

This document consists of two (2) parts:

Part A: Portfolio

Part B: Thesis (Creative Work)

PART A: PORTFOLIO

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Poetics and Narrativity

Reimagining the writer and reader image

Writing has always experienced as the elite relative in the family of arts, especially among African artists and art consumers. Somehow writing has in past and to a great extent still is in the present been referred more than song, storytelling and dancing. Interrogating the past of colonization of African narratives I could point that this is the case because African expression had always packaged in a ‘*come see the Africans are dancing, singing or storytelling. Listen to their clicks.*’ Writing, however, could only be executed by those Africans of white assimilation with higher social status and missionary education. Among amaXhosa, the disparity of socially lesser African arts and that of the educated has been termed the narrative of *Amaqaba* and *Amagqobhoka*. *Amaqaba* being those whose stories have taken longer to be documented in modern means of writing but have been enriched through years of live telling. *Amagqobhoka* on the other hand who easily documented their narrative after having been trained in writing have enjoined the audience of readers and access into literary space longer.

In today’s literary space the inherited privilege of being part of the *Amagqobhoka* as educated Africans is still prevalent and easily identified through the titles Black writers have. Black writers still carry the burden of having to prove their education status as *Doctor So and So* if they want to be received as worthy literary contributors. *Amaqaba* on the other hand are still sidelined. I, on the other hand hold it as a centre within my storytelling and writing that the pen and title of a writer is by no means an extension or ingredient to the narrative. It is only an outlet.

Not bashing *Doctor So and So* status or the pen but rather capitalizing on them as instruments within my possession, that being the pen in my case. My thesis and overall writing process is a personal initiative to lend my pen as an outlet to those stories and narratives of *Amaqaba* which, excluded from literary spaces are rich in human experiences, perspective and life.

My stories and success in telling them can only be captured in the sentiments of Legendary Theatre Stalwart Mam’ uNomhle Nkonyeni when commenting on her receiving The Presidential Order of Ikamaga, Silver:

“*Ndiyifumene ke ngoku, ndiyifumene and akhomntu uza kuyithatha, yeyam. Yeyam nabantu baseBhayi. Ndiyile nto ndiyiyo nje leli Bhayi eli*” translated “I have received the Honour, there is no one who will take it away from me. It is mine. It is mine and the people of Port Elizabeth.

I am what I am because of Port Elizabeth”. Because no university has prepared me until Honours level in order to be at the level I am in – No, university can claim more of my being than the community from which my pen and writing has been mastered.

Ndiphekwe apha eBhayi

IBhayi, the Port Elizabeth that *umam*’ uNomhle Nkonyeni refers to, is not limited to the geographical markings on a map. She is referencing the culture, history and experiences that she has, in her memory. Moments she has shared and observed within a particular environment that has shaped her perspective. All these factors add up to give her narrative, mannerism, depiction, voice and gestures. She follows her above statements with: “...*ndiphekwe apha eBhayi*” translated “I was trained here in Port Elizabeth” by its culture and people.

This is equally as true for me as it is for *umam* ‘Nomhle Nkonyeni. In the absence of “formal education” from an academic institution’s perspective. It has been the streets of the township, the alleys of the night, the whispers of secrets and lectures in Beer Lecture Rooms that are the knowledge base of my homemade Honouree Degree. Because after all, all potential no matter how outstanding must be groomed, as a discipline, if that potential is to stand a chance of coming out.

In literary circles, there is a say; “write the book that you want to read”. This say is under-investigated as it clearly implies not everything to write about has been written about. So there still is space for the new under the sun particularly pertaining to written accounts. As a writer, I have had to answer for myself, what drives my need to write? Is it measuring myself against books I’ve read and I am still to read, or is it in purely staying inspired and stimulated? The latter has since taken the prize.

Inspiration and stimulation from the same source as the people that I as the writer portray in the narrative through a character are very important in my portrayal. The lived experience of dancing to their music, laughing to their jokes and crying to their pain only adds to the richness of the story and character depiction. The fact of living in a time with an increasingly tainted and bias worldview through media, which can taint the writer’s portrayal of character. If a writer drops guard and thinks that the media or a once of encounter with a person of a particular community is enough to equip them to write in the character of the person. Likewise, a writer is constantly trotting along the dangers of one; subjecting their characters to the social norms

and stereotypes that the writer has on social acceptance. Two: the writer having an idea of what his/her market audience wants from them might compromise the character they are writing in order to have the character fit into the desires of their audience.

The writing process of *Hope in A Small Town* was fuelled by a desire to be as honest to the process and the characters portrayed as possible. The narrative itself is a hybrid, half-fictional and half non-fictional. This end hybrid product is a result of the workings of memory as an independently evolving resource and data because of the creative drive either to heighten a particular occurrence or to intentionally obscure an event.

Memory is the foundation on which relationships stand, relationships that the novel *Hope in A Small Town* reflects and invites the observing eye of the reader to be a part. The reader, in this case, being the market must arrive in a founded relationship that is reflective of trust, care and honesty between the writer and its characters. Still, this relationship must be navigated in a way that upholds the importance of each literary member: the reader and the character. As equally valuable components of the book's literary experience.

The dilemma of balancing between reader and character as equally valuable components might seem like a self-inflicted pain and burden within the industrial, academic and oft western approach to writing which ultimately is merely another way of storytelling. However, this balance is a balance that has been achieved and is the centre principal of African storytelling. Take for example the theatre, in a Western theatre performance, the value gage between character and audience is tilted towards the character portrayal on stage. Through the ideal of 'audience ethic' which in practice is silencing and erasure of the audience from the immediate action in favour of the characters and story on stage. In African portrayal the opposite is true, the audience is evoked to become a part of the life unfolding, the audience's emotions and judgement are intentionally tormented and questioned. This approach to storytelling is an approach that has repeatedly been borrowed by many African writers as a creative and ideological point of departure when writing, portraying character and creating an experience for the reader.

Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo says "I had a large family where people told stories in the evening. My first introduction to literature was through oral literature, oral interpretation." Likewise, South African poet Lesego Rampolokeng states in an interview by Robert Berold:

When did you first encounter oral poetry? What effect did it have on you?

LR: Oral poetry doesn't necessarily see itself as such. I came across it in the streets and in my home as well. For instance, my grandmother, when she was in some kind of excited state, moved to anger or joy or whatever, would rattle out some lines that would put quite a number of people today going as poets to shame... I did not recognise it as poetry itself. It was just the way in which my grandmother would express herself at certain times. This country's best poets will never be known, will never be recognised, because they do not even see themselves as poets, just as people putting words out there, in the street, mouth to ear, that kind of communication.

The placing of literature within a readily accessible family experience as these African writers have done is not an idea that has been wholeheartedly pursued within literary spaces. Often the institutionalization of literature prefers to suppress the collective and open access, African approach to literature, as recreational or some other cultural *woonga*¹ but not literature. Literature seems still suffers from a colonial hangover that defines and contextualises it as an exclusive past time.

Even among African lovers of literature, their books have a nasty lived experience of isolating them from their community, as for the language issue, literature has often separated them from their very culture and stories.

Ngugi wa Thiong again says in his essay: *Decolonizing the Mind, The Politics of Language in African Literature*. As he relays an encounter with a fellow countryman which prompted him to write in his mother tongue Kikuyu. He recalls the words as said to him:

“The trouble with you educated people is that you despise your languages. You don't like talking to ordinary people but what use is your education if it cannot be shared with your own people. Let me tell you, you may possess all the book education in the world. But we ordinary people in tottery clothes with bare feet and blistered hands who have the real knowledge of things.”

The above words present at most an unseen and unacknowledged burden for the African more directly put Black Writer. On how to write in a manner that places his narrative at the centre of

attention of his people. This burden begs to ask the question. What is the gaging value of literature and among people?

As with grandma's stories, my personal value metre for Hope in A Small Town is in its ability to live up to the power of bringing people, family and community together. Its ability to evoke pride among people as the visibly hidden value of clan names recited in ceremony recalling the narrative of a people through code and symbols kept in memory.

I establish this story based value system by writing a narrative in which the community and people I portray write in themselves into the story as a people with a future, past and present, where they themselves are the ultimate makers of history and future. By changing the power dynamic of the reader, writer and character relationship. To expose the readers out of their silent comfort as observers, to come into the story at the invitation of the character. The character, written in, in local languages isiXhosa and Afrikaans as the people would speak without yielding to language as a structured code but rather a tool to communicate, when, how, whatever. People moments are lifted out from the narrative narrated in English. The intended result then is instead of characters being narrated about; they jump out of the text and story and be, in their own terms. Of course, they are being within the limits of creative memory of the writer doing his best to allow the characters space in the narrative to live. As best as memory would allow all moments of being, from real life, have been captured and relayed through the character in the novel. The character, therefore, is rooted in reality as an ode the person represented. The character, as only inked words on paper has a task to perform for both the reader and the remembered person who inspired the character. For the reader, the character is a channel delivering all the components of the narrative and to the recalled the message '*A you are important and you are alive!*'

In this story as in life. People who are featured in the novel as characters even with their names altered will read the novel to have an experience with the characters as themselves.

However, an ethical dilemma immediately arises for the writer when seeking to make the invincible visible. As romantic as the intent might seem but once you realise and acknowledge the invincible in any case is not a subject of story and study but a human being with their own preference, escalated by the fact that this human is part of a many. Part of a community with their own take on life, where then does the writer's social conscious start and end? When does the telling of this community move from portraying them to exposing their nakedness and betraying their inner parts and trust?

Writing the Rhythm of Pearston

Language in Pearston where the novel is set can move from *goo goo gaga* with an infant to extreme vulgar of cursing words in a split second. For a storyteller who has a presence in Pearston as *mam' uNomhle Nkonyeni* has in New Brighton, I can empathise with the people and understand the true meaning behind their vulgar words. In the case of the reader who does not have the luxury of background empathy with the characters, the inked words are all they have as a means of forming a relationship with the character affording them a degree of sympathy.

“*FUTSEK!*” being the first thing you hear at 04:03 on Saturday morning, echoing around the corner from an identifiable voice, can easily be dismissed with “It’s the weekend and alcoholic Joe has probably had his fill again”. To start a novel on the same note though would be to run the risk of alienating the reader prematurely from a beautiful story and relationship with ‘Joe’.

To counter this I applied language in its descriptive ability, describing the emotion and its cause as best I could against reporting word for word that which was said. In order to capture the frustrations of the people in the novel I minimize relaying from memory what the person recalled had said, I describe the situation and the conditions that sparked the thought and speech of the character. By describing, I recreate with text the conditions that fuelled the character’s sentiment then invite the reader to experience the character’s violation leading to the vulgar so that the vulgar is internally induced from the reader as opposed to the reader receiving it externally from the page. The resulting experience is not an experience of vulgar but the vulgarity with which the experience has been captured. The vulgar portrayal of Pearston is deliberate to capture the vulgar in everyday language and living conditions. However, in the narration vulgar has been silenced so that we can hear the character not for how it says things but for what it says. To see the character not for the kind of person it is but for who it is.

Who is the character? Is by far the greatest pursuit. The writer can at any time articulate his inspirations, the reader the same, and evolve his or her deductions. The recalled the same and if need be totally deny and distance itself from the character, but the character has no other way but to be as is in text, and once written cannot be unwritten.

Celebrated novelist Toni Morrison discusses memory and the aesthetics of Black art, by which the reader is made an active participant in her novels. In her essay *Memory, Creation and Writing* she recalls:

“In *The Bluest Eye*, the recollection of what I felt and saw upon hearing a child my own age say she prayed for blue eyes provided the first piece. I then tried to distinguish between a piece and a part - in the sense that a piece of a human body is different from a part of a human body.”

This has been a striking realization in my ideological approach to writing, drawing from a realization that the memory I recall of my Pearston experience and that which I evoke in the text is but only a piece of the greater part of Pearston. The realization is both scaring and exciting in that it opens an opportunity for two contrasting reactions should the reader be from the community: a reaction of agreement and/or a reaction of total dismissal of my version of the narrative.

Titling of Chapters

I’ve put great thought into how I’ll be titling the chapters. The same thought goes into naming a poem or song. The titles act as landmarks into the heart of the story. The narrative of Pearston, a small town hardly heard of is a narrative that may seem like a faint echo due to its strangeness. Even though narratives of small towns have been written about many times, the strangeness of Hope in A Small is a narrative that requires orientating the reader to each chapter as they close one, and open the next. This is true for all novels. Along with deciding on how to title a chapter, it required much thought as well as to how long must each chapter be and where, and when to cut each chapter.

After the last part-time students’ Contact Week in May 2019, one comment stood out the most for me, which I took home when working on the novel. Fellow student’s Siya Ntsumpa’s advice of taking advantage of narrative shifts within my initial super long chapters as ideal marks of where to end one chapter and start another.

Among the books, I have read during the course of my study, one book stands out as a great example of how to title, contain, begin and end chapters. The method of NoViolet Bulawayo in her debut novel *We Need New Names* is a shining example of chapter titling, beginning and ending. Throughout the book, NoViolet Bulawayo holds the hand of the reader through her characters and runs across the pages without ever letting the reader breathe unless at her well-

executed end and start of chapters. NoViolet Bulawayo's protagonist Darling's spirit echoes through the chapter titles exposing her state of mind everywhere she goes.

Examples of her chapter titles are:

'Hitting Budapest'

Hitting Budapest evokes action in a language of duality. The title presents a mental challenge of how the verb is used, be it in the traditional sense, or the contemporary 'hitting' meaning going or moving towards. Within the first line of the chapter the writer assists, the readers solve this mystery. This chapter is for introducing the scene where the novel takes place.

'Darling on the Mountain'

Darling on the Mountain, the second chapter after Hitting Budapest having set the scene. NoViolet Bulawayo reminds us who the protagonist in the story is. The chapter, Darling on the Mountain puts the spotlight on Darling as an exalted character within the story.

'Destroyedmichygen'

Destroyedmichygen is definitely my favourite titling work. The best I have ever seen in all my reading. The title allows us to experience the psychological dilemma young Darling has after moving from her home in Zimbabwe to the United States of America and is orientating herself with a new culture.

We Need New Names is a novel of 290 words and 18 chapters. Approximately this ratio would work out to 16 pages a chapter making for a moderate read calling for a reader to invest a reasonable amount of time per chapter before moving to the next. Unlike one other book I read, The Blacker the Berry by Wallace Thurman, which has 146 pages of story and only five chapters between them. The ratio becomes approximately 29 pages per chapter. With 29 pages to read per chapter before moving to the next, the story of The Blacker the Berry became a drag to read. Often I would read the book and have to break mid-chapter and call it a night to continue the following day obviously now out of rhythm making a jerking experience of the read.

Both these reads were close to my novel since both of them deal with displacement, the leaving of one's home in search of another. In the case of The Blacker, the Berry this theme was even closer to Hope in A Small Town since the protagonist in the story is a new graduate looking

for work in a new town and having to navigate the new social order culturally and economically. That said *The Blacker the Berry* was first published in 1929 and *We Need New Names* in 2008. With 79 years in between each publication, it is safe to say the literary culture had evolved in time. Nowadays the 21st-century reader does not engage a novel looking for the same experience as the 20th-century reader.

Today's reader is much more preoccupied mentally with exposure to technology, physically with the demands of modern life, work and family, and the general mental and emotional well-being that comes with being a citizen of the contemporary world.

Along with offering chapter titles that grasp the readers' imagination, having remembered Siya Ntsumpa's advice on chapter length I was mindful to create chapters that also embody the pace and mood of the story. *Hope in A Small Town* has 195, A5 pages with 20 chapters in between them at a ratio of nine pages a chapter. After going at a rate of eleven pages per chapter before this year's (2019) contact week, I not only decided to cut down on pages per chapter but also had a realization that has since driven my writing choices for the novel.

As I was reading the various books, I kept asking myself for whom was *this* book written. Particularly books from African writers. Often in such books as a reader, I would find notes explaining concepts. This explaining is not to be confused with translations. When certain concepts have to be explained, there is a subliminal message that the written word in itself is not necessarily written for the people around the writer and the story being written about. There is an undertone of an extended invite towards an outsider, the other and often this outsider seems to be getting preferential treatment to the local reader who would connect with the story emotionally and culturally.

The real people reflected by the characters are not necessarily afforded an opportunity to travel and enjoy the narrative honestly through an experience emotionally, intellectually and culturally. The character is seldom written for the people to find themselves in the narrative but the narrative and character is written in a way that begs to convince the reader that the character reflects people.

In order to write in a way that allows people to find themselves in your characters requires great skill from the writer. Surely in society as segregated as South African society culturally and economically the task of humanising those unseen at the peripheries of our communities

is a noble gesture. However, the slightest misstep in this ‘humanizing’ and a writer can be called out for ‘liberal activism’ of patronizing nature raising the question: who said we were not human in the first place?

My idea of this humanizing ability in text stems from the Black Consciousness ideology by South African civil rights activist Bantubonke Steve Biko.

“In time we shall be in a position to bestow on South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face”

Through this ideological lens, the humanizing process is just that – a process. One based on possibility and potential. In my thesis *Hope in A Small Town*, the protagonist offers only a lens taking in the scenery of Pearston in its strangeness and similarity. While he has arrived to teach drama, in other words, to resituate or introduce an activity in a ‘stale’ environment. He is constantly confronted by the potential of his students as singers and dancers. Throughout the novel drama, lessons as he has come to introduce them remain a possibility. Thus, an air of life is captured in the small town amidst the Dry River and ashy brown RDP houses. This life is purposely hidden from plain sight of the reader in little mundane creatures such as beetles and arched backs drawing the readers to a particular focus while the life of the character continues freely without over marketing it for the reader’s senses.

Nonetheless, a reader must still be orientated to the story if they are to follow it through and as established Chapter Titles were a great method to achieve this. Here are some of my own Chapter Titles and their themes.

‘Dung Beetle’

Dung Beetle introduces the novel, its focus on the tiny insect on a brutal road sets the inquisitive tone of the narrative. Though the characters introduced in later chapters have odds against them this still remains their life to live. The protagonist knows nothing and is in a constant state of discovery. Pity is an unwelcomed guest into the world as we travel into the narrative in the comfort of an Amarok. Instead, the Amarok itself is used in the story as a distinguishing factor between us and them, privilege and the underprivileged.

‘The Pastures’

The Pastures interrogates purpose and relationships with and within the protagonist and its new community, Pearston. The ‘pastures’ of opportunity are lush and green before him still at the back of his head there is a constant reminder that he is the stranger. However, it is not the local who can claim belonging or understanding of things around. It is the one given authority by the community or self-imposed. The chapter does not tell definitely how this authority is granted to the protagonist, and maybe that doesn’t matter at all. What is clear, is that there is a new arriving ‘hero’ of development, and Pearston is his playfield. Strangely in the twisted nature of developmental events, it is not a respect for the people’s culture that reminds the protagonist to tread carefully. It is dogs at the hotel, a place of privilege that remind him of his blackness and belonging within the greater scheme of what they have come to do.

“I realized then that my relationship with the dogs is not so much on a, *who am I* but on a, *who I am with* basis. Inside the hotel, I am a prisoner by melanin found guilty and having to prove my innocence with every step I take. Proving myself to dogs.

It’s a good thing most of our days require us to be outside swinging our chances and playing golf with people’s lives. How can we save the world today?”

‘Arched Backs’

In this chapter, I refer to the term ‘arched backs’ that I have made up as an adjective to the men, numerous times in the story. To capture a void in the being of the local men in demeaning conditions. I use this term to capture a void, even though I open the chapter with a place of belonging for the men, their women. The social violence captured in the chapter triggered by alcoholism is a real dilemma. However, the men fulfil a function within their society, despite their arched backs and parched throats they remain breadwinners with dire conditions.

‘I’m Leaving’

I’m Leaving, the final chapter gave me a headache of headaches. As the final chapter, it gave me more than just an opportunity to close the novel. It became a moment to conclude the journey between writer, reader, characters and people. What would be the final impression that I as a writer create of the people through the characters in the readers mind?

The final chapter much like the final scene in theatre embodies the dramatic exit of the narrative, the question I had to answer in my mind was, will I finish off in a closed or open ending, and most importantly, who is deserving of having the final word in the story?

Life, as in the world of the people I was drawing my inspiration from had altered. The child who had been the most thoughtful had become the most reckless, the outspoken had become quiet and distant, and the quiet had developed a confident attitude.

What was I to do then? Should I use this novel to punish the child who had become disobedient? Or should I use it to reward the child who had suddenly developed into a star student? Thankfully reason got the best of me in this catch 22. I knew what was happening before it happened. I was now letting the writer come in the way of the story. It was easy to fall into this trap, I was after all now concluding the narrative and temptation was there to end in a BANG! Whose bang? What bang? Would the bang add or take away from the story?

I have written as I have written it, the questions remain in my head but I take a bow with a mind that the final decision is not mine alone to make. The story remains a collective process from start to finish. Even the last line of the final chapter is an invitation, “*Ungasilibali Bhuti, umane ufika uzosibona nje*” translated “Do not forget us *Bhuti*, remember to come and visit us whenever you get a chance”.

The last line said by a character beckons on the reader that even as you end the final chapter and close your book, our lives must continue.

In all efforts, to tell a positive story that channels the children’s spirit to the fore. If a skill does not match the task, it is easy to get the mission and message twisted. Creating confusion for the reader at the receiving end. As a writer, I was careful not to come across as the hero of the story by positioning myself at a moral high ground but to be transparent and exhibit my confusion when not knowing what it is I was actually a part of.

In the novel, one chapter that captures my confusion is ‘Texts and Messages’. In this chapter, I tell of the communication fine lines crossed between teacher and student. Creating contrasting chaos that serves as a resource of lessons on parenting in monitoring children’s activities on social media.

I wrote the chapter intentionally as a method to defuse the ‘hero’ narrative. In reading it in retrospect, the chapter conjured up thoughts of a novel called *Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*, by Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov going by the pseudonym of Humbert Humbert (or H. H.).

In the novel, Vladimir Nabokov tells of his upbringing and love affair with Annabel Leigh a twelve-year-old girl. The protagonist Humbert goes on to be an English literature teacher who moves to the United States in a small town called New England. He is obsessed with teenage girls and becomes sexually attracted to a twelve-year-old Dolores also known as Lolita whom the novel is named after. Humbert flirts with Lolita and documents his advances on her, in a journal but using his powers as a writer excuses his own actions by narrative shifting, writing that Lolita had seduced him. Once Vladimir Nabokov saw that his journal is ready for publishing he took it to his lawyer with instructions to get it published only after Dolores had passed.

Humbert’s journey is parallel to that of the protagonist of Hope in A Small Town, a theatre teacher who also goes to a small town. In that, both protagonists use the student-teacher relationship of influence to enter the innocent world of a girl or girls. However, events from the point of contact between teacher and student determine how and when the story is told. Whereas Nabokov wishes the story be told after Dolores death, presumably in hiding what is said from her, the person as represented by the character in the story. Protecting her from the detail and narrative as a compromised teen. My wish is that my students in Pearston see themselves in the narrative as proud individuals.

Writing in Life

One of my favourite assignments during my Master's course was Writing in Community Assignment. I implemented my assignment on 24 December 2018. The premise of my assignment was:

Contemporary Africans find themselves at a particular point of their lives within the global narrative where they have inherited a colonial recall of self. In the past five years, South Africa has seen a wave of protest among African scholars who refuse this recall and narration of

history and are calling for interrogation of historical narrative through an Afrocentric lens. This is a proposal to implement that interrogation of the current (colonial) historical recall through Afrocentric lens.

However, as indicated by my premise as captured above that in the past five years South Africa has seen a wave of protest among African scholars who refuse the current recall and narrative of history as a colonial inheritance. I must clarify that the refusal to be self and not, a colonial subject has been ongoing in Africa for many years. However, this resistance has as captured in the history against colonialism been waged militarily and politically.

Literature itself has taken longer to arrive at the battlefield where it joins the struggle in refusing the inherited colonial recall of self. This is because of how literature as we know it today – the book form – was inherited. The book has always been associated with the white colonialist in Africa. Only as recent as the early 2010's I recall it being said jokingly in a say "if you want to hide something from a black person, hide it in a book". This statement fuelled by the racism levels of the day clearly demonstrates stereotypes regarding black people and books. Fortunately, its popularity has diminished.

In South Africa when the first writers mostly who wrote in their indigenous languages started writing they wrote only to realize writing for its practical value: documentation. Therefore, in the face of colonization and vandalization of indigenous cultures theirs' was to record their people's way of life and cultural outlook before total erasure. However, at the rise of African writers who wrote for 'leisure' a shift is immediately seen in the language they adopt – English. With this language shift though also comes an audience shift.

The audience is a very important aspect of word; no writer can or should ever downplay this. In the romantic air of the French, say *'l'art pour l'art'* translated *'art for art's sake'*. This say has in numerous times been criticized by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in his saying that in Africa 'Art is for life sakes'. Sculptures evoked the spirit of gods and in literature, the 'Word' is revered.

The power of the word in Africa must be filtered and taken with a pinch of salt as to not be confused with religious notions but to be understood in its true cultural and social context. This context has been written about extensively by South African isiXhosa author Witness Tamsanqa in his book *Ndithungile Selani*, in the book W. Tamsanqa breaks down the concept

of *'ukuxoka'* translated 'lying' by men in life and in the practice of storytelling. I will not be going in detail into the author and his book. I make mention of him to only illustrate that among African communities the concept of 'word, truth and lies' is not only a concept of tongue or pen and pad but is a cultural concept paired with philosophy and spirit.

This concept, which may take many moons to theorise about, is at the heart of rituals and when evoked in practice is called *'ukuyalwa'* – 'the giving of the word'. As an author stemming from a particular culture the cultural, spiritual, emotional and ideological specifics of my culture are therefore the fabric of my actions, in this case my writing. My writing process has not only been an act of me, writing. It has been an act done in full realization that as I write I am in fact 'giving word'. I have been fully aware that I am giving word as testimony and evidence in a context that is beyond me. Once the word has left my tongue or hand in writing it is no longer mine but that of the recipient to manipulate and embody at will or discard. This manipulation and embodiment happens in the physical and non-physical realms of life. Should the recipient honour my word and they share it with others in conversation or in relaying of narrative they will in effect be extending my being and sharing me with the other? This idea must not be confused with 'word of mouth' for marketing sakes but for the intent of sharing and being self in another. It is this idea through which the notion of 'Writers never die' comes from. As egocentric as this may sound, its science is basic – when a writer reinterprets history in the present by writing, they are etching a future to their liking.

Another way of interpreting word and its hold on humanity is through Professor Patrice Kabeya Mwepu's, PhD (University of Cape Town) abstract on his lecture titled 'On Moral Imperatives Arising from Otherwise Purposeless Acts'

'Whether spoken or written, the Word rules life. Why should we care, if at all? Much as it might not be possible for Masters of the Word to live every single Word, or to take action for every single Word that they produce, one might contend that they should, since they seem to set standards for our lives. Regardless of the material medium, including language, society and/or culture, the literary critic transports us to the fantastical realm of invisible worlds which, given its esoteric nature, would otherwise remain the preserve of a select group of insiders. Without the critic,

these worlds would remain apart, and every Word forever tucked away from the mundane world of common knowledge.’

The audience, therefore, is not a passive component of the story, contrary, it is its lifeline. In the same spirit as captured by Reggae Dub Poet Mutaburaka’s poem titled ‘Dis Poem’ closing lines:

*“dis poem is watchin u
tryin’ to make sense from dis poem
but you shall not, listenin to this poem
this poem shall disappoint u because...
dis poem is to be continue
in your mind
in your mind
in your mind”*

There are many ways to theorise on the novel but essentially the only opinion that matters is the thought initiated in the mind of the reader.

Who Is The Reader?

Since enrolling for my Masters in Creative Writing and attending the first contact week with part-time and full-time students gathered together. One concept has stood out for me in the talks we had then. That is of Literary Culture, a term and concept I have come to understand as the functions, runnings and playmakers of literature. In South Africa in particular, the world in general but most importantly of how the South African literary space is positioned in relation to the literary culture of the African literary scene. In order to initiate and carry the necessary conversations that are burning in modern African education and socialization. A modern writer cannot be aloof and arrogant to the fact that there is a new African arising in the continent, an African unashamed to produce its own yardstick to measure excellence instead of standing in agreement with western norms. This new African has come as a result of the Pan African ideology coming to light with Africans wanting to portray and view themselves as agents of

change in society and in the continent. As opposed to the colonial narrative that spoke of a hardship befalling on an unsuspecting group of people.

One of the burdens I silently suffered under while writing *Hope in A Small Town* was fighting the temptation to overemphasize with Pearston as a location. With Pearston being a fairly unknown town the temptation to invite the reader in by explaining the environment was a reality that persisted. My choice nonetheless was to highlight the children as a people with culture and identity serves as my own condition on how I want the reader to relate to the story, not as tourists exploring a narrative but as humans who see themselves as one with the youth. Be it in the common identity and culture as youths, girls, African, people.

My use of ‘African’ is taken from the definition offered by reggae great musician Peter Tosh,

*“Don’t care where you come from
As long as you’re a black man, you’re an African
No mind your nationality
You have got the identity of an African”*

This definition has and continues to be groundbreaking because it is one of the first pop culture dare to define yourself as Black and give it meaning outside of the political and academic rhetoric that came before. With African then spanning, meaning and incorporating all people Black, the African literary space I speak of is international and resonates with the first-hand experiences and black condition worldwide.

This experience and condition are rooted in the sciences and arts of Africa in their crudest form as in the African cave paintings with distinct features. The ingenious solid stone buildings of Mapungubwe and the forged forms in Picasso, African inspired paintings. It is all-encompassing of hard forms and the formless at once as concepts of abstract art, needing not an educational but a cultural and spiritual perspective to understand.

“Nothing would be more hateful to me than a monolithic prescription for what Black literature is or ought to be. I simply wanted to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably Black, not because its characters were, or because I was, but because it took as its creative task and sought as its credentials those recognized and verifiable principles of Black art.” Toni Morison

Having been uncompromising in telling a people's story as real as I could, I would not want the story to be classified as black simply because it is written by me or it features the people it has, but because black culture has its own yardsticks for excellence and that, the story upholds those verifiable principals of Black art.

In today's world to have firm principals and hold firm onto them can backfire resulting in isolation from the other not subscribing to the same principals. Often the above-stated realization pushes the beholder to an uncomfortable compromise that forces them to have to explain themselves and compromise. Often the logic in this explanation does not live up to the reality of being because logic relies on all matters of limitations to communicate: vocab, understanding, perception, etc. Whereas being come and exists in abundance and duality, no single idea lives and preoccupies imagination and being alone at once. Whenever there is one imagined and real being there is more such at the beholders' access and for the idea of my art upholding the principals of Black Art as a solid form there equally is a subscriber within, that Black Art as a form is in itself formless.

On the reader relating to the narrative as a youth, considering that 'youth' in South Africa is socially and legally classified as the age group between 18-35. I would still like it to resonate with all age groups, however, it has become clear to me that literature has turned its back on young people. Be this, is because I am currently in an academic course and the kind of literature I engage with is aimed at a higher age (academic) bracket. In South Africa, generally literature is still seen and treated as an academic experience, culture and exercise. Seldom does one come across books that have not been written by a doctor, professor and/or advocate. The titles of our authors alone suggest that 'authorship' is only attainable after years of rigorous academia. If not that then through a social pass as a celebrity to write an autobiography. In essence South Africa has a long way to go to rid literature of elitism.

South Africa's literary space has no room for crude creativity. Creativity stemming from the streets and from the social spaces where people are. To a great extent, this phenomenon can call be labelled as 'South African Literary Self Destruction Post 1994 and The Role of Academia as An Absolvent'.

On Friday, 30 August 2019, I was in attendance at the Jozi Book Fair, when authors Uncle James Mathews and Dr. Mongane Wally Serote sat on stage for a discussion with the audience in attendance. Both men are prolific poets whom I admire, Dr. Wally Serote being the current

Poet Laureate of South Africa and Uncle James have a common history. In that, they were once members of the historic Medu Arts Ensemble of the late 70s to mid-80s. Renowned for its activities in the fine arts through artists Dumile Feni and Thami Mnyele, Medu Arts Ensemble ran units specializing in music, theatre, poetry and the visual arts. Some of the many members that made it mainstream include Hugh Masekela, Gwen Ansell and more directly to my topic in literature James Mathews, Patrick Fitzgerald and Wally Serote.

Dr. Serote made this statement, “it is not us who called ourselves Soweto poets, Protest poets and all these things, and it was academia. Universities have a tendency of taking literature away our communities because they are the ones who define it, analyse, interpret and accredit. The real challenge of the arts and literature today is, what must we do so that poetry is interpreted by the people who inspired its voice?”

