

Flying Cows & Other Traumas

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

Rhodes University

by

Philisiwe Twijnstra

04 November 2019

| | |
|---|----|
| Table of Contents | |
| Flying Cows & Other Traumas | 0 |
| Thesis Abstract | 2 |
| Wounding Skins. | 3 |
| Every house has a bucket of water | 4 |
| Jack's Whistle | 6 |
| Shading Moons. | 9 |
| The stained yellow dress | 10 |
| Introductions | 12 |
| Garissa and the gold moon | 17 |
| Snowing Bones. | 20 |
| The first time I drank beer I was six years old. | 21 |
| We are going to have the best funeral | 29 |
| The girl named dis/rup/tion | 33 |
| The car remote | 39 |
| When Mama Chiusali took a taxi... | 45 |
| Hallucinating Vaginas. | 51 |
| Lust by Rina | 52 |
| The alien prostitute | 59 |
| Ketata the first Witch | 65 |
| Erupting Daggers. | 72 |
| Bury me, don't bury my face. | 73 |
| MoonEyed Maiden | 77 |
| Sorana | 83 |

Thesis Abstract

My thesis combines short stories and flash fiction and a short novella collection. Working between reality and fantasy. The collection both engage the strangeness of magic in everyday life and explore other worlds. The stories uses different points of view to highlight the impossibility of a single stable reality. The writing is heavily influenced by Amos Tutuola (**The Palm-Wine Drunkard**) for his big imagination and how he draws from Yoruba folklore and mixes myth to fiction. Mica Dean Hicks (**Electricity and other dreams**) he writes with simplicity and his settings always believable yet with one sentence everything becomes a different world of seen and unseen. Margarita Karapanou (**Kassandra and the wolf**) The tone of the book captured me, how she balances heavy social theme around a young girl, the tone changes from chapter to chapter - from surreal to hallucinatory to mythic to something in between all these modes. She writes rape, but not once has she mentioned rape, yet she is writing about rape. Some books that revolutionized the way I see stories are (**Kintu**) written by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi and (**Homegoing**) by Yaa Gyasi. They both draw from histories yet contemporize their stories. Which my thesis intends to do that in stories such 'MoonEyed Maiden' and Sorana.

Flying Cows & Other Traumas is an exploration of female body, when the sacredness of the female body is dehumanized by social injustices. Each story is a stand alone; the structure holds the through-line of the collection which conditions the complexities, the rawness and bluntness of how imbalance our society is. When the body is tainted with unfairness and powered down-how does one come up from that?

The collection deals with poverty, sexual assault, systemic injustice, and sexism and some stories draw from personal experiences and fears. The female body is used as a hostage of shame and commodity and the female protagonists in 'Flying Cows & Other Traumas sharpen their own stuff and shields to face their own injustices through blurring lines of mundanity and fantastical with experimental tone.

Wounding Skins.

Every house has a bucket of water

The road to the river was too far for Nombewu to carry three buckets alone. Going there she had no problem but coming back was the issue. She always thought she should share the work with her brother Nqobani. It was not the steep hills or the snake pit shrubs that frightened her. She just didn't want to disturb what might have been resting inside the bushes. Nombewu had tried to explain that to her granny, but it landed on deaf ears – so she had to wake up before the owl rested on the tree.

Windows must replace the mirrors in the house, the floor must replace the roof. She would sit on the stoop and wonder how these proverbs would help her to become a woman. She wondered whether it meant that Ubhuti Bhekokwakhe would be a man, because he walked with his hand deeply in his left pocket pants, head bent, shoulders dropped, knees almost touching, whistling some old tune his gaze following line of grazing cows. Would that make him a man?

There was a ceremony being held a few blocks from Nombewu's house as she made her way to the river that morning. The girls from that house had blossomed and become sprouting daisies and leafing lilies. She was given strict instructions to never place her feet in that house. But something pulled her to it - could it be the flower garden or their chickens that seemed to look fatter with every blink? She walked past the big white tent where the ceremony was taking place. Their yard was filled with people, everyone pointed at her and quickly looked away. She hurried home.

'Nqobani!' she shouted.

Nombewu's voice was swallowed in the mist of the chaos. She put the buckets next to the gate and walked towards Nqobani. She knew that she was not supposed to be in that house which was why she planned to remind her brother. When she walked in, heads of strangers turned and gasped.

She could make out who was who. The crippled couple was there. The other one on the walking sticks and the blind one stood with blind walking stick. The Pantsula boys from the corner house where there with a bowl of sorghum beer. The ladies that only wore two-piece outfits were also there. The old lady that sold warm soup closer to that rail way station cocooned herself amongst everyone. Nombewu was amazed that every person that seemed to cause problems easily was invited.

'*Hawu wenzani lana?*' she asked him, ignoring the stares some tramped back and started murmuring 'Ufunani lana.' 'Akahambe' 'Hayibona!' Nqobani stood up.

'Nombewu, leave.'

'Why?'

'You not suppose to be here!'

'So, do you.' Nqobani stepped closer to Nombewu with bloodied hands touched her shoulder

'You are not to be here little sister.'

'What're you doing?'

'I am slaughtering a cow.'

'I see that. But Gogo said *singalibhadi lana.*' She whispered the last part.

'Nombewu, please go.'

'But Gogo said ...'

'Gogo said you the one who is not supposed to be here Nombewu!'

