, its Museka?" It had totally slipped my mind that I had not told Sister Beatrice that Mto's father was Museka. "I see no point in spending the money we don't have anyways to welcome the people who already have it. It serves them well to find Mto without diapers," said Sister Beatrice, ending the phone call. I saw a point in this. But if Museka was coming he needed to see that I am a fighter – a good-looking young mother, a published writer, and a final-year student at a top university in the country. That counted for something.

Wendy, with her sick theories, often said that when one meets their ex-lover, one must make it a point that he regrets the moment he left. Mine was a slightly different situation. I no longer knew if Museka was really my ex. I went to the funding office to ask for the balance of my textbook allowance. Mister Avo was there, but I simply went to a female consultant and I was helped. Sister Beatrice's home looked bright, as if the old furniture had been newly replaced. Everything turned out well, but the night before, Museka's text message came in. "I won't be coming any more, but my uncles are on the way." I wasn't ready to meet him.

Two of Museka's uncles arrived the next morning. From the beginning, Sister Beatrice made it very clear that she stood as both mother and father. One uncle clearly had a problem with this, but when Sister Beatrice said, "if you're here to parade your manhood then you should get out of my house," they produced a stack of two hundred rand notes and apologised. I was then called to bring the child.

"Ah, what a beautiful girl and mother," muttered Museka's uncles. What did they expect? That I would simply wrap a kitenge and walk in barefoot? Sister Beatrice added that I was a writer of books, and was also studying to become a doctor in the writing of books. They were struck like they had received an incorrect memo about me. They ate, drank, talked about changing Mto's name and surname to their family names, and asked if Sister Beatrice would be open to selling a portion of her plot for a business they wanted to start.

That night I wrote:

Will ten thousand rand repair the damage you've caused me? I'm not a broken machine.

With the 'damage money' Museka's uncles had offered, I paid Mto's crèche fees for the remaining months of the year, bought diapers in bulk, and bought clothing for the next season from the 'WAS-NOW' sale section. The rest I gave to Sister Beatrice who knew how to handle money.

"I had a car accident last night. Can I see Mto this evening?" I was awoken by this text from Museka. "Not a problem. Sister Beatrice will receive you. Are you okay?" I asked. Minutes later, I regretted having asked him. "I'm okay, thanks." That was typical of Museka. I'm fine. It doesn't hurt. I'll survive it. Even with a fracture in his right leg, he continued to campaign, balanced on a crutch.

His first visit was followed by many more. He drove to Nambili every weekend. Sometimes, during week-days he took time off to see Mto. But Timma was not there; he did this alone. Had she known that Museka and I had a baby? Had she not seen the baby wipes and little toys in Museka's car? Were they still together? At the annual national dinner with ministers, political leaders and their partners, Museka walked the red carpet alone. How was it my business anyway? There was Sadza in my life.

Born of a Zimbabwean mother and a Senegalese father, Sadza was a fine, dark and tall young man. We first met at the leavers' dinner function, and there he asked to go out with me for lunch. I only agreed after his fifth attempt. I was tired and no longer thought I knew how to be in a relationship again – how to give and receive love. Although I liked him, I feared for my happiness, because I had been wounded in the places where I was once happy.

Being a poor student is difficult. Being a poor student and a mother is far worse. But Sadza took care of me. He drove me to Nambili every two weeks to see Sister Beatrice. He paid for Mto's doctors' appointments when I couldn't ask Museka. He jumped way too high for me and doing the same thing for him was not easy for me. I was crippled and the only people I knew how to love were Sister Beatrice and Mto.

One weekend, Sadza and I drove to Nambili and found Museka sitting outside with Mto on his lap. "He didn't say he was coming," I said, reversing Sadza's car to enter the yard. "Who?" inquired Sadza.

“Museka. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know we would find him here.” Sadza and Museka greeted each other, as “brother.” Sadza sat in the dining room and Museka continued to sit outside. Mto was very happy to see Sadza. She kept running back and forth to Sadza and Museka. Sister Beatrice was feeling sickly that day and so Sadza and I prepared lunch. How was I going to ask Museka to join Sadza in the dining room? Between Museka and Sadza, who was going to break the ice? I finally called Museka in, the way he had done – years ago – when Timma had visited his office.

I watched them talk about the places they had travelled, the antiques, music, and paintings they had collected, and the foreign words they had learned. It was all about what they knew and where they had been. After that, the only way to break the silence between them was to talk about soccer or politics, and when the topic shifted into politics, as expected, Museka did much talking while Sadza listened. Between talking and eating, Sadza said, “baby, please pass me the sauce” and then it was, “love, thank for the food.” I watched the words needle Museka badly enough that immediately after the meal, he excused himself and wished us well in our studies.

Sister Beatrice was still not well, and so Sadza and I left the next day. While Sadza washed the dishes and I wiped them, we spoke about how awkward the day had been, and how little the ‘Son of Nambili’ became when Sadza called me ‘baby’ or ‘love’. That night, I told Sadza about Made, Mister Kenneth and Museka. I reflected later that perhaps I should have withheld some information. But what use was it to sieve something that was no longer there? Sadza and Mto played a game on Sadza’s phone and I slept peacefully.

In the morning, Sadza and I drove Sister Beatrice to the nearest doctor. Her blood pressure had gone up even further. Sadza said besides the high blood pressure, Sister Beatrice looked troubled, and that maybe I should find out if there was anything bothering her. Not wanting to disturb my studies, Sister Beatrice assured me there was nothing to worry about. But after I had written my exams, I found out that her late husband’s son by another woman wanted the title deed named after him.

The house was first registered under the name of Sister Beatrice and then later, when Sister Beatrice’s first husband Moses died and Sister Beatrice was wedded to Khawule, it ceased to be hers and belonged now to Sam, who was still very sickly. He started off by dividing the stand into five blocks, sold one to an apostolic church, and advertised the rest for rent. The day the church came to fence their portion, Sister Beatrice called the police, who were already in favour of Khawule’s son. They said that the beneficiary was already very sickly and when he died the land would automatically belong to

Khawule's first son. Within four months, he had already built two rooms to let, and the church's building plan was already drawn up.