Referring to members of Medu Arts Ensemble, one is conflicted in that members of the organization never referred to themselves as artists. On the South African History Organisation (SAHO) website under the Medu Arts Ensemble, it states:

“Medu members preferred to call themselves “cultural workers” rather than “artists”. The term implied that art makers should not see themselves as elite and isolated individuals, touched by creative madness or genius; but simply doing their work, whether painting, music or poetry”.

By this definition of simply doing one’s work, Medu implies that the creative process is owned by the creative, as a constant state, of being. This being, when shared within a collective, becomes a basis of culture for which each member must work to sustain, much like the slaughtering of a bull in a ceremony where every man participates either by holding a hoof, skinning or at the final stage of cooking. However, by the definition and ideology of Medu to be an artist, isolated and elite is to imply that the artist sees itself as a chosen being from the masses adorned with anointment to speak above or to the masses from an exalted sense of self-importance. That is evoked through the title of doctor or professor. This self-importance is the basis of false expertise that many writers, poets and actors approach their craft. This is an industrial attitude that disposes of the village local of the slaughtered bull’s carcass placing it solemnly at the discretion of the butcher who cuts the meat and the village has no other choice but to consume it as it has been cut.

The artist works alone as it and only it alone has been “touched by creative madness or genius.” It is therefore isolated in a futile exercise to maintain a fallacy, a world of escapism and suspended belief between it and its audience.

With political talk, increasingly referencing “The Creative Economy” there is added pressure on creatives to become artists with an audience base because audience equals market. As a result, cultural workers are fast diminishing in society.

The importance of a cultural worker in modern society is greater than the romance of admiring the zeal of yesteryears practitioners. It is rooted in the reality that the filter effect between person to artists is too distilled and often to get to the other side a person has to lose so much of themselves to be an ‘artist’ and with them, they lose the people’s stories and narrative.

My greatest achievement in the Master's course is having come in with a voice and although having met different influences that acted as distillers I was able to retain my voice. Yes, I have been influenced, but to me, those influences have been additions to my voice and not subtractions.

My voice, in this case, is meant as a being of the collective, an ‘I’ that is part of an ‘us’ *my voice*, therefore, is a mirror with which I reflect my surrounds and my people.

“Our art should speak to the immediate community, to the people who brought us up, who speak to us, who are living through what has made us as we are. The arts should build self – awareness and self – image, link our people’s experiences, create new understandings of our lives, and pass on these understandings. From this should come a vision of how to take our community and our people forward” Medu.

My written thesis, *Hope In A Small Town* is an attempt to embody this ideology in literary form. By writing a novel that speaks to the immediate community in a language that they understand and use. It is to hold a magical mirror that not only reflects an image of the people within dry and dusty Pearston but to also reflect people’s innermost aspirations for themselves and their community. This is to be done by celebrating moments and experiences of people’s lives to eternalise positive memories. Once the novel is complete and published which is my pursuit the art product ‘novel’ is to slave-like functional artefacts, as artefacts from Africa are known to be. As a podium and pedestal for all mentioned to climb on, in order to reach for their dreams.

After receiving my reader report, one thorn stood out as a cliché comment that embodies the university versus community, artist versus cultural worker conundrum. The tension arising from these opposites is best captured as “show don’t tell” order. It is an order and nothing else, an order for obedient writers eager to please the reader and audience before taking time to explore and capture the story.

The reviewing reader states “As much as the strength of the work is (in) its power of observation, the writer does overpower the story with his insights”

Well, I receive the review with appreciation; however, I stand with a conviction that as per the ideology with which we personally consume literature then we shall seek from it accordingly. Sometimes a reader, who is a valuable component of literary culture, wants comfort asking of the writer to hold their hand and walk them through the literary narrative. By appealing to their sensualities of excitement, pain and beauty. They prefer to stand on the other side of the counter and ask of you the butcher, to cut the meat to chunks convenient for their cooking and consumption. Everything must have a pre-determined place and definition; they are to be the audience and you the artist.

If the novel is the bull and the narrative the carcass then in adopting the approach and ideology of cultural worker my meat is prepared and dished out differently. In telling a social story that can be read by all I am intentional in having a place at the table or within the social structure itself for the youth to feast and contribute as active audiences if the story is to be complete and fulfil its purpose.

The writing of the novel, though a private affair, it is also meant to be inclusive, in that everybody within the novel itself has written a part of it and therefore is deserving of an accolade on how well and or fiercely they are living their lives.

Thami Mnye of Medu Arts Ensemble says “Our Art must become a process a living, growing thing that people can relate to, identify with, be part of, understand; not a mysterious world, a universe apart from them”

“The act of creating art is not different from the act of building a bridge – it is the work of many hands”.

Though I put great emphasis on narrative and how people are represented as characters, it is worth noting that I hold literature in high regard for its social relevance on how it can and

should be accessible to people. Both in culture and meaning. People need not hustle to put their hands on books, and once they have, they should not hustle to find the meaning of the words on paper. The life and meaning of those words should jump out to the reader with truth, remaining true to the lived experiences of the reader emotionally, psychologically and physically. Add to that, spiritually.

The story of Hope in *A Small Town* is not the story of what it is, in between the covers but what happens to the reader getting lost in the world of text, hence: hope, who is this hope for? A general answer would be for the reader, yes, but a hope definitely for the people behind the characters, the young people who inspired an adult level novel.

Social discourses are often held at a tertiary level away from the young, and intentionally alienate the younger generation with big words (academic language). Used to remove social debates from young people's lived experiences.

At best, if ever young people are given space in society to engage and debate that space serves either as a space for indoctrination or distraction. Children's books are fast becoming adult entertainment, a blasphemous space for adults to recreate a perfect childhood lost unto them by writing manuals of behaviour. In the case of distraction, even with well-meaning intentions, it becomes clear that adults who write for the child market have not spent enough time learning, analysing and understanding their market. Therefore, when they write they often greatly underestimate children's intelligence.

Young people today are fed social narratives and are constantly on the receiving end, made out as powerless and, brainless consumers passively engaging in popular culture in the name of entertainment and visibility. This is a dilemma that has been touched within a popular culture by many artists particularly within hip-hop at the turn of the second millennium, 2000. It's around the year 2000 when hip-hop music as a genre became industrial at a rapid pace leading to commercialization of rhymes and narrative, were rappers started to rhyme more about flashy lifestyles inducing the 'wow' effect and less about social circumstance and events.

As captured by Chuck D from hip hop group Public Enemy, speaking about hip-hop pre and post its industrialization.

"The purpose of rap music ... is to raise dialogue" and "The Corporation just seized it by the throat and threw it down the tubes ... like gangster become more marketable"

The trend of marketable gangsterism would follow hip-hop into all creative fields it crossed over to such as film.

When my Reader's Report came in reading

“The opening chapter is dry with the protagonist driving to Pearston. There is nothing lively about this chapter with only gushes of appreciating nature. The writer would do well to liven his prose by starting at an engaging place. Perhaps he could start on his first day at the school and use the trip as a back-story. He could dramatize this as they usually do in films about unruly children”

I understood what was being said, the phrase “as they usually do” gave it off. I too had seen many films about unruly children. What the reviewer has not mentioned is that “usually” such films mask black and poor communities through those films about unruly children. As seen in such films the children/students are never themselves the hero of their circumstances. Hero status is often granted to the visiting teacher from outside the community, who somehow has the sole ownership of genius to turn things around. This is an approach to narrative that also came out during contact weeks where fellow part-time students insisted for an almost over imposing presence and purpose from the protagonist. During breaks I would be involved in various debates with fellows asking, how I felt about this kind of reviews.

My answer then and now is, ‘there is a clear influence caused by cultural imperialism that Hollywood is asserting over literature’.

If I were to receive an award for representing the youth of Pearston. Then this is the one and only way, I would shy from portraying them as ‘Unruly Children’. In fact even as per the title suggests it is the hope of children caught in unfavourable environments I want to capture, I do not want to gangsterfy them in any way. In fact, none of the children honoured are gangsters in any way. They are children.

When it comes to children's literature an observing adult may want to impose their standards and norms informed by what ‘literature’ is to them from their ‘expert’ eye. But, as a writer I must not be distracted from the needs of the child, a need identified, informed by various studies, is that childhood in the time we live in is more and more a lonely stage of life. With that said, a writer of children's theatre in the year 2019 and beyond must keep to the psyche of his clientele and weigh it out for themselves what it is that they are willing to favour in the balancing of action versus insight in narrative for young readers.

The reader's report also states, "As much as the strength of the work is its power of observation, the writer does overpower the story with his insights". In my opinion, this is probably the one statement that captures my writing intent for the thesis. In my Topic Proposal for my thesis, I proposed as such:

"The storyline of the novel narrates the process of becoming for young people within the South African education system. The story follows the lives of young students from day one of school to matric and focuses mostly on the psychological journey of characters; parents, learners and teachers.

How does the environment and human interaction contribute to the becoming of young people as they grow from toddler to young women and men?

What is invested in young children from the time they attend their first GradeR lesson as children growing in poverty and receiving poor quality education?

The novel draws from my life experiences ... at Pearston High School in the karoo. Through this novel, I portray through fiction the cycles of poverty, gangsterism, alcoholism and teenage pregnancy. I will negate the myth of education being the single most powerful tool to change the world which is not so if it doesn't come with opportunity"

From the proposal, I communicated that my intention was to write for insight sake. Insight would be the main product of the novel, allowing the novel to become a friend with reason to the young people it would be read by. In the world today, particularly in communities such as Pearston, as dead as it may appear, there is never a shortage of action. At any given time of day, you can hear a curse word being belted out from one side of town to the other, and physical violence is also in abundance. What is missing, is subtle conversations among the people. This is the void the novel intends to fill.

As someone concerned about literary culture, which includes the market, it could be said that my denying of 'action' in favour of insight is shooting myself in the foot. However, the contrary, favouring insight is to ensure a sober narrative free from cheap thrills. As world culture evolves, I do believe that the time is right for sober narratives. People worldwide are now beginning to look for meaning and children from all countries of the world are beginning to call out world standards and trends as set by the old guard.

Independent movie director and scriptwriter Spike Lee captures the value concept of dramatization quite well in his production *A Huey P. Newton Story* with the following dialogue, speaking on the one-sided portrayal of The Black Panthers in the United States in the press.

“...they are required to write a lot of nonsense ... we had a legal education, now legal education was just as much as important part of our self-defence programs as the guns but you don't read about that, do you?”

In the script, the character Huey P. Newton proceeds to name all the other positive and progressive programs of The Black Panthers that are silenced by the press in favour of their gun-carrying and concludes:

“...you don't read about that, why? Because there are no guns there, there's no sensationalism there, no dramatic value, it doesn't sell newspapers”

As much as the style of narration referred to above is that of the 1960s one hopes that in 2019, narrative consumers are more open-minded, seeking positive and progressive representation as opposed to sensationalism and dramatic value at all costs.

The End

¹ A concocted urban drug smoked in South African townships

Book Reviews

Book 1:

Mangy-Dog by Luis Bernardo Honwana

In the Southern African region, Mozambique seems to be the quiet cousin in the family. We have seen this country in the media in the past years for very atrocious reasons varying from its citizens subjected to brutal xenophobic attacks in South Africa to the recent floodings. As a South African, I hold Mozambique in great reverence with regard to our shared history and the role the country has played in the liberation struggle in this southern part of the African continent.

With all that Mozambique has been subjected to it is natural that somewhere in this nation is a voice or voices that hold the nation's memory and sanity. That voice comes to be heard through Mozambican writer Luis Bernardo Honwana 'We Killed Mangy-Dog' translated from Portuguese by Dorothy Guedes. Luis Bernardo Honwana's, We Killed Mangy-Dog is the sixtieth publication on the African Writers Series and although the old sage 'never judge a book by its cover' lives. One cannot deny the potency of the book's cover art illustrated by Pedro Guedes, a linocut print with a man staring through the barrel of a gun capturing the content and intent of the words between the covers.

When reading translated text one cannot help silently ask at the back of the head 'What nuances have been lost in translation, from language to language, culture to culture?' Still, We Killed Mandy-Dog is an easy read, a collection of seven short stories; Dina, Inventory of furniture and efforts, The old woman, Papa, snake and I, The hands of Blacks, Nhinguitimo and We Killed Mangy-Dog.

The opening short story Dina is a cornfield of power games where character and reader can easily get swallowed up in the storytelling game of 'hide and seek.' Luis Bernardo Honwana sets the scene beautifully while carving his signature storytelling method that unravels as one reads further into the book. He is not so much a storyteller as such but a master at insinuating dropping detail by detail and letting your mind do the rest. Throughout the book, there is an uncomfortable presence lifted from the text as if the story is not being told but happening at a level of consciousness parallel to the occupied. His reference to gesture and prop of his characters makes the characters immediately identifiable.

In Dina, Honwana punches in a dignified Afrocentric view to life and behaviour in a dismal social order of gangs of labourers. Who, in their heated gang order, talking about women suddenly stop to acknowledge Madala ‘the old man’ approaching them. It’s almost as if Honwana takes his time to build the cultural reverence Madala holds among the various labour gangs. As a character Madala is built in the midst of chaos; the late cook and the burning sun in the fields. His command extends as far-reaching as to command the respect of Maria the local prostitute. However, Madala even as a king in the gang remains a boy in the cornfield and his authority is stripped with the loosening of Maria’s capulana – wrap-around skirt – after a short struggle with the Overseer who then rapes her.

After Maria’s ordeal it is not her who is viewed as the victim but Madala who loses all authority and the gangs’ reference in his inability to act and stop the crime as it happens. In the modern literary landscape with heightened feminism, Dina will spark debate and proves itself as a story that has become frozen in a time capsule yet still very relevant for contemporary debate.

It is this power that disempowers Honwana, his stories echo a similarity that has almost faded like old jeans that have been passed down from generation to generation. Certainly, what Honwana lacks in freshness he makes up for it in sentimental value. His stories and wording read like a tale that your grandfather or drunk uncle once told in jest.

Acclaimed South African Literature essayist Lewis Nkosi says (South Africa: Information and Analysis) this of the longest story: “...a hauntingly beautiful story, whose simplicity of narrative conceals an extraordinarily sharp poetic insight into the theme of life and death, the impulses of love and violence. ‘We Killed Mangy-Dog’...” This is true for We Killed Mangy-Dog, and hauntingly so for The hands of Blacks. In The hands of Blacks, Honwana observes and captures the atrocities of colonization and racism with heightened intelligence. Which he conceals in the simplicity of narrative with such genius that he runs the risk of definite absolving of his genius almost appearing as a minstrel in the tightly monitored world of literature.

Writing in an era – 20th century Africa – where books and literature were still largely perceived as the past time of the fortunately educated and middle class. Honwana exhibits a pioneering spirit that produces literature in the common man’s language and themes of everyday life making his narrative and emotion accessible to the masses.

His unapologetic phrasing, spelling words phonetically as the commons would pronounce them is a constant invitation for the masses to journey with him into the story as if he is aware that a language of heightened words could easily cause a rift between him the write and his chosen audience the reader.

As for the title story ‘, We Killed Mangy-Dog’ one must take it from Lewis Nkosi, this: ‘is a story which skilfully uses symbols in a manner which brings into artistic unity emotions of fear and hatred, protective love and cruel victimisation’. Mangy-Dog dog is described with nostalgic emotion ‘had blue eyes with no shine in them at all, but they were enormous, and always filled with tears that trickled down his muzzle’. The dog’s state of hopeless is innocently juxtaposed against his everyday existence ‘walking in the shade of the wall around the school patio’. Immediately a contrast between life and death is established and reading further is to tight rope walk the bold line between the two.

Book 2:

Soza Boy by Ken Saro-Wiwa

Ken Saro-Wiwa, one of Africa’s most underrated literary giants is as comfortable with the placard in protest as he is with the pen in his hand. In fact he is a shining example of how to use the pen as a tool to affect social change on the continent and abroad. Saro-Wiwa, was a television producer, novelist and human rights activist. In 1995 he was executed by the Nigerian government for his work on human rights and environmental activist. A year after his execution he was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

In his novel Sozaboy, he spares no punches and wastes no time as he tears into the heart of corruption in the Nigerian government. His introduction breaks literary norms in introducing hope at the cover of night as opposed to the cliché of hope ushered in by the light of sunrise. Neither is the hope he refers to a normal hope, his hope is more of a laxation, a moment to breath from a tightly squeezed chokehold to a chokehold. Rather than a chokehold to freedom, whose freedom anyway, by whose definition will freedom be measured in such a damned society as he portrays?

Saro-Wiwa’s voice is unique as a drum beating in unison in a choir of djembes and congas. The activist in him jumps out from the pages like a defiant freedom fighter refusing to betray his comrades. He is not afraid to say ‘we are in this together’. His fight is not a fight he denies

but one he claims and owns. Without saying it outright you hear him assert 'I am in this with Fela Kuti and Amos Tutuola!'

As he surrounds himself within a musical and literary army he jabs at the protruding social disconnect among civilians and the corrosive public servant apathy. He doesn't handle issues with kids' gloves but as he boxes away at the issues in the line of his activism he doesn't criticise his fellow man but rather offers tough love in the ring of the narrative setting an example.

An example overlooked and judging by his execution in '95 deemed expendable. Yet if writers never die, how does a man and writer as prolific as Ken Saro-Wiwa get relegated to the outskirts of African literature denied his rightful place among the giants such as countryman Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri? The answer is simple, English. Ken Saro-Wiwa does not write in English, he beats the queen out of it! An educated man himself, Saro-Wiwa puts down his qualifications when writing and uses the common man's tongue as a dagger driving its blade through all English literary rules. Grammar and spelling have no value in the currency of his narrative, which he is staunch on having measured only by being true to the life and people he is narrating about.

His language is an evocation of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. As the long queue of African writers twists and turns like a long snake into the colonial pits of literary prize approval by mainstream cults, organizations or cultures as you wish. These two; Tutuola and Saro-Wiwa have braved the bashing and cold wind. They have found their feet on the tongues of the people and as such have successfully preserved a culture of the common man in Nigeria and the West of Africa. *Sozaboy* is not only a good read but a trustworthy mirror and portal to look through into the society Ken Saro-Wiwa depicts, not only in Nigeria *sef*, but the whole continent.

The book has a cunning ability to open its lines and let you in until you feel the dusty streets and the potholes along the long roads between Dukana and Pitakwa shake the axils of 'Progress' the truck. The narrator's voice is characterized as an apprentice driver concerned only by getting behind the wheel of 'Progress', the apprentice driver a young man with an unwavering love for his mother has an irresistible pull pulling the reader into the eye of innocence in a deteriorating environment.

Once the reader gets the rhythm of Ken Saro-Wiwa's language 'pidgin English' they begin to embody the soul of the narrator an apprentice driver of 'Progress' naïve and ambitious. It is this combination of naïve ambition juxtaposed against the increasingly hostile and deteriorating environment in the background that Saro-Wiwa's dry humour stands out like an infant boy's erection.

The apprentice driver thinks to himself:

"Pastor Barika of Church of Light of God, the most important church in Dukana, was saying that the world will soon end. I no like that one at all. How will the world end and I never get my licence? Is that good thing? How will the world end and I never marry sef? This Pastor Barika is useless man. He is useless man inside useless church."

As Pastor Barika preoccupies himself with the ending of the world things in Dukana are not all well, a new newness is slowly creeping in the village. Dukana people's hopefulness is not long-lived as news of war trickle in from returnees from afar. The locals are told to share the little they have with strangers coming into their village causing tension and an environment for violence.

The naïve apprentice driver still hasn't grasped what these new news of brewing fights is about, he rationalizes

"I see people dey fight for market and for motor park everyday"

As redraws from his immediate knowledge for reference. In no time the brewing news swallows him and his village in civil war. At the approach of war Saro-Wiwa achieves capturing the brewing of war in way news of war will never be told in again before the age of social media. The old he wrote about is old the reoccurring new will be a narrative that old soldiers will and must undergo for every war they go.

"Since I join soza, I have not know what they call fear" Apprentice Driver

Book 3:

The True History of Robben Island Must Be Preserved by Dr. Motsoko Pheko

The True History of Robben Island Must be Preserved by Dr. Motsoko Pheko is a metaphor for ‘Until the lion learns to speak, the narrative will always glorify the hunter’. This thin book is a cut that wounds and bleeds new perspective out of the general South African narration of Robben Island experiences.

In this, book Dr. Pheko uses his knowledge and pen as a scalpel of memory and narrative to our history, particularly of Robben Island. The book is a risky piece of literature, ‘rough and unneat’ but necessary despite the risks attached to it. Throughout the book, there is an unhygienic presence in each chapter. Adhering to the medical metaphor Dr. Pheko’s surgery room is definitely not in the mainstream. It is a dingy traditional doctor’s surgery where the legacy of rebels such as Sobukwe, Masemola and Mothopeng come to be resituated and cured of their injuries.

Such work, is easily shunned, shows no desire to comply with the rigid norms of ‘western medicine’ in this case literature. The chapters, sentences and rhythm have no sweetener, no pompous words no colourful wording. Only that which is. Both in collective knowledge and ignorance, as fragments of memory, without clear form for chapter and theme. The book reads like a nightmare of recall as if falling through a pit of memory with spirits appearing from nowhere, on your way to hit the ground and not getting bruised, until you wake up. Like an ancestral signal from the other world with those of your clan guiding your steps mentally, physically and spiritually.

The fragments honourably titled after Pan African Congress (POQO) members who were political prisoners on Robben Island do not necessarily tell a story of the person whom the chapter is titled after. They flicker like memory flashbacks on a patient recovering from a comma. Since “history is written by the victor”. Those who thought the battle was done and that history is their possession to manipulate and write at will. This book is a crude kick from the dying horses of memory announcing that the battle is not yet done, let us go in for another bout.

Reading through the book one empathizes and feel’ Dr. Motsoko Pheko’s hand aching as it labours under the wrath of memory and purpose to preserve a legacy. What is unclear about each fragment is the doctor’s relationship with each person written about. It is not clear whether Dr. Pheko writes from the memory of a shared experience with each person or through a caught

whisper of word of mouth through an alley. What is clear though, is that the book has no leisure effect. In fact, it is a personal burden Dr. Pheko shares with us imploring us to remember. It's almost as if he himself has woken up from a bad dream and the book was written in pursuit of refuge from the monstrous act of forgetting. Where he finds or seeks to find his refuge is strikingly curious. If he sorts refuge from his peers or elders who had in some way experienced moments with the people he implores to be remembered in each fragment, the pace of narration would be slower and relaxed. This is not the case, Dr. Pheko does not seek refuge and comfort for himself, he seeks a safe memory bank where he can dispose or invest his knowledge and memory.

The hurried pace of the writing fragment after fragment is placed on a race track and every unveiling of memory is a passing on of the baton. Banking on the energy and zeal of the current and younger generation to run with these memories to the finish line.

“We have to study yesterday if we have to build a happy tomorrow. History is an important tool of mental liberation, self-definition and nation advancement. Africans must move away from a partnership of horses and riders in which Africa's people are the horses. I am glad to make this humble contribution to this history. I hope that our writers, historians, scholars and researchers will do a better job of our history by writing it themselves and not allowing it to be mutilated or manipulated by foreigners or by its own colonially brainwashed people. Africans must write their own history.”

The imploring quality of the book on “our writers, historians, scholars and researchers” adds a social and conscious burden on whoever reads it. Therefore making the book a strictly not for leisure read, and an extreme ‘art for life’ activity. Dr Pheko knows exactly who he has written the book for. He imagines for himself a readership of people who not only love history but who also seek truth and accountability from it.

As a result, he has not written a book per se, he has initiated a conversation and instigated a brawl of knowledge between the mainstream history of Robben Island and – in his words – The True History of Robben Island, which must be preserved.

In South Africa and the world as a whole, the history of Robben Island is a subject of contestation. Clearly whoever owns it is able to control the narrative of people; prisoner and imprisoned since 1658. With over 1000 Pan African Congress members having been

imprisoned in Robben Island in the 20th century, the tale of Robben Island to Dr Pheko is not a tale of revised history but a tale of pride.

“The true history of this ‘POQO Prison’ or ‘Sobukwe University’ must be preserved”.

As brutal as the history of Robben Island was, it is enduring how Dr. Motsoko Pheko has humanized those who suffered on the island. His narratives are the lasting ‘master key’ by created by Ntate Jafta Masemola to unshackle the men from the label ‘prisoners’ to ‘freedom fighters of our country who served and sacrificed for liberation’.

Dr. Pheko has done well with his ‘humble contribution to this history’. This thin book bleeds the ignorance of our history as we have been taught it. As ignorance weakens, the baton is passed to the oncoming to complete what this book has started.

Writing in Community Background

As part of our Master's assignment last year, we had proposed to host an event ‘Writing in The Community’ made of a workshop or workshops where we as students would facilitate writing in our communities. I had dubbed my workshop ‘Inverse Narrative’ and was to have it in New Brighton on 20 October 2018, 12:00-14:00. However I had not calculated that this time would be exam time for the attendees I had imagined partaking in my workshop.

On 24 December 2018, I was afforded the opportunity to implement my workshop and assignment.

Premise

Contemporary Africans find themselves at a particular point of within global narrative where they have inherited a colonial recall of self. In the past five years, South Africa has seen a wave of protest among African scholars who refuse this recall and narration of history and are calling for interrogation of historical narrative through an Afrocentric lens. This is a proposal to implement that interrogation of the current (colonial) historical recall through Afrocentric lens.

Implementation and Ideology

The workshop happened in two sessions. In the first session, attendees were made to narrate the common story of Nongqawuse from their own understanding as has been told to them from generation to generation. They wrote a written text without being told which form and so some wrote poems, a monologue and prose.

The story of Nongqawuse is a story about a Xhosa prophetess whose identity and purpose in the story has been dented with immense colonial residue. That strips Nongqawuse of culture and a people of whom she would have had a common order on how to engage in problem-solving during her time subjected to British conquest.

I, Xolisa Ngubelanga then theorised the telling/writing of story as an art form predated by the ideas of past African intellectuals and creatives such as Chinua Achebe and Bantu Biko. Chinua Achebe once said in Africa art is not for art's sake, meaning there is purpose attached to why we write and tell stories.

To assist the attendees to get to why they are telling their Nongqawuse story I asked them these questions:

- 1) To whom are you telling the story and what is it in the story are you gifting them?
- 2) Why are you telling the story and as whom are you telling it as?

Bantu Biko effortlessly addresses both these questions as to how modern African is to strive to tell his or her story when he says: “seek to rewrite the history of the black man and to produce in it the heroes who form the core of the African background.” Bantu Biko

With this ideological ground established I then tasked the attendees to rewrite their stories of Nongqawuse as if writers mandated by Biko to rewrite history and to birth and or produce heroes. The story of Nongqawuse was/is, after all, a story of a part of their history and as custodians of the history they should not fear to interact with it and without imposing themselves to narrative give narrative and character (Nongqawuse) the African background she deserves.

The attendees then began writing their second rendition of the narrative.

Outcomes

Outcomes mentioned here are in the form as some titles that attendees gave the text in session 1 and 2.

Session 1: As inspired by the common narrative of Nongqawuse

- Was it The End?
- Baxecele ngoku ndibonileyo
- Mysteries of Our Past

Session 2: As inspired by a reimaged narrative of Nongqawuse

- The Rise of uNongqawuse
- Nongqawuse Untold
- Goddess of Centuries

Attendees

There were 12 participants in the workshop

Pictures



My Writing in The Community Project was conducted at The Old Beerhall in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. This beerhall also doubles as a Judo Dojo. I deliberately avoided spaces of traditional writing output such as schools and libraries, choosing to place writing in township spaces that the community have control and right to be.

Conclusion

Throughout my work, the community is at the heart of every story I tell. The term storytelling for me means that everybody has a narrative to contribute to the literary space. Writing, therefore, serves as the packaging but the core of my work is in the stories that people particularly in social fringes; townships and Karoo towns of South Africa cage in their chests. My thesis aims to use writing as a means to bring to light and public discourse the narrative that has been dimmed through writing excellence that requires no charity for the narrative of a silenced people to receive focus.

Part B: Thesis (Creative Work)

Hope In A Small Town

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Rhodes University

by

Xolisa Ngubelanga

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Dung Beetle

Spring is kicking in and Mother Nature is up to something. She is always busy, especially around this time of the year. No one has ever seen Mother Nature's face nor heard her voice for sure. But we have all seen the little creatures that she summons busying themselves, running errands on her behalf. Her wrinkled face is reflected all around us in the hills and valleys that behold her ageing beauty. A heatwave blows across the earth as a hot breath escapes her lips. She is as busy as a new mother doing her best to assure her child with loving affection. But her warm face is relegated to irrelevance by man's ingenuity, invented to make the natural world more bearable.

The aircon of my companion's Volkswagen Amarok blows a cool, chilling air, and as she turns the bend, racing her bakkie towards the sun, we both reach for the windscreen blinds and pop them open to keep the sun from piercing our eyes. For a moment, in temporary blindness, Mother Nature's beauty fades. I catch Carla's voice, "Jeez it's hot". Carla, that's my companion. My sight returns in time to catch her hand, cranking up the fan on the aircon inside the piece of German machinery we're both travelling in.

Germans are by far my favorite contradictors of nature, with engineering that battles all elements. Fans to wage war on summer and heaters to wage war on winter. They can never accept anything for what it is and try their best to engineer an opposite of the existing. This has been their secret to engineering ingenuity, an extra-large gall bladder. God bless their soul and God carry this Amarok and bestow peace in it. For in it is a private World War between Mother Nature and technology, and for now, technology is winning.

As quickly as I was blinded by the sun, I am blown cold by the fan. I retaliate by turning the fan down, assisting nature to subdue her staunch enemy.

"Are you cold?"

She asks. With an added intonation on 'cold'. I don't know, I'm confused. Not on how I feel but on how to express it. Some feelings have not yet been matched to words for expression. Only rhythm and gesture can get my point across now. So I shake my head, tighten my lips and hope she gets the message. She nods.

"It's beautiful out there."

She says, beckoning me to agree as if countering my instinct to shrivel my face. I focus my eyes in the direction she is looking and realise my eyebrows are still suspended high up my

forehead from my last facial expression. Carla is a friend, and by now I've come to learn of her likes and dislikes. The beauty she is referring to comes at a glance in the mirror reflection of Mother Nature. Lush green bushes, I like bushes too so I agree.

“Ja.”

Her counter has worked. I feel my face contract and eyebrows drop as if bungee jumping down my forehead. The sun's heat has heightened my facial senses.

We both enjoy sightseeing but she tends to enjoy it a bit too much. In no time I am inundated with “wows, look at that” and “that's pretty”. It's a mystery how she manages to keep her eyes on the road and sightsee all the wonders around us in the lush bushes and hills: the little flowers that bloom in their thousands. Indeed these roads cut through Mother Nature and they cut through where Mother Nature took care to apply her best make up.

As she “wows, look at that” and “that's pretty” with her one eye on the road and the other somewhere over the plains, I find myself having to measure the following distance to the car in front of us. I notice the driver is alone, I take time to scan the car for stickers and find none. Then I look down to the road. Dung beetles everywhere. I can't help but diagnose them of primitive intellectualism to willingly lay themselves down at the mercy of our ride's black tyres. What message or task has Mother Nature summoned them on, that they must risk it all by crossing the tarred road? Theirs is not life but a daredevil marathon against time and death. One beetle miraculously shows up under the pacing car in front of us. In a split second, I see its tiny legs hurriedly try to carry its dung across the road but not before our German machine sweeps it under. Gone. I can only hope it came out alive behind us, but for how long? How long before it is swept by the truck behind us or the inevitable – crushed?

Already a dozen dead dung beetles are visible on the road. Their shiny carcasses and crushed limbs reflecting in the sun. A dozen more with a death wish reign *kamikaze* as they take on the black tarred road. I am convinced Mother Nature is an old woman whose sermons no longer make sense in the industrialized world except for inducing “wow, look at that” and “that's pretty”. I wonder if Mother Nature does not perhaps spend too much time in front of the mirror-like an aged beauty-obsessed model applying makeup while driving. Clearly she is headed for an accident, and if she is not careful enough to spare these beetles against the crushing wheels of the cars driving on the national N1 route, beetles will soon be extinct or be on the endangered species list. Did she confuse her messages for these little creatures to cross the valley of death and be crushed by imposing machinery? Everything about my trip along this long stretch of

road seems imposed, nothing feels quite in its place, even in the comfort of the Amarak's seat. The green valleys on either side of the road behind rusting wire fences lose their magic as soon as it dawns on me that they are property. Some rich farmer's property and nothing else. All the sightseeing, the "wow, look at that" and "that's pretty" that's not admiring nature. That's prying into someone's property.