Nombewu held her breath for a few seconds.

‘Come on, let’s go!!!’

Nqobani grabbed Nombewu’s hand. Nombewu hadn’t realised her hands had turned into frozen snow. Nombewu’s lips turned white. The coldness was slowly finding its way to the bones of her spine, to the tail of her bone. Her pupils changed to the colour of the sun. Nombewu glanced around, unfamiliar faces had crowded through the window and fences goggling at her.

‘Come let’s go, now! Njenga manje!’

It was as if the strength of *Samson* had landed on Nombewu’s hands. She shoved Nqobani to the ground, and everyone grew silent. The music stopped. The cows stopped mowing. Nombewu didn’t believe the strength she had. Nombewu turned and ran. The earth opened up, dust of wet sand spewed out from the ground and turned everyone around into granules of frozen salt... except her.

Jack's Whistle

I knew that whistle – that *Baby phum' endlini, ngizokuchecka kinder* whistle. I wanted to stop breathing. To put my hand inside my throat and squeeze the air out of lungs gently because I felt that in seconds this life would not be mine anyway. I have been in this house for seventeen years no whistles had ever disturbed our dinner conversations. Until today. Until now. Until Jack's whistle.

I was seventeen years old and I had never been kissed, but that was soon to change.

Jack was at the gate. He was shorter than most boys, and I was taller than most girls. We seemed to match. He was skilled in soccer and I was skilled in netball. I saw him in his uniform dribbling the soccer ball. I had just finished my netball practice. I pretended as if I didn't see him, but the truth was I liked looking at him, especially when he was not looking at me. And one day I saw he was looking my way; the way he looked at me, made my elbows dislocate and my whole body felt like pieces of bones on the floor. Our eyes met, followed by a smile.

So now, he was at the gate.

We just finished eating dinner, and everyone was full and happy and laughing and clasping hands. I heard the whistle again. Jack was outside the gate. My breathing quickened, my tummy was in knots, my mouth was dry. I grabbed the table cloth. I let go of it and grabbed it again. My hands were trembling, I shifted on the chair. My grandfather was talking but I couldn't hear a word he was saying but I could hear the whistle clearly as it became louder and longer.

Jack... Why? Eish!

Jack knew he was not supposed to come to my house, that was the first thing we established the time *ngimvuma*. Do you know what my grandfather would do when he found out I was *boyfriending*?

Jack whistled again and again and again; even Pikachu had woken up from meowing in his dreams. And, mind you, he was the laziest cat in the township. That nasal high pitch whistle weaved and settled in the kitchen pots. All of the sudden my skin shivered, and there was mucus at the back of my throat. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed how the whistle's call had pierced right through to the kitchen...

Shit! Ngafa induku!

That might just happen, if I don't do something. When my grandfather found out that my aunt, who was twenty-five years older than me, was pregnant out of wedlock, he made my aunt run around the township in only her petticoat and bra.

What would he do to me? When he found out that I was on my way to let love turn me upside down and inside out ... probably he would burn me on the kitchen stove. I stood up and quickly took the plates off the table. I collected all the bones and the leftovers on the plates, I dashed outside. All this seemed was unusual on my part because I never cleaned up dishes, I always had to be asked to do so. I was lazy as Pikachu. I hurriedly threw the leftovers at my neighbours. I went to him, to Jack. I didn't see that my grandfather had following me. I think he wanted to smoke, but I didn't see him.

He waited at the gate with his hands in his back pockets. He leaned all his weight on his left leg. I walked towards him. A magnet of some sort pulled me to him, it could have been his watermelon bubble gum. Disbelief circled inside me liked fire circling the matchstick.

Jack could have had any girl he wanted and stood at their gate, but he had chosen me. The girl with layers of brown skin, a front bite, broad shoulders, with hairs on her skin. He smelt like salt and vinegar and I felt like a big fried potato. My skin rippled in little rains, but I neared him, I suddenly felt cold. I thought I would find the words to at least say hello, but it turned out I coughed before I said hello. In fact, I didn't get to say hello.

'What are you doing *lana*?'

'Hello *swidihathi*.' *The nerve of this black man...*

He moved towards me, ready to hold me tight in his arms, but then it hit me; a few minutes ago, during dinner I had stuffed my face with a mouthful of cow intestines, the smell would quickly end this night masquerade. So, I thought I should end this, before it ended on his terms because it would be like falling on the ground without any panties on.

'*Uzongishayisa ngomkhulu wami, ufuna ngishaywe yini?*'

'*Ugrand?*'

'I was eating... *mala mogodu*. Now I have to do dishes. I must go before ...'

He was close enough and everything inside me had mercy on him, the planets inside me planned to convince him to stroke what was ready to be touched after seventeen years.

'I came to say hello and to get a hug and a kiss.' *Kwaze kwashesha bo, phela ngimvume ekuseni!*

I became breathless. The street lights glowed on his face. His eyes filled with melody, his white straight teeth lit up the moon and his tongue believed in me. A kiss was an assurance for being officially girlfriend and boyfriend. If Jack wanted to taste my lips, it meant I was his someone, it meant we would walk in the streets holding hands I wanted Jack to date me, but I was soaked with nerves.