Regardless of the many threats Khawule's son had been making, Sister Beatrice said, "I'm not going anywhere." I was not happy about this. I feared for Mto. One Saturday afternoon when I had gone home to see Sister Beatrice and Mto, I found Khawule's son saying that he would not allow strangers to benefit from his father's land, that I should start paying rent, that I'm an educated crook who is waiting for Sister Beatrice to die. Hearing these accusations, and the hate with which they were uttered, I no longer deemed it safe for Sister Beatrice and Mto to stay there. The following year, when I did my honours, I rented a place outside the university premises. I begged Sister Beatrice to move in with me but she said she was prepared to die there. And months later, she did. She did die there.

You can already imagine how my life turned out, thereafter. Sadza went home to take care of his father's business, who was at that time very sickly. To keep our relationship afloat we skyped twice a week, but even as we did, there was a sense of something breaking between us. The rental prices were nothing short of what I had expected. My monthly allowance went towards the rent and Mto's pre-school fees. The last time I saw or heard from Museka was the day he met Sadza, and from then on, he had not called or returned any of my texts. Against my will, I would sometimes find myself texting, "Mto hasn't been feeling well" or "Mto's pre-school fees have not been paid" and when I emailed, I would often receive a notification that Museka was outside the country. What would happen if I called Timma? Would she simply say, "Alright, I'll make a deposit" or ask, "How is it my business?"

Museka's uncles did not come back for the ceremony they were meant to do for Mto, but the rubbing of her nose, eyes and ears had stopped. Where were they now, when I needed them to keep their promise of taking care of Mto? Hardship and pain brought Made's memory back. How she yelled and surrendered to pain when things were difficult. Hardship and pain were there – all written around me. But to feel it now, while Mto watched, was something I could not allow her to see. Balancing things meant skipping some months' rent payments, and the dread of finding my things outside the flat meant I needed to stop answering knocks – just in case it was my landlord. Sadza came back from Senegal. He knocked several times without a reply. To avoid being called by my landlord, my phone had been off for a week. Sadza did not know what to think any more, because even in my department – where I did most of my studying during the day – they had not seen me for many days.

That was the beginning of our big fights. I asked Sadza to stop fetching Mto from school. But sometimes I found myself calling him again to pick up Mto because she didn't want to be fetched by me. Things were sweet today and tomorrow – sour. The Indian vegetable curry with roti nights, the sapid red velvet cake mornings, and the many visits we made to the campus clinic – holding hands – for family planning and HIV tests, were ending. “What good is it to get by? If this is no longer working for us, I think we should be honest enough to say it.” This is what Sadza said, one afternoon, after two weeks of not hearing from me.

Every time I tried to write, I wondered what Museka's silence meant. Had he had been outside the country for many months, or deliberately ignoring my texts? Was it Sadza? To raise enough money for Mto's schooling and the rent, I entered about five short story competitions but won none. I therefore decided to go to the campus library at the historical papers department to look for a job. I got it.

The first client I helped was Professor Vorster. The one whose name is written on between the thin spaces of the tiled walls in the female bathrooms of Wendy's department. Before shaking his hand, I thought about Professor Nyandu and feared that what Professor Nyandu had done to me would happen again if I met him in his office or in any enclosed area. I told the librarian, Sis'Khosi, who – now that Sister Beatrice was no more – was like a sister to me. Sis'Khosi advised me to only send his work via email and in cases where I have to meet him up, meet up in open spaces. It worked out, and from then on I applied the same method to clients who, having seen my profile picture of my email account, specifically asked to meet me for a glass of wine when the work was done. Nonetheless, things got much better. I would pay rent, Mto's school fees, buy groceries, and still have a little cash left for an emergency.

Sadza no longer came to my flat. He only texted, “I hope you're well.” I didn't mean to shut him down. Things were suddenly too much and they needed my attention. I had my thesis to finish, Mto to take care of, a new job, and Sadza. It was too much. Now that things were much better, how was I going to make up for the lost moments? I invited him for dinner but he only showed up late – drunk, and pretending not to be drunk. The only reason I had stopped drinking wine was because Sadza did not drink. I only managed to sleep the next day, in the early hours of the morning, wondering if loving Sadza was a big mistake.

Then it was a phase of dealing with Mto crying for 'Sister Beat', and the administrator in my department who called to tell me that my process mark had dropped, and that in order to be permitted to write exams I needed to get a letter of approval from Professor Nyandu. Straight away, I went to Prof. Nyandu's office and resolved that I was going to talk about being a single parent, losing a guardian, my new job, and how these had been of detriment to my studies. The last time I saw Prof. Nyandu was from a distance. I explained my reasons for having missed seminars and when I was done Prof. Nyandu said, "I have a meeting to go to. Come see me later."

It was already heading into late afternoon, and so I asked Sadza to receive Mto upon her arrival from school. But later when Prof. Nyandu had typed the letter, lifted my skirt and said, "don't fight it. You're fighting it," and the pile of books fell, he said "I've helped you a lot and I hope this will stay between us." I found Mto playing peacefully on the building security's lap because Sadza, presenting his research paper at a conference, had not seen my message.

I called Sis'Khosi that night and wept. I couldn't be a river anymore. I couldn't. There was a lot standing in my way. Sis'Khosi took Mto for a while and I used that time to be by myself – to think – to remember where I came from. Mto was not a difficult child at all. Within a week she had bonded really well with Sis'Khosi. I worked on a long short story I had to submit as an exam, and I was so very happy that Prof. Nyandu was not going to mark it because it had been about him.

The end of semester and the results came: I was first in the class. Sis'Khosi prepared a little lunch for me. Sadza was not invited and when he saw Wendy's Facebook post, "well done my dear friend for coming out first in your creative writing class," he liked it and texted me privately, "I'm so proud of you." Seeing this reminded me of the Sadza who drove me to Nambili every second week of the month. Of the many stops we made to buy gifts for Sister Beatrice and Mto. Of how Sadza caressed my bushy pudenda. If there was one person who had contributed immensely to this bundle of joy, it was Sadza. I called him up and worked things out. Sadza's father was still very sick, their family business was collapsing, the remainder of his fees were not paid and so he had showed up drunk that night for dinner.