Mother Nature is F'ing losing this war to man and technology. As sure as beetles have no chance against the turning wheels of this German machine, man has subjected Mother Nature to his wrath. I turn the radio's volume up a notch to silence the din of her mediocre squeal as the helpless beetles suffer the wrath of how the world works. The sounds of Finely Quay provide a distraction, but it doesn't silence my inner curiosity. What spurs them on such deadly missions? The road we are on is sandwiched on both sides by lush green grazing pastures. It shouldn't be difficult for them to find dung on either side. No need for them to cross the road. See, cattle go on about their *moo* business. Grazing and shitting. Could it be that dung beetles know which dung is sweeter and are now seeking the best? Even risking death for it. Maybe the dung is sweeter on the greener side of the road. Yes? Yes. That's what their trip is about. Dung, and so is mine. I am leaving shitty old Port Elizabeth behind me to find new dung. My dung, and maybe Mother Nature *is* wise after all.

Port Elizabeth is a kind of dung town that has come to mean many things to many people, but true to its nature, it remains a messy pile. I've carried the town's dung prints everywhere I've been and dirtied many carpets with its grossness. I've always found pride in its smell but the time had come for me to distance myself from its warmth like a maggot wiggling off a shitty path and exposing itself to hungry birds. As an artist, many have said to me *leave this pile of shit* but like a fly heavy from its fill I've always delayed opening my wings. Port Elizabeth, my dung, had dried in the sun and I was on a dung beetle-like search to find fresh, soft and moist green dung. I am moving on, crawling, not flying, yet.

People don't fly into the Karoo town of P-e-a-**R**-s-t-o-n where this Amarak is heading. They crawl and wiggle like maggots. The Karoo is definitely not the place many had in mind when they told me to leave Port Elizabeth. Flies don't abandon a pile of shit for a brown stretch on toilet paper. If a fly abandons shit it makes sure the next shit it lands on is the softest and best suited to lay its eggs to secure its genetic line. So do dung beetles. Dung beetles may not know much about one greener pasture from the next, but they do know the best dung on the field. Here they are risking it all, crossing the sun-baked tar from one green pasture to the next, to

find the best dung. Being swallowed under cars, trucks and buses, and feeling the thunderous vibrations with their tiny legs as the vehicles approach. Switching to fight mode when suddenly overwhelmed by darkness as the cars sweep them under, and almost being cooked alive as the heat from truck engines pass above them. They suffer the worst. Being crushed alive by machinery that cannot be theorized by their dung beetle mind, and I, I was on my way to the Karoo. For what? I was no smarter than the beetle with its limbs ripped out of its tiny shell by pinching tyres as they pressed it against the tar before crushing its shell.

This trip taking me further and further away from my vices and art of choice –theatre – including the media and a ripe audience that sustained me could easily be the death of me. I have taken my first steps into oblivion and my strength and destiny would be put to test if I am to emerge on the other side blooming.

Going Where?

A name is never assured permanent residence on the tongue unless it captures the beholder's imagination and emotion at once. I only hope that Port Elizabeth has a place for me in her heart and mind to ensure I stay on her tongue. As I am practising and preparing a place for Pearston on mine. I've practised pronouncing the name of my new town to be many times. PEARSTON. I've practised it in the comfort of my private company and I've practised it on friends. I was by far my own favourite audience to practice the pronouncing of Pearston on. At least when I said it to myself I could console myself by imagining this small town's whereabouts on the map as I stressed the R in P-e-a-**R**-s-t-o-n like a Karoo Dutch descendent. When I said it to others; friends and family? I was sure to be met with a:

"*Phi?*"

"Where?"

"I've never heard of that town."

"How do you pronounce it?"

P-e-a-**R**-s-t-o-n

"Noo, I don't know it." "Never heard of it."

People's ignorance of this town played like a Top 30 Billboard 60's tune on a retro music countdown. I knew the ignorance was there but didn't expect to hear it as much. I kept on looking for an "I know where that is," and find it I did. Every "I know where Pearston, Pearston, not P-e-a-**R**-s-t-o-n" I got was followed by

"How did you decide to move to Pearston?"

"What on earth are you going to do there?"

"Is there anything to do there?"

"Pearston? ...Pearston? ...Are you sure you want to move to Pearston?"

YES. I am sure. The impact of people's doubts about my decision was to some extent cushioned by the fact that they at least knew the town. But in my alone time, their doubtfulness about my next life move haunted me. It was clear P-e-a-**R**-s-t-o-n was actually a part deep in between the cracks of the body where the sun doesn't shine. One for which people didn't care to memorise a name or function. If my body was South Africa; Johannesburg would be the nose,

Durban the lips, Cape Town the ears and Port Elizabeth the eyes. These features stood out and were well recognised on my body and as cities on the map. Makhanda would be the neck and the town of my Father's birth which I also claimed as my town of origin, Peddie would be my pinkie toe. Sometimes I'd forget I had any ties with Peddie or forget the town was even there until I hit the corner of a table barefooted and my ancestors would scream and make themselves felt through my whole body. But P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n, I am yet to locate on my body. Even when walking down the street and bending in public I would be aware of my man butt. I had more awareness of my buttocks than people living in the same Eastern Cape Province seemed to have of this lost place between the cracks of South Africa. Maybe PeaRston was my armpit, definitely. Some lousy part on the body that no one knew existed. Even when complementing their loved one, you would never hear a spouse say "my better half has beautiful armpits," they were just insignificant. As insignificant as a town that has no presence on the provincial road map. My eyes were set on this town as my body sat inside an imposing bestial machine, the beetles and winged bugs crashing against the windscreen, I teleported towards it.

The arm wrestle between nature and technology was now happening inside my head. Technology's victory, though unannounced, was made definite by the soothing playlist as I selected track after track. The over-exaggerated crushing sounds of beetle shells in my head long buried by the sounds of Finley Quey. I have now moved over to the sounds of Salif Keita and his melodies and harmonies had me captive to the speakers. I find myself embracing the features of the German machine as it bulldozed through the traffic overtaking long, heavy-duty hearse and trailer trucks. This was no longer an exploration of Mother Nature's skin but a road trip. The rusty fences that scarred the land became a feature of no particular crime and were welcomed by my sight as the odd, stray butterfly crashing on the windscreen. Cattle on the other side became juicy steaks and burgers in the making. The industrial disease infecting nature was contagious and developed with every roar of the engine as we devoured the road ushering in technology's victory.

With the "wows, look at that" and "that's pretty" now silenced and grazing cattle aligned with their bloody destiny as burgers and steak. Time becomes a factor for the first time. Past an hour, going for two on the road and behold the first signs of civilization in the time-bound Karoo. Human settlements like art installations tease the concept of human rights and scream the legendary inhuman conditions in which farmworkers are kept. The pale walls have smoky doorposts and window pales telling a story of cold winter nights without German gall bladdered heaters but fire to keep the inhabitants warm. My stomach twists and turns as I enter my new

world like a beetle that realizes midway across the road that it's going the wrong direction. By their looks, these dwellings have made a promise to keep all under their roof in perpetual poverty. Outside, in the yard a handful of people sit on tin drums in a circle taking refuge from the sun in the shade under the trees. They look strong and healthy but arch their backs, the kind of arch symbolic of a body worked out of its intellectual ability leaving it to claim its worth and humanity as a labourer. The kind of arch that has been trained to sit at the back of speeding 4x4 *bakkies* on the bumpy farm roads exposed to the elements of the Karoo. The kind of arch that allows the body to fit in like a cog within the mechanics of industrialized farming. The kind of arch born and raised on the power dynamics of *baas* and boy on the farms. The kind of arch that straightens only to let a sip of the diabolic alcoholic brews that eat at humanity before lying flat in a drunken stupor to be skipped over by children growing on farms, soon to repeat the cycle. I imagine what could be inside those dwellings dark all around as far as the eye can see. I imagine an old woman. Too old to work the farm fields but dear to the hearts of the arched men and women outside. Each dwelling must house love of some sort to anchor these people and make them stick around. Even as I feel a kindred pulse within, I absolve myself in the comfort of the AmaroK and allow the German metal to cut all ties between me and them. I breathe deeply and feel the wheels turning beneath me racing me towards the town of WHAT THE HELL WAS I THINKING?

Like the year has seasons from spring to autumn, wars have different stages of the battle. I am convinced this whole trip is a war at different stages. The first a battle in which nature called to my senses about the plight of her children, the dung beetles as they were under siege from all forms of machines that squashed, flattened and crushed the tiny soldiers. Until she reclined in oblivion muzzled by a musical discharged from the speakers of our vehicle. Until her scars became a facial feature as I couldn't differentiate between fence and face of a cliff. Now as we enter the civilization of the Karoo the war has matured to industry versus humanity. As nature had fallen to humanity's technological ingenuity. Humanity was now falling to industrial farming. Maybe humanity had fallen from the first battle and here is where the shallowest of shallow graves were to bury it.

Passing Aeroville one is greeted by a graveyard, nothing fancy, just heaps of sand on the edge of the road. Aeroville behind the graveyard and farmland behind Aeroville. The graveyard could never be a dignified place of final rest. Less than a stone throw away from the main road at glaring view of all passing by. That land, thereby the horizon, could have been better suited as a dignified graveyard but that's someone else's farm. Open farms, a tightly packed township

and a dusty graveyard clumped together. A road sign points towards my destination as we enter Somerset East and as quickly as we drove in, we drive out like a strong laxative into a road that steers in single file till we arrive at a stop and go. A cruel joke. An unnecessary joke as there are no cars driving on the other side of the road. We park there for what seems like long enough to roast a leg of lamb, cooking in the sun glaring through the windscreen. We pop the windscreen blinds and crank up the air con but all in vain. I decide, as I jump out the vehicle— if I must cook then let me spice my stay on the stove with sight viewing. I am welcomed by a flirting heatwave and refuse its advances by returning back into the German gall bladder which by now has lost its prowess. Mother Nature has taken this moment to remind us that she is supreme after all and although some elements might win battles at various junctures, the spoils of the war are hers alone. I relent under breath “you win mama, you win” and as the stop and go finally lets us pass my senses are restored, Mother Nature is queen. As we near PeaRston I am aware of her might. I begin to lead Carla on a game of “wows, look at that” and “that’s pretty”, excited at the sighting of springbok at the other side of rusty fences and drive into P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n in good spirits.

The town has one street cutting through it, *this is it*, there’s not much excitement about this town but I remain humbled from nature’s recent beating and view the scene through an optimistic lens. At a distance, the street steams in the burning heat and forms a mirage. Men and women in orange overalls toil like termites on either side of the road. I quickly assess a social order among them as the young and tough etch away into the earth with a spade and a pick in the boiling sun and the elder and more pampered carry on with minuscule tasks in the shade of the trees. It’s a hub of activity with laughter echoing in all directions. I love the small town’s mindfulness present in this gruelling task. People replenishing their souls with laughter as their bodies are punished by task and heat. A joke no matter how small is shared among all, and if it is heard under a tree letting the handful in the shade burst in laughter, it is then shared with those in the trenches, in the sun digging. Then it is shouted with great animation and gesture to fellow workers on the other side of road and thus the whole town erupts in laughter.

Laughter is the sound of traffic in small-town P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n, not the abusive language of road rage in the city and loud hooting. As soon as a joke fades silence sets in and the iron sound of picks are heard against the stone as the young men work. Our presence is not undetected, eyes follow us with curiosity until we make a turn off the main street into the soul of this town. A dusty road leaving the tarred main road behind. I realise that the main road is a wig the town wears for passers in an attempt to hide its scabs. The wig gives an impression of beauty that

everyone in town bears the task to live up to. We arrive at a building that borders the town and the beginning of nothingness: a dusty field with shrubs, thorn trees and government ashy RDP houses that have outlived their ‘made by government’ guarantee. The houses have failed to live up to their potential as homes but instead have become storerooms for the poor, shelved as citizens of the nation. The houses are visibly falling apart, adorning cracks as a wife in an abusive marriage wears a blue eye.

The fenced graveyard in front of the building has a monumental feel about it. Grand housing for the dead that puts the RDP houses next to it to shame. I’m in a building called the ‘Golf Club’ and I’m told it used to be a clubhouse in a golf course where farmers used to play golf during the town’s *boer* glory days. Before the course was bought by the government and its lawns used to settle people in low-cost RDP houses given to them by the government as free democratic gifts. The golf club is the only remanence of a golf course on the ground I’m standing. I can’t help but wonder that somewhere in a greater realm, golf is still being played with people’s hope and with this town as the hole. Whoever sunk it first, won. This game was won a long time ago and everything else is now a game for those hoping to make it to the podium as runner ups.

Wide smiles approach me, colored guys with all their teeth intact, unlike the Cape Town stereotype colored. P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n defies all. These are the youth of the town that have risen to the call of social development and civic leadership. They work from the golf club and render services and programs to uplift their town, every grain of dust and flaky brick that make the structures of homes around. A great weight to be pressed on any one’s shoulder. They are eager but not experienced; I came to contribute my expertise as a drama facilitator fresh from the evergreen dung that is Port Elizabeth. People here think every town outside the Karoo perimeters is evergreen especially the metropolitan cities, understandably so. The scorching sun burns like a prank that nature has the heart to play only on the less favoured. I don’t sweat, I leak through my skin pours and feel a stream of bodily fluids flowing down my neck and through the valley created by the groove on my back. My armpits, the P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n of my body feels like a wet sponge dripping grease after kitchen duties but the wet map on my t-shirt doesn’t discourage the social encounter and exchange of hugs. The smiles here are contagious and even though my face is made of plaster, I crack a smile. I smile as if summoning my teeth to save me from my armpits. A smile definitely helps in moderating body temperature. All smiles, “hello” and “how are you?” are followed by “what made you think of moving here?”

Truth is, there is no reason behind my move but an impulse, similar to that of Mother Nature and her children, the dung beetles. This impulse is the purest of all drives, and every now and again one must avail themselves to it. To know what lies beyond their perimeters. That's why I came to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n. A job offer and a dare to find out mentality. Cross the road to find your dung heap, and if you must die, DIE. Die fighting a giant and exploring the unknown. Small town P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n is, and must not be confused for its size. There are problems here greater than the possibility of a camel going through the eye of a needle. After all introductions, I am shown the school that is my calling to come. That is the school with unruly teens, teens hooked on all sorts of drugs, hyper sexually active teens and pregnant teens. That is the anthem and social commentary on the teens. They are all bad. I try to match the images narrated about these young people to the school building in front of me. The school looks sleepy and from the side view it appears as a hive of opportunity, exactly as any school should be. The angelic appearance of the school leaves no room in the imagination who the devil ought to be.

“Listen you are brave”

“What do you mean?”

“Those kids don't listen”

“It's the drugs man”

“It's the drugs *ja* they smoke too much drugs. Do you smoke?”

“Drugs? No.”

“What about the other stuff?”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes is fine but those kids, they overdo everything”

My dreads are a siren screaming ‘marijuana smoker!’ and I've accepted it with great irritation. No harm is done with small talk. That's a skill I must learn and the marijuana topic has been a reoccurring exercise. My dreads have opened philosophical doors for me. When people see them and automatically jump to a conclusion on marijuana. This is never really a commentary on me but on the thought patterns of the observer and their unique perspective on life.

No one seems to be on the kids' side, the whole of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n had concaved on them. Even the young civil activists I was meeting. I was in danger of adopting a second-hand enemy if I

had listened to any of the commentary about the kids. It is clear my stay would include building walls to ensure my sanity and building a bridge between me and the high school students. I never believed the students were as bad as they said. I refused. Instead, I theorised about social dilemmas that the students were possibly reacting to. No one spoke about the thorn in their soul. The poverty so vivid reigning without apology. Not to mention the rampant alcohol culture. A culture that everyone knew as a downfall of the town but not of the kids. The kids were seemingly all falling by themselves tripping on their youth. It was their own self-made downward spiral that had created the state they were in. No crutch was available for them to lean on but a hundred pointing fingers like thorns accompanied by mouths that spewed condemnation. The kids had it rough. P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n with its visible scarcity had no more empathy left for its own children.

Our small talk was nearing the end. The time of reason had come to go meet the principal and students at the high school. The walk from the golf club to the school across a field of pepper trees felt like the walk of David entering the battlefield with Goliath. It had to be done. There was no backing down but damn! Damn! Damn! Not the heat from the sun, not the dryness of the scorched earth. It was the small steps towards my calling that bound my spirit and froze my confidence. The walk was like going towards a lions' den to inspect if their teeth were healthy. A lion ought to eat meat as a school is to teach but just because complaints had risen about the lions' lack of appetite, doesn't mean all were capable of diagnosing the cause.

If the lions' teeth were too fragile for buffalo meat, my soft human flesh would be a welcomed treat. I was crippled with fear. The high school would eat me alive then spit me out back to Port Elizabeth defeated. Swinging a sling of opportunity and shooting stones of ambition I charged towards the school that dwarfed all of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n's problems. Step by step then found myself in the principal's office.

The principal seems a decent man, soft and sensible. Our introduction is swift as we weight down the plan and rules of engagement. The principal is calm and shows none of the nerves that have taken me over. The principal's office, like a dentist's surgery, has a haunting presence, but the principal's smile is reassuring and he is expressive of his need for assistance, displaying a rare vulnerability. A visit to a school is not complete without surveillance of the playground where we are met with smiles and fading resemblances of innocence. Students call to us to take their pictures using the camera dangling around my neck. Photo moments call for the alter ego to rise like a sphinx and gang signs are thrown in the air by boys and skirts are

lifted higher by girls. I am in the heart of the lion's den and the danger signs are written on the walls with the bloodstains of previous victims. Gang signs and vulgar create an atmosphere and affirm the reports about the students. The school is no saint. Broken tables and glasses litter the grounds creating an eyesore as we walk deeper into the school grounds. A group is panicked as we approach and hide their cigarettes before calling for Kodak moment as they pose for the camera. Our hope is nurtured by a small group that sits at a distance far from the activities in the school field. This group is making the best of the little shade they can get between the classroom blocks and busy themselves with school books. Heaven! This is the group that has been omitted out of all commentary on the school's condition. The few good apples holding on to their freshness.

A freshness inside a bag of rotten apples is freshness about to be a worm's dinner unless saved. No program can save the rotten apples but the good ones must be saved before they spoil and hopefully, the bad ones can be put to good use later.

This group is rather shy and hide their faces behind their books when I point the camera at them. Am I intruding on their privacy? I don't care, what I do care about, is that this is the story I need to reverse the high school's cancerous narrative. Their pictures could be just the cure needed. I show them how the camera has captured them and they protest that their faces aren't visible. In no time they emulate the rotten apples. Girls push out their chests and boys twist and turn their fingers for hand signs. I protest. Trying to make them understand the beauty of the pictures with their faces buried in books. They disagree and in the process, a beautiful and short interaction happens as we exchange our ideas and thoughts on what's beautiful, what's not? What's expected of them, what's not and how they ultimately have to choose how to respond? In the end we negotiate a compromise. They will give me the pictures I want of them as students. Then I will take pictures of them posed as hunks and eye candy. I take the offer and embrace it like soft dung.

The Pastures

Dung is for beetles, I'm human so my struggles are not as simple. My skin is not as hard as the beetles. As hot as Karoo days can be, so can its nights be cold—this is a land of extremes. I need to find accommodation fast. In the meantime, Carla has booked a place for us at the local hotel but I don't see myself staying here for long. The owner of the hotel, Kobus is exactly the kind of guy I imagined when I pronounced P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n in my head. The Dutch descendant with a nasty history with blacks. He never steps outside of his hotel and the red on his face is not from sunburn but the bottles of brandy he downs from the bar. His wife aunty Marie is constantly in the kitchen with their resident chef Pik cooking up a storm.

Food is my only source of comfort among these strange fellows. Being told when to eat though is a permanent discomfort, one that can turn an extended stay at a hotel into a stay in a classy prison. Where you are told when to eat and must negotiate your every move against the suspecting eye of sniffing guards; their two dogs. These dogs don't act on raw dog instinct of: I like you, I lick you. I don't like you, I bark and bite you. No! These dogs are trained to be well mannered. Even if they don't like you, they are trained to keep their eyes on you. They wag their tails at Carla and give me the stare, of all mind games I've played none is more primitive and insulting than playing mind games with dogs. They don't interact with me as much as they size and interrogate my every move. P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n is a place of extremes as hot is to cold and as black is to white. So obvious is the divide that even dogs spot the difference and have chosen their side. Maybe they think I'm the gardener's cousin. When I'm with Carla the dogs size me to see if I'm a good black. Alone, I dare not go to the back of the hotel where they run free.

Once I went to the back to view the dark P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n skies and was met by growling monsters unlike the tail wagging cuties I saw at day. I realized then that my relationship with the dogs is not so much on a, *who am I* but on a, *who I am with* basis. Inside the hotel, I am a prisoner of melanin found guilty and having to prove my innocence with every step I take. Proving myself to dogs. Harsh.

It's a good thing most of our days require us to be outside swinging our chances and playing golf with people's lives. How can we save the world today? That is the agenda of our meeting at the golf club. Ideas pour like water from a leaking tap before disappearing into the drain. As we debate and debate without a concise action plan. We are toying with a new approach to development, a paradigm shift model called Asset Based Community Development. A great approach that assumes every community has an asset or assets to be identified and offer in the

process of development. Maybe, maybe not. I sit and listen as the town's assets are highlighted by the locals all glowing and teeming with optimism, this is a challenge they welcome. To think positively of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n, or should I say Pearston? For now Pearston, yes, just for now. Still, new ideas require new people. They must be thought to perceive themselves in anew.

The new is only the result of a departure from the old. When the game is reversed and they are asked of things that upset them about their town; the negatives. The flood gates open. No mouth is shut. Everyone has something to say. Even the rule of putting your hand up when wanting to say something is neglected as negative after negative escapes their lips, flooding the ears. Soon we are drowning in a heated news broadcast of all things local and negative. The session takes a lot of energy from everyone and everyone looks tired except the glowing Mam'Rubie. Mam'Rubie has been quiet all this time displaying a radiant shy smile. After everyone has had their say and she is singled out for her opinion she smiles again lifting her round cheeks and showing her teeth before saying she agrees with what everyone has said. Her smile comes from an inner peace of acceptance as if saying no matter how dry or opportunity starved P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n is, it is fine. People here have accepted that and our work as noble as its intentions are, is centred on disrupting that acceptance.

For years people had concealed their emotions like lava inside a sleeping volcano and here we were pressing it out like pus out of an open wound. Discomfort caused by their situation was etched on their faces— the trademark small-town welcoming smile gone in favour of a hardened armour facial expression, a hallmark in impoverished communities. In this small town where everyone else knows the others business, a hard face is like a boundary mark to tell people where your limit ends, and people here had reached their limits, except for Mam'Rubie. Don't let the Mam' prefix fool you at all, Mam'Rubie is no mother. She is a soft spoke chubby girl who got the name after a soapie character. The soapie character Mam'Rubie is an aggressive portrayal unlike the young lady in front of me. I wonder how she earned this namesake. Maybe there is a side to her that is well disguised by her shy smile.

Carla facilitates the meeting, and as the group huffs and puffs, she asks how everyone is feeling now that have all had their say about the irritations of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n. They admit to the heavy energy weighing them down compared to the light air that existed between them when they spoke of the town's assets. This is the soul of Asset Based Community Development, creating energy among community builders that's bearable and light on the spirit to work with but it does not solve their problems. It definitely hasn't solved my need for accommodation. People

solve people's problems and I will have to be direct with people in expressing my need for accommodation if I'm to find the help I need. When I open up to them, multiple hands reach for the ceiling, everyone knows someone who knows someone who can help if they can't help themselves. That's when I start noticing a lady named Kate. Kate approaches me during interval of our long meeting to say she knows just the person who can help but she will have to talk with the person first. After interval Kate declares to the group that we have spoken and she will be the one helping me, she talks with a serious demeanour as if clinching a deal. Everyone yields that she is best suited to help me after she told them about the place she has in mind. On my way to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n hovering above those beetles a couple of times I had it in mind to ask Carla if she would stop her German machine so that I could climb out and assist one or two beetles cross the road. I wouldn't expect any reward in return, I would do it from the goodness of my heart just to sleep better at night knowing I saved a beetle or two but I never did. I think Kate was acting on those same instincts, a desire to help, and I was a dung beetle in her hands being assisted to greener pastures.

Who can know for sure what a beetle wants from dung and how it rates and compares it to the next? Maybe noting how all the negatives in the meeting had affected the mood, Kate had decided that she will do her best to shield me from them. She found me a place to stay with her Christian friends, Eric and Joyce. The house is perfect, the room I'm letting even better, with more than enough space—but the problem is, they are Christian. The heavy sterile "I want nothing of this world" Christian kind. Before moving in, Eric and Joyce gave me their holy ground pep talk "in this house we don't want alcohol and you are not allowed to bring girls". I wasn't in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n for girls and alcohol, I could do without them, so when I said: "Yes, it's fine". Little did I know I was self-convicting myself into a prison. P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n it seems is a town of many mini prisons and willing inmates whether under the guard of dogs or faith. I, like a beetle crossing the road from one pasture to the next for dung was perhaps the most unfortunate after leaving semi-moist dung on one side of the road to discover dry dung on the other side. If I was to be a prisoner then I would prefer dog wardens then to be caged by a faith that is not mine, but in prison, every prisoner knows they must adapt.

I was to accept that Sundays were not a day of peace and silence but blaring gospel music and prayer. Every day was, but Sundays were worse. In the mornings I would wake up to a conversation between Eric, Joyce and God with the two shouting from the earth through the skies to God in heaven. I'm glad God had his own means of response, maybe he never shouted down in respect of the confidentiality of their conversation which my landlords had no regard

for. Not only was I to learn of all wrong done unto them, but I also learned by whom it was done, and how God should punish them in return. People have a lot to be angry about, and in a prison-like P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n everyone needs a big friend like God to look out for you and keep other convicts in check. Here you must accept and not question too many things; a dull mind is a peaceful mind. My mind, however, is still fertile from norms of PE and now finding myself in new territory I must acquaint myself with the new surrounds and scenery that P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n has to offer.

The sun, like a troublesome inmate, has no respect for my prison curfew and it urges me to break free in a quest for freedom. I walk with the sun placed on my head as soon as I step outside the door my dripping armpits make their presence felt. The long road cutting into P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n is consumed by silence and not a single car in sight. Orange overalls which have now become a trademark P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n feature are slowly making progress digging by the roadside. As the young men dig, leaving open trenches behind they are followed by bands of older men and young ladies whose job it is to fit in cables where the trenches are and cover them up again. A chubby young man who'd probably been left behind in the digging team calls from the other side of the road

“Ahoy Jahman!”

“Ahoy man!”

Damnit the attention my dreads bring to me, I turn to him

“Anything for me I n I?”

“Anything like”

“The green stuff!”

This better not be a regular event in town, please...

“Nothing my brother”

“OK Aya next time”

What the...next time? How? These shouts are not new to me. I've heard them in different places far and wide. I just didn't expect to hear them in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n of all places. Here I was to find peace. I walk with no particular destination besides stretching my legs and site seeing, I end up at the Chinese store and buy bottled water. I have not taken a liking to the local

tap water with its salty taste that leaves a white thick layer of dust on the kettle's enamel when you boil it. Under the ground where P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n sits the government is planning to frack for shale gas exploration and has been conducting tests digging underground to see how deep the gas is. It's said all that digging has spoiled the town's water quality by allowing some of the gas to mix with the town's underground drinking water. The quiet town of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n has a ticking time bomb underneath it or a gas gold mine depending on how you see it. The road works by the orange overalls fuel gossip that the gas is going to explode soon. In the shade under the trees whispers echo. Some whisper about the said fracking and others whisper about me. It's a small town and strangers stand out like a coffee stain on a white table cloth. There's a name for strangers moving into town '*Newe Gesig*' New Face, and it pretty much spells how the town views you. The town has seen many New Faces come and go with some staying for three months, ten years or six weeks. The New Face story is largely the same. A New Face comes to town often to work in an office job or be a teacher in one of the schools, they get better pay than the average local guy. Girls fall for him he makes one pregnant, breaks a heart, leaves and the girl is left as the subject of ridicule. Some of the wilder women have made a name for themselves as *newe gesig* snatchers and they greet with broad smiles "Hello" followed by a "Buy me a cold drink, it's hot". They look like trouble and are exciting to converse with even for five minutes just to test the edge. Their sexual nuances and wit are the fastest beat in town and give me the rush of township life. For some reason P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n moves like a drama rehearsal stuck on a scene with an actor whose forgotten their lines repeating over and over again.

"Hello" followed by a "Buy me a cold drink, it's hot" and "Ahoy man!" "Anything for me I 'n I?" Cut! And repeat!

Except these characters are not temporary lifers in a rehearsal room they are real people. People who've been acting out their lives within the limits of their town. People who like any character have a background story that informs their actions and gestures. I am curious to learn this story, heavy in presence yet unknown to me. There is more to PeaRston than a small town and I can sense it in the air from the echoing laughter and loud bodily gestures. A story here is being acted and has been acted the same way for generations without much progression, the "Ahoy man!" "Anything for me I n I?" have been part of the script since its inception and the "Hello" followed by a "Buy me a cold drink, its hot" are executed with cunning experience. Every line in the script has been personalized to the point where they blur the lines between person and character. As the laughter and conversations among the orange overalls fill the air it becomes

clear that here you draw your own lines where and when you please. For now, there are no lines more vivid as the line between me and the locals. A fourth wall strong, solid and yearning to be broken.

Inside The Bush

Everyone has been a shadow until now. Outlines of themselves like two-dimensional photographs. I have seen many like a tourist breathing through the lens of a camera without any personal contact. Like a wild horse, I've kept my distance from the handler fully aware of what is to come if I allowed the community any familiarity. Or at least I assumed I'd be ridden until my back concaved. The newcomer always pays a fee for acceptance in a community. I learned this in the streets of PE's townships. A new face that lingers long enough to be considered a new resident must pay *new face* tax in the form of cigarettes for the guy squad at the corner and spare change for the crew lingering at the neighbourhood store. Survival instinct shaped by the fatigue of losing undisclosed amounts through this tax hardened my face, adding confidence to my "NO", "*Ek het nie*", "*Andinayo*". Every 'no' is said with intent, to let the community know that this stallion was a racehorse thoroughbred and not a wagon puller.

I was alienating myself from the community in favour of a Super Hero status that I bestowed on myself in my head and a false sense of purpose: that I was here to rescue young helpless students from a community that had turned on them. Whether I liked to admit it or not. My intention to serve art programs to the youth of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n had come to bite me in the rear. I made an enemy of my greatest assets in town: the people. My time was spent at the Golf Club having *laissez-faire* conversations that appealed to the effortless, hygienic pastime of keeping hands clean in an otherwise messy situation. That required less intervention than presence. A horse that races with its head too high in the air surely runs the risk of being trapped in a mud puddle and sinking in soft sand. If a wild animal wants to survive the bush then it must familiarise itself with the sounds of the bush and know the language of other animals. No two different conditions yield the same product, Karoo lamb chop as my witness. Community Development theorised in another city is found wanting in the particulars of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n.

By the realisation of a need for a more engaged approach with the community or by the thirst of my parched throat eager to catch a few drops of beer in the tavern down the road. I make an escape into the night with stars sprinkled across the sky and music baiting me towards Mpumzi's Tavern. The tavern is still empty, occupied only by professional drinkers who uphold the principle of punctuality in the appointment between their throats and beer. The tavern is always a community space not for private drinks to escape the pressure of a hard day but rather a sacrilegious AMEN and public access into heaven. That means your drink is the only thing you have claim to until a friend or a scheming face shows up with a smile ear to ear bringing you all the neighbourhood's news with their mouth, while their hands slither across

the table, and before you know it, it's squeezing a glass with one hand and pouring beer with the other. Mpumzi's Tavern is in a Coloured community with majority Afrikaans speaking people. One by one they come to my lonely table and talk and talk. Confusing me more and more with every word. At least, for now, I don't have to feel guilty about putting on the fourth wall between me and my table's guest. If a hardened plaster crack reel is strewn across my hardened face it is because I understand nothing being said at all. The misunderstanding creates awkwardness and ejects people from my table faster than a porn tape mistakenly playing during family time in the lounge. Then I am by myself again. Until a tall figure enters with deliberate moves, adorned in a no-nonsense demeanour. He comes to my table and introduces himself as Litha The Poet. An earthquake of joy erupts within, breaking every bit of the fourth wall and shattering the cement on my face exposing the smile I bury.

In no time, Litha and I are conversing and sharing ideas about community engagement. I tell him what I do and why I've come to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n and he tells me about his dirty work trying to turn youth on drugs from their ways. Impressively he tells me not about community building theories but about his struggle to reach "The Boys". He's identified ring of talented boys wasting their lives on drugs. This is why I left my room in religious haven and plummeted into the brown oceans of beer bottles. To meet young passionate people like Litha whose words were accompanied by introspection and critical social interrogation. Not only that, but his hands were also dirty from the work of social development. As sweet as our conversation was I had to cut it short in respect of my landlords. The tavern had already started filling up and filling up with feminine energy charge, but rules were rules. At my age, following rules is not a matter of subjugation but a calculated move to retain peace and I needed to keep the peace between me and my landlords. On my way out I catch the friendliest...

"Hello!"