But I could not shake my worry... He had chosen the worst hour to visit. Instead of holding hands, I would be running from my grandfather. I was worried about being caught, and feeling the leathery, sjambok digging into parts of my body. I saw my grandfather's face in my head. I rushed to Jack to hug him and before the kiss I thought I saw a magical garden appearing, with sprinkles from the stars.

His lips were the shape of a meticulously sculpted being. The feeling of floating in the air enveloped me and balloons burst inside me. Being that close to him felt like a mosquito vanishing in the air. The cars passed, by this time I was not bothered. My face and his face were glued cheek to cheek. He didn't rush. I didn't dare him too. Rushed things never last... His lips found my lips. He kissed me.

During the kiss all I heard was as if someone stepped on a puddle of water and decided to jump on the same spot. It was like drowning in slime. I felt as if my throat had been a blocked toilet and he had used his tongue to unblock it I gagged. My whole face dripped saliva. It felt as if I

had just kissed a wet cupboard. This was not how I imagined my first kiss. I turned and left. Mortified. This was not my Karabo and Tau moment.

‘Goodnight babeee...’ He shouted. I wiped the excess saliva dripping off my face.

‘Who was that?’

My grandfather had followed me. He had watched everything, had heard my conversation with Jack.

How do I get out of this without a fat slap on my face?

‘Uhm...! Ahhh... *Akumuntu.*’

‘Don’t start *inawsons!*’

I had to interject before he continued: ‘It was nothing. *Mkhulu.*’

‘Stop le *nawsense.*’

‘Okay.’

He paused, took a long pull of smoke. Now we were both standing in the dark, my grandfather leaning on the wall. I kept wondering what he was thinking? Was he going give me tips on relationships or smack me?

‘Hamb’ olala, ungaphinde, izinto zasemsuku azikho grand, sezwana!’ Go to sleep and leave the night things to the night.

I could only nod and be grateful that tonight at least, I wouldn’t be beaten like a slave.

Tomorrow, I thought, I’m dumping Jack and his soggy whistle.

Shading Moons.

The stained yellow dress

I got up from the floor after she had thrown me on the ground. My mind was a trampoline of thoughts. I thought about how my yellow dress was stained, how my front hairline nearly flew out with my skin and how the tip of my tongue frolicked on the soil.

The whole action was like a deleted scene from a film. It didn't make sense, there was no warning or whatsoever. Why would someone drive all the way from wherever they came from just to hit me? Clearly this person had been harbouring certain feelings about me and kept tags on me. Truly I'm the victim here. I mean if one was planning to hit someone, shouldn't you let the person know first?

It rained two days ago, which was a good thing for other people, but not for my custom-made dress. I didn't know how it had all begun, I was also not sure why it had happened. I was new to this part of town.

I like to think of myself as a local tourist. I never stay longer than three months in a city. I like to avoid attachments, strings and threads... I am like a bird that migrates to warmer places, where my feathers are unknown. My business is always settled. I never leave a hanger hanging in cupboard, I always take it with me and lock the cupboard.

That morning the sun agreed with my intentions, but the ground was muddied. I am one of those people with no baggage. Sometimes my friends say I invite baggage, because I don't have it, but I don't think it is like that.

Shongweni Market smelt of old grass and dried meat.

I strolled down to, towards it, shoving my way in to my flat, creamy sandals. With the wind ruffling my twirling dress. Wherever I am, I always aim to please the eye. On the sidewalk, women sat opposite their woven baskets and wooden sculptures. One of the women didn't see me stopping in front of her, her head bent, her hands digging in her lunch box, licking the gravy that trailed off her fingers. You never lick your fingers when you don't like something, so I guess the pap and the cow's inside were something to like.

Memories flashed in front of me. I was almost six years old, a little girl and the previous night an uncle I knew touched me in a place where he should not have touched. I moved towards the plate and ate with my six siblings. I wore a red flowery dress which my granny had made, we sat outside the doorstep, eating and laughing. We grabbed a hand portion of *ipapa*, molding it in our hands as if we were Clive Sithole the clay-pottery maker from the arts center nearby known as The Bat Centre. The heat in the pap felt like a warm blanket for our fingers, we dipped the pap into the gravy. It tasted like salt on oil.

Now that I look back – that kind of eating was a group effort, a way of solving a mathematical problem. While enjoying a meal you had to make sure that your tummy got full enough and also to make sure that you ate quickly enough to get a bite of meat before any of my siblings did, but also making sure to not eat too much, to share with everyone accordingly because my granny hadn't raised dogs.

I snapped out of that memory. I stopped being that person who holds on to the past, so you can imagine when I'm bulldozed for reasons only belonging to the past. The woman I was back then

is no longer the same one in this stained yellow dress. I'm no longer taking what was not mine. I had learnt my lesson. I go to church now.

I held on to my bag as I bent to pick up one of three wooden sculptures of women with babies on their backs.

'Malini?' I asked the woman who was still busy eating. I realised I might have shocked her bit, her eyes swallowed her forehead, because she didn't expect me to be standing in front of her while she was eating.

'One thousand five hundred rand,' she answered.

I nodded. I put it down. She went back to eating.

The street swarmed with people jumping off the buses, some taking pictures with the vendors, touching every item they looked at.

'There she is!'

I don't easily get distracted by noise anymore. But this startled me. Suddenly I was on the floor, dust engulfing me as if I was a windmill. Some other woman grabbed the person that pushed me – just in time, because it seemed as if she was about to kick me while I was still on the floor. I was confused and scared. I didn't know what was happening. The anger cemented in her eyes paralysed me. And the sun was blinding.