That very night Museka called and told me that, with my permission, his family would like Mto to move in with them. Studying and raising Mto was not easy. But, by 'family', what did he really mean? Was he referring to Timma? Timma was going to raise my child? She had Museka, and now she wanted my

child. The only thing that, if all else failed, I could claim as belonging to me was Mto. I said, "I'll give it some thought."

And while imagining Mto away from her, I got a scholarship to do my MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan, United States. The Nambili girl who was raised by Made and later by Sister Beatrice, the girl who could count many nights of going to bed without food, who fell but stood many times, Mto's mother. I laughed, cried, rolled on the floor, and screamed, reading the offer letter over and over again. But when the rejoicing was done and Sis'Khosi asked what I was going to do with Mto, I suddenly thought it was better to lose the study offer than to give Mto away to the man who tore my heart.

"You're still young. Take the offer. It's his child too. If he wants to raise her, let him." I was back to sleepless nights again, grappling between resistance to allow Museka to raise the child and accepting the offer. On the last day of the offer's validity, I met with Museka, and accepted it. What could he say now that the girl he had let down, the girl he had seen as a pleasure thing and not a wife, was going to study in the country which hosted most of his meetings? "We are happy for you" was all he could say. And by 'we', who was he referring to? Timma? They agreed that he was to pick Mto up next month. There was nothing between them. Nothing. The only proof of what had existed between them was Mto. "Take care of yourself," he said, reaching for his pocket, "this is just a contribution."

Meeting Museka in public spaces was a crisis. At one point waiters and waitresses were asking for selfies, and when we went to the parking lot, a group of young girls also stopped him. I had always known that he was going to become a great somebody, but that he had come to a point where he was expected to move from talking about Mto's future and bidding me farewell, to smiling for selfies, was something I could never imagine.

"Are you happy?"

"I don't know any more. I don't know when I'm happy and when I'm not."

"And how's the campaigning for presidential elections?"

"There's hope."

Over the remaining days I said my goodbyes to close friends. I also went to visit my brother and sister who now resented being absent in my life. They stressed the importance of uniting as a family, and said "come back to build us big houses." I spent the last days with Mto, Sadza and Sis'Khosi, and when Museka came to fetch Mto, I said "Mommy won't be long."

A Rat Tale

Because he wants meat, he kicks your warmly-made brown soup and it spreads across the room to land on your face. Because you cut him a portion of your thigh and served it hot, because he comes back in the middle of the night to bang your doors. Because he says there are dogs barking at him when there are no dogs, he has lost his wallet. Because you've opened so many doors for him, he shuts them all. Because you're the door he keeps shutting, you open another one and another one until you're left with no doors to enter yourself. And no one knows why because while you ask if he has eaten you have forgotten about yourself, and you shouldn't. You shouldn't be happy when he's home. You shouldn't play your cards like that when you want to check – to win your dice back. Because you're not happy that he's home, you never say so, and at the end of the day, you have to add one plus one to feed his balls, and they are hard to please. But you watch him belch your name, your mother's name and your mother's mother's name, and you don't tell your mother that he belches your name, her name, her mother's, her mother's mother. You feign a he's-good-to-me smile and apply a we're-doing-fine blush and it's on your left cheek he strikes and he'll never be good. You'll never be fine. It isn't fine. Because when you tell your mother that he curses you and her and her mother and her mother's mother you expect her to curse him, his father, and his father's father right back, and she says if only, because if only, only if a rat was sent to go into marriage, it would have spied for you. But now, you have to endure, heed your mother's advice, because she's your mother and has lived longer. Because she says you're a rat in your own marriage you're not allowed to turn yourself into something else, because that's what marriage is all about, Grace did it that way, and everybody does it that way. Because, like Grace and many others, when he hits you on the left cheek, you turn the other, and you've done all turns, there's no turning back. Your head will never fall, because it's already hanging, and now that you're only a neck remaining, you'll never be able to scream such a thrust of love and that's all you need. That's all you need. Because who keeps banging your door? Who fixes a broken window every Monday? Who is a broken window? Who fixes you? Who picks up your pieces? Who turns the other cheek when he hits the other? Who? Who says you've done all turns and there's no turning back? Who says it's his turn and forever will be? Your blood drops are forming stars, and no one should wish upon them. No one should fold their hands at the story they tell. Because there is no sweet dream and you're dreaming but this is not sweet. Your daughter screams your name, your mother's name, your mother's mother name but no one screams for her. No one screams when the knife is after her. When she enters your door and finds it closed. For where should she run to when you're left with no doors? Whose door should she bang? Who keeps saying, like her mother, like her grandmother, she ought to be a rat in her own marriage? And she should never leave, never leave. Because no-one leaves, Grace has never

left, her mother has never left, and so was her grandmother. She must endure, because the man who hits her like a child is also a child, a knife that eats his family and himself. Because who will be eaten next? At what point? By which knife? You ignore the tell-tale signs, and say there are no tell-tale signs, and you won't read the signs.

A Stream of Sugar Water

Makhazaza's burial was a hymn cut short by the whistle-blowing, dust-twirling, gun-firing, hooting black convertibles, which left many running and screaming, helplessly, their hands on their heads. Some fell, while others crawled to the nearest the car or bus, taking off. "What just happened?" many asked, speculating about a dead rat. But as for the why of the rat's death, and its miasmic smell only being detected at the burial, the speculating could not make out.

I was still trying to make sense of what had happened when a woman who sat next to me asked whose child I was. I realised, only then, that although I had been in the wrong car I was in the company of people who knew Makhazaza.

I looked out the window, through fields, trees, and running children, for Makhazaza's body. "She was never at rest. Even as we buried her, her body was still being tossed and turned," said the woman on my right shoulder, pretending not to have heard her. All was left plain. The spades that were going to be used to cover her body after it had been laid to rest. Somebody could dig it up and leave an empty box. Somebody could snatch the box and leave her lying there. Somebody could snatch her and the box. I rolled the window down, hoping that the fresh air would blow these thoughts away.