...known to mankind.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes" I reply

"Ok, hopefully I'll see you next time"

"Hopefully"

A big hopefully, hopefully, next time comes soon too. I think to myself.

I enter my new home with church mouse precision added to every step then climb the staircase to my room. A plate of food awaits me and I indulge with a drunken appetite. Sleep becomes an elusive concept as I lie on my back on the bed replaying the scenes from the tavern. The corner eyeballing, the intentional bumps, Litha The Poet, Litha The Poet's conversation and that beautiful "Hello!" as I exited. Tonight I saw a new side of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n like a coin flipped upside down, I'm even considering "Pearston". I feel like a tree whose roots have discovered an underground water reserve. I shall never thirst again but I must not lose sight of the purpose. I stay up swatting mosquitoes and sweating from the heat not aware how time flies when excitement and heat gang up to bully and keep sleep at bay. Before I know it there are choruses of drunken noise passing below my window. The group speaks a mixture of Afrikaans which is expected and Sesotho. Sesotho? Hearing it in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n shatters my geographical and cultural perceptions of the Karoo town and before I know it my head is sticking out the window to view this culturally diverse group as it zigzags through the night in a drunken dance. I start imagining the geographical location of "Pearston" on the Eastern Cape provincial map and don't imagine it anywhere near the border of Lesotho or the Free State. One thing is for sure there is a definite story behind the intense Sesotho presence as I heard it.

In the morning, recovering from sleep that had crept on me unknowingly last night I gain consciousness to an unearthly conversation between my landlords and God. God must have misplaced his hearing aid piece judging from the pitch of the voices sounding like the weather during Moses exodus from Egypt when he crossed the Red Sea. Every "*HALLELUJAH!*" and "*GOD!*" blasts like thunder pounding in fear into the Pharaoh's heart and his army. I feel my sins and hangover escape from my skin pores as the house fills with the Holy Ghost downstairs but a single demon clings on, anchoring me to my bed a while longer until the prayerful storm subsides. At the first sign of calm, now finally able to hear the birds chirping outside my window and finally feeling the aftermath of the shouts of "*FIRE! FIRE!*" from the burning sun outside I yield to the thirst in my throat and heed its call to the fridge for cold water. Passing the lounge I notice the TV abandoned playing a 7de Laan episode. I freeze for a second hoping that a friend of mine, Fikile Mahola who plays a part in the soapie will appear as I scan the English subtitles on the screen translated from Afrikaans. Thoughts marathon and sprint in my head – I am in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n after all – learning the Afrikaans language might be an added advantage and I think I might have met my teacher: 7de Laan. I let the thought marinate in me for a split second when a voice from behind bellows,

"Good morning"

Good God, I did not expect that. As a heathen, when living in a house with the Holy Spirit you don't appreciate random voices speaking without being seen. In case a biblical event is about to take place. This time it was Eric seated on a chair at the dining table.

“Good morning”

“How did you sleep?”

Everything now becomes fishy. I've heard of incidents where the religiously faithful communicate with the Holy Spirit about everything that happens in their house. My Grandfather was one such man, he relied on the Holy Spirit to keep him informed about all his children and grandchildren's mischief in the house. Because one could never hide anything from a spirit one could never hide anything from my grandfather. I have unfounded respect for the Holy Spirit as the greatest snitch there's ever been and I become self-conscious that the Holy Spirit has ratted me out on my mildly drunk night.

“I slept well and you?”

“I slept well. Me and my wife just had our morning prayer...”

Walls build up in my ears blocking out every word he said after prayer as I panic. *He is not going to ask me to join them, is he?* His mouth opened and closed a couple of times before sound could reach my eardrums finally.

“...my wife is in the kitchen making breakfast. I hope you are not hungry yet but food is on its way”

Peewu, that was close.

This was a nice guy after all. I need to start learning to appreciate his ways. He was not so much against everything under the big blue sky. Only he was more convicted in what was in his own heart, his faith and belief in his Lord and Saviour.

“No it's fine, I'm not hungry yet. I'm thirsty, it's hot today. I'll get myself a cold glass of water”

“Ok, Joyce!” He calls

“Sit down my wife will bring the water”

I try to tell him she shouldn't bother. As he'd said Joyce the wife was busy preparing breakfast and didn't need to be assigned water. Just then Joyce appeared from the passage connecting the lounge and kitchen.

"Het jy my geroep? Oh, morning Xolisa how are you?"

"I am well, thank you. How are you?"

"I am busy with breakfast, the food will be ready soon"

"Xolisa soek net a glass van water; kan jy bring dit vir hom?"

My legs could make a dash to the kitchen in half the time taken by Joyce but two is company and three is a crowd so I mute in order to pacify my presence.

"Ok, ja ek bring dit nou"

She dashes back to the kitchen, the old wooden floor counting her steps; six loud GWAA's and in the kitchen, she goes and the final release of the tap. I hear the water as she fills the glass and jumps from the couch I'm seated in without thought dashing through the passage thumping over the wooden floor. GWAA, GWAA, GWAA, GWAA and I'm in the kitchen.

"Sorry Joyce, I'd like cold water from the fridge"

"Oh, oh..."

Hurriedly she closes the tap and throws the water in the glass down the sink then propels herself to the fridge. I let her know it's fine. I can get my own water, besides the glass she had in her hand was not exactly what my dry throat was hoping for. I ask her if she doesn't have a bigger container and she opens a cupboard to reveal the right sized plastic jug. Just what I had in mind.

"That's the one"

"Are you sure? Dit lyk groot."

"Dit is reg groot mama, this is the right size. I need a lot of water to cool myself, it's hot outside."

For the first time this morning I see her relax as she cracks a joke or fun fact.

"Oh ja, you are in the Karoo now. Dis baie warm hie if I wanted I can cook breakfast in the pavement outside"

Her face opens up flashing the gap of her missing front teeth. The gap acts like a magnet for my eyes as they involuntarily roll their focus to Joyce's gap which she normally disguises with dentals except this morning. Impulsively she rests her mouth against her left collar bone and moves her shoulder to cover her face. A textbook boxing defence move: the shoulder roll. If only she knew the potency of her movement, a movement perfected by legendary boxers such as Mayweather and the great Mohamed Ali. I dare not ask the story behind her missing teeth, I simply galvanise in my own imagined version of the story.

Time stands still a while with the ice breaker offered by Joyce when she remembers the brewing tomato and onion soup on the stove. She quickly returns to the pots and I give two jerks at the fridge's door to open it and a tidal wave of tripe smell burps out the fridge. Two big dishes sit in the fridge, one bloody dish with sheep head and feet, and another dish prime suspect for the smell sits with uncleaned tripe. Joyce must have seen my surprise and quickly interjects

“That's our supper”

“OK”

“You eat tripe?”

“I love it”.

My enthusiasm tickles her evoking a smile which she catches and hides again before her gap is exposed again. I catch my breath recovering from the smell jabbing my nose and my eyes scan the fridge for cold water. I quickly pull the glass jar of cold water and close the fridge immediately. I really love the taste of well-cooked tripe especially the one sold in PE affectionately known as iQadidi cooked with special spices that only the women from Port Elizabeth's Townships know how to mix. But for some reason, the smell of raw and uncleaned tripe always needs an act of bravery to endure. Tripe is a delicacy that if cooked well, tasted as good as it smelled horrid when raw, and its cleaning process is a boot camp activity. I pitied Joyce's task for the day as much as I revelled in the thought that I AM GOING TO EAT TRIPE!

As I pour the cold water into my plastic jug and place the jar back in the fridge Joyce has already finished dishing and shows me my plate; mountains of bread, fried egg and tomato soup. I leave the kitchen with two full hands; my breakfast plate in one hand and my cold jug of water in the other, down the passage towards the lounge, browsing my eyes over the TV screen to see the credits of 7de Laan rolling up and up as I head to my room.

As my mouth bites, chews and swallows my mind busies itself with an activity of its own. The blissful chewing was to be the last of such leisure moments as the D-day was soon approaching for me to do what I had come to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n to do. Facilitating drama at the local high school. My nerves rise with the sun bringing the day of reason closer. Before I know it bite after bite and then the chewing. I've eaten through the mountain of homemade bread and wiped the soup clean of the plate. Taking the plate back to the kitchen I notice 7de Laan is still playing on the TV. It must be the weekend omnibus. A feast of soapies for South African families to indulge in, coming back from the kitchen Joyce extends an invite

“Join us, we watching TV”

Besides the fact that I don't own a TV and haven't watched it in years, the program I am being invited to watch is 7de Laan and it's in a language that would confuse me until I didn't know my left from my right.

“I don't understand Afrikaans”

“That's not a problem, they write the English on the screen. *Jy kan dit lees* and you'll understand”

Why must Eric insist so much? I yield and as soon as I take a seat it becomes clear that the aim is not so much to watch TV with me but to *carte-blanche* me and know me better. Understandably. I am now staying under their roof.

“So what is it you do?”

Not one of my favourite questions in life.

“I am a youth and drama facilitator.”

“Wooo.” Joyce's face lights up with excitement but her ballooned eyes pacing about in their sockets relieve her confusion of my profession. Slowly she collects herself then asks again.

“What does it do?”

“I use acting to teach teenagers about life.”

“Oh, I get it so that's why you'll be teaching at the high school?”

I answer,

“Yes.”

Joyce's face has dimmed back to normal and I notice that she now has her dentals on, must have put them on while I was upstairs eating and imagining my D-day. She dims her face, even more, allowing her dentals to shine through even brighter as she tries to make sense about my answer.

“You are going to teach at the high school?”

“Yes.”

A familiar air fills the room. An air of confusion and accusation at once, confusion: ‘*why would anyone want to go work at that high school?*’ and an accusation: ‘*you must be crazy for wanting to work at the high school.*’

Eric tries to rescue the downward spiralling synergy in the house. While laying a serious foundation.

“Now Xolisa tell me, what do you know about the high school?”

“Nothing much except from what I hear from the Golf Club and other people”

Joyce jumps in like a blank news page waiting in print for the publication of the latest news article.

“What do the guys at the golf club say, did they tell you about the children?”

“Yes, they did. They told me the same story as everyone. The children don't listen, they are rude and fight back at the teachers.”

“Oh, so you are going to work there?”

Joyce has a dramatic spark twitching, twisting and turning on her chair while trying to be calm. Amidst her confusion and accusation, I sense a concern for my wellbeing as if a cruel joke is being played on me by being sent to the high school. Gentleman Eric takes the line with the verbal gymnastics of a bureaucrat.

“It will be good for the school if you teach there, those children really need something to do. There's no sport in that school and the children are wasting their lives”

“But Eric he's not teaching sports, he's teaching...”

“...drama, acting...”

“...acting, *ja.*”

Silence blankets our conversation we all workshop the recent details into our understanding. Mental hammers and chisels etch our thoughts and forge new reason.

“Acting?” Eric said silently with his eyes to the screen before realising that he meant to say that within his mental workshop of reason. He twists once making himself comfortable on his chair in front of Joyce who is staring at him with anticipation to hear what logic or question he will deliver next. I sit on the sofa admiring the face of their marriage. I look at Joyce’s anticipation for Eric’s next sentence and feel her appreciating her husband’s thoughts. After all, in marriage, it should not be about what the neighbour or the intruding outsider from the big city thinks about you. It should be about you knowing and appreciating that your loved one has a good heart and mind. Eric delivers.

“What acting are you going to teach the children?”

Right then I remember that *7de Laan* is still playing on TV, so I point to the screen and say

“That kind of acting, teaching children how to tell their own stories”.

Wait did I just, point to *Seven de Laan* as a reference for what I do? I always feel a private pain when I have to reference some soapie when I explain what I do. That pain has followed me all the way to the Karoo. In PE whenever I had to explain my work I was often pigeon held to a

“Oh, *la nto kaGenerations?*”

Relenting I would affirm.

“*Ewe la nto kaGenerations?*”

At times my affirmation would be enough but then you would get people who tested the boundaries of my sympathy for their understanding by seeking a second affirmation,

“So, *wenza eza zinto zesketsh?*”

Thixo! Such people know how to rub chillies to an open private wound. The pain of having your efforts constantly misunderstood in the line of work when taking drama to the people. People have no sin in their ignorance, every artist must admit that all art in its various forms has been exclusive to the majority of our people for a lo-o-o-o-ong time. At least now in my new environment I wouldn’t have to reference *Generations* when talking about my work anymore. A new environment equalled a new experience, new references. Out with the old and

in with the new. Now *7de Laan* would be reference, I might as well practice my Afrikaans too so I can reference it accordingly.

“Dit is wat ek doen, soos Sevende Laan. Ja!”

Damn it, why doesn't Fikile Mahola appear on stage? He would be the nail to seal this topic

“Sy is my friend”

I'd say when he appeared on the screen

“Ek weet whom, sy bly in New Brighton”

All of the Afrikaans that I had acquired through life and stored in compartments unknown in my tongue was ready to be exhibited but the time never arrived. Eric was my hero instead.

“That would be good for our children.”

“Ja” Joyce agrees

“Listen, one thing I can tell you is we have very talented kids in Pearston”

Pearston, wherever I got that P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n idea from? Clearly, such a place doesn't exist, Pearston is Pearston, not P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n.

“They just don't have anything to do man, you see?”

“I see” I jump in, excited by the direction the conversation is taking

“The only place our kids can go to here is Mpumzi's, do you know Mpumzi's?”

Is this a trick?

“No I don't know it, yet” I lie.

Joyce doesn't hide her contempt for the tavern, she doesn't express it with her mouth as yet, but she allows her sentiments to be written all over her face. Which she rings up like a raisin. Maybe when your contempt for a place cannot be expressed verbally the best means are body language. She sends the message home without effort.

“It's the tavern down the road just after the bridge, tjerre”

Tjerrrrrr with the rrr going on like a tearing carpet

“Didn't you hear the drunk people pass in front here last night?”

“I heard them, speaking Sotho”

“Sotho, *ja!* Those are the *Tente* people”

“*Tente?*”

“The guys fixing the road here in the orange overalls. They not from here. I think them from Bloemfontein or somewhere”

“They stay in tents out of town when you go that side of Graaf Reinet”

My puzzle about the Sesotho I heard spoken last night is coming together.

“Some stay here in the big house by the road”

I may not know much about the Sotho speaking *Tente* people but it’s clear they are not liked in this house.

“Those people were from Mpumzi’s, that’s where they pick up the girls”

“Oooh! And the girls, Xolisa please stay away from the girls here in Pearston”

HAWU!

“No don’t worry, I didn’t come here for girls. I came to work”

I master my most serious expression to hide my hurt

Stay away from the girls? Uthini na uJoyce ngoku?

A drop of wisdom in me registers her instruction as a word of advice and not so much a sentiment of scorn towards her town’s people. After all, I am *Newe Gesig* and my survival instincts already told me that I am being hunted—not that I mind.

“Good, you know this is the house of the Lord and we won’t tolerate girls sleeping over” Eric over stomping his authority is my cue to leave the couple for my room.

“Don’t worry about that guys, as long as you understand I will be working with people, some girls. So if they have to come to visit me then I hope they are welcome even if they don’t sleepover”

Those words slipped out my mouth as I unconsciously replay the moment of the friendliest...

“Hello!”

...known to mankind and the...

“Ok, hopefully, I’ll see you next time”

...in my head.

That big *hopefully*, ‘HOPE!’

For peace, a man can calculate and execute all forms of compliance but for Hope, he must fight. Thankfully my tongue knew the right words to unleash while allowing my mind time to delight in its fantasy.

The bush has as many temptations as the Garden of Eden, and I had sighted my Eve at Mpumzi’s. Her smile revealed teeth I’d let bite my apples. I was going to follow all the rules of my landlords and bend them where necessary, when necessary, for her necessarily.

In my oven hot room, I sit by the window for the cool blowing breeze and for hope’s sake that a hopeful sight may pass by the dry Karoo scenery outside. Mpumzi’s had already opened and people were now reversing the drunk traffic that poured out the tavern towards various homes at night. They are going back to the tavern for the cold morning beer to cure their babalaas. Only in the morning the boisterous songs of the night are not heard accompanying the march to the tavern. If the intoxicated night’s exodus from Mpumzi’s is a coiled cobra then the morning’s march back to the tavern is an unfortunate march like beetles crossing the deadly highway. In the morning people walk like possessed zombies responding to a call greater than their reason. The urge for a cold one has the town in a tight chokehold even my throat began feeling the crunch. Though my crisis is not as urgent as those sick to the core with babalaas. I manage with some of the water I had in the jug even though the cold in it had now been bullied out by the hot P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n weather. P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n had rooted itself to reason when I introspect on this small town, no matter how many times. I am convinced it is Pearston, not P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n.

P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n is my way of budging Pearston into perspective. P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n is no longer a matter of location it is a matter of attitude. It does well to remind me that I am a big city artist – Drama Facilitator – who has come to spread the gospel of theatre. P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n is what cabbage leaves to a goat are to my ego and if P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n must make way for Pearston then Pearston must feed my ego the same way, although it should do so with HOPE.

My mind is set on discovering HOPE which need not be a hard thing in a small town where all humanity's virtues gather at Mpumzi's Tavern. If HOPE was not there yet I was going to squeeze the last drop of patience in me 'til she comes. My heart and feet move to a rhythm drummed by my hopeful thoughts, out my room down the stairs and at the door my tongue takes control.

"It's hot, I'm going out for air"

At this rate, my body is a well-rehearsed dance show where every part knows when to take lead except for my parched throat and sweaty armpits. I join the zombie army and off to Mpumzi's we go. To my luck. I need not squeeze my patience, HOPE is not here *yet* but Litha is. I join him for beer and he tells me all I missed out on. The latest Tavern News, something which sounds too similar with taverns all over South Africa. Ladies came out, men were bulging in the pockets, money was spent and he, Litha, in particular, took a girl home. He tells the story with month-end bravado but he says nothing about HOPE and I don't ask. As soon as the excitement on The Tavern News fades and the acid in our beers goes flat we turn to serious conversations which revolve around me admitting to my nervousness at meeting the high school students on Monday. Litha offering his support reassures me I'll find great children in the school, he goes as far as providing me with names to look out for and incorporate into the drama project. I tell him I have no control over who will join, that part is taken care of by the teachers then for a fraction of a second he loses enthusiasm and regains it. Monday will be alright.

Little Things, Little Creatures

The sound of picks and shovels resumes under my window signaling the return of working days. Monday has arrived. For a while I had forgotten about weekdays. My mind had been focused on the task I had to perform and today the day had arrived. All nerves about today were a thing of the past like Mpumzi's beer over the weekend. I was now arriving to my appointment with destiny and hopefully, eager young people. A force of curiosity pushes me out my bed toward the window to peek outside. I open the window for fresh air while at it. Gently pushing, I jerk the window frame a couple of times to loosen its dry hinges. The squeak from the window catches the attention of the workers downstairs who look up at once and send their greetings.

There's something whole about today as if I've woken up in a world without need. As if time itself had been patiently waiting for me to arrive. As I put on clothes there's a knock at the door; Eric has brought breakfast for me. A kind gesture. When negotiating rent I had offered to pay more for food and the costs to be included in my accommodation. That way I didn't have to cook a separate meal in the kitchen, I would eat what they were eating when they had cooked. Food and accommodation, that's all I had in mind when I made the offer not necessarily, added room service. Anyway. Kindness is kindness. So I take the tray of food and eat peacefully in my room.

Taking the tray to the kitchen I find Eric in the lounge watching a Major One Prophet Bushiri episode. I am in time for one of the Prophets Trademark "Receive!" outbursts and with judgmental curiosity lock my eyes with Eric to see if he is really going to respond. My gaze has unsettled him but with undeterred compliance, he responds "I receive" as he refocuses back on The Major One. A loud fart rips through the TV's speakers "Prophecize Major One!" and I decided to let Eric be. As I walk down the passage to the kitchen I leave him in a chorus of

"Receive!"

"I receive"

"Receive!"

"I receive"

With "I receive" gaining confidence with every step as I take my judging gaze further away from the living room. In the kitchen Joyce is by the sink engaged in a religious act of her own, doing dishes. I tiptoe like a church mouse once again but not quietly enough and spook her in the middle of her silent prayer

“Jesus! You scared me” As she puts her hand over her heart.

“Joyce!!” Eric appears in the passage “is everything fine?”

“It's fine, I didn't see Xolisa coming. I was busy praying and the next thing I know... I'm fine”

Time froze still allowing me to register, *what the #ell is happening here?* As I slide my plate in the sink, Joyce takes a deep breath.

“Leave it, I'll wash it”

“OK”

Maybe this couple has lived as the two of them for such a long time they also have to be reminded that there is a third person in the house with them. Maybe this set up needs some serious getting used to for all of us.

I'm only meeting my new students at Pearson High School at 15:00 and it's still early morning but excitement for the day has my energies on a high. To pass time, I go to the Golf Club to catch up with the guys and exchange weekend facts, but the conversation is not enough to fill the day until 15:00, then silence sets in. I decide to go outside, almost impulsively drawn in by the scenic view of fluffy white clouds and surrounding mountains blowing kisses at the town. I wonder if these kisses ever reach the people. The mountain stands tall and confident imposing its presence like a drunk uncle's affection. There's something sinister about it, a tease like the game we played as children grabbing food pictures on magazines and claiming it as their own. We would claim a picture of food and chew imaginatively before swallowing a mouthful of nothing. That's how I tasted my first grilled steak and burger and pizza and pasta and, and, and. You could see the food, own it, chew it, taste it in your head but you could never experience it. You can see the mountain but you can't experience it. Unless granted 'permission'. It is a no-go area fenced away from the rest of the people as private property like the “wow that's pretty” scenes behind rusty fences. Swallows circle the sky freely ignorant to the games of ownership that humans' play. For the birds the sky belongs to them and if they want the mountain, the fencing and legal clauses of private property have no bearing. I've done about enough mountain viewing. I've even spoilt a great scene with land politics. Should have just said “Wow, that's pretty” might as well go inside the clubhouse or change my ideology. Ignorance would definitely help me down the scene better.

The dry field with thorn bushes, the neatly organized graveyard in front of the clubhouse and there, just over the graveyard – Pearston High School, ashy like a black boy who’s just returned from a swim in the river. I spend the rest of the morning sightseeing everything from ants to graves, to thorn trees, to mountains eager to push the hands of time forward to 14:00 when school goes out and then another hour until 15:00 when the students come back.

We spoke; I and the principal about the ideal starting time for the drama class. He was adamant at allowing the children to go home from 14:00 when school adjourned to eat and come back at 15:00 would be best. The approach unsettled me knowing from experience how hard it is to get children back to school after they had already left for home but meeting a principal who had the children’s interest warmed me as the children had to eat after all. When I went to the school at 14:00 the children were already streaming out the school’s gate in different shapes and sizes. For my class, I am given grades eights and nines so as the students passed by me I kept my eye busy screening for the tiniest of the students as they left for home, slightly lifting the dust on the school’s ground. My eyes locked with a tall, skinny boy whose face looked familiar, as I tried to solve the puzzle of where I’ve seen him before he approaches me and says “Sir, did you bring the photos you took of us?”

Then I remembered. I met the boy the first day I came to the school. He was part of the group who posed with their books when I was taking pictures.

“No I don’t have the pictures with me yet, I still have to print them. Are you coming back for the drama class I’m teaching?”

“No”

Sharp and straight to the point. His answer drops my excitement and grounds it like a bird with broken wings. I drag my feet to the principal’s office doubtful if anyone would be interested in drama. At the office, I get the feeling the principal had been waiting for me as he quickly calls for a Mr Mnqwazi. Mr Mnqwazi is the school’s Arts and Culture teacher and he would assist me in coordinating the drama classes. After our brief introduction, Mr Mnqwazi leads me to a classroom block surrounded by large pepper trees next to the school’s admin block. The class we are to use belongs to English teacher, Mr Thumbu. The class is small and is made even smaller by the cramped desks that fill the space leaving only the area near the blackboard for acting. This is not the ideal space for drama classes but for the time being that is not a concern for me. The classroom is empty, no student insight and without students no drama lessons can

take place no matter how big or small the class is. I will have to sit it through, waiting for my students to return back to school for drama lessons. In the meantime I feast my eyes on the graffiti on the walls. It's in excess as if the students were given freedom to write what they please or it was written in the absence of a class teacher who enjoyed being absent for a period too long. None of the graffiti has a crude message, rather it's all a proclamation of the relationships children mould at school; *Friends for Life, Gr11 class of 2015 rocks*, and the likes. Outside the window there's a man-made mountain of broken school desks piled on top of each other.

Mr Thumbu leaves me and Mr Mnqwazi in his class ensuring me that the students will return and are looking forward to drama lessons and that he, as their English teacher has made sure that budding talent joins the program. His words are like morning dew to a thirsty desert plant and are welcomed by my ears reigniting faith on the return of the students. Mr Mnqwazi does his bit to amplify Mr Thumbu's words with a

"You see? I told you the children will return. No need to worry"

Time marches pass loudly announcing its exodus and the students' absence. The hopeful Mnqwazi's demeanor dims and doubt is expressed in his restless body language as he constantly goes to stand by the door scouting if no student is approaching. When he says

"Don't worry they are coming"

It begins to sound like his own personal mantra that he is reciting to himself than a message of hope for me. Occasionally he asks

"Lithini ixesha lakho?"

"14:35"

Then again

"Lithini ixesha lakho?"

"14:39"

This conversation continues until 14:55 and then as if hiding the embarrassment of somehow realising that the students will not return he excuses himself to go check up on the principal at the office. As he leaves, a small human shape appears at a distance and approaches the door. He stops right before entering the class and looks inside. His face becomes a mirage of

disappointment seeing that he is the only one. His greeting is a soft “Hello”, before sitting at the first desk next to the door.

“How are you?” I ask

“Fine” he responds

Clearly, he is not one of many words

“Others are not here yet,” I tell him the obvious in an attempt to make him comfortable. From his responses I gather he had anticipated such and that he is beginning to regret that he came. After some attempts of small talk and hitting a hard wall I begin to consider that maybe language differences are at play. The boy is Coloured, P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n Coloured. Maybe I’m speaking the wrong language to him – English. A Port Elizabeth English at that.

Students at Pearston High School come in from two local primary schools. Pearston Primary School in Nelsig, a Coloured community and Lukhanyiso Primary in Khanyiso Township a Black community. By Black, I mean a Xhosa speaking community. The main medium of instruction at Nelsig Primary is Afrikaans and in Lukhanyiso the main language is isiXhosa. English is the grey area of the two communities. Too much English however in both communities can easily isolate one as posh and learned. Probably too learned. In the absence of an intellectual connection between me and the young man the physical drums at my conscience and my stomach reminds me that it has not been fed since leaving home in the morning. I ask the young student for the nearest shop and if he would be willing to go buy something for me. At his willingness and his too eagerness, the soundtrack about Pearston High School students plays in my head

“They don’t listen”

“They are unruly”

“They are junkies, drug addicts”

Trust issues whirlwind in my mind. Should I trust him? What if I give him my money and he doesn’t come back?

“What can I get at the shop that I can eat as a snack?” I ask

“Niknaks,” he says without thinking. I haven’t had those in a while. Not to mention that when I chew they always get stuck between my bad teeth.

Ok, Niknaks it is. I take out a R5 coin from my pocket and before I hand it to him I ask

“How much is a packet of Niknaks?” I’ve done it all wrong a voice whispers in my head. I was supposed to ask him first then show him the money. One never shows how much money they have before asking the price. That’s a lesson I learned in Traduna Mall, downtown PE when negotiating with the Somali shop keepers. I would negotiate for everything at Traduna Mall, even airtime certified to be sold at R10 if you looked desperate enough you could buy for R9. That was before the Somali shop keepers started applying trade laws: marking everything up and sticking to their price. Now they sell the same R10 airtime for R11 and won’t even allow you to negotiate with them to take it down to its certified retail price of R10. I will have to let this one go, I left myself at the mercy of the student with horror movie commentary at the back of my head. *He is a drug addict. He’ll take your money and run. Don’t trust him.*

“A packet of Niknaks is one rand”

“Ok buy five packets”

One rand sounds reasonable enough. I haven’t eaten Niknaks in a long time, in fact, the last I ate them they must have cost fifty cents but at the rate that food prices have been going up lately 100 percent inflation sounds just about right. One rand it is. I check the time again 15:05 and nobody has arrived. Maybe it was a great idea to send the young man to the shops in the meantime. At least now he can keep his mind on another errand while I wait for the students to arrive. At 15:35 a group of girls announce their presence with giggles outside. It must be them! The students! I jump up from the teacher’s desk I’m sitting on to look outside where three girls are standing. The girls are black, I feel it, and welcome the feeling as greeting rolls off my tongue without second thought

“*Molweni.*”

“*Molo bhuti*” they respond shyly

“*Nize kwidrama?*”

“*Ewe.*”

“*Ngenani.*”

I invite them in and they follow me in single file. They are just as nervous as I am and they are a bubbling brew of giggles. As soon as they sit huddled together in one desk I curiously ask,

“Kutheni nihleli nonke edesikeni enye? Hlalani nangapha ininzi indawo.”

Unfortunately, the space still available is not welcomed. I would have hoped by now the class would have been packed to the rafters with students. They reply

“Siqhel’ uhlala kanje Bhuti.”

“Nobathathu edesikeni enye?”

“Ewe Bhuti.” They reply

Maybe the three of them attend class together. By now my curiosity borders on interrogation for the three girls and their demeanour becomes shier with every answer they offer. I refrain from asking any more questions to allow them to regain their confidence and space to giggle. As they whisper among themselves I imagine what a typical day in this classroom would be like. I imagine all the desks in front of me with three students in each instead of two. I imagine students sweating in the Karoo heat as they study in this oven. Dozens of elbows pushing at each other while freeing the arm and getting the hand in position to take down notes from the board. I still my mind and watch the calm on the girls as they occupy their seats on the desk. It’s as if this is the perfect norm without a hint of what else could have been. Huddling up as if that’s all they know, huddling up as if huddling is the ultimate public school experience. Huddling up as if safety in numbers is needed to deal with this intruding new drama teacher.

The desks offer their own narrative of the class experience, affirming the overcrowding on a regular class day but assuring at the same time that I need not worry about them. They are strong and can stand the combined weight of three little girls for now, but they are also old and in time they will give in like the other broken pile of desks forming a manmade mountain outside the window. In between the activity in my mind, I miss the girls’ sign to get my attention but as I silence my thoughts and return to the present I am welcomed back by six-round eyes fixed on me. Their gentle stare down is broken when a figure appears at the door with five packets of Niknaks in its hands. A welcomed ice breaker. The boy puts the packets on the teacher’s desk where I am sitting as he turns for his seat. I offer him a packet.

The girls’ eyes round up ballooning like dough ready for the oven.

“Niyazity’ iichips?”

They nod ‘yes’ frantically as if in a nodding choir.

“Yizani.”

The desk squeals and squelches as they pushout coming for their chips. When they get at the desk they line in single file cupping their hands out in wait for me to place the packet of Niknaks on their palms. Their mastered manners remind me of Grandma’s discipline, how she would make us line up in a single file in front of her from oldest to the youngest on Christmas day when she was giving us our treats. Or when she pushed heaped spoons of molasses into our mouths. That was years ago and such manners I had thought lost years ago. I am in awe of their old school discipline and manners as they give a gentle bow and whisper “enkosi” with their heads slightly looking away from me when I place the Niknaks in their hands.

Where are they? The people that said!

“The children at that school are rude”

Where are they? The people that said!

“Those students don’t listen” “They fight back at the teachers and are cheeky”

Where are they!?

When these students display manners that would make my own grandmother fall in love with their show of respect? I would defend these girls and boy with my own name. As soon as the girls huddle at their desk again the class is filled with crunching sounds as they crush and chew on their chips. We make small talk in between the chewing and swallowing introducing ourselves to each other. As with group introductions, the names don’t stick immediately except the name of the one girl Zukiswa. Her name had come up in conversation between me and Litha at the tavern. He had vouched for her talent and enthusiasm. I make a mental note of her and allow the crunching sounds to massage my nerves about other students not pitching when again I look at the time on my cell’s screen it’s 15:59. I’m alone with four responsive students and Mr Mnqwazi has abandoned me, I think to myself. The Niknaks packets are almost all emptied when a

“*KANDIPHE!*”

Calls from outside, one of the girls lifts the packet to her mouth directly emptying its content into her mouth and grinds her teeth.

“Mapha!”

“*Niks mapha!*”

“Hayi akasengcole lona, ude uziqongqothe iichips emlonyeni ngenxa yokuvimba?”

The culprit responds, *“Hayi beseziphelile ezam.”*

“Uyaxoka! uyaxoka! Uzigqiba ngoku tshi.”