I could not exactly see who she was, but she was fuming steam. I got up, dusted myself, one of my creamy sandals broke. I felt like a burnt crust in a big Zulu pot. And then I saw who it was... I nearly fell back down on the ground. I hadn't expected this. I didn't think that today would be the day. It was her.

Fuck, how'd she find me?

Introductions

Introduction 0

You are constantly in a war with yourself, trying to un-measure your own failed experiences. Frequently you go back to your past and try to rectify every wrong deed that was done to you. You pull every thread to make it fit the new needle that has fallen into your lap. You announced to the world that you were once a victim. The world expects you to live by its laws. The world continuously needs to be fed new meanings of what it meant to be an angry, black, bruised woman.

I looked at my daughter and I realised she knew none of these definitions or stigma. She decided what she wanted to wear and do. I could only smile and looked at how free she was to think what she wanted without me imposing my own beliefs and norms on her.

One afternoon she came home she said she wanted to play soccer. I associate soccer with boys; and yet in my mind I could see her playing better than the boys. I went to see her playing, dribbling that ball. I thought she was really good. That moment her joy met mine. When we got home, she politely wanted to use my makeup, saying she had a boyfriend, actually *two* boyfriends, and their names were Rahul and Thobelani.

I asked what they all did when together. She said, 'Mom we climb the jungle gym together and Thobelani is nice to me.' Sitting around the table we laughed and ate dinner.

The previous week we had gone to a food market where there was a space provided for kids to play. After playing for some time, she had run back to me when we were ordering food. And she had told me that a boy forced to kiss her in the cheek, she hadn't liked it, and my heart raced hearing this. I wanted to bulldoze whoever had the nerve to harass my little girl. I asked where the boy was, and she pointed to the little boy. He was seven years old. I realised that the boy should be sat down and taught about how to treat girls. It was not my daughter's fault that she was playing and being nice to him. I went to the boy and asked where his mother was. He pointed me to her. How do you even tell someone that her son of seven forced a kiss on your daughter of four, without perceived as overreacting and being slapped with a comment that they are kids, kids play, kids do that, hashtag it's not deep ... Is there even anything to report to that woman or am I imposing my own views and experiences?

Here is a thought, some firsts are like beauty floating, but for women like me, it was like being trapped in a corner with sharp needles pinching holes in my body. My name is Pauline, and these are my introductions.

Introduction 1

First time I was six years old. A neighbour. Wearing his matching suit and tie. He had a ciggie in his fingers. I wore a flowery red dress. My grandmother had sent me to buy Coca Cola. On my way to the shops, I saw him in his usual spot. I ended up in his house, he followed me behind and closed the door when he entered. Next thing he was licking his fingers to page through a magazine. A magazine filled with people who preferred clothes on the floor, not on them. He asked me whether I wanted big breasts. I knew I wanted breasts because often my friends from

three houses down from mine and I would put an egg cardboard inside our flat chests and parade around the streets like older women. Like a nail being hammered on the ground, a hole gaped. Blood trickled down my inner thigh. A valley inside me cracked open. He stood up and left and sat under the tree. He pulled grapes from the grape tree and ate them, and the juices oozed out of his lips while he zipped himself and tucked his shirt inside his pants. I left with one rand on my hand, trying to find a painless way to feel.

Introduction 2

It was my first sleepover. During the day the woman in the house was a tyrant. She shouted at everyone for leaving breadcrumbs on the table, for leaving unmade blankets on the sponge mattress, for forgetting to empty a bucket of wee. But at night when dreams were underscored by sounds of snoring and tosses I found her on top of me, grinding me, saying we were playing house to house. She was a man and I was a woman. The following night we exchanged roles. I was the man she was the woman. I ground into her the way she had done the previous night. I was wet. She asked politely if could I pee on her, but I had to take off my underwear. In the early hours of the morning, I was alone in bed, when I heard a swooping sound of a belt and piercing screams of a child who had forgotten to sweep the yard outside.

Introduction 3

New Year's Eve was a big thing in the townships, especially where I grew up. Everywhere I turned, there was a party on the go, together with great amounts of alcohol. The most beautiful thing about the New Year's Eve was watching the fireworks. I had never owned fireworks, so all I could do was just sit and tilt my head up to the sky to enjoy the spectacle. *Ugogo wami* allowed me to stay up to welcome in the new year. But I had a curfew.

I passed the neighbours' house. I felt my hairs prickling on the back of my neck. I was frightened. I became stiff. But it was my first New Year's Eve, welcoming the new year of 2000. I was full of excitement and adrenaline, which allowed me to be anything, anytime and anywhere. I joined a group of guys, three men and two women in the house. They bought more to drinks. So, the touching began. But everyone was in a party mood, so it was okay to be kissed a little and stroked for a bit. When twelve o'clock hit, the sky was clouded with colourful fireworks. It felt like it was never going to end. We went out of the house and gazed up at the sky. Still kissing and stroking and grabbing some more. A little giggle here and there, couldn't hurt anyone.

The night is so beautiful. Why did my granny want to deny me a chance like this? I wondered.