I was singing her song, "ndikhokhele," when the chaos erupted. I didn't get to finish it. Makhazaza's song always ended two verses before the chorus. I imagined, laughing in between, she would say, "Maybe. Maybe, I'll hear it in full when I get to the other side." But when I imagined her saying something, it always turned out to be me saying it on her behalf.

Her burial was not complete. Neither was her song. And her? Was she complete? I rolled the window up, for the fresh air had also been infiltrated by my thoughts.

The men who were tasked with completing the burial job couldn't locate her tomb. Could she have been hiding her body again? Did she not want to be found? Had she forgotten that it took several mortuary visits to identify her body, after her Mother said that the pink islands around her neck and the pyramid-shapes of a hot iron around her thorax couldn't have been hers?

Arriving, we immediately queued for the beef and samp that was being served. And because no-one found the thought of spades abandoned inside an open tomb palatable, most plates were left untouched.

I might have been forcing down two spoons of that samp when I heard the wail of Makhazaza's mother. "What did my daughter do to deserve such a burial? Tell me, what have I done for her to have such a send-off?" I ran to the kitchen to prepare some sugar water, because the woman who

drove us from the cemetery said she learned after her mother's burial that sugar water really does calm many of our woes.

Her mother's hiccup was so deep. Like that of a female cow slaughtered in preparation for the burial. It didn't do much fighting, but its depth made the men who had been called to slaughter it sweat. Others placed their knives aside. Could four tablespoons of sugar in lukewarm water have been enough to soothe such a deep hiccup? Could a double dose have ended it all even when I was told that an end to one hiccup is the beginning of another? A flooded house, whose doors leak into one other.

Back and forth, as I was being called to make sugar water after another sugar water, I met my own tears with a tinge of sweetness. A false impression, perhaps, that pain – deep pain – can be numbed by the magic of sugar water.

What was the texture of her mother's cry? Could I have heard it if there hadn't been a *krrruuhh krrruuhh* sound to it? And could I have connected that with Makhazaza's body being dragged, an hour after midnight, because she had attended a ladies' night service at Rivers of Sugar Waters Church? That cry, was it that those salty waters weren't there to cry? That what's left to cry is the chest? The stomach? The womb? The cry, could it have made your stomach quiver like mine? And like me, could you have said, "it's just a stomach cramp, it'll go away"? Could you have endured it like the pink islands, the pyramid-shapes of a hot iron which Makhazaza withstood? Or like her mother, could you have said they couldn't have been hers, when they had been?

Between serving tea on a fifteen minute interval and taking little breaks of pulverised tobacco leaves, I wanted to hear more about her. Longed for somebody to tell her secrets.

The following day, things moved very quickly. Not knowing when night ended and morning began, the men who had been sent out to finish the burial job had looked for her in vain. Was she hiding deliberately? Would it have been better if her mother had been there to cover her body? Would she have made her dead body visible to her even when was so alive she could never have shown her her neck or turned her back around?

Makhazaza's mother made say something when the tea she had drunk fifteen minutes ago, its full-cream milk intact, covered the floor. The woman who had yelled at me for getting a cup instead of a washing tub ordered me, and this time softly, to get a washing tub and a cloth. I ran for it, the way I had done all run-arounds for sugar water, making sure that I heard washing tub and not cup. I kneeled before the mattress and started to wipe her mother's puke. As I twisted the cloth to wipe the floor, cobwebs of thick saliva spread across my fingers. I was not disgusted by this. I was not. I

was reminded rather, of the day Makhazaza valiantly changed the nappies of my then-sickly sister. If I couldn't have been there to rub the pink islands, the pyramid-shapes of a hot iron, beyond your reach, I needed to have at least done that.

Everybody decided to bury the hatchet. To agree that if she had been buried in full, it didn't matter who had done it.

By the time I finished wiping the floor, the men who had been sent out again to find her were said to have been on the way back. Had she been found this time around? Had she been buried in full? Or already buried before death? Before being buried? The woman who had introduced herself as Makhazaza's colleague said, "finally, this woman will know what peace feels like."

I had never seen her body open, long, and free-flowing like a river. Even when she had come to leave her stress on my doorstep, after she had taken a bath, she would always dress up in the bathroom. If she didn't, if I had forgotten something in there, the bathroom was narrowly opened, only letting me see her face. The pink islands and the pyramid-shapes of a hot iron that Makhazaza's mother said could never have been hers. It was no use asking, how did they land on her body? How had they formed? When did they become hers? They were there for all to see. For all to make out who had caused them. For us to mark where the dry patches lay beside a stream of sugar water.

Weeping Green

The scarf covering her face only lets her see the path.

Two front-eyes, in black trousers, march before her. A side-eye, in khaki trousers, walks besides her. And the back-eye behind her. She cannot see for herself.

She has to lower her head. Let her face remain hidden. She has to lock her ears. Pretend not to hear an uneven chorus of reporters shouting that it's her. The accuser. It's her.

Her limbs are trembling. She cannot fall. She misses a step. But she does not fall. The back-eye grabs her by her hand. She stops trembling.

She wants to unwrap the scarf. Confirm that it's her. The accuser. It's her. But she's met by the sharp sword of Welile's words. "See no evil. Hear no evil. See this to the end." She adjusts the scarf to cover her exposed right ear. She can only see her legs. Hear? Evil? She knows it lies in the air.

They continue to walk on a flat path as if it's steep.

They loosen up and catch their breath.

A shrill female voice sounds close. It insists, who bought you, lying bitch? Who bought you? The country wants to know. It leaves the right side of her face exposed again.

This is a break for a green-and-yellow reporter who flashes as he pleases, before the front-eyes gives him warning.

She adjusts the green scarf, now, tighter. She is sweating. Panting. She wants out of that green thing. But, for her safety (which she has never scented), she must keep covered.

Facing forward, she sees an arrow pointing to her right. "There's still one more passage to go through before we can enter the court building," she thinks to herself, but knows too well that the arrows could be deceiving. She wants to pull up her military pants. They are beginning to show her back. But doing so will yield the scarf to the hammering squall of camera flashes.

So she resolves to hold it by the neck like a chicken to the slaughter.

They continue to walk a weaving path, almost toppling at every attempt to step.

They relax and catch their breath.