Zukiswa hints with her eyes at the new arrivals that there is someone else in the room. The arrivals look my direction and immediately apologises “Sorry Sir”. Light giggles occupy the class again. Zukiswa empties the remaining of her Nknaks on the hands of one of the arrivals and the second girl does the same to another of the arrivals. The third girl lifts her shoulders and tilts her packet upside down to show there is nothing left in it. Murmurs of “*uyavimba*” are heard from the new arrivals desk and a “*ndiza kubonisa*” to close it off. It’s clear that the girls have a vibrant social life but the boy has been sitting at the desk near the door alone all this time. I get up to make small talk with him leaving the girls to go about it their own way and as I approach his desk, outside the door a sea of students are approaching the class drowning me in excitement. Immediately I forget about the boy and reach for my cell phone again to look at the time 16:20. Timekeeping here is a cause for concern and as the classroom fills with students like beach pools in high tide, I know there is not enough time to conduct my first lesson as I had planned anymore. Today will have to be a day of improvisation and small talk to establish familiarity between me and the students. Another shape appears at the door bigger than all children that arrived before. It’s presence at the door silences the robust energy that’s filled the class by this time. It’s Mr Mnqazi, he salutes the students and they respond “Maneer” I’m satisfied by his relationship with the students; he clearly seems to be popular with them. Mr Mnqwazi has come to confirm that the children have arrived.

“Bafikile ke, uyabona?” but he doesn’t come through the door then speaks again *“Ndiza kushiya nabo ke.”* He turns his attention to the students, *“niziphathe kakuhle nina”* adding a few words of English that he directs to the boy sitting by the door “behave yourselves otherwise I will deal with you tomorrow”. A handful more students enter after Mr Mnqwazi has left there are now 28 students in class in total and the time is 16:31. I had planned to end class by 17:00. A two-hour session between 15:00 and 17:00, and now as far as my plan is concerned I had only twenty-nine minutes left to have my session. It is of importance to me that I release the students at 17:00 or as close to the time as possible considering that African children their age have chores they perform at home like cleaning and cooking.

Keeping the students in class for *long* is directly related to the inconvenience their attendance in drama class causes at home. The more disruptions I create at their homes by keeping the

children away from pots or from being available for an elder to send to the shops because their child is in drama class, I'd be unknowingly signing a banning order for the child from drama. We quickly rush over introduction with students telling me their names and reason for signing up for drama. Again with close to thirty students doing introductions, their names don't stick but their interests do. The young Coloured man I sent for chips has interests in drawing. My eyebrows raise as his is a special case, I might not be the best to facilitate fine arts but this explains his quiet persona. A young man with interest in fine art, so-called the silent art. Trying to encourage a feeling of inclusion I entertain the boy's presence by telling him about set and poster designs. Most of the class talks about music ranging from rap to choral music. Rap I can do for as long as I can tap into my well of youth and memory of rap. As for choral music? It's a BIG, NO.

I tell the class about one of the most bitter remarks I ever received from a South African theatre stalwart, *umam'* Nomhle Nkonyeni when she remarked: "Xolisa you are vocally wounded" throughout rehearsals she'd tell me "Xolisa *sucul' umnqundu!*" Students who understand isiXhosa erupt in volcanic laughter, filling the class with forceful lava of HAHAAs. So contagious is the laughter that even those who did not understand the joke are caught in the chaos of laughter and erupt joining the rest of the students in a thunder of HAHAAs. The feeling of being funny is as addictive as the drugs these students are said to be hooked on and so I keep my '*I cannot sing*' jokes coming. This time I tell them in English and deliver it to the boy by the door.

"Once I was part of the youth church choir and practised with them all year but when our youth choir had to sing in front of the church, our choir conductor told me not to vocalize and instead said I should mime as if I was singing like this..." I enact a goldfish circling inside a fish tank gulping for breath. In English, the joke is not as fun but I use it to lure everyone into the grey area. To my surprise it is not received with HAHAAs but with a pain-stricken "Eish!" As if the students are embarrassed for me. This drama class is on the right track, in this class we shall not seek HAHAAs but seek the ability to make people feel. If feeling embarrassed is what the people must do? Then let them feel! Rather let's make them feel! The peaked sensitivity in the class acts like a pat on the shoulder saying "you are good *kwedini kaNgubelanga.*"

The temporary feeling of satisfaction amps my *I am the teacher* mode and I follow with a question feeling for the class's current knowledge on drama like an ant feeling with its antennas in the barrows of the students' knowledge.

“Do you guys know what mime is?”

The students sing their “yes” like a choir and I am catapulted to the top of the world.

“Right! Besides drawing and singing what other talents and interests do we have in the room?”

“Poetry!”

“Poetry!”

“Poetry!”

The cry “Poetry!” echoes in the room like a shout in the woods.

“Who are the poets in here?”

“*Ndim.*”

Jokes one young girl with a smile as broad as the horizon and as bright as the setting sun casting glowing beauty on the mountain tops surrounding Pearston. She is equally showered with gentle raindrops of “*hayi, hayi, hayi.*” “*Akho poet inje bhuti*”, “*lo mntana uyathanda ukudlala.*”

“*Masimyekeni mhlawumbi ufuna ubayi poet naye.* Anyone can be a poet.”

There are many Coloured students in class and they all take turns getting lost in translation between the isiXhosa spoken by the more buoyant students. I am concerned about the young boy who arrived first and sat by the door. It’s as if he anticipated an irritation and positioned himself at the door ready to jump out and leave the class if need be. Some Afrikaans speaking students take time to arrive at the meaning of the isiXhosa jokes and occasionally laugh but he is constantly not arriving at all.

“Do you write poetry?”

“*Nee.*”

“Guys don’t worry about language, I speak isiXhosa at home that’s my language but I can also speak Afrikaans...”

I throw myself in the lions’ den,

“...so if you want to express something and can only say it in Afrikaans it’s fine. Hopefully at the end of the year when we have our show we can have it in a mixture of languages. What do you think?”

“Yes!” They thunder

Intentionally I point to the bright smiled girl whose humour had earned her the temporary identity as a poet – recite a poem, I command and she bursts in laughter and iterates “Andikwazi, I’m not a poet Bhuti”. The class becomes restless as the December beachfront full of youth waving its hands in the air to catch my attention.

“Bhuti”

“Bhuti”

“Bhuti”

Until they can’t take my delay in choosing a hand anymore, they explode like a pot of heating popcorn.

“There’s the poets!”

“Nazi iimbongi zethu bhuti!”

“Oh, and what is a poet in Afrikaans?” I ask encouraging multilingual engagement.

“Yi digter, Bhuti.”

“Intoni?”

“Digter!”

“Ok jy is ons digter” my Afrikaans is received with giggles.

Zukiswa is among the poets being identified the other, the other is...

“Khandikhumbuze igama lakho.”

“NguThimna Bhuti”

Thimna is a shy girl. When I asked her for her name she stood up to stand next to the desk with her feet together as if a python had coiled itself around her legs. The thumb of her right hand clutched in her left hand and her head tilted to the floor but with eyes shooting to the front aiming straight at me. Zukiswa turns and affirms “*bhuti mna ndiyimbongi edumileyo apha ePearston.*” The class echoes “*Yho bhuti uThimna!*” She has her small face tilted at an angle towards the floor doing her best to hide her blushing, but her face is not big enough to hold her smile as it overflowing at the rims.

“*Khasenzel’ ipoem Thimna.*”

“*Makenze uAfrican Child bhuti,*” the choir of students erupt in agreement

Even the Afrikaans speaking students join

“*Yho Bhuti hai African Child, jerre dis warm. Gaan an Thimna*”

“*Khasenzele uAfrican Child*” Thimna lifts her head up to take a deep breath while looking at the ceiling and breathes out to hold her head high “ok” she agrees.

“*Yiza phambili kaloku.*”

“*Yhu, Bhuti phambili?*”

“*Ewe yiza!*” As she comes forward, Thimna magically transforms from the shy girl to a phantom with every step. Her spirit fills the room with every breath as she occupies the front of the class where her stage is. As her audience we do not so much give her our attention but submit to her. Her stage authority is not one where a performer flocks its arms about in an attempt to fill up space but one where she is space itself and we become lost in the potential of her Young Girl Child world. She is the truth, the way and the light, and a shining example. As she begins her poem, the class is taken to the territory of a girl child’s potential not yet mapped by civilization. I am mesmerised from her opening line “I am An African Child” to the last word. Her poem breathes like a storm that ends as soon as it started yet leaving great devastation behind, we have all felt her impact and I will never be the same again. My pillars of reason for the work I do have been wrecked and rebuilt. With lines in her poem that ebb in my soul “I am An African Child, My Future is not determined by charity, All I need is an opportunity, I am An African Child”.

Like an animal of prey feeding and tearing off meat from a carcass I fill myself on these lines tearing them in my mind and leave the rest of the poem to be. For now, I am full. I look at my cell screen again, 17:14.

“Guys, it’s time, let’s wrap up class today. Tomorrow let’s try to be punctual guys so that we can go home in time, so you don’t get in fights at home. Thimna *undigqibile*, I want to hear more from you and anyone else who has a poem or song to share. Bring it!” At the signalling of time to go the group releases song, and freedom of purpose and being is achieved at that very moment.

Around Dusty Streets

Word has gone out about the new drama teacher at the high school, but not every student with interest has responded. Students have their process of ‘natural’ selection where some are not made to feel equal to others. Some students require some nudging before they commit to a new activity. Curious eyes of young boys and girls follow me wherever I go like a bag on my back. Sometimes when I return their stares I catch them pointing. For now, I am the odd stranger, not yet the drama teacher. Even with my class lively and full to the brim—considering I don’t have much space to work with anyway—I know drama is an *in and out* of class experience and these young strangers will one day be part of my audience. I need to win them over soon, for my purpose, for the purpose of the young actors in training, for the purpose of establishing drama as a cultural experience between actor and audience. For the sake of doing my job right. I become a greeting jukebox, no need for coins, only eye contact directly or indirectly and I sing the tune

“Hello, *Molo, More*”

Everywhere I go I greet and soon what started as an administrative move becomes a portal into human experiences. My greetings are focused at students but naturally they became inclusive of the old who appreciate my greeting tune more than the students.

“*Molo ma.*”

“*Molo mntanam...*”

“*Ninjani?*”

“*Yho mntanam...*”

I soon realised that

“*Unjani mama?*” *Akabuzwa nje nanjani ePearston*. Especially if you don’t have time to hear the response. Some elderly people really took it far but the verbal miles measured in conversational words were worth it. Like a road trip to an unknown destination offering the most scenic of treasures in humour and in wisdom. Answering the ‘why were words created in the first place?’. Each and every random conversation as random as winning the lottery offered a wealth of perspective and as we parted gave an added bounce to every step. When you meet people in Pearston it is seldom from a social necessity to be polite but a genuine encounter among strangers leading to friendship. All preconceived notions of people and place must make space for the lessons in abundance. Lessons on the town and its people.

My first day of drama classes has come and is slowly coming to a beautiful end dotted with the orange sun resting on top of the mountain. The excitement and a feeling of accomplishment make a prison of my room, urging me to wiggle out to sightsee in pursuit of an, *I don't know*, just run, run like a prisoner escaping. As soon as I walk out the door my feet find a rhythmic motion flowing towards the bridge. It doesn't take much from my feet's beat to convince my mind to join the tune, and instead of walking I dance towards the bridge until I'm in arm's length from Mpunzi's Tavern. To my surprise my feet continue beating and drumming a rhythm past Mpunzi's, deep into the Coloured township of Nelsig. I've been here before in the Amarok with the Golf Club guys dropping them off house by house after a meeting. Today my feet feel brave enough to explore the surrounds. If I do get lost then I'll be as a sirloin steak down a vegan's throat. Wrong throat but the right direction nonetheless, towards the bowls. All streets in Pearston lead to the same place making it impossible to lose your direction, only offering a different route. On towards Petrofina's home I dance on the streets, a free performance for onlookers. My jukebox policy well intact.

Direct eye contact.

“Hello.”

Indirect eye contact.

“Hello.”

Since I'm in Nelsig I play the tune of “More” which I remix with “Molo” for culture shock purposes.

Little people with small bodies move like a high-speed chase as they play, running and racing each other for tennis balls because they can. The energy is robust like live wires, one immediately identifies the next Brian Habana and Usain Bolt from the games they play laughing without worry. I've walked past the Bloudak Sal Community Hall, still admiring the scenes of the community, then my ears catch my name being thrown across the air. The voice is sweet and the shout is powerful.

“XOLISA!”

It's Petrofina surrounded by neighbours and friends, her voice came as an alarming beep on a capped speedometer of a delivery van about to pass its limit. I was about to pass her house but turn immediately, drawn to her surprised smile. She greets me with

“What are you doing here?”

I answer in gibberish not knowing why I have come besides she has disturbed me mid my dance of stretching my legs and following my feet. I happen to know that she stays with her grandma. I’ve seen the old lady at a distance before and Petrofina had spoken about her granny once, not in so much detail but enough to pass the message that her gran was part of her life and that they stayed together.

“I have come to meet your granny” I reply saving my tongue from an – *I don’t know*. I don’t remember thinking about her or even missing her. My feet simply caught on a rhythm and flowed like a river to her as water going downstream. Petrofina has a bump on her belly announcing the life she is carrying. She herself is young with a tiny body and a wide smile. When I teasingly inquire

“Hey you, what’s in your belly?”

She turns her head away, rolling her big round eyes, walls herself behind her smile before she pushes a

“No man”

Then a giggle comes out of her mouth.

It’s clear she is scared but her strong personality is all the support she needs. Petrofina learned from an early age to carry her own helping hand with clenched fists. Her arm moves behind her nudging a friend she is sitting next to as she passes the smoking cigarette in her hand.

The smoking warnings on cigarette packs have no impact like new knowledge before an exam studied to be regurgitated and soon forgot. The warnings on cigarette packs “Smoking Causes Cancer” and “Don’t Smoke If You Are Pregnant” flash on the front of the packet like red traffic lights to a taxi driver and are to be ignored. I’m not surprised to see the burning cigarette leave her hand as her friend uproots it from her fingers. I acknowledge that she cared to hide her nicotine stick. At least she knows there is wrong in her actions. Unfortunately, her wrong is right in the community. Her friends wrinkle their faces and skew their eyes amused that Petro would care to hide her habit of social significance.

“*Wa is ouma?*”

I ask and she responds with her two arms pushing against the wooden bench she’s sitting on, getting up to lead me to the house. uMakhulu is sitting quietly on her sofa, eyes on the

shimmering TV screen, absent-minded. She does not register our presence until Petro calls out and she turns beaming with a smile. It's clear where little Petrofina gets her smile from.

"Molo makhulu."

I greet and introduce myself, umakhulu returns the honour *atsho ezithuta "maMphinga, Mawawa..."*

"Makhulu, ungumakhulu wam ngqo"

Khandibesakwazi ukulinda. Makhulu smiles brighter.

"NdingumXhosa my kind, qha ngoku sendahlala namakhaladi. Kaloku ndanditshate no tamkhulu wabantwana, ooPetrofina. Ngoku andinamntu endinothetha naye al wat ek doen is praat. Abasifuni isiXhosa abantwana julle soek nie Xhosa nie" She says accusing Petro.

"Hey, why don't you want isiXhosa wena?"

"No man."

No man, that's Petro's defence of choice when questioned.

"What's that in your belly?"

"No man."

"Why don't you want isiXhosa?"

"No man" "No man" "No man."

She says it gently and as she says it, swerves her hand across the air. Hand so innocent and small. I take a seat on the sofa next to umkhulu and Petro stands by the door post then fixes her eyes on the shimmer shimmer glitter glitter of the TV screen. UMakhulu gains her spark and gives the TV a lesson on how to tell a story. Narrating her life story. In no time silence reigns again long after umakhulu has taken a break from her storytelling announcing my cue to leave. Petrofina has been standing at the doorpost for a grandma's life stories time enunciating her presence with giggles and alarms. *"Hayi ouma" "Hee..."*

"Mandinishiye makhulu"

"Oh, uyahamba ngoku?"

"Ewe makhulu."

“Ok mntanam unghlali kude kube mnyama, uhambe kak’ hle”

“Enkosi makhulu, nisale kak’ hle nani”

Outside the sun is about to knock off from its sky duties handing over to the stars and Pearston’s summer moon at night. The sun has not yet made it out the sky’s workshop but is slowly making its way out as it squeezes through the horizon between the sky and mountain announcing its exit with a beam of orange sunset. Petro walks me out of her hood showing me a short cut that cuts between two debilitated houses. One with doors and windows were broken where the neighbourhood crystal meth junkies smoke their doses of tick. The other house is fortified with wooden planks closing its windows and has one sheet of iron zinc for a door. The house is a visual interpretation of stuffy and stale without any air let for fresh air to flow in.

“Go straight between those houses then you will see a crèche there, then you must go around the crèche and you’ll see the road” Petro directs as she turns back. Her escorting duties have come to an end.

I follow her directions cutting through the two houses when a group of men appear behind a shrub in front of the fortified house squatting on its step. I catch a *“Wie ‘s die?”* *“Newe gesig”* in the wind blowing from the group of men. Their formation squatting low, their numbers which I couldn’t count and their line of question *“Wie ‘s die?”* could spell trouble. If I was an unknown in a Coloured township in Port Elizabeth somewhere in Shauderville or Helenvale I would be wetting my pants but I’m in Pearston and continue walking towards them. The squatting men become deliberate on their whispering as if alerted that I caught wind of their first question. They put their heads together and then lift them up in unison towards my direction. Helenvale or no Helevale their meeting and discussion has all the signs of a brewing jump down and mugging. These signs are enough to make an elephant change its route fleeing a congregation of lions in the concrete jungle of township life. The KwaZakhele township wisdom in me pleads for me to change direction, the KwaZakhele township wisdom in me confuses me. If I cower and flee now then my status in Nelsig Township, P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n will be ruined forever. With each step forward I take, I break into their whisper zone and that which was spoken silently I now hear loudly. *“Dis een van hulle”*. I am not yet sure who *‘hulle’* is but I hope they are known for their good deeds now that I am being associated with them. Things don’t seem to be going well but still, I put one foot ahead of the other and forge forward as I approach. I am confronted with a

“Ahoy Rasta”

“*Eita*” I respond,

“*Dumela*”

“*Dumela.*”

“*Okae?*”

“*Ke teng, okae?*”

“Alright, alright Rasta” “*Ahoy!*”

The squatting men seem to be in the middle of a complex puzzle they want to solve. They put their heads together again to whisper some more. I seize the moment and pass them with an inward sigh of relief that my feet were walking in Nelsig and not in Shauder or Katanga or any other place. My ears still heightened to their discussion which has been upgraded from whispers to full delivery.

“*Die man vorstan Sotho.*”

“*Ja, ek het ge se hy is een van hulle.*”

“*Nee man, die man is nie a tente nie.*”

I hear them solving the puzzle of my identity and I presume purpose in Pearston more confidently now that we have shared greetings. Peacefully. They go on like detectives who’ve just discovered new evidence for their investigation. *Ek’e, ek is nie a tente nie*, but it’s clear the tente people have quite a presence in little Pearston. I carry on, on my way home.

At the house, the doors and burglar gate are locked and a prayer session is at play. I wait outside for the final AMEN as mosquitoes do their will with my heathen blood. As soon as the AMEN is pronounced I frantically knock on the door as if ringing an emergency bell to be saved from the buzzing onslaught blanketing my skin with itchy bumps.

SILENCE, no more prayer, just the flickering TV in mute and no urgency to come rescue me either.

“Eric!”

I call out to the landlord, another beat of silence. Then a roll of thunder from inside as Eric races across the wooden floor to the door. I sense and appreciate his urgency running to the door then suddenly stopping. Slowly a squick from the hinges as the door opens relieving light

from inside. So slowly Eric opens the door. As if cautious not to let the Holy Ghost which they've invited into the house with prayer leak out.

"It's me."

I politely say. Composed not to broadcast my irritation as one mosquito buzzes exploring the caves of my eardrum and many more indulging in a bloody feast of my body like colonialists cannibalizing on Africa.

"Oh it's you"

Gracefully as our eyes meet Eric turns his neck giving me the back of his head, calling inside "Joyce!"

"Hello!" Joyce's voice rings in the background

"Where're the keys?"

They play a tennis game of question and answer which seems to drag for forever. Inside I die a slow and buzzing death, so fed are the mosquitoes now they begin to pack takeaways of my blood to eat at a later stage.

Joyce's curiosity serves the question "Who is it?"

Damn!

"It's Xolisa" Eric serves back, a couple of more serves back and forth, then slowly and lightly I hear Joyce's steps against the wooden floor. She walks like a saint who has just walked through heaven's pearly gates. Hell's fire fumes in me as blood is pirated out of me by gangs of mosquitoes.

"Oh, here they are" Joyce appears. "You left them on the table"

With a single thrust into the keyhole and a turn of the key Eric opens the burglar gate allowing me to pour in, close the gate and bang the door behind me. The bang must have been suspicious, the kind of bang you expect from a drunk teenager sloppily closing the door on a still night waking the house. Four eyes pierce through me as if I'm being studied under a microscope. Eric and Joyce now stand side by side drilling their gaze on me. I greet in an attempt to break the wall they've created with their bodies but the walls of Jericho don't budge. Irritated and itchy from the mosquito onslaught I squeeze past their bodies and go up the stairs to my room.

As I open the door my eyes race to sight a plate of food covered on the desk next to my bed. The couple downstairs is weird without a doubt but they have a heart made of gold. Before my appetite invites me to dig in the food, my sense of decency tells me to go downstairs and deliver a word of 'THANKS'. Downstairs there's an air of stillness as the couple cuddles in front of Major One who orchestrates them from inside the TV into a choir of "I receive!"

I intrude on their moment and say "thank you for the food".

Pathways

The sun shines by day and returns to its hiding place by night. Even a smile must return to the neutral face. Nothing good lasts forever. Some only last a few moments like raindrops in a desert. The kids no longer fill drama class as they used to. One by one they disappear like fresh rainwater evaporating from a mud puddle on the side of the road. The puddle in which children played joyously has disappeared and only their footprints in the drying mud remain. Has the relevance of drama suddenly dissolved under the sun into absolute obsolete? A fisherman patches a net which fish swim through when it's torn but what does a facilitator do when his class can't seem to hold students? For a few moments he convinces himself that many are called but only a few are chosen and that his is to work with those that want to work.

All is not well when the time to go in to teach beckons me to march up the empty road railed by workers in orange overalls on either side pressing tightly on the edges. Turning the long stretch of road into a straw of human traffic. Further up, a gush of students flow up the straw from school hurriedly as if being sucked back into the township by a vacuum.

Their bodies shelled by school bags like tortoises they walk unburdened perfuming the air with laughter and game. One tortoise has been removed of its shell and is chasing another with screams and shouts,

“Saph’ ibeg yam wena!”

Only to be greeted with echoing laughter from her peers as the boy reluctantly giving in, not to her plea but to the weight of the books in her bag.

“Rha! Inzima le nto yakho, kutheni uphatha amatye eskolweni?”

These are the games children play. They tease, pester and bully each other but the girl has a spirit inspired by the old wisdom of AmaXhosa that says *Indlovu ayisindwa ngumboko wayo*. As she swings her long and skinny arms the bag flies from the ground like a grasshopper landing on her back, where it belongs. Not to be outdone by boyish juvenility she strikes

“Ayisindi le bag, uweak qha wena. Inoba khange uyitye ipapa.”

Laughter erupts from the students like a flock of birds taking sudden flight. The strong birds flap their wings first punching the air with HA HA HAs and the rest follow. The old and weak birds join last, nature's process of survival of the fittest is at work and each child laughs to assert their belonging in the group. Even the boy accused of not having eaten porridge laughs

and entertains the group in appreciation of humour as a virtue of social relevance. Small groups of students come and pass like waves rippling in the ocean, each going about its business in its unique shape, size and character. Until a lone Thimna appears with her head bowed down like a puppet whose string has snapped from the heavens above. I approach her and she moves away with her bag huddled against her back. Her big bloated bag like the belly of a well-fed lion cub hides her tiny frame exposing only her head turned towards a man in orange overalls standing on the other side of the road returning a cold stare back to Thimna. Something is definitely wrong. No words are said.

I proceed on my journey to class. On my arrival, a group of students are dumbfounded that I have arrived as if I've disturbed their prayer for the class to be cancelled. As facilitator I am God during the time of drama class and if they have a prayer during this allocated time then they must pray to me. No need to bow or close your eyes, just talk to me '*ubhuti we-drama*' is quite reasonable. The students lock eyes together daring each other for one to speak out. Akhona takes the challenge speaking on their behalf

"Bhuti asizongena thina kwa-drama"

"Ngoba?"

"Singxolisiwe eGolf Club kuthwa masiye kwi-rehearsal"

Confusion...

"Rehearsals zantoni ezo?"

"Rehearsals ze-dance bhuti" another skinny girl punctuates,

"i' dance?"

"Ewe bhuti." The group responds in chorus.

Their voices sounding victorious like when Ebson finally got a glow from his lightbulb invention.

"Masambeni siye kwa-dance"

"Bhuti?"

"Masambeni!"

They follow with amazement as to why I'm letting them off so easily. For a moment my conundrum of, why my kraal was diminishing, solved.

"So nimane ningazi kwi-drama nikwi-dance?"

"Ewe bhuti."

"Kutheni ningatsho nje?"

There's a loud silence. The type that's a symphony of youthful guilt and innocence coming together like ebony and ivory on a piano.

"Ndiyabuza!"

Akhona exhibits a smile that invites the real God into our moment before answering with a simple

"Hayi!"

'Hayi' 'No man' 'Nee man' 'No' are clearly overused in Pearston.

Silencing my thoughts, I enjoy my march to dance with the group. The whole moment tastes of heaven like stealing meat from a pot before it's dished out. Heaven on steroids, as the group, bursts into song. Akhona leads, the others back her and the skinny girl adds magic. We make a spectacle of our entrance at the Golf Club and without wasting time heaven's group find their partners on the floor. Without wings the girls teach the boys to fly as they swing their arms. I sit and watch in awe as the skinny girl takes flight her arms moving elegantly in the air like a gliding swallow commanding flight effortlessly.

These beautiful children should never be made to choose between dance and drama but sometimes we adults get carried away by our own pursuits rather than bestowing happiness on them. Only the children were expected not me and my presence has become a distractor. The young dancers become obsessed with a desire to impress when their pursuit should be greater. I excuse myself from the dance instructors and students leaving everyone to discover flight. With my day being shorter and now finding time in my hands I walk about Pearston, seeking out corners which I have not yet explored. After about an hour or so of wandering and searching for the unknown I find myself in a field that separates the town from the township and unannounced the skinny girl runs, cutting across the field

“Hey!”

I call out to her and she stops with a panic

“*Bhuti ndingxamile.*”

“*Uyaphi?*”

“*Kwi-practice*”

As we speak drums sound at the distance

“*Yho Bhuti, sekuqaliwe.*”

“*Kwenzeka ntoni ngapha?*” Me pointing the direction the drums are beating from.

“*Kukho i-practice ye-traditional dance bhuti.*”

“*Masambe*” I command her to take me where the drums are coming from. On the way I learn the skinny girl’s name is Mihlali. A girl with dark skin and equally legendary shyness fixing her eyes on the earth as she walks she stretches her strides forward towards the drumbeat with accurate determination. As we approach the question of, where is the drumbeat is coming from? Is laid to rest as a swarm of children gather around a small RDP house like bees around a hive. As soon as we get to the group I see familiar faces Zukiswa, Akhona and other faces whom I have not yet matched to name. Plus a dozen other new faces whom it’s my first time meeting. Mihlali leaves me with a quick sprint as if announcing the end of her tour guide duties and races inside the house. I remain outside and greet the new and familiar faces.

“*Molo, Molo, Molo...*”

My favourite jukebox tune to play. This time I play it from the heart before setting foot in the house to see the happenings. In this tiny two-roomed house, young dancers form human lines from wall to wall and their tiny feet repeatedly beat a song out of the cement floors to the rhythm of the drum. They do so guided by song. With more than 30 people inside the house singing, dancing and sweating there’s no way of avoiding the funk. Even with the windows wide open the house has difficulty breathing. The drum, beating feet and song inside the house’s squeezing lungs give way to a commotion from outside and the siren shouts of

“*Makazi!*”

“Makazi!”

“Makazi!”

“Nank’ uMakazi!”

I don’t know who Makazi is but her reference commands an urgency among the dancers

“*Iyho uMakazi uyeza nina.*”

Panic fills the house like oxygen in the lungs of a yogi after a deep breath. Outside the shouts and yells of Makazi become menacing and a young opportunist seizes the moment to barge into the rehearsal of the older dancers. A small head tears through the crack as the door swings open allowing a draught of fresh air into the house followed by a high pitched “uMakazi *uyeza nina!*”

“*PHUMA!*” The older dancers respond in unison.

The small head draws back as the door slowly closes. I take the opportunity before it is closed and announce that I am going outside to meet uMakazi whom I don’t know, yet.

Makazi has a broad smile and a face personifying kindness. She tries to take a step towards me but is blocked by tiny little people tucking on her jeans and hugging her legs. Her hand is softly pushing away at the young people until I finally close the distance between us. For a moment she sings a song that I have sung a dozen times before.

“*Molo*” and I accompany her as a backup vocal, “*Molo*” her right arm slowly trying to rise for a handshake gifts opportunity for one little girl to latch on it and swing. Makazi blasts out a thunderous roar of a lioness irritated by its playful cubs.

“*Hayi mani! Aniboni ukuba nditheta nomntu?*”

The young people scatter having gotten the message. On towards another search for another tolerant soul to irritate. My introduction with Makazi is spiced with laughter, drums, song and an overall vibe that would put the best HipHop beatmakers to shame. For over a month Pearston has been a Steve Hoffmeyer track on repeat but now I’d found in it a rhythm close to a Madlib production. Finally I could vibe to its invitation for a freestyle and creative spontaneity.

Today I crossed the river that’s a river only by name and a dusty and rocky stretch in being. The drum beating louder in a rhythm that has found a home in my ears. The next day in class I

tell the drama students present that they no longer have to cross the dusty river twice from and back to school again. Drama will now cross the river to their little ashy RDP house. A place of utopia and art in the midst of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n.

What's in an RDP house?

An RDP house, not more in size than the houses at the edge of the Karoo where men sat in a circle with their backs arched under the shade of a tree, but much, much greater in potential. It is heaven on earth. A place where children govern with their talents expressed in song and dance. What the adults had failed, the children lifted up and filled the air with life. Their strength is in their belief of possibilities; *'one day I'm going to be a dancer' 'I can see myself on TV acting in a soapie'* inspire their actions with confidence.

'Finally, the weight of my school bag and the constraint of my school uniform have been put down and I get in my trusted short pants, I can dance!'

Depending on the time and day of the week the RDP house at corner Thandeka Grootboom and Mbulelo Nzo Street plays host to gqom crazed youths who pulsate to its electric static. Or, to an army of skinny legs with feet thumping against the cement floor drumming a beat to traditional songs. Now this RDP house was being asked to digest yet another creative activity, drama. The house swallowed all without prejudice like a round belly at a banquet. It's assumed that the RDP's stomach made of only two rooms has enough space to accommodate all. The children don't seem to be concerned at all about space. They march in until all space is no more and open the house's tiny windows as if opening them will expand the size of the house to accommodate more.

They converge at the house like parliamentarians giving each other turns based on activity and age. First, the youngest of them still in lower primary grades enter the RDP chambers of bliss and possibility to rehearse their traditional dance moves guided by one of the older kids. Then speakers come carried on the shoulders of older boys and girls, the gqom generation who plug them midst the younger children's rehearsal to much protest.

"Niyasiphazamisa!"

"Hayi thula! Uneshori wena utsho ngamehlo amakhulu apha"

"Ah right, afana nentloko yakho."

"Uthini? Uthini?"

A chase pursues, in the pregnant house until the *youngie* is caught by the older colleague who delivers a blow to the head with an open hand.

“Suthetha nje kum wena, ndimdala kunawe.”

“Umdala kunam? Umdala kunam, kodwa sifunda eklasini eyiwan?”

The *youngie* speaks an uncomfortable truth that embarrasses the older child allowing much-needed silence to settle in the house for a brief moment until other older children intervene on behalf of their embarrassed peer.

“Yhu, mabahambe abantwana ngoku.”

“Mabahambe nyani, yi-turn yethu ngoku”

“Phandle! Phumani!”

“Mxim, anikwaz’ nojaiva”

“Uthini?”

“Anikwaz’ ujaiva”

“Phumani!”

“Siyanogqitha thina!”

The young ones are driven out, pushed out the door like paraffin poured through a funnel, causing a roar outside. Inside the house, the speakers are plugged in and in no time bodies jerk to the rhyme of *gqom*. Outside, little people climb on windowpanes to peep inside, time flies and in no time Zukiswa puts her head through the door

“Lixesha ledrama ngoku”

Zukiswa has already made a name for herself in this government and no one disputes her leadership. The *gqom* children immediately turn off their speakers and before they can unplug them and carry them off on their shoulders back to where they borrowed them from, Zukiswa and her group barge in with confidence.