Introduction 4

A woman of around twenty. She was shorter than me. She claimed she was not a virgin, that she was experienced. But when I entered her, after the production party, she blurted out that she had never slept with anyone. I remember reminding her, saying you meant you have never slept with a woman. Feeling a little bit anxious myself because this was my first time with someone as beautiful as her. But she said no, she was a virgin. I was lost for words. I was immediately reminded of what it was to be a virgin. I had lost my virginity when I was six. I never had a chance to enjoy being a virgin. Now my eyes looked down at this gorgeous woman telling me to handle her with ease because she was delicate. I remember moving away and reality poked through walls. Where does one start with a virgin? Would she need counselling? And, most importantly, how do men break in a virgin and live to tell the tale?

Introduction 5

I sang gospel music in a choir at church. I was the chorus leader. My eyes would glance over at our conductor, and I could smell his cologne as he praised and worshiped. He was tall and dark, gloriously handsome. I finally introduced myself to him. He did the same. At first, we marvelled about God and how great it was praising him with our voices. He asked for my number, it was easy to give it to him. I thought nothing crazy would ever happen with this Christian boy. Whenever I would think of him, my thoughts escalate into thoughts that would shoot me straight to hell's gate. My legs would be stretched wide open, my breasts would dangle out of my bra. The tall and dark man from church would be praying between my thighs. My relationship with God was broken after that.

I started singing popular music.

Introduction 6

The shack was pitch-dark with a melting flickering candle the only source of light. There was no bed. It was really nothing more than a shack with one room, separated by a curtain, with candles and a primus stove on the floor. The room smelled of paraffin, and one window was covered in tape. The night became foggier and foggier, and rain started drizzling. The air started shifting somehow. The guys began playing ignoring games with me, making up excuses. They had transformed within seconds into uncaged beasts. They were guys on a mission and their plan was going very well to this point. It rained hard on us. Something was different... As if they had a plan. I screamed and begged. The guy with big ears smacked me. I fell on the floor.

'I prefer a bitch to be silent when I'm fucking her!'

The guy with a gap in his teeth was irritated. He wanted it to be over and done with. The other one had a husky voice and wore short dreadlocks made with sunlight soap and a towel. I was numb. I became a puppet on strings, being positioned about. I was gagged. I pleaded for air. My face bruised, my lips were torn, and my eyes swollen. I couldn't walk. There were bloodstains all over my clothes. I tried to stand up, but it was like something dragged me down. This was not the way I had hoped to start my New Year. I woke up later. I thought of death.

Introductions 7

Two cousin boys. Three uncles from Zimbabwe. Four drinking friends of my grandfather's. I had to wake up early in the morning and sweep the yard. Clean the yard and scrub the floors of the kitchen and wipe the dust from the windows in time for my cousins to wake up. I was to prepare tea with bread and butter. I had to sit outside while they ate when they were done. I had to wash the sink. My grandmother preferred the sink to be a spotless grey.

A knock at the door, I was expected to greet my uncles as they walked in. They always told me I should look a certain way, my hair should be relaxed if I wanted Thabo, our neighbour, to ask me to go with him to a bioscope... They sat around the table eating while I stood outside. My grandfather's friends trickled through. They had a way of greeting me. One would comment that I would make a good wife for his son because I was always cleaning the house and I was respectful. When they passed me, another one would pinch my protruding chest and he would say 'What is that?' as he pulled my nipple and they all gathered in cheerful of laughter. My

grandfather would send me to Thabo's house to buy bottles of beer for them. Night came, my grandmother took out all my blanket and gave it to my uncles from Zimbabwe because they had arrived without blankets. I slept on the kitchen floor where roaches felt invaded as I occupied the only space they had.

Introductions 8

A man, a plane and a suit. Tembe was not ashamed of the work he did. He took care of lives. For long hours in the air people abided in his rules. They were forced to worship him. Pray for him in different languages. Although when it came to mentioning his name. They said it with great hope. Hope which they needed. *Captain*. But hoping sometimes seemed like a game, hide and seek, searching between the truth for what was real.

Tembe was not all he had been described as. He grew up on a farm, green in summer; in winter there was snow on the fields. He lived with his father. His dear father. Who was a drunkard and Tembe was the spectator who sat across from him and was regularly beaten up by him up with a cooking pan. Fortunately, there was no hot oil in there. Camping under the tree in the night watching the stars becoming a spatter of dreams; this was where Tembe plotted his own hopes, wanting to become the god of people, someone who controlled wings, who flew between squally winds and unsettled rains.

And so, he managed to be included in different prayers. Some bowed. Some nodded. Some looked up. Some clutched at a rosary chain. Some brought good luck charms. Some realised they were in the clouds, and that the stars were a mirror of death. Perhaps it was an unnatural thing to be flying. Wouldn't you say? Sometimes he felt a mystical force surrounding him or maybe it might have been the air shooting from the air intake box. Duha from the Turkish Airlines mechanical department had installed that thing six months ago. But it made Tembe's seat quite floaty anyhow.

Introductions 9

Returning to live with his father, he encountered a different authority. He would cut pieces of branches from the tree in different sizes and made Tembe choose which one he would be beaten up with.

The next Monday morning, he went to work at the factory as a chocolate wrapper. The ones they sold at airports. Every morning he put out an empty glass which held his first baby teeth. His grandmother told him a story of a child of the Nguni tribe of Samburu. How the child escaped the realms of dying it was because the Nguni child of Samburu had swallowed his teeth and they were stuck in his throat which made him unable to make any sounds. He was quiet for as long as he was alive. Because he never disturbed the vicious monster that paraded the village. He was still alive today,

Tembe had become what he was because of those teeth next to him. Tembe never slept on a job, no matter the weather. He was proud.