As they enter the first staircase, she clings to the scarf, for there the wind wrestles for the best shots.

"It's my red carpet day. Misery is my red carpet day," she thinks to herself, and smiles at the meaninglessness of it all. She takes a last step before entering the house of judgement. Front-eyes, in khaki trousers, hurries to open the door for her. They enter the building. They enter the courtroom. They are right on time.

If only she could fiddle with the horns of time to her convenience.

They are going to wait twenty minutes longer because the accused has not arrived.

She gathers herself. Pulls up her military pants and turns to the back-eye. Her mother.

She walks towards her and pats her on the back. On the same shoulder, where her scores live. The ones with green stitches. She closes her eyes to listen to their soft pain. "Come back, when I'm alone," she whispers to its cracks. Packing its worms and needles, it leaves.

"Here. It's prayed for," says her mother, handing her a bottle of water. She looks at her and says, "the very same god living in this water bottle must show up for my court case." She touches the bottle with her nailed lips and closes it again.

Her mother gulps it on her behalf, taking its full stream. For the parched moments of the path are unknown.

She remembers she has to unwrap the scarf. She unwraps it. Looks behind. And sees a couple of faces she knows. She waves her right hand. Smiles without exposing her teeth.

She takes her position as the accuser. The lying bitch who has been bought. Takes out her cell phone, to fix her eyes on the face of a small boy on its screen. A sudden warmth fills her eyes. Green tears. She opens her eyes wide and sends them back. It would not help her to let them run here. It would not move her case. She yawns at the already-beginning journey. She folds her arms. And awaits her justice.

Jet sirens are heard racing outside. Chest-men in black run into the courtroom. When a bringmymachinegun song flares, she chants, "when your tricks are over, you won't again be safer."

Enters the accused. In a sheep's cotton and a red tie, he exchanges handshakes of favour. Old-boy networks.

A traditional healer climbs on his seat. Wags his tails to the face of the accuser. And, walks out of the courtroom.

Ululations and ovations in the air. She sees and hears evil.

The accused takes a stand. He smiles. His teeth are on the verge of falling. He takes out a tree trunk. Chew. Spit. Chew. Spit. To balance them.

The woman who screams, "If I were... I would not have washed," is immediately shown the door. And back in.

Stealing glances at the accuser, the accused adjusts his spectacles with his middle finger. When he's sweating he fixes his tie. When he panics he clears his throat. And, when he pretends not to be looking. He adjusts his spectacles with his middle finger.

Terror, Not Her Scarf!

While a group of women marches before her, her family, friends and colleagues walk beside her, and her mother comes behind her, the scarf around her face only lets her see the path.

Though it shields her ears, the noise outside the Supreme Court seeps. "It's her. The accuser. It's her." It hurts her. And under the scarf, she trembles. Doesn't fall. Only trembles. For she must scarf on, for the fallen scarfs that once stood in the courtroom.

Jostled by the wind, the scarf around her face, falls slightly on one side, and the noise begins anew: "The accuser. It's her." It hurts again. But she continues to scarf her way towards the Supreme Court. Even as the noise says, "Who bought you, lying bitch? Who bought you? The country wants to know," she continues to scarf her face tightly, knowing very well that the scarf is not her terror.

She mounts a flight of stairs leading to the Supreme Court entrance, clinging onto the hope that courtrooms are not scarfed tears and justice, not a strangled scarf.

But, suddenly, when she has entered the court building, misery scarfs itself around her, causing her to tremble a little beneath her scarf. But it does not fall, it only trembles. It does not fall because the woman-crowd singing around her rallies her to scarf ahead.

She adjusts her scarf to stand as 'accuser'. Accuser of a sheep of a man – an uncle who could never have raped her. Holding her hand, her mother scarfs her trembles to keep her standing. For terror is not her scarf. Nor is it her tomb.

Meanwhile, outside the courtroom, machine guns are fired through her scarf. But the women crowd around her, singing, "When your tricks are over, you won't again be safer." They keep her standing. Until a sheep of a man in a red tie, passing handshakes of favour, enters the courtroom. But even as she sees and hears evil, she continues standing, head-scarfed.

A sheep of a man adjusts his tie to stand 'accused'. While standing, he chews – spits. Chews – spits the dragon-balls that will win him the case. When called to give his account of the rape, he chews – spits. Chews – spits, the dragon-balls that strangled many scarfs.

But, even as she sees this, terror is not her scarf. It isn't.

Coffee Stains

“Tighten your hand a little my child, coffee stains are too stubborn,” said her mother, adding more washing powder to a white tablecloth she had been washing. She turned it over and applied more force to her hand washing. How could she have avoided the skin-peeling that hand-washing did to one’s hands? She stood up to rinse it. Then, by two ends, held it up. At a distance, the stains seemed gone and yet up close, like a faint map, like little worlds, whose traces those who once lived there or had been there to witness the coffee spill, can only mark. She had fought them. If they had been there, it wouldn’t be because she had not done her best, but because the fabric had seen a thousand stains and as a result had grown too stubborn by age.

She went inside the house to remove the calamine, on her forehead and right cheek, which she had applied before going out to the sun to do her handwashing. Could the whiteness of the calamine have diminished the pimples that were already encamped on her forehead? And the black spots on her right cheek, were they diminished? She looked across the calamine container, at the *How to apply* section and the *Results* section. The only thing that was written there was that you can re-apply it as often as needed, and that if your skin gets worse after using it, consult the doctor.

Removing it, section by section, she found herself wanting the results immediately. “Let’s give it four weeks,” she thought. She’d give her face exactly that much time to recover. Then, she applied two drops of Vitamin E oil one and half of 50 SPF sunblock lotion a concealer five drops of liquid foundation one on the forehead cheek sides chin and neck followed by a matte foundation a blusher powder and red lipstick.

“Wow! You look beautiful. What happened to those things? They can’t be tracked down at all,” said her younger sister in total awe.

“Beautiful like mommy,” added her mother.

Although this was true, something below her stomach dropped. It was the same as the afternoon of early Christmas shopping, when she and her mother ran into her mother’s high-school mate, who said “you have such a beautiful daughter, but you are going to spoil her face with those things.” Using her index finger she tapped her right cheek and laughed sheepishly.