“Phuman’, phuman’ angenile amagqala ngoku!”

The silence that comes in response is an indication that Zukiswa is well within her right to say such words. When her sister Akhona parrots her and says the words.

“Phuman’, phuman’ angenile amagqala ngoku!”

She clearly lacks her sisters' confidence and is met with backlash

“Hayi, uthetha ntoni wena?”

“Phumani...”

“Thula Akhona! Suzenza mdala apha, ungumntana into oyiyo”

Zukiswa rushes to her sister's defence

“Nisathetha? Ndithe phumani! Niphuma nini?”

Again there is silence, until Akhona decides to add salt to the already unbalanced power game at play.

“Noba ningathetha, ok' salayo niza kuhamba sana. Phumani!”

The gqom kids do not respond to her overzealous attempt to cook an already ripened pot. They pierce her soul with sharp stares instead. Piercing her uncomfortably until she seeks refuge at the back of the room. Britney, a more reserved veteran adds to Zukiswa's urgency to drive the gqom crew out

“Jere die kinders vat lang, gaan aan”

And out the door, the speakers go carried out on the shoulders of the gqom generation.

The house is too small for any dramatic drama exercise and will take some getting used to in terms of how to conduct activities within. As I make sense of the spatial limitations of the house I notice there is no crack of the house that does not have eyes peeping in. Through the keyhole and windows all around one can sense innocent intrusion, eyes big and small prying in. The curiosity pulls on my heartstrings and in no time the act of keeping others out of the new activity, drama class makes no sense at all. I call for them to come in and a flood of giggles comes in with them. Prompting a sudden change of minds.

“Ah, ah bhuti mabangangeni abantwana bazosingxolela apha.”

Before I chase them out the drama group has acted on that impulse.

“Bhuti subahoya abantwana bazokurwaya intloko”

“Ok mntanam, masisebenze thina”

Not all of the *youngies* have left on my command. Some have sneakily hidden behind the drama students showing their heads at the sound of the door banging closed. In no time a fury of hands knock at the door and small heads on tiny people peep through the door and rat

“Bhuti mabaphume nabaya.”

Akhona who ruffled her feathers against the *gqom* dancers finds no challenge in asserting her authority against the younger children.

“Heyi! Ningenapi kwizinto ze drama nina hambani!” her voice sharp as a needle.

One of those who sneaked and hid behind the class comes out with wrath and joins Akhona’s effort to chase the young ones out.

“Hambani, nithanda gqit’ ukuthetha. Kugxotwe nina kange kugxotwe mna”

“Phuma Elethu awenzi drama uxhentsa nathi.”

“Hayi ngubani obethe andenzi drama? Thula awuwazi nto. Ndiyayenza ke sana idrama, uthetha nje into ongayaziyo wena. Kaniphume nitsho ngeenwele ezifrasi”

“Nawe utsho ngamehlo amakhulu!”

Elethu really does have big eyes. A pair that she rolls with every word she speaks to accentuate her point. She has a tiny frame and a crippled leg, it’s a wonder how she carries those big bulging eyes around. Her small body may not fit her eyes in size but her eyes and personality are the perfect match Big, Big.

Without noticing it Elethu has already taken centre stage delivering a heated monologue to the scruffy heads peeping through the door demanding that she be chased out of class

“Mgxothe bhuti!” the peeping heads plea

“Yhu shame, ni late vha? Yekani mna ndinixelele ni le-yi-ti. Akazondigxota uBhuti uyayazi ukuba mna – beating her chest – ndenza idrama”

I know nothing about Elethu having joined drama, but I decide to enjoy her delivery more for its performance and less for its truth. She commands everyone’s attention even the children she’s arguing with at the door take time to appreciate her performance. Before I know it she is received with fan fair by the other girls who shout.

“Yes girl!”

Elethu is here to stay.

I Found Hope

Sleep is rewarding and waking up even easier since I've started going to the RDP house. Time flies and lands at will. It's Friday morning and the morning prayers have become a norm, AMENs take to the air like the roar of a lion to a zookeeper. Eric and Joyce still patrol their home for any signs of sneaked in girls. They seem to have convinced themselves that girls are being sneaked in the night somehow. They must have seen my bounce when I returned home last night. I tend to stay longer at Khanyiso Township after rehearsals in the RDP house. I stay and talk to Makazi. Well Makazi talks to me. I listen and admire her zeal around how she opened the doors to her sister's RDP for young people to gather in peace and art.

That RDP house is my heaven in Pearston, but my Christian landlord couple still seem to be looking for their heaven. I found mine but Heaven was made to be shared so I wait for the opportune moment when they've relaxed their house patrol duties and settled.

"Hey Eric, do you know Soqaqamba?"

"Sorry?"

"Soqaqamba, the dance group in the township"

"Oh, I see, the traditional group in Khanyiso?"

"Yes"

"The one of that lady with dreadlocks... Mai? Mai, *ja* from the *lokasie*" Joyce explains to an Eric wearing confusion on his face.

Mai is Makazi's alias on the Coloured side of town. In Khanyiso she is more affectionately known as uMakazi. UMakazi is not her real name either, it is an affection poured into her spiritual cup by the children of her community. Makazi is to Khanyiso what Molo is to my jukebox, it booms and echoes out of every twitter and subwoofer mouth. The song of every child is:

Makazi!

Makazi!

Makazi!

From my window I look to the right, towards the bridge that leads to Mpumzi's Tavern, my ears have become numb to the picks and shovels of people in orange overalls whose

conversations once woke me up like chirping of birds in the morning. There is a different energy today hopeful and buoyant punctuated by the music that has already started to play at the tavern drowning all reason in me. Fun pulsates and lures my heart for sightseeing at the tavern. I negotiate with myself for a reason not to embark on this journey. I cannot partake in evils such as alcohol consumption before 10 am. It shall be a visit. I will visit someone in Nelsig but who? MamPhinga? I wonder how she is today. I wonder and wonder until my wondering transforms into genuine concern. I am very concerned about MamPhinga's wellbeing I convince myself. I must go and see if she is well.

MamPhinga always has a smile and today is no different. She is fine and I have started my day on a positive, clearing my list of concerns. Now I can freely pass through Mpumzi's on my way home. On the stretch of road down towards Mpumzi's I pass youth and women pushing wheelbarrows filled with groceries and get the hint, today must be payday. Payday has really boosted the bravado of men who close off the entrance to Mpumzi's, downing beer from brown bottles, splashing its foam and calling out to the women and girls that pass pushing their burdens of groceries. On a concrete slab a distance from the tavern's entrance a sweet voice calls

"Rasta!"

Two small hands at the end of long arms shake keenly for my attention.

"Rasta!"

Then a beam of sunshine is revealed in between the two mountainous men that shield it. Its face wears a smile pure and longing.

"Don't mind them, they, not my boyfriends, they are my friends."

Such words normally pave the road to a fight. The mountains are clearly irritated at this sun's choice to shine my direction. One of them pulls her arm inviting the sun's burn.

"*Los my!*"

As quickly as the sun was heated it calms showing the nature of PE weather, four seasons in one day. Autumn, Winter, Summer heat and the cool Spring sun.

"You scarce, *wena*"

Her face as beautiful as the evening I first saw her while leaving the tavern. When we met and assured each other

“Ok, hopefully, I’ll see you next time”

Hope, has been delivered.

I’m reluctant to embrace her like an explorer seeking new adventure but choosing his trail wisely as not to disturb sleeping mountains. But Hope, I’ve been told never tells you when to stop hoping. Hope will have you hopping until you find yourself dangling over a cliff of disappointments. This hope presumably tipsy as beer and three cider bottles lie on the side of the mountain footstool where she has risen has a mouth as mighty as the Zambezi currents pushing words of no significance out her lips.

“Rasta, *kea urata.*”

“*Lena kea urata.*”

“Oh, you understand me?”

“*Ja*, I understand you”

“I knew it, you are Sotho. Are you staying with the other guys?”

Swimming against her verbal current is a strenuous sport so I relax and let flow with it.

“Yes, I stay with them.”

Hope beams like twelve midday’s summer sun with rays of sexual feistiness radiating from her face. Her hand slowly closes the gap between our facing chests and tucks on my t-shirt.

“You must come with the others tonight, its mos payday we can have fun.”

As soon as I found Hope I immediately lose it.

All Pay

It's still morning, hardly three hours since school started at eight and the high school is already out! At first, I see them in little groupings in town and thought them to be the rotten apples the school has trouble dealing with. In no time the flood gates at the school are confirmed opened and waves of school children are zigzagging in town like little streams during rain and damming up in and around shops. In my confusion, I'm reminded of my musical obligations as an old jukebox that once inserted with a coin starts with an awkward beat. The students greet me as they walk past,

"Molo Bhuti."

"Molo."

"Molo Bhuti."

"Molo."

"Molo Bhuti."

"Molo."

The greetings are as off-tune as my singing. I search for a familiar face to straighten the wires and rid the static from the speakers. A group of boys and girls, strange and familiar dressed in the school's maroon and yellow uniform approach but are reluctant to sing the *Molo* tune. I lead -

"Molweni."

"Molo bhuti."

I've never seen the school out at this time and inquire about the reason -

"Sikhutshiwe bhuti."

"Ngoku sawukudibana ngaban' ixesha?" I ask.

A dozen eyes look at me with surprise as if to question how I dare call for rehearsal on this day.

"Ndiyabuza."

"Akhona," the ever-willing and shy spokesperson expands,

“Bhuti yi all pay namhlanje, asizokwazi ukuya kwidrama ‘funeka siyo grosala.”

The rest of the group back her up in synchronized harmonies, some say

“Ewe,” others *“Yes,”* and others simply hum *“Hm hmm”* all responses come together and make music of the otherwise disappointing news that there won’t be drama today.

I take a few steps and my eyes spot a tiny little human burdened by her school bag and the invisible halo that weighs her head down looking to the earth as she walks. It’s the ‘I am An African Child’ poet, seeing her always excites me.

“Molo Thimna.”

My greeting is not received, instead, it goes to the dust like spat-out gum. She cringes as if squeezing pass through the cracks of my affection towards her - *have I crossed the line?* I wonder still staring at her hunched physique like a porcupine ready to strike. Did I insult her with my affection? The man in orange overalls from the other day stands to look onward, his presence felt like crocodiles under waters by thirsty impala. There is nervousness in all students watching the scene. He returns back in the hole his colleagues are digging and his pick raises its head above the heap of soil already dugout. It’s all happening fast without giving me time to make sense of meaning, a group of three to four rowdy members of the drama group whisper as they pass.

“Hayi Bhuti”

I’m lost and offended by myself, internally I accuse myself of passing the wrong message to this group who’ve seen my eyes locked onto a child’s rear as she walked past a group of men hurling dangerous construction tools.

“Yho! Nina uzobethwa uThimna,” another whisper crosses the conversation between the group. I’m not sure who is whispering to who, but I get the red light that a dangerous situation is brewing under my nose, and perhaps by my own doing.

“Yiman’ apho” I try to slow down the group that has now passed a distance. In the air, there’s a danger seemingly is too complex to engage directly. So, I make small talk to gain access to the heart of the group.

“Akho rehearsals namhlanje, nivile?”

“Aa, kasive bhuti.”

“Kodwa bhuti besingazoya namhlanje noMakazi uyazi,” adds another.

The students are still shaken by their prophecy of Thimna’s beating to come. They look back to the hole at the randomly surfacing pick head, then shake their heads and sigh. The pain of Thimna’s beating is here and cannot be avoided.

“Uzobethwa ngubani uThimna?”

“Yho bhuti, ngumntu wakhe!”

Bonga dishes out more news than comfort to the group.

“Nankuya umntu wakhe bhuti”

“Hayi wena!” The others try to silence him even lifting a hand to his head that lands with a slapping sound but Bonga does not comply. Instead, he is prompted to speak out.

“Andizongayitheti! Bhuti, i’owu kaThimna ngula bhuti ugrumba pha,” his small hands protrude a finger that points to a hole where the pick surfaces.

“Yhu! Uyathand’ ukuthetha izinto zabantu wena, utshongobumnyama”, one directs at Bonga

“Ndi right, ndi right!” He brushes the comment away.

He might be right, but the situation is wrong. Thimna is a child you imagine being burdened only by her maths and nothing else. She could not have ‘willingly’ agreed to this. He is a giant compared to her school bag.

Bonga is in a role, or perhaps this is his plea for intervention to save a friend from an unfitting situation.

“Bayahlalisana bhuti,” Bonga emphasises by ballooning his eyes as he speaks.

Silence. None of his group of friends interrupt him, silence just hangs in the air like laundry on a quiet Saturday. Silence persuades Siya to join Bonga’s plea.

“That’s why uThimna engasazi kwidrama bhuti, umntu wakhe uyambetha xa ebuya kwipractice.”

“Uthi uzofumana amadoda phaya.”

I've been struck and silenced but my feet move in unison with the group and as we move ahead they keep sharing more or crying out about Thimna's pain if only to heal themselves as helpless bystanders unable to assist a friend in distress.

Time has died on our watch. The day is playing hide and seek with night and for the first time, I am introduced to Pearston's underworld of scars, wounds and yokes that children carry - a large monster hidden in their small chests and eats away at their childhood and youth. No matter how many moments pass in my silence still no reason arrives to convince me how this situation could be possible.

"Baphi abazali baka Thimna, kutheni ehlalisana nje?"

"*Yho bhuti abazali bakaThimna basePlasini...*" Siya has chewed and swallowed the muzzle that closed her mouth at the beginning and is now driving the plea for a friend's deliverance, "...ooThimna babehlala pha ehostela qha bagxot.wa pha."

"Ngoba?"

"*Badala, bhuti. La hostela ngeyabantwana baseprimary and kugcwele ngoku so kuye kwafuneka bahambe. Babebaninzi bafuna indawo zokuhlala apha elok'shini uThimna yena wahlala nala bhuti.*"

I've crossed the dusty river and walked into parts of Khanyiso I've never been without knowing. Still dazed by the news I'm thrust back to reality by Bonga who parts with the group saying, "*Bhuti ndizophuma ngapha mna.*"

We are standing outside Siya's house, where an old woman sits on her veranda. I dare not turn without first going to introduce myself as the new drama teacher. The old woman's face brightens up, perhaps the only good today is the smile she shares, "uSiya wasoloko endixelega ngawe nale drama... Ndiyibiza kakuhle Siya?"

"Ewe makhulu" Siya disappearing into the house. I say my goodbyes to her grandmother.

Before I've even crossed the river back to town I hear loud sound systems that have just been switched on to entertain the returning workers with their all paycheques. All pay is the day when all things are given time off earlier than normal, from school to the people in orange overalls whom I can see crossing the river from up the hill at Siya's house. Some have already made a turn at the local liquor store and carry five-liter plastic bottles of wine two in each hand.

I cut in between them passing baritone greetings changing between “*Molo*”, “Hello” and “*Sho*” depending on sex and age of person. Then he appears, a dark figure like a shadow at night, Thimna’s boyfriend.

The air between us is tense as we pass, no longer confident to stretch his neck like a scarecrow as he does in town spying over a child, he drops his head and hides his face behind a mask of nothing. I scan his face to make sure I can identify him at all times.

Before entering the gate to the house, a voice calls from under a tree on the other side of the road.

“X!”

It’s Litha The Poet, I cross the road to find him rolling grass, not a herb but grass. The lowest quality of weed one can find. He offers me a puff and I decline. I know that kind of grass well. The type that only gives you a headache if smoked alone, but the type junkies mix with mandrax for a substantial-high.

It’s amazing how Litha and I conversate over the loud throwback sounds of Joe Mafela ‘uSdumo’ Congo-Zaire – Zaye! Blasting from Mpumzi’s. The dirty grass and choking smoke from Lita’s zol reminiscent of teen delinquent stages with uSdumo in the background. PeaRston is a crude time capsule.

Today school went out early, workers went home early and the night has begun early, much, much early. The sun’s tail hiding behind the mountain is still wagging the last bits of sunshine and men have already started walking in drunk zigzags in town. Sesotho is spoken in droves as groups of men pass by, all roads leading to the tavern. Litha lights up with excitement and pronounces

“Hey, Xman. *Kuzoba mandi namhlanje, yi all pay bra.* I got paid, everybody got paid.”

Holidays?

When the winds take a turn at howling, they silence the wolves and the rhythm of danger is muzzled by the leaves. Birds little and large alike take to the tumbling currents of the skies and are blown from pillar to post. Winds carry seeds far, wind and outward with euphoric energy. Students also ride these currents for relief from the predictable seesaw games of Pearston.

Elethu rolls her eyes and releases a trademark energy and vibe that holds us hostage to her lovely being.

“*Yhuu bhuti, mna? Andizobakho kaloku next week, I’m going to Cape Town...*” – *rolls eyes.*

“*...ndiyohlala nomama wam, ‘khe andi spoil’e ngemali yakhe nam ndiphile buthepu.*”

The performance is electric, but does not go uncontested as asthmatic Ashante takes a gulp of air in preparation of her monologue of boast -

“*Uhm, nam ndizoya eKapa bhuti ku mama wam...*”

“*Awubuzwanga Ashante! Yhuu, ndisabalisa ngowam umama tshomi. Sungxama uzoyifumana ichance yakho*” – *rolls eyes.*

“*Uhm OK tshomi nam besendisitsho*” – *deep breath.*

“*Hayi sana bayavuya abantu abano mama abahlala kude*”, says Nosiphiwe with her upper lip folded tight and tensed like the beak of an eagle about to tear into the flesh of its prey.

“*Yhuuuu kumandi sana (rolls eyes) aye ngoman’ eyombona kwamazwe akude.*”

The seldom silent Mihlali takes the podium and speaks over the gentle and joyful commotion of young girls deliberating about their mothers.

“*Ayikho lo nto, umama suppose uhlala nabantwana bakhe because abantwana bane needs and thina singamantombi. Siyakhula so siyaba need’a oomama bethu.*”

Nosiphiwe with arms folded and mouth tensed with an upper lip like an eagle’s beak, feeds on Mihlali’s wisdom without flinching, except for the movement of her eyes and squeezing of eyebrows showing her out to be digesting. The girls go on reason after reason, disagreeing and agreeing.

Deep breath, “Umm, ewe bhuti injalo omama bethu supposed ba bakhona xa sikhula because” deep breath, “sizi teenagers ne sinemibuzo efuna i’advice yabo and ezinye izinto asikwazi ukuzibuza kuwe funeka sizibuze komama bethu.”

“Yhuuu heee, ufuna umama’kho azo hlala apha ePearston?”, rolls eyes “Uzaphangelaphi apha? Wena xa ufuna impahla uzakuthengela ngantoni?”

“Hayi Elethu asithi omama bethu barongo ngoyo phangela kude, qha sithi nathi siyaba need’a for i’advice as amantombi akhulayo.”

“Ohh, ubocacisa kaloku – rolls eyes – because omama bethu nabo bayafuna ukuhlala nathi qha ke, life”

Life.

That’s a big word for anyone to try to make sense of, not to mention little girls whose wet ears have been hardened like dry mud baking in the sun.

“Life” concludes the deliberation, imposing silence and evoking a restlessness among the girls. Eyes roll from corner to corner from every beholder as they scan among themselves who shall oppose Elethu’s reason.

Nosiphiwe who sat quietly with her eyebrows tensed as if funnelling her vision onto a specific point releases herself from the snare of her arms pressing against her frame like a hatchling breaking free and stretching its wings. Her movement is sudden and powerful landing on the lap of Anita, the youngest of the girls, who doesn’t really do drama but attends every rehearsal. Today she attends the meeting just to see and listen to what her community of sisters will be doing next.

“Ouch! Zina!”

“Uxolo, andikubethanga ngabomu.”

Wait a minute...

“Uthini xa umbiza?” I ask.

“Zina, bhuti” Nosiphiwe speaks using her every facial muscle, funnelling her eyebrows and tightening her lips.

“Nosiphiwe ligama lam lamanyani bhuti, qha abantwana bathi Zina xa bendibiza”

“Ngobani abantwana?”

“Abaphi abantwana?”

“Singabantwana kuwe Zina?”

The group protests. Poor Zina must not have expected that response from the group as questions popped from every corner of the room like popcorn roasting in a closed pot.

“Andithethi nina, ndithetha abantwana bancinci”, as she rings herself back in the clutch of her arms folded and pressing tight around her body then tensing her lips forming the beak of an eagle.

Eyes pop even larger from Elethu *“Ohh ubocacisa xa uthetha kaloku ungathi abantwana, ubothi abantwana bancinci.”*

“Hayi nyani cacisa, because mna andingomthana.”

“Hayi Mhhlali ndindala kuwe tshi, nawe ungumntana kum.” Nosiphiwe speaks with her beak pointing straight at Mhhlali ready to tear her to threads. Gentle laughter makes its presence felt in the corner squatting behind the homemade bench of wooden planks. It’s Asemahle folded like dough in a bread pan.

“Yhuu uAse kunini uthule?”

“Hayi besendim’libele noba ukona”

“Akathethi...”

“Uthi gqi sehleka”

“Uhleka ntoni kona?”

Shy Ase grows shy with every remark if she could dig a hole behind the bench to hide herself she would. She opens her mouth and speaks gently, *“Hayi, ndinimamele.”*

Nosiphiwe’s fuse seems to have run its course and she explodes *“Bhuti, ndizoya eCookhouse mna ngehol’dey!”* Her hands at the end of her tensed arms rolled into fists the size of dumplings. She speaks with authority as if speaking her desires into being rather than sharing what is to be of her ‘life’ when schools close and holidays begin. She may not go to Cookhouse, but she wants to go to Cookhouse!

Suddenly it dawns on me that unlike the many other teenagers and school children who'll be going on holiday as a needed season of adventure, friends and family. For these children of Pearston, holidays are a time of need. A crude reminder of what they don't have. A lack as simple and deep as a mother's presence. Something they silently long for obscured in the commotion of the sleepy Karoo town. Holidays are a reminder that the bonds they have formed in rehearsals as colleagues and friends were not theirs to keep. That at the end of their youthful bonding every child must return to their family like a bird soaring the skies and returning to a broken nest. Still they flourished in each other's presence teasing and establishing each other's boundaries and positions.

"Ndimdila kunawe wena, sundiqela kakubi"

"Kon'ba umdala, ayithi lonto ndithuke"

"Kandikuthuke, ndithe ndimdala kuwe. Aniva gqit"

"Uyandithuka, uyandithuka. Tshi! Xa usithi ndiyakuqela uyandithuka."

"Hehake abantwana, abafuni nje ungaphenduli."

"Yhuuu, kaloku sukuthi abantwana. Umnye umntana omdala kunaye wena apha." – Rolls eyes.

Deep breath. "Umm, kodwa mna bhuti ndiyafuna umthethelela omnye umntana. Yaziz? Into yoba makuthwe uyaqela ayibimnandi. Xa umntu engayithandi indlela othethe naye ngayo kunoske akulungise angathi uyaqela. Ayikho right leyo into shame."

Gently whispered, *"Uyaqela lo mntana."*

The words assert the message, but the whisper tickles the air and the friendly bonds -releasing a Hiroshima of laughter whose rays seep through the walls of the house. Down the grey streets of Khanyiso Township painting, each square meter with colour bubbled in the many HA HA HAs that come in varying tones of vocal rages from sweet sopranos to marmite bitter basses. Finding their last home in the ears of passersby who stop and acknowledge the choir of children's laughter with smiles.

Deep breath, *"Umm bhuti, nawe uzohamba for iholidays?"*

Hungry eyes stare in my direction eager to hear how I answer. They bulge, rising and flowing out the socket like dough perfectly kneaded to make *amagwinya*. I count my words, but I don't spare the truth.

“Ewe, nam ndiyakhunjulwa ngabantu basekhaya.”

“Thina awuzosikhumbula.”

“Ndiza k’nikhumbula.”

“Bhuti xa uye kwi holidays uzakubona umama wakho nawe?”

“Ewe.”

The questions pour like summer rain drizzling from white fluffy clouds eager to cool the earth from the sun’s heat. One cloud holds it in a little longer. Arms folded tight against her frame and with a mouth like an eagle’s beak. She rolls her eyes to-and-fro funnelling her vision on whoever has a question to ask then sharply directs her face like a satellite towards me to catch each word of my answer. She is clearly not satisfied by the playful questions posed by her colleagues and takes to the podium herself.

“Bhuti, uzophinda ubuye?”

I down the question with the bravery of swallowing hot porridge and not wanting to show discomfort; opening my mouth more to catch breath like a baited catfish than to answer.

“Ewe ndizobuya.”

“Nyani bhuti?” Eyes funnelling in.

I feel the hook from the fishing rod pulling on my tongue as if its sharp-pointed blade is physically peeling off any lie or words of false hope from it. My tongue now wounded and exposed to the bite of salt. Each word I say bites like salt thrown on the back of a lashed slave, my tongue now carries the burden of hope for these little ones. *Speak kind but not false words*, I remind myself.

“Bhuti ungasiqathi uti uzobuya kanti awuzobuya apha”

“Theth’ inyani bhuti, uzobuya?”

“Aniva na nina? Ndithe ndizobuya!”

Deep breath - *“Uhhh... Mna guys ndiyam’ biliva ubhuti, uzawubuya”*

“Yhuuu bhuti zamnandi ezondaba.” Eyes roll with a touch of suspicion.

“Ubuye ke!” Eagle beak and funnel faced. Eyes piercing through me.

Mihlali towering above the other girls, tall and slim with dark skin seeks assurance for the last time.

“Uqinisekile bhuti?”

“Ewe Mihlali.”

“Kudala kaloku kumane kufika abantu apha ePearston bezosebenza nabantwana baphinde balahleke singayazi bayephi”, she adds.

“Abatsho naxabazokuhamba!” another shouts.

“Ewe and iyatyafisa lo nto shame, uthi into usayithanda umntu wayo vele alahleke.”

Rolling eyes no longer rolling, hinting at the seriousness of the conversation.

“Ndikuxelele mna bhuti bendingazoyi join’a i’drama because ndiyayazi abantu bayafika ePearston bathi bazofundisa abantwana baphinde balahleke. Qha uMakazi wayocenga ekhaya wathetha nomakhulu ukuba ndi’join’e. That’s why ndilapha kodwa ke ukuthetha inyani, kumnandi apha. Ngaske unгахambi bhuti.” Eyes fixed staring straight at me without their merry-go-round roll effect.

Expectations, expectations, expectations. Sometimes they go against ones’ dreams, especially in a world where the bigger the city the better the opportunities to fulfil the dream. Pearston by its size is definitely not the platform I should be standing on to reach my dreams. That would be like climbing a broken ladder to the fifth floor. Port Elizabeth is a better ladder - fresh from the box and fitted with extra support. Johannesburg, on the other hand, could be an elevator that at a touch of a button would lift me inside a mechanical box straight to the top floor. Yet here I was in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n, an old ladder left out in the rain for many cold nights with wood rotting and steps that snapped under the foot at a slightest step.

The problem here is, there are too many souls and young people with and dreams the size of planets climbing this ladder. Up and down, footing and stepping with precision avoiding the cracked steps that would snap and send them down the gaping throat of poverty and brokenness.

A crew of beautiful young girls not needing but wanting a lifeline, a rope to improvise their ascend from the marginalized outskirts to the dignified edge in case the ladder snapped beneath them.

P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n is not a town in a country but a flea on a mattress. A disease-infested parasite making a meal of its sleepy host, the hopes and dreams of youth. This place coughs and rattles the homes of many with poverty that eats at bonds like tuberculosis. In the schoolyard the less sick find refuge from the diseases plaguing the surroundings. That's where students find precious time to chat about dreams and aspirations. Yet now like the night that accompanies the dying sun, the holidays had come to dash the dreams that trickled out the taps of young people's mouths. Outside the school on the other side of the high fences that blur the line between education and imprisonment, the rivers of dream had dried. Dropouts and friends, and parents burp like fish stuck at the bottom of muddy beer bottles. A stillness hovers in the thick air inside the RDP house, eyes are teary, mouths pinched tight and faces hardened from the lemons of life. The young master the lessons of the dusty town, how to hide their feelings and not show vulnerability.

The echoing "Yhuuu!" Rolling eyes, and "Uhmms" of those who have parents on the other side inflict wounds into the soul of those who have nowhere else to go but Pearston where dreams struggle to fly like sea gulls drenched in oil.

No Good Byes

They are done with their year-end exams and just like that, holidays are upon us like autumn. Our tree of friendship is punished by the dropping climate and the cold tears us apart one leaf at a time. Some are patiently waiting to get their progress reports before their hearts can lick the road. Others, their wings caught wind on the slightest breeze after the last drop of ink from their pen skid across the exam paper and took off. The warm circle of friendship has lost its shape and the sweet “HA HA HAs” that filled my days like peanut butter and jam sandwiches are running low. Even the short skips to the RDP house are now longer. When I arrive, the doors are closed and the DRUMDUMDUMDUM of the drum no longer circles in the air as beautifully as the clouds. Lone figures cut the horizons stumbling towards the house. Their dresses blowing in the gentle wind like empty Niknak packets void of content. Their heads have grown heavy weighed down as if pushing their eyes like wire cars on the paved streets. There is no need to say more.

The air and body betray our tact and the message is said without our mouths’ participation. Today there will be no rehearsals. We will not enter the RDP house to fill it like a deep breath into the lungs of monks meditating at the mountain peaks.

Four of us huddled at the stoep, and Nosiphiwe with a wire rod in her hand drawing on the earth at our feet. Her mantra to go to Cookhouse has not materialized. Life’s ears must be deaf to her words as the rain is to the plea of the dry river. Maybe, Life doesn’t speak the language of this young girl’s dreams. Even with her arms stretched forward, there is a feeling of a wall pressing against her. Her funneled face and eagle beak mouth have lost the youth that protrudes like a budding sunflower seed sprouting between rocks. Every line on her face sits like a trail back to heartbreaks and disappointments. It’s not that I don’t want to say “I see you are hurting” I just don’t know how to say it. Even with her pain written on her face, I know her heart is a private affair and sometimes too much familiarity scatters the prize, the hunt, *her trust*. For now, *let me offer her my presence*, I think to myself. That too will be enough. Besides there are two other children with us and Nosiphiwe may not feel free to speak her heart out in their company. So we let silence reign, externally, eternally. Internally, senses screech like a loaded cargo train coming to a sudden halt. Our body language writes innocent notes to each other, her dropped head and arching back. A monologue screams out of Nosiphiwe’s body, and that which I say to myself, she hears it out of my body. Trust between a young girl and a man who’ve met as strangers is not something that is earned through a language spoken from the mouth. Even Life did not listen when she said aloud “*ndizoya eCookhouse mna ngeholid!*”

More figures appear, cutting the horizon with youth and creating lively contrasts between the grey pavements and hard brick RDP houses. The younger children going about their way innocently bouncing a pink plastic ball among themselves. A bounce of the ball, a chase, laughter or a sharp shout. The pink ball is like a magnet for the other girls who playfully stand to give chase and join the game of bounce, chase, laughter or a sharp shout. They leave me and Nosiphiwe alone at the stoep. The playful group doesn't stop when they see us. They go on about their business with a pinch of childish aggression. They taunt Nosiphiwe as an act of revenge for not being allowed to do drama with the group.

“*Uhambile uAshante, ndimbonile namhlanje!*” One says with pouted lips, hugging the ball and temporarily stopping their game.

“*NoElethu sana uye eKapa!*” adds another not to be outdone, finger-snapping and a pout.

“*Ndiyayazi lo nto!*” Nosiphiwe does her best to put on a brave face.

“*Ayi-zo-ba-kho i-dra-ma!*” One little girl emphasizes twisting her body with every syllable. I recognise the girl, recalling her head piercing through the open door during my first day at the RDP. I recognise her actions too, the kind of actions that live in the realm of childish clap backs. Nosiphiwe is mature enough to get that too. She sighs, “*Yhu! Abeva abantwana!*”

Her sigh expresses irritation at the childish games children play, but she does it with a smile as light as a pinch of salt. She gets up and the children sprint in different directions leaving their siblings in diapers behind crying with their arms open. Those who have just recently learnt to walk, and graduated to walking with their older siblings wobbling about. Crying with their hands stretched out as if the noise they make will propel them forward.

“*Andizonibetha! Nibaleka ntoni?*” Nosiphiwe asks at the group, “*Jonga nishiya abantwana.*” Then over the distance she had put between us without me noticing as my attention was snared by the sight of the wobbling toddlers doing their best to run. She says...

“*Bhuti ndiyagoduka ngoku.*”

“*Oh, ok ke, ndiza kubona next year*”

We part with no goodbyes.

When I cross the dry and dusty river back to my place, I feel it is drier and dustier than ever before. My skips to and from the RDP house have become a long walk. I reflect and regret, I should have said *bye*.

Goodbyes, no matter how bitter to the ear can at least be drowned with the thought of '*we'll see each other next time*'. It hits like a hammer missing the nail and landing on the thumb 'I have a bond with these girls, and I am going to miss them'.