His father always disappeared when he was sober. As if the scent of the walls melted in the moisty trail of a leaking ceiling.

Gates at the airport opened for Tembe walking in his black blazer and yellow stripes, pulling his suitcase. He didn't look at the people, that would weaken him. That was one of his beliefs,

although his ears still heard what people were saying around him. His father showed love in slaps and kicks. His mother hid the marks of love under the layers of make-up. Tembe walked the corridors of the airport. He saw his mother; he saw his father. At times he saw his mother in his father and his father in his mother. Tembe passed a long queue, as he strode in his shiny black shoes. He was proud that he would introduce the first-time flyers to the hooping sound of the engines, and declining seats with screens close to their faces, as if the screens wanted a kiss; alternatively, it wanted to distract them from their fears.

Introductions 10

A man, a woman, and in between them a young girl. Tembe thought he was a doctor of some sort. He saw I was on the phone. He always said I was his lover. Queues became longer every minute; this flight was the cheapest and the safest. Tembe stopped and sat three rows behind me. His smell enveloped me. His dark sweaty skin indicated he had a long flight. I could not help wondering how Tembe found the time between the squeeze of clouds and air. Sometimes that can be satisfying. He looked at me. He rubbed his chin. Seven years had passed since we had seen each other. What will happen if I turn around, my eyes locking with his, seeing the lie beneath all the poise of his statute, of his position...

Introductions 11

It was kind to greet me even if it was seven years ago. I was mature now. What had happened in the past floated in my thoughts yet remained in the future. I knew that many years might pass, and one day I would be able to face him without fear. My daughter ran towards me. My daughter was spitting image of Tembe. His eyes were wide open, his suitcase fell on the floor. Tembe stood up and slowly and walked towards me.

‘Moneo, go to Ausi Lerato. Mommy is talking to a friend. Zip your coat, Moneo!’

I looked at Tembe in his pilot’s suit.

Six years old: raped.

Thirteen years old: pregnant.

Twenty years old: has an 8 years old girl.

Eight -years old girl: meets the man who raped her mother eight years ago.

Garissa and the gold moon

He saw Garissa into the taxi. He was upset. He left without saying goodbye.

No one knew Garissa had the gift. She only found out about this gift few minutes before dying.

‘Close the door behind you,’ said the taxi driver. His skin had stolen the colour of gold. Garissa’s face was a forest of thoughts, wondering whether she was ready to leave behind the man she loved.

The driver looked at her. He had nothing more to say to Garissa. His gaze penetrated deep into her. Garissa still had her brown lace boots on. And the gold moon sauntered closer to the taxi. The taxi driver’s job was to drive her, and her job was to be seated tightly in a seat belt.

Before she entered the taxi, she had gone to the toilet.

She felt trapped within the tiny space with its grey walls. She wanted to release something. On her left there was a tissue. On the floor next to the toilet there was a bin. She hung her denim jacket on the door hanger, she took off her bra, and hung it on top of the denim jacket. She preferred to be free of all things.

Shadows below the next toilet made her think. You know you find people who say they would rather mess themselves than use public toilets, but they are, in fact, the first ones who will use toilets at the taxi rank. She wondered who had walked in. How many bags had they carried in? Then someone knocked on her closed door. Everyone knows that a locked toilet means only two things: either it is not working, or someone is using the toilet; and at this time this toilet was in use.

There was the sound of a woman complaining about how the toilets smelled. The toilet was a home for a smell. The keeper of smell, the sanctuary of smell. She heard the voice of a kid, he sounded like he didn’t want to wash his hands. The bickering of the woman and the kid took the silence away from her. Silence was a form of release.

‘There’s no wash.’

Inside the taxi. The moon was gold. Full. Only she could see it. It had been like this for days now. The wind whirled and whirled, weakening her further, it was a different kind of wind. It was not the same wind that blew you in a car when you were wearing your glasses and scarf. It was not the same kind of wind that blew your clothes off... This kind of wind had woken up the dead, in order to embrace her in joining them.

The moment of dying felt like meeting the moon for the first time. Hearing church bells. Seeing Gabriel strolling in the river. The sweet yet remorseless sun boiled the water bottle inside her bag. Her cell phone still worked, it rang and rang. She couldn’t answer she had no hands for a cell phone anymore.

Her blue dress and jean jacket was in shreds.

Memories slowly faded as they crashed. Pieces of glasses rested inside her skin. Protruding... Crackling bones were louder than the shattered windscreen. Warm liquid repainted her in scarlet hues, erasing her; her loose torn skin was soaked in blood, dripping down her lip. She could taste it: if she had been thirsty or if she had found herself in a desert, she would have had the pleasure of drinking it, but the real pleasure was looking at the mingling colours between her congealing blood and her chestnut skin. Gushing blood.

However, it was him, Jake, that kept her alive. For a moment. At least that was what made sense to her.

The mother and the baby who sat in front of her in the taxi, were badly injured. She died instantly but the baby laughed as the taxi rolled and threw people out of the windows. Everyone screamed. They called on God, yet the baby had the most angelic smile with pink polished gums, small hands, tiny feet and fearless laughter. The laughter was contagious.