What dropped? Why had it dropped? She was so impressed with her mother’s unsullied laughter at such a cruel statement. Was she not shaken by this? How had she not felt the drop? When had the shedding of a thick shell happened? Regularly, when many times her skin had been described as overly breakable?

Long ago, one particular man had even prophesied that when her mother was still a little girl, a woman who saw her beauty sprouting and did not like it had cast a spell of bad skin on her after-bath water, resulting in mounting blasts of pimples. Even this did not penetrate her mother's tough skin. Sometimes people found it unbelievable that her own mother had birthed her. In family gatherings, those who openly undermined her mother gave her the most attention.

Young, beautiful and dark girls in her family wanted to be lighter like her. Her similarly-aged cousins took note of the facial products she used. She was such a spectacle that even her own sister had once asked her if, when she grew up, she would be light like her. That thing below her stomach had dropped and she said, you'll grow to be more beautiful than I am.

How did it feel to have your daughter hold attention better than you, you who had birthed her? For her mother, the praises that went to her daughter did not damn her; they were hers too. The question of how it felt to have one's beauty held or passed on to one's daughter did not matter because to see her daughter was to see another version of her own beauty. What did the saying, "beauty does not birth beauty" mean? Was it even true?

There were even times when her daughter didn't want her friends to meet her mother. Not because she was ashamed of her, but because she was tired of responding to, "you don't look much like your mother" or sometimes, jokingly, "are you sure you weren't stolen from the hospital?" She was tired of walking with her mother and watching people give her all kinds of prescriptions: try a homemade facial scrub melt Vitamin B pills apply them to your face drink green tea daily on an empty stomach use Epsom Salts as a facial scrub apply lemon juice or vinegar with cotton wool apply plain yoghurt change your pillow case every week wash your pillows every month stay away from the sun use a fragrance free soap lotion buy this product and that.

The thought of growing up to have a face like her mother frightened her. More so when her own brother, giving her a you're-in-trouble look, said "you are starting to look like mother now. What is going on?" And her boyfriend, "baby those things are back again. Are they painful?" Not knowing what to say, she would simply reply, "they come and go and I've made peace with it." But from this boyfriend, there was no pressure to wake up before he woke up in order to apply makeup.

She felt loved even though, sometimes, he demonstrated his frustration with them by wanting to press them. "Don't press them. They'll go away," she said with the pretence of ease, knowing very well that she would hate it if they didn't go away. During this phase, many would say "your mother's things are sprouting again?" How was she to respond to that? "Yes, my mother's things are growing back. They are here and I'm treating them," she said. They said it like a dark spotted face was cursed,

diseased; an end to one's beauty. The way her ex-boyfriend, months before their break-up, had said, "what is happening to your face? You're not taking care of yourself. You should take contraceptives, you know."

She was so hurt by this. So hurt because that morning she hadn't slept, and hadn't been to her flat to take a shower due to working all night on an article that was due the next day. What was more important? The article or an un-made-up face? She scored an A-plus for that article because of the sleepless nights, baggy eyes, and an uncosmeticised face.

What about black spots suggested that one wasn't taking care of oneself? Why was he only saying this now? And what did contraceptives have to do with it? Was he insinuating that, perhaps, she had been sleeping around without a condom? That people who had unprotected sex had pimples, or that people who were on contraceptives did not have pimples at all? Did he know that her mother had the same skin? Had he spoken out of ignorance? It didn't matter. Saying those words to her meant saying them to her mother.

Applying makeup thickly, she longed for her then-smooth face. Was she doing this in an attempt to reverse his words? Were they reversible? They stayed with her for a very long time. But loving her mother, appreciating her in her fullest, meant loving herself irrespective of what her ex-boyfriend had said. This was before she wished her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend a raisin-bread face. Before she decided this was unforgivable. Perhaps, that way, he would learn that beauty is both even and uneven. It is never one thing and is forever shifting between these two ends.

She packed a few things she had needed before her friends picked her up for lunch. Upon seeing her they said, "look at you, that foundation hides those things so well". If she had gone through this, how much more had her mother endured? What had she heard? What had she chosen not to hear? And how had she survived statements of this nature without a drop of something? What did she see in herself? What had she so believed about herself that nothing swayed her?

When she returned home that night from lunch, she headed to the back of the house, where the washing line was, to fetch the white tablecloth. It had long since dried. Folding it, she smiled at the thought that even whites don't remain purely white.

Memory in a Honey Jar

A memory in a honey jar is a stitch of time. You fold and bind it to a key. Set prayer alight and call grace for a dress-fitting.

The fifth floor of Hundred Jorrison is a text you vowed never to walk when you shut the windows and left the curtains open. Scholastic tête-à-têtes under the vanilla test light contesting the mood. How big was the flame at Hundred Jorrison? What degree was its fire when you loaned him your two-tone heart?

Memories – in honey jars – are lustful like white wine. Who wiped sleep from your eyes when you shut the windows and left the curtains open? When it, suddenly, dawned to you that you shouldn't have left them open to flying things – wandering things. Who keeps darning you with fear? There's surely something around you if you look hard enough.

A good morning to you sunshine is a text you never believed the day you shut the windows and left the curtains hanging because it was dark and his sunshine was gone. Look at yourself now. It's like you've never belonged to yourself. Before you moved in at Hundred Jorrison. Before you left the windows shut and the curtains open. Before you stopped wanting what wasn't for you to want.

When your head played skipping, how many words did you say? How many of those said did you mean? How many did you not?

Memory, in a honey jar, is like a door leading to the one you've been through. A mind game, a search, a count-the-words-he-said. The words he meant and did not mean out of the said. The words he said and meant.

It's like *I played a destructive role in your life* is a text you ignored, years later, when you had long shut his windows and long left his curtains open. Disappearing in a bookshelf for a little high-end saving-your-life. And he doesn't like it. He doesn't like it at all when tuck your pussy into your head to await a happy day.