Texts and Invites

Impuku ngomngxunyo wayo! Granny and Aunty raised children now finally basking in the motherly love they have fasted from for most of the year. I hope they count their blessings like I counted the skeletons of crushed beetles on the N1 road when I came to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n. It's not difficult counting dead beetles even if it's by the limbs, two limbs here, four limbs there and the rest of the body over there missing an antenna it still makes a beetle. I fancy that's how children in the Karoo count their blessing.

“A meal today, a roof over my head, a granny, aunty, absent father and a phone call from uMama and I have a happy childhood.”

The feeling of happiness is addictive and keeps one coming for more. At times they even stalk it. Facebook friend requests climb, no mutual friends but the ‘*lives in Pearston*’ is enough to get a ‘confirm’. The invites come from young people somewhere basking in the bliss of 21st-century parent and child relationships of “*mama kandiboleke ifon*”, “*thatha phez 'kwe tafile*” – silence. The child goes into mom's phone unlocking mama's pin codes and straight to social media accounts. With Facebook and mother's passive consent allowing, their inbox texts come in written various formats.

“Hī BhūTī iTś ĀśhaNtè”

The font punishes my reading coordination and is ignored.

“*Hii Bhoöti, its BB*”

“*BB?*”

“*Yès Bhoöti, BriTüY Bèbe*”

“*bHuti*”

“*Bhoöti*”

“*BhūTī*”

All the fonts one can think of, fonts and fonts that make you realise just how old you have become. The evolution of writing in the post Mxit era of Facebook and emojis pound my inbox beeping my cell phone like a bee beating against a window trying to break free. Until baby bee runs to mama bee for back up and warm texts land in your inbox like a sting behind the ear.

“*Bhuti ngumaka Ashante, kahoye umntanam wethu kudala ekuzama*”

A crack splitting dam walls, my cocooned kindness is open and by instruction I respond to every

“bHuti”

“Bhoöti”

“BhüTi” and finally “Hi BhüTi iTs ĀśhaNtè”

Conversations run in circles, and are carried out in capital letters,

“HUD”

“WUU2”

Spiralling upwards to “I mis drama” the most readable text with spelling mistakes and missing letters. As I busy myself posting on social media, I wake to a dozen likes and new friend requests many from Pearston. If I don’t respond to my inbox they write on my wall and by the advice of some genius among them, one must have took my number from my account. At first there is a hoard of missed calls buzzing my phone like a mosquito tunnelling into my ears. Then it is the ‘Please Call Me Back’ from unknown numbers. Then came in the WhatsApp texts,

“Molo bhuti”

I suspect it’s one of them. I ignore.

“Ndim’uMihlale”

“Molo Mihlale”

“Bhuti nam ndizokuza ebhayi for holidays” “unjani bhuti”

“Ok, ndiyaphila Mihlali, unjani wena? Uzothini eBhayi?”

The line has been crossed between teacher and student like squeezing at the back seat of a taxi with uMama taking more than her side of the seat. The dramas of Pearston aren’t escaped even during holidays they follow me and haunt me in my inbox. After arriving in Port Elizabeth - the other side, with greener grass, you realize that sometimes the dung you know is the best dung for you. Submerged in new manure without friends, and the most familiarity of wet earth, dung beetle Mihlali texts from her mother’s phone,

“Ndise Motherwell bhuti kumakazi wam. Ndibhorekile apha, akhozi show zenzekayo?”

“Ikhona endiya kuyo Saturday”

“Bhuti cela uhamba nawe plz”

“Ok, cela umntu omdala akukhapha Saturday”

“Ok bhuti sizodibana phi?”

“Umakazi wakho uyayazi enjoli?”

“Ewe.”

“Ithi makakuzise KwaNcedo ngo12 ishow yona eseJoe Slovo kwesinye iskolo endisebenza kuse”

“Nkc bhuti”

A drama teacher can never deny a student affection for their art. If a student craves a performance then by all means, a performance they must get! The lines were crossed a long time ago, and now uMama’s elbows are in my face and her hips squeeze me against the taxi’s ribs from inside. Every passenger must pay their full fee in a taxi no matter their level of comfort. I’m so pressed up against uMa and the taxi’s ribs my hands can’t reach my pockets. I am forced to make an arrangement with the conductor that I will pay later when my arms are free with Ma side eye-balling me. At the end she gets the message and wiggles away releasing me and applying pressure on the other passenger, in spite of the new freedom my arms are still numb.

The WhatsApp conversation between me and Mihlali continues as we make arrangements to go see a show together.

“Ithi kumakazi wakho makakuzise KwaNcedo. Ungahambi wedwa uze nomntu omdala”, as we confirm for the last time on Friday evening for Saturday morning.

“Ewe bhuti” seals it, until a communication pothole shakes the taxi throwing uMa across the seat landing on me, pressing me against the taxi’s metallic rib cage. The torture of skinny guys filling space at the back seat. Those *iza bhuti oslenda* to add numbers at a back seat that is already fully occupied but needing *u’slenda* to add a head so four passengers are counted when the time to pay comes.

Mihlali’s mother has intercepted our WhatsApp conversation with a tone telling she was never aware of it.

“Ungubani?”

“Bhut’ Xolisa ofundinsa ooMihlali idrama ePearston”

“Bhuti ufuna ntoni kumntanam?”

“UMihlali uthi useBhayi and ufuna ukuyobukela ishow ye drama”

“Bhuti uMihlali ngumntana ka grade 8 ongayazinto ngobomi please hlukana nomntanam”

The ride becomes more unpleasant as we enter the township and the taxi has to turn against the sharp township curves swinging uMa left and right across the back seat. Nothing I say now will make a difference, all I can do is wait until a stop where someone gets off and adjust my sitting. For now, this is all part of the journey patiently awaiting my destination.

Let's Ride

I return to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n before the holidays end. Vacuumed back by its tranquil silence like a mother checking on her sleeping infant. The long road back has lost its newness. My eyes scan the road for beetles to no avail. Mother Nature must have changed her tune. The heat of my first trip to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n enveloped in a season passed. It is summer, the sun stands firm between the clouds using our foreheads as its walking stick. We feel its grip, hot but not hot as spring. Nature has her own wisdom, just when humans expect the Karoo summer sun to be raw heat she accompanies it with rain clouds to cool it off.

There hasn't been a shortage of rain over the holidays. Through the whole road heading to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n, grass stands taller than I remember, and man-made dams bask in the fields like puppies that just had their fill.

“That's pretty?”

A trip to Pearston wouldn't be complete without a “that's pretty”.

If spring is a pregnant woman then summer is her as a new mother of triplets. No one cares about her labour ordeal, everyone seems to be possessed by the bundles of cuteness in her arms, multiplied by three. Mother Nature has given birth for the umpteenth time. The green aloes of spring now adorned with buds of pink and orange. In patches, a species of aloe grows pink and infects the whole landscape – turning the whole landscape from dirty green to pink. The drive is surreal and even the RDP houses that host poverty at the edge of Karoo's civilization are as beautiful as the irony captured in a ‘township painting’ with watercolours.

“That's pretty.”

I keep echoing in my head, as I press against the taxi's sliding door and looking out its window. The seats in Amarok are much more comfortable, but the taxi is much more alive. Students coming back from holidays, women returning from visiting their children's homes and, men, come from everywhere and anywhere. The two rows at the back of the taxi are filled with men. They give none of the passengers a chance to be alone with their thoughts. When the taxi stops at Colchester garage to refuel, and we all get off to stretch our legs. A few passengers go off to the toilets, and a few more vanish into the Spar. The women come out with bags of padkos and the men come with three bottles of Old Brown Sherry and a nip of brandy. At a beat, as if cued by a signal, they pour into the taxi; the men joking playfully and the women laughing.

The spice from pies perfumes the taxi and gospel music is the soundtrack to the women's feeding and the men's drinking. Until the men call for a change of mood -

“Driver, *khatshintshe mahn!*”

“*Ewe, bathandazile omama. Iphumile inkonzo!*”

“*Hehake, nasicukumisa sizihlelele?*”

“*Mama, ithi amen qha wena*”

“*Amen ntoni? Bekuke kwathandazwa kule moto?*”

“*Tshini mama! Nixaphe zi pie kanti nitye ningathandazanga!*”

A chorus of laughter bellows in the taxi. My people make conversations a gentle match of wit, and Mama will not be defeated.

“*Ukub' usazi mna ndithandazele udriver aphephe endleleni sibenofika ezindlini zethu, andithandazeli 'pie mna ndiyazazi izinto emandizithandazele*”.

“*Mama, utye i'pie yabantwana wena. That's why ungakwazi ukuyithandazele. Utata ukunike imali for uthengele abantwana phambili i'pie wayitya, sumfakha u'driver kwinto zakho.*”

The bellow becomes a roll of thunder, even the driver cannot resist as he bursts in laughter.

“*Mfondini, mfondini indlebe zakho zilisela. Uhleka indaba zethu kodwa isicelo sam kange usive.*”

With one hand holding the steering wheel, the driver turns the volume of the gospel music down and tries to identify the men by looking at the rear-view mirror and asks, “*Ngubani lo uthethayo?*”

“*Ndim uzandithini? Uzandithini?*”

“*Mhlise driver! Mhlise!*” the women add jokingly.

“*Asoze alunge kum, niyasibona sibaninzi njani? ...Futhuz' ndimlo uthenge obutywala. Ukuba ndiyehla ndakwehla nobutywala bam ayawuzibona la madoda ukuba mawayenze njani*”

“Hayi, hayi mfondini! Akhomntu uzokwehlisa apha. Ukuba uyehla so-o-o-nke sakwehla! Andithi Rasta?”

My game of “wow, that’s pretty” ending abruptly. Drawn into the human experience of laughter and drunken talk.

“Rasta, awuna mculo apho? Kafakhe uLucky Dube mfondi. RASTA NEVER DIE!”

“Awuyifun’ ishot Rasta?”

“Aa enkosi bhuda”

“Ahoyi!”

“Ahoyi!”

“Ahoyi!”

“Ahoyi!”

“Ahoyi!”

“Ahoyi!”

“Rasta never die!”

Silence seeps in as the men rest their jaws from random shouts, then a -

“Driver katshintshe le gospel man”

The energy erupting at the back of the taxi is like the sound of a thousand wildebeest hooves drumming the plains. You either go against the rhythm or join in, and everyone in the taxi has decided to join.

The drunken men are no strangers but neighbours and uncles whom we are meeting for the first time. A hand, no matter how hygienic it is kept, will sooner or later wipe the ass and be introduced to germs on a first name basis. The drunkenness is fitting for the direction we are going. Driving adjacent to the fences that mark territories and farms that the local men with backs arched enter as labourers. Fences that scar the earth and are better left ignored.

“Kudu!”

Just at the right time to distract my line of thought. The men and women have merged into one band - teasing and laughing. My eyes and thoughts might be outside the taxi but my ears are a recorder picking up every joke and holler whenever there's a:

“AHOY RASTA!”

That's my cue to say,

“AHOY!”

“Rasta never die!”

“Rasta *awunamculo apho kuwe?*”

“*Aa bra yam*”

“*Ndiyamthanda uLucky Dube Rasta*” Erupting in song “*We Don't Know What Tomorrow Bring in This Crazy World*” before being silenced by the women who gang up.

“*Hayi!*”

“*Hayi!*”

“*Hayi!*”

“*Tshi!*”

“*Yhu! Driver! Khabanikhe lo mculo bawufunayo man, sawutya le nto ngoku*”

“*Akayili*”

“*Yhu! Ingati yibhokwe exhelwayo*”

“*Thiza! Zanga ndayifumana into enje*”

“*Mfazi, sivelelwe namhlanje*”

A static beat of gqom buzzes through the speakers softly as the driver changes music catering for the men. The men express their appreciation for the new sound howling with satisfaction after having their way.

“*Nazo!*”

“*Hiyo!*”

“*Khayinyuse drayi!*”

“Hayi, hayi iyangxola le nto!”

“Uzayinyusa nje kancinci mama ayizongxola”

The driver looks through the rear-view mirror and wedges a smile before teasing

“Ndingamhlisi ngoku mama? Ingati uzimisele ukuhlupha uyambona”

“Hayi, hayi. Sumhlisa. Asinakho ukumshiya umntanomntu net so op die veld”

“Yhu! Enkosi mamam. Enkosi mamam, ungumzali.”

“Ndingumzali mntanam, ndinabantwana bayi,” lifting her hand and showing four fingers, *“Amadoda mathathu nentombi enye. Yerre my kind. Andiyazi bendibazalelani abantwana bangamadoda. Hulle doen niks, all drie is dronkies soos julle.”*

Mama speaks with authority telling her story, even the electrifying gqom from the speakers seems to have excused itself allowing Ma to speak. For the time Ma speaks there is a borrowed silence in the taxi, the men’s drunkenness and the women’s laughter lay on an unnatural pause.

“Mnye umntanam ongu mntana kum, ngulo uyintombi. Nangoku ndivela kuye eMissionvale eBhayi, unendlu la mtana RDP house en sy bly net by sy self en sy kinders. Jerre mara sy werk te veel. Jonga ngoku ndivela kuye bendiyoty naye uDisemba, kange nakhanye lamntana aphumle, uvuka everyday ayophengela andishiye nabazukulwa.”

The woman’s burden is equally shared in the hidden emotional bonds of all womanhood. Other women sigh releasing bouts of air under Ma’s wings to carry her spirit amidst her testimony to strangers. Other women offer a reason as solvent to help Ma digest the experience with her daughter.

“Akakwazi ukuphumla kaloku Mama umntana, izinto ziduru phandle apha”

“Shame umntanam, bekungaske afumane indoda ezamncedisa”

“Uzayifumanaphi Mama”

“Ndikhona mna, andinamntu”, a voice erupts from the backseat.

“Rha! Njengoba urongo ngoku uzamlungela njani umntanam?”

The men bellow in laughter like bulls with the butcher’s blade pressing on their throats.

In the taxi, we lick each other's wounds dry while placing our lives in the hands of the driver who juggles his attention between the road and the mini tavern behind him. Even if there was a lone beetle crossing the road, I wouldn't have noticed it. The road to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n has new meaning. I no longer travel with curiosity, but an awareness that somewhere deep in the cracks of the Eastern Cape is a town with people: people alive, people drunk, people with people problems and people with hope.

Finding Home

Approaching P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n, the mountain sleeps on the right casting a shadow that blankets the lives of the people. Its beauty pulls your gaze until the ashy brown walls of the RDP houses at its foot are invincible.

It prompts a “wow, that’s pretty”, at the back of my head. Then a storm of realization kicks in, I am in Pearston now, with only the stories of the women and the jokes of the men as a thoughtful after taste. I pass Mpumzi’s and drop off just after the bridge. Eric and Joyce’s house a few meters away. I’ve made up my mind that the warm plates of food and ascending staircase to my room were a privileged nest. Add to that the all-seeing eye of the Holy Ghost that patrolled the house at night and the ‘we don’t want girls’ policy in the house, had kept me estranged from the rest of the community. Eric and Joyce were such infamous believers in the Fire of Christ that any thought of worldly intent became flammable in their presence.

I wanted the township. I’d spoken with uMakazi on the phone over holidays and asked her to look for a house for me and she had found a beautiful greenhouse on top of the hill in Khanyiso Township looking down over Pearston. The house was next to a tavern KwaBesta and the December holiday craze had not yet ended in Pearston. That meant the gqom would still pump into the early hours of the morning every day until Pearstonites who were home to spend their annual December bonuses returned back to the cities where they work.

Mid-January, silence, at last. At least from the gqom and, drunk jeers of men and women speaking the language of the night. Then start the knocks from neighbours, knocks that shock when they announced their unexpected arrival with faces bright with kindness.

“Molo Rasta, uhlala pha ngoku?”

“Rasta khandiphe umcinga.”

“Rasta khandifakel’ irandi ndifuna ukuthenga ibeer enext door”

The knocks come with requests that vary in boldness. Some knocks frequent more than others, but one knock has come to stay. A tall and lanky walking canvass of prison tattoos that stings the eyes at first glance. It’s a distant knock, there-but-not-there, testing the ears. The man knocks with half his body inside. His boot, that has seen better days, eats its way in through the half-open kitchen door slowly making its way in like a python slithering between rocks. P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n pulls and tugs on one’s threshold. Something says to patiently accommodate the intruder as an overzealous, friendly neighbour but his green skin tells of years behind jail cells

and begs me to draw the line on how far he should enter. I hold the kitchen door with my right foot freeing my hands in case I need them - the man is startled. He leaps backwards in a swift and singular motion betrayed only by his age. Then stands at the door post straining his cataract possessed eyes to scan my face before taking his yellow hat off his head. Folding it. Swaying his eyes side to side wanting to grasp the best light to assist his sight, he speaks,

“Tyhini, kudala ndisiva ukuba kuhlala umntu apha. NdinguMonwabisi Yayi waseMantakwendeni mna. NdinguLeta isiduko, kusekhaya apha.”

The tension of seeing this lanky man towering at my door post dissolves at the mention of his clan name. OoLeta, ooMntakwenda, ooMbhozi those are my mother’s people and suddenly the stranger with skin like rotting meat, green from prison tattoos becomes my uncle.

“Ok malume, ndiyakuva. NdinguXolisa mna uNgubelanga ndinguDunjane isiduko, uNxasana, uZengele ndiyazalwa eMantakwendeni”

“Rerag man?” His hard face melting like iron in a furnace. *“Ndikhulela pha mna, yindlu katatam le. Qha mna ndihlala ngapha,”* pointing to the air at a distance neither here nor there, *“apha cang’ kwendlu.”*

My body, now at ease, flows like a stream towards my newfound uncle for clarity. An uncle found in the cracks of the Eastern Cape. I squeeze past the slightly open kitchen and follow him with curiosity to see his home. A small room built against the house with a different door but the same wall as the house I now call home. We are neighbours, housemates and family. The drama teacher and the tattooed man. Uncle came as a stranger with a knock. On my door, all knocks start with a tap on the wooden door then twist and turn into conversation before ending at the same place.

“...can I have...?”

“...khandiphe...”

“...gee ‘n...”

Uncle’s knock was no different from the dozen that came before, only his way is gentle like that of a master persuader.

“Mtshana ndihleli nomakhelwane apha nantsi indawo endihlala kuyo mna. Andizithandi ezindawo zingxolayo ubutywala bam ndibusela ngebhekile. Umqomboti uyathengiswa apha, ten ranti qha. Kandiphe man ndiyohlala nabantu endihlala nabo.”

In the yard next door, shaded under the tree, a group of men and women sit on tins and broken bricks arranged one on top of the other. They seem peaceful going about their drinking with their backs arched, arched maybe to be closer to their drinks that sit on the floor. I know that arch, I've seen it before. The trademark black man in the karoo arch. Uncle wants to go join those men and women who arch. As my hand slithers down my body and into my pocket, his cataract dimmed eyes glow briefly with hope that I'll do a magic trick and the hand that went into the pocket with nothing will pull out ten Rand. The second by second suspense of the magic trick about to happen is no secret between uncle and nephew. It is viewed by an eager audience arched under the tree. By the time I mistakenly pull out a twenty Rand note from my pocket, the brave amongst the men and women who are seated on bricks, are now on their feet shouting,

"Rasta khandiphe nam iR2!"

"Rasta ndiyashota kandifakhela iR5!"

"Rasta...give!"

"Rasta...ge!"

"Rasta...kandiphe!"

"Hey, futsek! Animazi nomazi uRasta senimcela imali! Julle is gemors maan!" One woman silences the rowdy audience still seated on a tin, *"Hlalani phantsi!"*

As the audience takes their seat, and she rises walking towards us. Without having to scan her face through his cataract, uncle's dimmed eyes shine a light that the two are betrayingly too familiar.

"Ngusisi endincuma naye ke lo."

"Oh... Molo sisi"

"Molo bhuti, igama lam nguMi"

"Ok sis 'Mi, ndinguXolisa mna"

"Kandiphe man Rasta into yokuhlala nomntu wam."

Uncle twists his facial muscles focusing the lens of his eyes to my hand. It dawns on me. He might have seen the big action of putting my hands in my pocket but he has not seen my magic trick, yet. Until Mi announces.

“Yitwenti randi!”

The trick of pulling money out my pocket also pulls a smile across Uncle’s face, who burps a humble. *“Yho!”* I put it in his hand and he immediately takes it to his left eye almost wearing it like an eye patch.

This is the home I’m in. From the all-seeing Holy Spirit to an uncle who can’t see a note without it being an inch to his face. A twist of events from having to tiptoe down the stairs and crossing the bridge to go to the tavern, to now having two taverns come to me and settled themselves as my neighbours. I was now sandwiched from two sides by alcohol outlets, the tavern and uncle’s favourite spot under the tree where they arch and drink homebrewed beer.

The strong thirst in uncle inspires him to lift his legs over the wire fence separating the two yards to join the others who cheer him along as he approaches until they are hushed by Mi’s, *“Futsek!”*

The fence stands askew as if impersonating a drunk man, telling of the many times it had to catch those who had one too many. The taverns represented two polar opposites whether they knew it or not. *KwaBesta* was for the hip and the fly who drank and took to the sky, and next door was for the falling who drank and took to the fence on their way down to the dusty ground. In between is the greenhouse, my home.

Molo, More, Hello

Sometimes when people go to *KwaBesta* they pass through my yard, right in front of my kitchen door. Some people even pause to look through the kitchen window. Some are shy when they pass by, but the majority make their intrusion known.

“Rasta!”

“Ahoy!”

“Jahman!”

“Molo Rasta”

“Molo bhuti”

“Bhut’ Xolisa!”

My yard is a highway and -

“Rasta!”

“Ahoy!”

“Jahman!”

“Molo Rasta”

“Molo bhuti”

Is the hooting of passing traffic, everything in Pearston comes as a shock. At the kitchen door, strangers become uncles and news of the family reunion spreads fast. In between the “Rasta!”, “Ahoy!”, “Jahman!” “Molo Rasta” *Molo bhuti*” is a “Leta!” “Mntakwenda!” and “mchana!” making my blood boil with belonging. The greetings come in many ways, thumbs up, waving arms and Black Power fists accompanied with “Amandla!”

On my way to and from the shops, it’s the duke box “**Molo, More, Hello**” in whatever order. In Khanyiso *oomama* don’t wait for me to ask, “*Unjani mama?*”

They are willing to share -

“Mntanam ndiyaphila”

“Mntanam andiphilanga”

“Mntanam ziinyawu”

“Mntanam yile swekile”

“Yho! Mntanam kubi.”

Compelling me to stand and humbly listen. You see a community better when you listen to its people’s stories. I’ve been *ubhuti weh drama* for most of my stay in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n and now I felt the change as I was becoming *umtshana waseMantakwendeni*. Every day or two, sometimes three times a day Monwabisi Yayi a.k.a Monza after a car he once owned a.k.a. Uncle would bring people to introduce to me *“Niyazalana. NguMntakowenu na lo? Uzalwa apha eMantakwendeni, uRasta.”* Uncle never showed up and or left without a request.

For every relative he brought he accompanied with *“Hayi man mtshana, kandithengele into yokutshaya.”* Cigarettes during the week and *ipayina* or *umqombhothi* on the weekend. He had a system. This way he made sure I felt like I’d met half the township, and with every introduction, a request. Most of the time I bailed him out, sometimes I couldn’t.

I haven’t seen uMakazi in a long time and I haven’t met the kids yet. Time for drama rehearsals to commence and pick up momentum on my sharing of the drama gospel. Walking through the township, in the hard rock gravel roads navigating the RDP house landmarks towards kwaMakazi and a sharp voice calls, *“Bhuti Xolisa! Molo”*.

“Molo ma.”

“NdingumakaMihlali”

The taxi ride has come to an end. Both I and uMama have arrived at our destination, *oko dibana nenyoka iphung’ umhluzi*. My blood boils and memories of the WhatsApp texts spill over to the present. *UmakaMihlali* has her back arched at the tap, her hands busying themselves with laundry as water fills the basin. She slowly rises putting her one hand on her waist as if to keep it in place in case it shifts if she rises too fast.

“Khazapha.”

Her eyes pierce my soul scanning it for my intentions in texting her daughter. This time was a long road coming, this meeting had played itself in my mind over and over again. *What will I say to umakaMihlali when we eventually meet? Will we laugh and acknowledge the communication pothole that caused us to crash or will she continue where she left and bite my head off?*

Walking to her I can feel every stone in the gravel road under my feet, imagining her scorn having to eventually meet the *pervert* that lures her daughter under the pretence of a drama teacher with each step. My thoughts are disturbed by a gentle smile on her face. Maybe her smile came because her assessment of the situation came before mine, or perhaps she saw some innocence in me. I imagine her weighing my character good against the bad. She doesn't know much about me though, how thorough can she be? If she gets it right, it will be at the same outcome results it takes to pass matric. Not a university entry but enough to proceed to an uneducated and unemployed matriculate status.

“Wethu heh, andakungxolisa efonini”

“Akhongxaki ndiya understand'a”

“Hayi wethu andingomntu ukwada mna qha kubi man phandle apha. Abantwana bethu babiwa kwaba WhatsApp.”

“E' injalo. Yiyo le nto ndisithi ndiya understand'a”

“Zange ndiyibone na le yokuba wawusithi uMihlali makahambe nomntu omdala. Ndingandwa ngumakazi kaMihlali esithi – Xoliswa uyathanda ukulwa. Awuboni lo bhuti uthi uMihlali makahambe nomntu omdala? Andayihleka. NguXoliswa igama lam ke.”

Drying her hands on the apron and offering her right hand, *“NdinguXolisa mna.”*

We shake hands, and I've made friends with *umama kaMihlali*. Shaken and blended by a bumpy taxi ride over communication potholes and text messages. As I'm about to carry on my way she says her goodbyes with a -

“Uhlala apha ke uMihlali, nam, ubokhe uzosibona.”

“Nzawukwenza njalo”

I carry on my way towards uMakazi and arrive to a busy home with many generations from uTamkhulu, the head of the home, to a dozen great grandchildren. Everyone is busying on under Tamkhulu's surveillance, who sits on the veranda with a jug of soft porridge next to him. If I were to greet every soul, I'd exhaust my tongue so I greet uTamkhulu as the head of the home and the rest receive my greetings through the blood that flows through the family. uMakazi is busy with some paperwork when I arrive, but she drops her work to give me her time. Her selflessness has made an impression on me. The many souls that occupy her home came at her call, then she blended her blood with theirs making them family. Children from

abusive homes now call KwaMakazi home. Soqaqamba Home. A place where they can get attention to fill the void of neglect left by their alcoholic histories. Tamkhulu seems to have made peace with the new great-grandchildren that he has inherited through his daughter's servant heart. When a cry shoots from one of the little people running about us at knee height, Tamkulu is the first to respond.

"Yintoni ngoku?"

A chorus responds

"Uwile!"

The cries and yells of the many children in Makazi's home compete with the drunken howls of teens and adults zigzagging past her house treating the road like a stage for their 18L rated show. The young audiences watch restlessly releasing embarrassed giggles at being entertained by the vulgarity. Their lips move involuntarily as they mimic the dialogue absorbing its influence until Makazi sends the drunken troop of performers away easing the suspense in the knee-high audiences who burst out in laughter as the jesters zigzag offstage.

"Ndiphila lo life ke X", she sighs.

She's a social director of stage shows of no particular script or cast. Performances randomly pop up around P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n and the whole community must improvise its theatre etiquette. The second half of the performance is reversed as neighboring women come out to watch the performance of Makazi and Rasta chatting on the veranda. They come like fashionable audiences to a prestigious theatre with their own rare sense of style. Women of age gaps as wide as the smile of a toddler. They are dressed in hot pants, short skirts, pyjamas and others only draped in cloth gather in front of us. Looking straight at us, the forth wall of this performance is broken and it's not clear who is watching who.

"Molweni Makazi", the women say.

"Futsek! Aniqhelanga ukundibulisa. Ngoku nindibona ndihleli nendoda, niyabulisa? Hambani phamb' kwendlu yasekhaya! Fokof!"

Makazi has no audience etiquette, at all. I appreciate the performance as a work of physical theatre – like a mime. Every movement of arm, neck and leg is calculated and precise. Definitely arousing an air of desire. Ever since I've moved to Khanyiso, I haven't seen Hope

and have found myself missing her “Hello!”, “Are you leaving?”, “Ok, hopefully, I’ll see you next time”

As the women walk offstage Makazi squeezes the words, “*Kubonwa wena sebezokumapha nje.*”

Watching the show end I wonder if Makazi is aware of my own performance as I act uninterested. Clearly not. She continues with her monologue telling me the story of her life. She is never short of motivation to share her life story. Offering advice from her experiences and spoilers of the next drama episodes to come.

“*Mtshanam kuboliwe apha*” commenting on plot and characters.

“*Uyambona lamntana unxibeshoti o’yellow?*” pointing at the performance about to end as the women turn the bend.

“*Ngumama walo mntana, oko ehleli apha kumalo mntana iveki yonke umamakhe woyiswa kuzomlanda oko enxila. Ngoku uzoma phamb’kwendlu yasekhaya ngenxa ebona indoda. Sis. Baziphethe kakubi man, bonke!*”

Again, Hope dies.

Encounters with Hope tend to result in Hope’s death, and for reasons unknown and not appreciated as yet, it’s the *Molo*, More and Hello from the elderly that’s full of life. As the knee-high people running around bare feet and snort in their nose I begin to wonder. What will be the result of their *Molo*, More and Hello be when they come of age? Will they ever be allowed to say ‘*Molo*’ to an opportunity and keep it alive?

As if reading my mind Makazi proposes a hunt for more ‘*Molo*, More and Hello’. The *Molo*, More and Hello to parents of the drama students. She knows them all by heart and stresses the importance that I know the parents too. More importantly, she stresses the need for the parents to see and know the face of this drama teacher who keeps their children enclosed in an RDP house in the afternoons. We embark on a mini-tour of Khanyiso Township, door to door collecting *Molo*, More and Hello. *This is Xolisa the drama guy* she introduces me to grandparents and families of the students.

Greetings are the master key to humanity’s closed realms. When the elderly follow on a ‘*how are you?*’ with a flowing monologue they are not only practicing an eroding patience but are sharing parts of themselves with us. Telling their life experiences and how they navigate

between embattled health issues and the present. It starts with a knock at the door then Makazi announces us with greetings,

“Molweni endlini.”

We do not wait for permission to enter, we offer our greetings like converts offer their faith as insurance to enter heaven then we push the door open. In some of the students’ homes, I feel like I’ve stepped into those RDP houses by the roadside. A feeling of walking into a hallway of emptiness furnished with memories. This is all the children have to call home, memories and an RDP house that’s as convenient as wearing an enamel plate as a hat on a rainy day to cover the head and nothing else. Today’s *Molo makhulu unjani* is not as romantic as that of yesterday. I am no longer meeting umakhulu at the roadside chatting with her face silhouetted by the sun. Today’s ‘*Molo*’ opened the doors on the forth wall swinging it off its hinges and exposing the monsters Pearston hides. Every day after rehearsal my drama students come and wrestle these monsters. A sense of appreciation polishes my eyes to see the fighters that they are. Here homes has the life of those RDP houses by the roadside just as I had imagined while seated in the Amarak driving over beetles. The old woman I imagined now sits in front of me on a rolled sponge looking through me and says,

“Ohh nguwe lo Bhuti ufundisa abantwana bethu?”

Her hands feel like they could break during our handshake, but I know her spirit must be strong to call this house a home. A house that seems to have made a bet with the houses in the neighborhood on which could keep its inhabitants in perpetual poverty the longest. All it took was a ‘*Molweni*’ and a nudge from Makazi and I was in. I saw the fragile frames the students call home.

Sinethemba

There is more traffic outside my house than normal. Up and down like lost ants before stopping suddenly, and chit-chatting through their antennas. Giggles belonging to almost a dozen girls surround my house. I wanted a house not an off-ramp into the highway. The sound of footsteps kneading the lawn outside irritates me, but the fact that I've established that they belong to little girls gives me the confidence to get up and go tell them where to get off.

Before I open my mouth, two heads and four eyes peep through the door and display innocent smiles as if they've just brushed their teeth with ashes from an acacia tree. Immediately my tension and irritation evaporate. I pull the door open and the high pitch squeal from the hinges alert the many others hiding of open sesame. Giggles announce their hideaway place and they appear smiles bright like flashlights during a police raid at night. Their smiles disarm me and I wonder if they will ever know the ocean of difference between my initial motive of irritation and fond action when opening the door. They pour in with curiosity to finally discover what's in my house. They've never been through my door until now. Their curiosity and shy levels can be measured by the distance they put between themselves and the door. The most curious are already in the passageway, the modest stand in the kitchen. Akhona stands at the door.

"Hayini nina."

"Yintoni Akhona?"

Akhona is really messing the game of 'I spy with my eye' the others are playing until they become direct.

"Bhuti uhlala wedwa apha?" echoes a voice from the passage.