The driver might have been drunk or tired or both. Long distance driving can fuck one's mind up, if you don't get shot, you get an accident, said an old grey lady whom was selling sweetcorn from a bucket.

When Garissa would wake up in the house with Jake, she would flounce into the kitchen and prepared a scrumptious breakfast of his favourite delicacies, he would say: 'There is only one bacon I want to eat this morning.' And kiss her on the forehead. He would grab her and savage her on the table, her legs spread around his face. They were good for each other.

Jake travelled often, and most of the time Garissa was left alone taking care of their cat and dog. This went on for months. Jake had a tendency not to call or text for these months. Garissa had no way of knowing how he was doing.

Without knowing; Jake's flight would land, Jake would climb into the car. Jake would stop at traffic lights. Jake would stop to get take-aways. Jake would climb back into his car. And then, when Jake arrived home with sunflowers and chocolates, Garissa liked to be taken care of and Jake happily took care of her needs while they spoke about the sauntering, about how gold the moon was. Which they used to name it 'the asshole of the sky' or Jake would say 'the gold moon was like an irritating acne on a smooth skin.'

But one morning, when he arrived unannounced after several months of being gone. He walked in through the back of the house, hoping to see Garissa in the sofa plaiting her hair. Instead, he found Garissa's legs wide stretched on the table, her bacon being chewed up by another woman.

There was a knock on the door.

Jake peeped through the window kitchen. The moon was still gold... 'Oh fuck off! irritating acne!' Jake looked around the house, it was quiet, just the television was playing. On the screen an accident splashed. A tumbled, cut in half taxi outside the taxi he had seen her off in earlier. Bags, suitcases scattered on the ground. Shoes, heels, slippers, her heels scattered on the road between the pieces of a taxi. Steering wheel across the long two-lane road. A hand there and there. Blood everywhere.

Jake's hand smacked his forehead as he pulled his chair out, lit a cigarette and dialled her number. The phone just rang.

'Doesn't she have hands to pick up the fucking phone?' said he whispered to himself.

There was a knock on the door. Jake opened it.

'Garissa.' Jake said.

She stood there with no hands, her head hanging on her back.

Snowing Bones.

The first time I drank beer I was six years old.

The first time I drank beer I was six years old.

That same night my grandfather slept as if the soil was the pillow and the tombstone was the roof. He had had a good time with his friends; he paid, they drank, they farted. They tap danced their fingers on my face. He thirstily glugged down a fourth bottle.

When he arrived home, my Gam was a fuel of anger and the sight of grandpapa stoked the fire. He had no way of knowing how to change what faced him. He crept inside his warm blanket and adjusted the pillow into a position that suited his neck.

The screaming match with Gam woke me up. I was not on my usual sponge mattress next to the stove in the kitchen. Gam stood close to the wall of their bedroom and leaned against the cupboard. The cupboard slightly shifted. I could not really hear the conversation, but it was clear from the tone of her voice that today the sun had not risen yet.

I skinned my own skin by laying on her precious sofa with my fluffy green blanket; that blanket made me feel like I was riding a bicycle down the hill. The dampness from my sweat made every dream slightly moist... I felt like I was drowning in my sweat.

Gam usually reprimanded me for sleeping on the sofa. Her sofas were precious, because she got them for a lower price at the furniture shop. However, on the second day of the sofa's arrival I saw something faulty which I didn't tell her about. There was a stitch at the back of the sofa that was unravelling. When I pulled it; something strange, if not familiar to happy kids next door happened. My tummy was jittery, my eyes watered. My body felt as light as if it were made of feathers. I focused on pulling the thread. I pulled and kept checking to see whether my Gam was looking my way, but she was making bush tea and talking about the new sofas. I knelt on the cracked floor. I enjoyed rolled the thread over my little finger.

The new sofas brought new meaning to my Gam. She dressed up and sat on them and read her Bible. The worst part was that I was not allowed in the dining room. There was a huge gap below the door where sometimes Gam placed an old cloth to prevent water from gushing inside the house. She usually did that when she saw clouds had turned greyish black. She was prepared in case there was a rainstorm... Air blew inside the house, and I saw the thread moving side by side... I hoped Gam wasn't seeing that because something was happening between me and the thread of the sofa. We were bonding, and for Gam to see that would have meant the end my fun.

Her sofas softened the hard edges of her life. Which meant that the dining room was the only luxurious part of the house, and we were not allowed in. The room divider in there had mugs and cups that were never been used, even when the priest from our local church would visited and prayed there. My Gam was not under his priestly spell at all, unlike Aunty Dorothy. My Gam took out normal cups for the priest, the ones Aunt Dorothy used.

I followed my grandpapa to a shebeen. My grandmother had tried to stop me. She told me I was young, and this was big people hang out place. They do not allow kids. She kept saying I should let big people do their things without me pestering. I sure did pester her eyeballs out. I really

wanted to go and getting my way was easy I cried, thrown tantrums and rolled on the floor. Eventually I got what I wanted.

The neighbourhood houses had no fence and no walls. The toilets shared one wall – you could hear someone in the other toilet flushing or shuffling newspaper. When it came to my using the toilets, I developed my own method of— the newspaper on the floor deaden the muffle of what I wanted to say. Anyway, on the side of the toilet a tap was attached to the wall. I would wet the newspaper and walk inside the toilet. Newspaper could be used for different things. Take my older cousin Khesaya. She used to play a word game, laying on the floor and finding words that started with the same alphabet and ended with the same alphabet. She would use the newspaper to hunt and squint for new words.