The story behind the Kudala Tree

Ahead is a broken stream. Better to run your way on its dry patches than to wet your soles. Or you can walk on its waters, hoping the sun will dry them up. The way Muzi hounds his big toes through its narrows. For what promises can the risen sun fulfil except to shine upon itself? Adamant to pray to the sun, he spits on the ground.

A bird, flying across his path, shits and cleans up. A cat, walking across his path, shits and leaves it lying there. Is this truly happening? Maybe it is. It's the medication kicking in or the TB ghosts of Ward 16, supposes Muzi. His left eye twitches, indicating that something unusual is about to happen. He looks ahead and sees a sign board: Speed humps ahead, max. 5km/h. He stops. Balances his hands above his hip and continues to walk straight ahead.

"Are you well? Your mind seems distant."

"It's this path. It refuses to end," says Muzi, searching for the voice.

"Or the hot sun burning you into your senses," mocks the disappearing voice, while Muzi turns and turns to locate its source. Must be the medication kicking in, supposes Muzi again, walking a long road that binds him to the sun.

He spots a tree for a shade, makes to sit under it to find it gone. He takes off his t-shirt to wipe his perspiring face. Could anyone really tell that it was once 100% pure cotton? A made in the UK hand-wash? All that's left is 2% of its pure cotton.

Then a sound of something approaching. He looks left. Right. Nothing! But the sound of something approaching remains. Is it the bird? The cat? The medication kicking in?

It's a white van. Left approaching – going right. He flags it with his t-shirt. It stops.

"Where to, Mfo?" asks the driver.

"Golden highway."

"Let's go."

"Thank you. Thank you," says Muzi, struggling with the door handle.

"Bumped your head against something?" asks the driver.

"No. Why?"

"You're bleeding."

“Bleeding? Where?” Muzi touches his forehead.

How could he have bumped his head against something without feeling it? Was this perhaps, the coming of the rain-blood Fudu had prophesied? Could there be an injured animal up the tree he sat under? What could the bird have eaten to drop blood? Or was it the cat? Was the medication kicking in?

He takes out a piece of tissue, leans closer to the rear-view mirror, and makes to wipe off the drop of blood.

“You’re not supposed to wipe it.”

“Why?”

The driver indicates to the right.

“Where’s your family?”

“In Johannesburg. We don’t see each other.”

“And talk?”

“...we do, but not that often,” says Muzi, moving away from the rear-view mirror.

“You sat under the Kudala tree, didn’t you?”

“The Kudala tree?”

“Never heard of it? The tree that bleeds.”

“The tree that bleeds?”

“Yes. For its long-lost family.”

“No. I haven’t heard the story.”

“Okay, let me move to this lane and I’ll tell it to you,” says the driver, joining the left lane.

Kudala, Kudala, Kudala! There was a tree called Kudala. It grew tired of its family and of living in the Kudala forest. And so, it left its wife, Makudala, and seven of its children: Kudala-we, Kudala-fi, Kudala-la, Kudala-po, Kudala-da, Kudala-ku, and Kudala-le, and went to live in another forest. There, it met a beautiful young tree called Lithalathala and within months they got married. But many months later, when Kudala’s pension fund had run out, Lithalathala grew tired of Kudala.

Muzi laughs.

“Ya! The Lithalathalas of this world, Mfo, are unpredictable. I once lived with one myself. Why? I would not tell you.”

Muzi laughs a little.

“You see this leg,” pointing to the right leg balanced on the accelerator.

“I got injured at work and couldn’t keep working. And so, I took my moneys and left. By the way, this was also the time when things were not well between my then-wife and I. So, you know how these things work, mos? I used that as an exit,” says the driver, indicating left.

“I fought her terribly so she could leave. She didn’t. But I still left.

Within a couple of months my moneys were out. I bought this van and gave Lithalathala the rest.”

He indicates and turns left again.

“Where was I?”

“...Oh. I could feed ten families for the whole year with that money. But within months I was featherless, homeless and penniless. Unbelievable, is it not?”

“Well, at least you own a van. Me, I have nothing!” protests Muzi.

Hearing a screeching sound, the driver stops the van. He opens the bonnet, and through the window of his seat reaches for a screw-driver. “Lithalathala ate my moneys, and now I can’t fix the damn thing,” he jokes, closing the bonnet to start the car.

“Where was I?”

He turns the radio on and when a loud *ssssshhhhhhhhhhh* comes up, he switches it off.

“Lithalathala,” adds Muzi, breaking the silence.

“Oh, yes. She was starting to complain about how Kudala drank up a lot of water and how its branches and roots took up a lot of space. Then, one day, Kudala woke up. Excuse me! To- excuse me! To find Lithalathala gone with all its summer fruits. Kudala was broken, and thought that maybe if he could go back to his wife and children, all would be well. But when he got home, he was told that the trees that once lived at the Kudala forest were moved because of a housing project. From that day on Kudala has never been able to find his wife and children, and has been bleeding Makudala, Kudala-we, Kudala-fi, Kudala-la, Kudala-po, Kudala-da, Kudala-ku, Kudala-le, without rest.

Muzi sighs.

“There’s nothing new out there. If there is, it doesn’t last for long. You’re still young, and that drop of blood is a sign that things could still turn out right for you.” He switches the radio button on and when the *ssssshhhhhhhhhhh sssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhh* sounds come up, he turns the volume down.

“See? This too must be fixed. But how? Lithalathala has left with my money.”

They both laugh, the driver belching in-between and excusing himself.

“What made you leave?” asks the driver.

“...A lot happened. It was mostly the things that had been going on for years that we were not talking about that started our fights. Bokub’hlungu but for the sake of peace, I left.”

“Eeeei! I hear you, Mfo. So where do you live now?”

“I live with my mother. It’s the worst thing ever. We fight every single day.”

“No. She’s your mother, Mfo. She cares about you,” says the driver, indicating left to join the Golden Highway.

“It’s all my fault.”

“No. Don’t blame yourself. It had to be this way. You had to be separated from your family, and the blood drop from the Kudala tree means you’ve still got time to make peace.”

“But where will I start?”

“Where you left, Mfo.”

“I think I’ll be fine if you drop me on that board, there. Thanks very much, Taima.”

“Bab’uNyoni – the bird. Call me Bab’uNyoni,” says the driver, handing Muzi a pink note.