Akhona's face is a rainbow of blushing colours. All she does is smile at the door hesitant to come inside as if there's a trespassing warning that only she can see. In her attempt to lure the others out she pushes a *"masambe siyo rehears'a."* Her suggestion is sound and I guide those with higher levels of curiosity from the passageway and out the door before locking the kitchen door behind me. On our way to the RDP the girls have a buoyant energy and fill the air with song. Every now and again, they scold each other for missing the high keys. To my ears, all is beautiful. With the RDP rehearsal room in sight, it's clear that the beautiful voices that surround me are only the escorting team sent to fetch me. Further ahead at the RDP is where the real gathering is. The drum is beating, and three neat lines of cute dancers move in harmony like

lion cubs exploring new hunting grounds. The beauty of their passion lifting up dust with every thumping foot in response to the drumbeat is a cloud full of rain.

The RDP house is small for all the dreams that call it home. Now the dreams have grown like an orchard after good rains. I've always known that the group of children I was dealing with was large. uMakazi always stressed "*baninzi Xi, qha usuke ungayazi baza xa kutheni okanye abazi xa kutheni na. Kodwa into endiyaziyo, once kuthwe kuyahanjwa bagcwala la ndlu ime ngeembambo.*"

I don't recall there being a trip. Unless uMakazi has planned one through Soqaqamba that I was not aware of. She is a woman of mystery uMakazi, and these children, after all, were still from her group. She has only lent them to me to teach what she can't, drama and in the process afford her needed time to rest. If only she did, rest. Now with me occupying the children during rehearsals she was up and down the whole of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n following up on child welfare cases.

I am about to take a page from her book. My mind in another world of its own thinking: *What am I going to do with these young dance and drama enthusiasts?*

"Bhuti ndikubonile wena estratwen' sam 'uhamba noMakazi." A brief silence as the world stops, in my mind at least.

"Nam bhuti ndikubonile ngokuya ubuhamba noMakazi."

The sentiment echoes moving from one child to the next like a spirit taking over their bodies and making them bare testimony "*Izolo ubhuti ebezile ekhaya.*" The drums have faded and the feet that beat the dust up from the earth are resting, planted to the ground like the sphinx enduring. Eyes pop and expose their white by the dozens.

"Heeh ubhuti wafika wathetha nomakhulu izolo"- rolls eyes.

Yesterday's '**Molo, More and Hello**' had cast a rippling spell in the community. That which was delivered to the elder had been passed like a baton to the young. As a result, the young had flooded the RDP house with eyes beaming with renewed trust. So bright is the shine in their eyes that the light beams fist the dark out of the RDP.

Not all light is welcome, no matter how useful it is, some light just irritates like the bright lights from oncoming traffic during a nighttime drive. The confines of the walls bounce the light back

and forth landing it in my eyes with the force of a healer thrusting a spear into the hide of a sacrificial bull. A thousand times the light bounces from the walls into my eyes penetrating to my soul causing discomfort at the realization of an ending romance.

Every day between Tuesday to Saturday some 40 plus bundles of hope, some in diapers knee-high and others in puberty like cocooned caterpillars growing into butterflies compressed in a house three leaps wide by eight. Many times I've stayed behind after rehearsals and measured the space by leaping wall to wall just to have an indication of the size of our rehearsal space. One, two, three I'd leap and again one, two, three...eight to the other side. Even the most decorated contortionist would be impressed to learn of the flexibility we employ everyday preparing for performances.

The time to wake up from my dream had come. I am not uMakazi and the fact that she had managed to keep the group going within such obvious poverty was her magic trick. I was a theatre graduate groomed in the broken classroom halls of debilitating schools in New Brighton where actors in Port Elizabeth rehearsed their productions. Even those broken classrooms were a paradise compared to the RDP and I wanted paradise back, the group deserved paradise. Their eyes told me so, they longed for an escape from the barred architecture of the RDP house.

Not sure by whose need it was informed by, mine or theirs, but a pulse beat within, a new idea formed. I had to approach the guy Bra Monza A.K.A., Uncle had introduced me to when he said,

“Niyazalana.”

Life's problems always come with their solutions, sometimes all you have to do is untangle yourself from the knot first to see the solution clearly. Memory was at the doorstep of creativity and rehearsals were halfway out the window. Fortunately, my insides are well hidden and none was able to overhear my soliloquy of concern for what's next. My thoughts drowned in the music of expanding vocal cords and drum beats. Today this will be the rehearsal - a rehearsal on how to be free, happy and without worry. Today my vocal wounds heal and I will join in singing and dancing the best way a worm knows how to.

Sinethemba! We have hope. Hope is alive as testament by the crèche up the road where the guy uncle introduced me to works as the principal. I have always swallowed rust down my ears whenever a stranger says *“siyazalana”*. Like with Uncle, *“siyazalana”* mostly meant *“you owe me beer or something of the sort.”* Today in the midst of human birds using song to fly their

hearts over the skies of limitation “*siyazalana*” changed meaning. For the first time in a long time “*siyazalana*” meant “he owes me something”. That something was the Sinethemba Crèche, my new rehearsal space. The drums beats, we sing and dance as I plot. How will I convince the principal, my cousin of only a few days I’ve known him, to give me a rehearsal space? I’m sure he’s seen the pain of the kids cramped in the RDP like cud in a sickly cow’s mouth. If he’s seen it and has still done nothing, then clearly he doesn’t care. If he hasn’t seen it as clear as it was, then he doubly doesn’t care.

Care he does. When I enter his office, his face beams enough to convince me that his heart is right to be working with little ones. I hardly have to explain my plight in depth, and he gives me a ‘yes’. A ‘yes’ that came too easily, unsettling my moral code. I was born with two hands. One for taking and the other for giving. As I take the nod to move drama rehearsals into Sinethemba Creche I make an offer to facilitate physical education classes in the crèche combining bits and of yoga here and there.

The exchange becomes more than a basis for a rehearsal space upgrade but a portal into the lives of the youngest citizens in Pearston, the bundles. Two girls tuck on my pants, I’ve seen them kwaMakazi and they make it known that we’ve met before.

“*Bhuti wam!*”

“*Bhuti wam!*”

They own me. Anchoring my being to their open arms as they call out “*Bhuti wam.*” The rest aren’t as sure about owning me so they call “*Bhuti*” while testing the grounds of a relationship by pulling my pants and slapping my legs investigating where *Bhuti* draws the line. *Bhuti* gives them a thumbs-up as he walks out the door leaving my stranger turned cousin Mntakwenda, The Principal, to deal with their calls of *Bhuti*. Tomorrow morning I’ll be dealing with them, a crèche full of bundles pulling, tugging and calling while testing my nerves.

The next meeting with the drama group I deliver the news to an amazed collective.

“*Bhuti bavumile nyani?*”

Let us see first if indeed we are not dreaming. The arrangement with the principal was to simply pitch and open the door he’d leave open and voila we’ll be in! The rehearsal space opens up in front of us evoking the kind of emotion a soul ought to feel when a new realm opens for it in the afterlife.

Hope! Hope, is in the air at Sinethemba Creche our new rehearsal space. Without instruction except for the pulse from the melodic heartbeats harbored in their chests they burst into song. This time I do not join. I am equally a drama facilitator and a watchman at Sinethemba Crèche. Having received the space out of blood relations and trust I have a duty to make sure nothing breaks or else we'll be back in the RDP with its walls muzzling our creative spirit but here we are free as a river diving at the waterfalls.

The crèche's furniture of bright little colorful stools and tables become props, and broomsticks become microphones as the cast tiptoes over the pink vinyl floor. A world of difference from the kneading they did on the RDP hard cement floor. Here they move not as if defying gravity but as if embracing flight like eaglets mastering the skies for the first time after many attempts. Today's lesson is simple, evoke an energy in them, contain it and let it be the basis of all rehearsals to come. Run! Laugh! Jump! Be free! Remember these emotions and reflect on them every time you come to rehearsals and create! Tomorrow I must pay back my debt to my cousin with a morning's physical education class for knee-high citizens.

When morning comes the principal passes by my house around 08:00 on his way to work. He says he is only coming to check if yesterday's rehearsal at the crèche went well. To me, his visit feels like the arrival of debt collectors at the door. I get the message loud in clear: *uLaqhasha ufuna ukhokwa.*

"Ndiza kujikela phaaa ngo 10:00"

I assure him while convincing myself.

It shouldn't be hard jumping and running with knee-high community members in the name of physical education. That should be physical enough for them. Time moves fast like a wet soap slipping out of the hand in a bathtub. Before I know it, it's almost 10:00 am, with only a couple of minutes to spare. No matter their size everyone deserves the respect of having their time honoured, whether one stands towering above shoulders or down there, below the knee cap. At this point, my cypher is about three quarters complete, time and energy invested but not entirely sure on how to navigate the rest of the journey. How did I get here? How far ahead do I still have to go? From students to parents and now the tiniest of all Pearston's people at the crèche, little people who charge at you like piranhas nibbling on an intruder in the river.

Principal tries his best at putting space between the crowd and me failing repeatedly until the physical lesson starts, jumping, jump and jump! Giggle, giggle, giggles. I never knew people

could have so much fun just jumping. Jumping and bumping into each other like atoms in the sun. They mimic every move dressed in broad smiles sirening their excitement and admiration. They constantly pull on my clothing as if it were a magical coat that would leave gold glitter on their hands. Within a few moments, the class is in competition inside the world of little people on who can manoeuvre the closest to uBhuti. I try to get the class to plank, but their young minds are geared on play. They turn my plank position into a bridge and start crawling underneath it as they giggle. Giggles that alert Principal of their naughty deeds and he comes to stand above us and finds the little people have turned me into a jungle gym. He puts on his strict mask and uses it to scare the little people. Trying to put space between me and them, and to line them up but the pulse within them is mightier than that in beetles crossing the road to their untimely death. Them the beetles, Principal the Amarok and I the dung, physical education probably - Mother Nature the reason.

Girl Power

A seed that germinates in the shadows grows the fastest as it races towards the sun's life force. Boys have always been the pride of homes and girls are there as family members on the fringe. From the back-breaking jobs of pick and shovel while adorned in orange overalls to the endless hours of field patrol on surrounding farms keeping an eye on goats and sheep in the sun. Then the pulling and pushing *op 'n boer maak a plan plaas* duties. The strength of a man is a degree in nature's university.

A man is the tomorrow of a boy. The girl? The girl walks with yesterdays in her like pearls inside an oyster clamped. Both girl and boy in Pearston are two-way traffic on a single lane. They bump, bruise and dent each other before reaching adulthood. Sometimes adults who've missed the turn to decency are in the suicidal carnage. The boys are not spared, but the girls? The girls? What of them?

Drama has no gender, but its participants do and sometimes the participants fight to participate. Especially the girls. They fight hard and they fight the most. They fight the eyes that objectify them as they shift shape between emotions and character. They fight the social norms that insist on being the way and the truth, and they fight amongst themselves. Perhaps the greatest fight they fight is the fight within. The fight against uncertainty. A fight to build anew. A fight to destroy the old. A fight to be.

The gates to drama club are always open against my discretion. If I want to build a solid team of drama students, then at some point I will have to instil in them focus and discipline. But drama is too new an activity in town. Almost every week new faces pitch with freshly dug out confidence from the dungeons of adolescence daring to take on drama. If I turn them back, I never know what talent I've lost. If I take them in and they decide to leave, they leave with the experience of being bitten by drama. Still, the traffic of new recruits coming in and out of the group does offset our development pace and frustrates the members whose roots have started breaking the concrete through which they grow.

The seeds that were sown have geminated into soft trees of boys and girls still green at the trunk, but to a man who is not used to planting. Even the strange little peach tree with its green leaves is confused for weeds and is pulled out. Drama the new social development kid in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n had made an enemy of itself. The bulging attendance it attracted had planted greens

of envy in the same community garden with the strange peach tree. Soccer clubs had started to starve as young boy talents moved from the field to Sinethemba. Until they stopped going for soccer practice altogether. Then by a chance encounter with the boys crossing the thirsty and dusty river with soccer boots around their necks I ask:

“Kutheni ningasayi eprektizini?”

The answer came,

“UCoach uthi masiyeke la drama, singamakhwenkwe into esiyiyo.”

One of the boys was not as reserved in sharing the coach’s commentary, *“Bhuti uCoach uthe masiyiyeke idrama okanye sizobaziimofi.”*

And like that, I was cast back into 1653 when drama and gay were still joined in marriage by Shakespeare’s pen. To do or not to do? Is the question I ask myself when I feel the urge to say, *“uCoach wenu uthetha ububhanxa!”*

I settle for ‘not to do’.

Not all the boys have yielded to Coach’s misguided advice. Two are still hanging around like ripening apples on a tree. Qokobane and Stena, they endure poison ivy every day in the name of rehearsals.

“Bhuti asiwafuni amakhwenkwe apha.”

“Yindawo yamantombi lena bhuti, amakhwenkwe mawaye ebaleni.”

“Bhuti apha ePearston amantombi awahoywangwa, amakhwenkwe anesoccer thina asinayo nenetball. Kuyaqala ubakho into yamantombi, that’s why singawafuni amakhwenkwe apha.”

The admirably cute words of brewing activism are betrayed by the rock hard masks of seriousness on their faces. It is clear deep down there’s more to the storyline than the simplified *soccer is for boys and drama is for girls*’ pretext. Stena and Qokobane have already made such a sacrifice to be here with us. I’ve become a fan of the boys and can’t find it in me to chase them out based on a majority vote making drama an Oriana for girls only. Qokobane is always the first for rehearsal and afterwards he must run home and attend to his family’s donkeys. Sometimes when I’m walking with him the community’s children tease him of his donkeys, he

would simply bite his nails obviously irritated and hold his nerve. Stena, a young man becoming, amazes me with his sense of responsibility. Only in Grade9, he attends school Monday to Thursday and comes to rehearsals in the afternoon. Friday mornings he takes a ride at the back of the bakkies that patrol Pearston's communities abducting the community's muscle to go work on the farms part-time and brings them back on Sunday. Every weekend Stena does this to earn extra cash to support his family. I love both boys with great concern, fear and hope that they escape the spiralling trend of boy to man as farm labourer.

My sentiments are not shared by the girls. They want the boys out! We have rules in the group - *majority rules* - and in the spirit of custodianship, I had relented all powers over the group's governorship to the group. We all agreed, I was only to guide and advise but at all times leave the final word to the group. The group's constitution embedded as an imaginary document in our heads had come to bite me. The girls had grown fangs and claws and had become monsters.

Determined not to be defeated by their games of ritual territorial markings I would rise to portray my dominance like a silver back pounding its chest and letting its cardiovascular drum beat reverberate through the jungle. I employ emotional wrenches to ring sense into their minds.

"Guys idrama ngeyomntu wonke ofuna ukuyifunda"

"Hayi bhuti!"

"Ewe! Wonke umntu wamkelekile apha."

"Not uQokobane noStena bhuti!"

"Batheni bona?"

"Hayi bhuti, asizokwazi ukuyithetha."

"Ngoba?"

"Hayi bhuti!"

"Jonga andizobagxotha abanye abantwana for into endingayaziyo"

"Bhuti bayasibhantsa ooQokobane eskolweni."

Male shadows. I've seen them with my own eyes around the community. Gently and harshly, men would have their will with women as if handling a lamb. On weekends it's a norm to hear the screams of women and the shouting of men followed by the sound of knob kiris against ox hide. Somehow P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n normalizes that. As soon as the sunsets and the choirs of drunks howl their song, it is sure to be followed by the screams of women expressing agony. Boys have already started mimicking the ways of their fathers.

It's almost too easy to fall in the trap, to be haunted by possibilities that soon the girls too will relive the horrors of their mothers. Maybe drama has an effect in humanity deeper than the pompous occupying of space on stage, maybe deep down in the girls a seed has been planted, that 'we will not be fish in the dry rivers of Pearston, our existence will be counted'.

The seed took its time to sprout but it has always been there. Even while we still rehearsed at the high school on our way home it was not strange to see the boys chasing girls and girls chasing boys. Giggle, giggle, giggle accompanied the game as they scatted all over the street, chasing and zig zagging through the plain.

Back then two older girls who were out of school would sit in during rehearsals with admiration as the students took on and off different characters. One of the girls in drama was actually their younger sister, Britney. Just after rehearsals, the students ran amok, as usual, dashing out of the classroom door to run circles around the school then out the school's gate. Britney's sisters were strolling next to me while Britney and Stena had a game of cat and mouse at the distance. The mouse had been caught by the tomcat, Britney wriggling herself out of Stena's grip who released her after slapping her behind. Britney's wrath was released. I froze. She turned into a ball of fury.

The two sisters who were walking besides me, screamed,

"Suka, su actor apha! Ubuyifuna la nto!"

Brown-skinned Britney turned red as an agitated eye poked during a violation retaliated at her sisters. *"Njani nithi bendiyifuna?"* For some time the assault of the slap on her rear had evaporated in the accusations that she wanted it and her standing her ground.

"Ayikho le nto yenzwa nguStena!"

"Uright uStena, ubuyifuna lo nto."

“Andiyithandi le nto ‘yenziwa nguStena mna!”

Stena stood alone at the distance like a broken streetlight in a dark alley. Slowly he became omitted from the scene with every heated word exchange between the sisters.

Deep in the girls, a voice had been maturing and now its time had arrived.

“Bhuti amakhwenkwe aziphethe kakubi and thina asiyithandi indlele abaqhuba ngayo.”

“Yho bhuti ukuba unobona izinto ezenzeka eskolweni, yoh!”

“Kodwa bhuti irongo into yokuba amakhwenkwe mawabambe imizimba yethu ngaphandle kovumelana”

“Bayasifostela Bhuti”

“Sometimes basibamba phamb’ komisi.”

“And asiyithandi lo nto.”

“That’s why singabafuni apha kwidrama nie, yindawo yethu le. Sifila safe apha bhuti.”

Their voices gather to speak one truth like a light drizzle with no harm. Amplified as it hits the iron zinc roof causing an echo and an impression of a storm outside. Will the heads under the iron zinc have the patience to allow the droplet voices to gather? Or will they wish it away like people cursing the gathering of rain clouds?

There is no knowing for sure if the seed of womanhood in the girls will ever see light. All they have is themselves as the seed, the earth, the sun and the rain of the women they want to be. For now, their words perfume the air like the smell of dry earth quenching its thirst on light rain.

Ever rehearsal the energy at Sinethemba is charged with animated girl power finding its feet like binging on Power Puffs Girls. The girls’ confidence has definitely risen with the granting of space. Having the rehearsal room all to themselves. Here they are girls, but when they go home they are trainee mothers all weekend, looking after siblings until Monday returns sobriety into P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n homes again.

Arched Backs

Pearston's grey streets are quiet most of the month like a class of Grade 1's told to put one hand over their heads and a finger to cover their mouths. It's a silence of instruction a response to command, but the fidgeting rubbing buttocks on desks and pent up tension waiting to explode is in the atmosphere. On a good day, you can stand at the edge of one street and look straight through it, not a single soul in sight. Such days are weekdays Monday to Thursday, and you have to choose the right time too, when the students are at school, the township is silent. A ghost town.

On Fridays, the right Fridays, month-end or every second fortnight Friday the town comes to life. Speakers choke at high volume and cough out the latest gqom as the women stand at their doorposts like lovers eager to catch a glimpse of the return of their lovers. They look towards the R63 road that cuts through Pearston like a butcher stewing lumps of meat. They watch to see those 4x4 bakkies that bring loved ones from the farms. This has been a routine well-rehearsed over time. They can even identify the speeding bakkies racing at the distance looking over the field and graveyard despite the thorn bushes that obscure vision. They know each, and every bakkie, the same way seasoned shepherds know their flock from the other.

"Hier kom..." calling the farmer's name.

"Abantu bethu!"

A group of women rejoice while the other group look on.

"Yerre ufika nini utakaVuvu?"

"Akhazofika ngoku, uyalazi lisile ela bhulu alisebenzelayo utakaVuvu mos lingabazisa ebusuku somer"

"Hayi! Akasoze. If bafika ebusuku then akasoze abuyele kwela plasi umntu wam."

For the first time, laughter cracks the tension of the morning. Laughter enabled by the sighting of the bakkie that has now made its way into Khanyiso with a load of precious cargo. Humans and the fathers of the fatherless homes in the township. The cargo is loaded at the back with backs arched and as the bakkie speeds zigzagging through the townships like a fly trapped by the window banging its head against the glass. The men rattle and shake, their heads pressed against their knees, folded like bails of wool ready for shipment.

Again, another bakkie is seen and more women join the excitement.

“Nabo! Bafikile abantu bethu ne mali zabo. Kuzoba mandi ibeyi Krestmesi namhlanje!”

“Thiza bafazi nitshixele abantu benu, kunxanyiwe phandle apha”

“Izizitshixo zendlu zenu zilapha kum, noba ninga tshixa ebusuku ndizofika ndivule-e!”

The women call each other from the doorways of their homes. As life in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n prepares itself to welcome the breadwinners. A South African Breweries truck exists the township after delivering its love dissolving liquid. Oom Duks, the local courier man, who gets tasked with petty chores by locals – sent here, there and everywhere around P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n at a fee to satisfy only his chimney cravings for cigarette smoke. Is pushing a wheelbarrow filled with the cheapest white wine affectionately known as fish oil, Karoo Stein, sold in 5litre gallons from the local bottle store and delivers it to homes turned drinking halls in the weekend.

Oom Duks pushes the wheelbarrow with the grace of tusker bobbing its ivory about. A group of young men stand undetected but for a cloud of marijuana smoke, which I mistook for burning rubbish and grass from a distance. They come out of their hiding like poachers thirsty at the thought of liquid ivory in wine gallons. They fire shots with their words making known their desire to have what Oom Duks has. Oom Duks though ever willing to make a trip to the shop for anyone willing to pay him with cigarettes does have a weakness for the *high* offered by the grassy weed smoked in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n.

“Oom Duks, izotshaya!”

They taunt him with the joint held up in the air.

“Makwedini anizazi izinto zodlala zibhalwe ‘Made in China’?” Oom Duks

“Hayi suthi makwedini kuthi kaloku!”

“Ningamakwedini!”

“Ons is jou bhuti!”

“Julle praat, julle praat... Nithetha ububhanxa!”

The young men are not men by cultural or social standards. They are a group of high school dropouts who sit and circle the drug house for sun and shade through the day. They are men purely by the misguided bravado of having seen the police and juvenile detention cells one too many times.

“Ina nantsi izol Oom Duks, ushiye noba iy’wan i5L!”

The tusker continues with his graceful effort pushing the wheelbarrow filled with wine.

“*Awufuni Oom Duks?*”

“*Jonga! Amajita ayafika namhlanje, sizobane mali yothenga intsango asizokutshayisa!*” They continue taunting him strike a nerve, the bullet that dropped the elephant bull, and Oom Duks slows only for a fraction of a second before the women still at the doorposts, who know *Oom Duks* too well interfere,

“*Hey! Yekani uDukengceni nina!*”

“*Hamba Oom Duks uthunyiwe*”

“*Tshini, yazi uyama!*”

“*Ebengasoze abanike kodwa uOom Duks abantwana, kuleyo indawo ndimthembile*”

“*Uzawubhathalwa kula ndaw’ athunye kuyo, azithengele owakhe umya*”

The women rest their focus from scanning the R63 for bakkies that carry men with pockets bulging on financial erections. For a while, they concern their anxiety with the immediate but they are not the only ones waiting for the men. Some neighbourhood rogues are equally participating in their game of wait. As the bakkie that tears up the dust from Pearston’s crotch it not only bring fathers with them. They also bring the financial reinforcement needed to feed the habits of the local alcoholics and addicts. The bakkie that was spotted earlier sprints down Mbulelo Nzo Street and comes to a sudden stop in the middle on the road and the last load of men burst out like a foam from a cola shaken and opened releasing bubbling gas. Everything about the men, their jumping off the bakkie and their clearing the way giving the Boer the road to speed off seems more like a race against the farmer’s impatience rather than *their* arrival. Once the men have entered their homes passing through their women at the doorposts, the doors close behind them.

“*Yerre uphi utakaVuvu?*”

“*Bayeza, sonke silindile.*”

“*Yerre ela bhulu lakhe linento eninzi kanjani, akaphindi abuyele pha. Kuzofuneka aphangele apha ngoku.*”

“*Nantso, nantso iven yabo!*”

“Yerre! Nantsi! Vuvu! Vuvu! Biza uSphelele nanku utata wenu, izani! Yerre bantwana ndini bendithe hlambani kanizijonge.”

Bakkie after bakkie the arched backs arrive. Mostly men but among them are women too. Vuvu and Sphelele are borrowed their father by the farmer for the weekend. Only for a brief moment, the women get to close the door of their homes locking themselves in with their lovers once again.

As for the women that arched their backs, they return to homes cracked by the absence of mothers and unlike the men that have returned to relax, they return to fill the cracks and hold the roof of homes where everything stops during a mother’s absence. I don’t know what happens at the farms or how the wind beats at the back of the bakkie after two full weeks on the field but it’s clear that whatever it is, it sure hits harder for the women; much, much harder.

Once the doors that closed behind lovers are opened they stay open. For the weekend no one cares to close them again like an empty beer bottle with its cap tossed out.

It is the weekend a time to do away with bending at the farms and arching the back behind a bakkie. The brewery’s truck and *Oom Duks* have done their part delivering the only liquid that flows through the rivers of Pearston. Down throats and out as piss. At first man and woman drink together as lovers. Enjoying catch-up time unpacking the tales of the week then woman goes to the other women and the man goes to the men. Inside the houses or at the back enjoying the warm shade, they only tell tales of life accompanied by laughter. They socialize with gqom spitting speakers and drinking troops that go up and down the tavern and drinking spot to get more refills. Each group has its own character, there’s the group that goes to KwaBesta and parties all night. Then there’s the group that sits under the tree next door, they don’t need any gqom. They swallowed their speakers as they were downing wine and *umqombhoti*, as the liquid twists and turns in their bowls it brews music and song.

When the arched backs arrive in Pearston they carry with them a hypnotic spell putting people in a trans that makes them zigzag when they walk. To some, the spell is strong like a can of Doom emptied on cockroaches until they pass out in drunken stupors at the side of the road. Knee-high citizens call out to their older siblings.

“Izothatha umama unxilile, nankuya estratweni.”

The child watches as its mother is skipped over by cats, dogs and Friday evening churchgoers. Another army of a drunk battalion breaks the horizon from the dry river’s side firing shots of

friendly vulgar to announce their coming. It's the scoundrels that had teased Oom Duks hours earlier prophesying on the arrival of their financial prowess. Their financial reinforcements must have arrived as they carry boxes of wine on their shoulders. The corner becomes a picturesque scene from one of those war in Africa Hollywood movies. When the Blue Hats meet the local rebels at a crime scene, but the laws of war play out that none shall fire unless fired at. Still, the hostility is in the air. The churchgoers - the Blue Hats, the drunk scoundrels - the rebels and the mother passed out in a stupor - the crime scene. It is the rebels that help not the drama teacher participating in the scene as a journalist assured of a newsroom award. One by one, the rebels lift the dead drunk mother by her limbs and in a convoy of warmongers take her to her house.

Life continues with the arched backs in town being the plot. The wines and scars of the dorp system evoked. It's the drunken howls, the choking speakers coughing out gqom and the cries at night accompanied by blows of abuse between man and woman. Daddy is back from the farms. Daddy gave mommy money for groceries and they drank the rest.

Some of the men with arched backs are fathers of the students in my drama class. The group points at them and say, "That's so and so's father".

So and so, responds, "*Hayi, hayi. Ayingo tata wam lowa, andimazi la mntu mna. Utata wam nguTa Spido*".

For a second we all laugh the pain away, but a second of time does not stand on it's own in P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n. It bleeds into the next creating long moments in time that never pass. When the arched backs have stayed their due at home and in the taverns having drunk the load delivered by the brewery truck dry. Their erected wallets turned soft, they stand against street signposts or sit on their stoeps and soak up the sun. Whomever passes them is met with.

"Rasta *khathi* ifive *randi*. *Ndishota nge-beer* my brother. *Liyandinyisa ibhabhalasi*."

Today the rebels are out of firing rounds, their verbal shots silenced and the homes whose doors have been open since the first emptied beer bottle lost its cap are nauseated. Eager to vomit out the arched back it had swallowed like a slim model vomiting out tripe.

Soon the bakkies will be zigzagging the township once again like hyenas scavenging for scraps. The bakkie eats these men who have become drunken scraps, scraps of fathers, scraps of men. When humans collide with poverty, they are written off. No matter how much social grants the

government pays as insurance. There are not many panel beaters that can resuscitate these humans after being in the accident called Pearston, at such force.

The hyenas have arrived. Dust lifts up behind them as they speed past the homes to corners designated as pick up points. They howl PEEP PEEP as they hoot and once they get to the corner they fill themselves in one bite and the men are at the back, arched back once again ready for the bumpy ride on gravel roads back to the farm. Knee-high people chase after the bakkies as it whisks their fathers away.

“Bhabhayi tata!”

“Bhabhayi bhuti!”

“Undiphathele ilekese!”

Even with their backs bent the men are heroes. They are hope, financial reinforcement and they are role models.

I'm Leaving

I do not want to be here.

I don't hate it, but I don't like it here anymore. I've done my time. I fell in love too soon and now the romance has died. I've circled P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n to Pearston to P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n and back to Pearston again. People live here, some people leave here and I have lived my part. Now it's time to leave.

By now I know where every line on the street pavements is. A sad tale of boredom, counting my steps to the shops and back. My door is open looking towards that mountain on the other side. On it the moon shines as if burning to spill more secrets on this town. I will never hear what the moon has to say. I only admire its glow as it lights up the nappy head of the mountain. I've been standing at this door now for... an hour – or two. Watching bats circle the sky. So far gone in my mind, I don't even feel the sting of mosquitoes.

There are boxes of yellow glowing from the lit windows in the sea of RDP houses. I get to see the bat's silhouettes when they fly close to the lit windows before turning away. I imagine the scenes they see through the windows flying so close and undetected. Do they see the children inside doing homework or maybe their mothers on their knees praying their children escape the life cycle of P-e-a-R-s-t-o-n? The bats don't look like they want to stay around Pearston for long. Maybe they are just passing by, seeking their own greener pastures. They own the dark skies and pity the dirt we call land – this town. Maybe the wind blew them unwillingly and herded nature's winged livestock into the kraals of the sky above. This town. My prison. A hunters and farmers paradise. I don't have a life here! I just do what I must do. Like everybody else. I watch the sun go up and I watch it go down and maybe the moon on some nights. In the morning I wake up to the neighbours' after honeymoon hangovers in the wee hours and greet them with Pearston's sleepy daily routine until I fall asleep again.

Only zombies live here. Even the birds mock us. They fly without flapping their wings gliding the sky. Mother Nature favoured the birds during creation. She gave them wings unlike the skinny legs she gave to beetles. Then she made them nest high up in the trees and not in mushy dung. Fortune that's all it is. Good fortune. Good fortune made Port Elizabeth the tree top for birds to nest and Pearston the dung for beetles. The wide skies above remind me of my wings. Tomorrow I shall be an eagle and fly, fly higher than I ever did. Then I will look down on the green pastures and when I see a pile of dung I will take a deep breath and hope Pearston gets a hard working beetle to roll and mould it.

From the sky, the land is like a soldier's flesh fresh from battle, scarred with fences. There behind the fence inside the farms the arched backs surrender their muscle and dreams to till the lands and herd the flocks of *Baas*. While dung piles at the door posts of their homes in their absence. Knee-high citizens are in class, but the teacher is absent. Gone like a chunk of flesh ripped off by a hyena.

The lands behind the fence with hills curvy and lush inducing a "wow, that's pretty" - that's where arched backs are bent and then spit out to the township. Where farmers and hunters play their games during hunting season and win. Drama students fight to be children and cross their fingers for fortune to give them wings. Any wings even those of a sparrow will do *just let me fly*. As long as they fly.

When the bakkies speed in the township the fumes out their exhausts choke the dreams planted on the concrete and in RDP houses. It's the roar of their hungry engines that rule tomorrow. It's become sickening like a sane person trapped in an asylum for three years slowly turning coo, coo. Like the boys that run after the bakkies as if chasing their father's prized oxen.

It's come to this an ending that could never be avoided despite it being delayed. No amount of pleading from the mothers.

"Bhuti ungabashiyi abantwana bethu please".

Or the children's yanking on my conscious,

"Bendiyazi mna uBhuti uzasishiya imini inye."

"Hayi wethu akhonto intsha, kudala abantu befika ePearston baphinde bahambe..."

"Yhu heeh nifuna uBhuti ahlela apha kude kube nini? Hamba Bhuti, nam bendizohamba ukuba bendinguwe" - *Rolls eyes.*

Deep breath *"Umm, ungasilibali Bhuti, umane ufika uzosibona nje."*

THE END