“Here, call your family. You’re young. There’s hope for you.”

Threads

Yesterday, Maru a Pula paid us a visit. The four bullets in the back of his head, the blood stains on our walls, are an empty glass he left those many years ago, without a word.

If glasses could speak, and there is no reason why they should not, they would tell of our tears, flowing for a season, some say twenty-eight years, yet he never bothered to come back.

“Make me a cup of tea, my dear. I have something to tell you,” said my grandmother, religiously, when the storm of her news brewed. But, when it brewed, the tea grew cold and her mouth failed her, for not a word escaped.

This habit, my father – Maru a Pula – understood very well. Keeping secrets when it mattered the most or silencing his thoughts when all I wanted to hear was his voice, his truth.

Nothing more my grandmother would say about the past that was obviously present in our house except to suckle a tea bag. So, I made her the fifth or sixth of the many cups she had drunk that day. A brew of the four bullets queuing at the back of Maru a Pula’s head. Of vivid stains on our walls. A brew of my grandfather’s madness.

“There’s nothing left for me, child of my child.” My grandfather – Speedkop – preferred this line, and mostly after four to six cartons of his Special Leopard Beer. “This is a wild animal, child of my child. Don’t mess with it.” But he kept messing with it and it kept messing with him. It kept on his head.

One Sunday afternoon, Speedkop walked into the house, snarling, “I want my wallet, you thieves. Give me my money.” Unsteady in his steps and slurring in his speech, he took out a gun, threatening to kill the thieves he claimed had stolen his wallet.

People gathered outside our house, around the fence. Running away from the fence and back to it. Laughing and screaming, daring him to fire another bullet. Like all those years ago when he shot a bat? A bird? A fly? When the fourth bullet went into the air and never came down. “Help me my dear. I’m the next in line,” said my grandmother, sweating, shivering in silence. This was not new. Our house had always been a stage for such drama and the heavy silence that lingered the next day.

When Speedkop was sober.

When he was not entirely sober.

When he had found his wallet in his pockets.

No thieves were after him.

I'm recounting these moments, now, in teacups and my world is so small, reduced like Makhali's rondavel.

"Your grandmother knew too well to hide things from you," said Makhali, throwing sea shells, old coins and poker dice to weight my world, my truth, my tomorrow. "I see a dead son. I see a gun and an old man with bloody hands..."

"Uyavuma-na?"

I agreed even though the threads connect the dead son – to a gun – to an old man with bloody hands – to a house that no-one visits because there are guns there, there are screams there, unknown to me.

A tree stump

Taking turns to draw from an asthma inhaler, Tabrandich sat down to admire the work of Chelimo's hands – how green they were – as she carried on with her instructions. "Now, you must learn how to harvest and cure your crops," or, "that plant over there is good for bird control."

The dry site that could hold twenty-seven classrooms, one hundred and one pupils, and still leave room for an aircraft, was a tea plantation, back then, when in a good year, peach and apricot trees surrounding the plot would produce canned and dried fruit and still leave them wood for winter. Now, the brown and white cowhide beneath the coffee table was the only evidence of the many cows that Chesilim – Tabrandich's husband – vended. The bandiat that Chelimo had harvested would have long died the night Chesilim, three months after taking Jemaiyo as his second wife, sat Tabrandich down and said "I want to sell this plot."

Where will the children go? What will they eat? And the near-ripe bandiat that, alone, could not pay their school fees, in whose soil will it grow? thought Tabrandich, chewing the hard bones of her mind for a way out. She knew very well that where Jemaiyo could carve Chesilim's mind into clay pots of whimsical dimensions, she was not capable. When his mind was made, it was made.

Sleep did not come that night. The following day, when there was not yet a sign that the sky would open up, Tabrandich rose early in morning, her eyes swollen from the hard chewing of the mind, to see chief Kimutai. The chief was yet awake. And so she sat outside, in the cold, and waited for him to wake up. When he did, he said:

"I thought it was a tree stump. But I was wondering how it got there."

"No, chief. It is not a tree stump. It is me."

"What are you doing here at this time of the morning? Did you fight? Where is Chesilim? Did he hit you?"

"No."

"Then, what brings you here at this hour?"

"My husband wants to sell the only piece of land we have. Where are we going to go? Kiptoo is almost done with his schooling. Jepkosgei has just started."

When she got to Jepchoge, the sixth of the seven children, her speech became unclear, and Chelimo – the school principal and fifth of the chief's wives – foreseeing a breakdown, swiftly stood to prepare

a mixture of sugar water for her. Without wasting time they made for Chesilim and found him still sleeping.

“I’ve been told you want to sell this piece of land.”

“Yes, I want to sell it. Do you think it belongs to a woman? It is mine! She’s got nothing here and therefore cannot advise me on what to do.”

“Ok, fine. You want to sell it? Go ahead. I’ll send people to arrest you.”

For many days Chesilim held his head. When he was with Tabrandich, he smoked the tobacco that in other days would have sustained him for three nights. Jemaiyo, who had lost the first child, was now expecting the second. Month-end came and, having received payment for the tea plantation, Chesilim drank it all, only to say to Tabrandich: “Your chief says he’ll arrest me. Let him try.”

The thought of going to her brother’s homestead to beg for a place to stay no longer bothered Tabrandich. Whether or not Chesilim sold the land, she was determined to grow bandiat and njuguk, or take menial jobs, for the children to continue their schooling.

Jemaiyo, on the other hand, lost the second child, and the third, and the fourth. The fifth child only lived for a couple of weeks. As a way of apologising to Tabrandich for his heedless act of wanting to sell their land, Chesilim said “there’s no point in keeping Jemaiyo there. After all, land is there to be worked, and who will work it when her womb cannot ground any of my seeds?”

Now, there was no hard chewing of mind-bone for Tabrandich. Chesilim was dead and buried in the same land he had threatened to sell.

And the parts untold

Where bone is found tears are chests stomachs larynxes names last seen wearing curves and backsides
chest your stomach womb your strap heels one woman gone is no myth of woman talking aches lumps
hiccups and all kinds of things salithambo will be your skin the wings of found or never or parts untold.