Houses without fences worked splendidly because you could see whether the neighbours were likeable or not. If not, that meant the house would never be a home, because no one made noises and ran around causing a mess. And most importantly who was I going to play with? my Gam woke me up by banging loudly on a pan. Although I think her annoyance was more about her precious sofa, and that I had slept on it.

I walked outside the door which led me to the neighbour's house. Saturdays were washdays for most people. I walked past Mapula. Mapula's younger sister was famous in the area. She was the fastest runner in the neighbourhood. A newspaper article had run a full page spread on her. We all knew about Mapula's little-fast-running sister. I thought that this was nothing really to be proud about. I knew Boom Shaka's songs and dance routines better than anyone. Why was I not in the papers? My Gam gave me the simplest answer: 'Maybe because the other kids know the words to Boom Shaka's songs as well as you do.' There was logic there. I nodded. Mapula's little sister was the fastest no one could outrun her, I got it.

Mapula, washed her laundry in three different metal basins. As I passed, I noticed a spiralling glimmer in the water. I saw that her hands wrung the water out of a white top, and still the glimmer remained. I was in a rush I didn't even greet her. I guess she understood the frozen, sulky face I showed her. Three-basins were filled with water; one had soap, the other had stay soft water, which smelt like lavender, and sitting on top of the drain she had a bucket filled with clothes. I could see different dresses and jerseys. I had no time to stop. But I couldn't forget the spiralling glimmer I had seen. I kept walking. I kicked stones and sticks, I stamped on some sprouting plants. I dragged my foot over the dusty ground, forming a huge curved line. I stood between two walls: a grey wall, which belonged to Mapula's home, and a green wall... Beneath my feet, the earth became warmer, but I liked it.

I crossed the street to get to the other side of the tavern. Further down the street friends of mine were playing catch. They were playing a game I invented. My first instinct was to go and join them. It looked like fun, but I decided not to. I reached a high closed gate... I squeezed my little body through the opening and got through easily.

There was my grandpapa, sitting on a stool. He gestured as he spoke, his companions laughing and clapping. Between his legs were bottles of beer and glasses. I approached him quietly. trickled towards him. I didn't know how he would react when he saw me. I thought he was going to chase me out because he might want to do what big people do when they were alone, but instead invited me to sit with him. I was surprised. He continued talking as if I was already part of the conversation or my arrival hadn't bothered him. But the other grandpapas were aware of me. The other grandpapas asked what my name was. *'Konje uthe ubani igama lakho Ntombi?'*

Politely I answered them. They thought they would be nice to me because my grandpapa kept beers coming in. I sat next to him legs crossed. The owner of the shebeen came out to greet me and asked how my Gam was. I told her what she wanted to hear.

My grandpapa coerced me to drink. He pour me a beer. I thought he was joking but I looked up at his round face, and he wasn't smiling or joking. I drank two glasses of beer. I was encouraged to swallow a big gulp, those who were around me cheered me on. I became a spectacle for them, witnessing a six-year-old holding a translucent glass with foam up to her lips. With every sip, my insides were pulled to south. Smoke swirled from the corners of their ears. I grabbed the glass, as the wall bent more and more to the right. The smell of the beer was in me. I finished the beers, the grandpapas applauded. My grandpapa then poured me another one. This time I drank with less hesitation, I knew what I was going to taste.

The smoke from their ears coiled right up to the window seals. The smoke formed shapes only my eyes could see. Each drink my grandpapa gave me seemed like a glue that would better our bond. He kept them coming until everything became slower, spun around and swayed more. It felt good to shut my eyes, as I laid down on the floor. I was giddy, I didn't know who I was anymore.

The next thing I heard was my grandpapa telling me to go home. He was firm and stern towards me. He repeated the instruction. I stood up. I was shocked, because it felt as if my legs had been chopped off. I walked back home, crossing the street where kids of my age happily gambolled about, and I entered Mapula's yard. Three basins filled with water still there. I tripped and fell inside the water. My forehead hit the bottom of the basin. Submerged under water.

I don't know what happened next, but I felt that I was no longer alone. I was one with a tribe of woods, trees and flowers, mostly lavender. The air was serene and tranquil. I was surrounded by a purple garden. I could touch the deep round orange sun. A rainbow of birds flew above me. I felt the wings on my face. I turned around to follow the trail; their music hypnotised me.

They stood before me: tall as sticks, brown as the earth, wounded like old scar tissue with square faces... This was like nothing I had ever seen before. I must have banged my head harder than I thought. I wondered whether this was what being drunk meant; seeing people with square faces. I heard my name; their mouths were situated at the back of their necks. They called me again by my name.

Now the voice became louder and familiar. I realised it was not these tall square brown things, but Mapula's frantic voice. She pulled me out of the basin, wrapped me in a towel. I couldn't see a thing. She rushed me to my Gam, who told her to put me on the floor, but Mapula lay me down on the sofa instead. I was still shivering.

I could not tell Gam that inside Mapula's basin lived something tall and brown with a rotting square face.

Madam Lady 's Mansion

They took girls like me to the other side of the ocean. There were too many of us. The journey took weeks without good food and water. We saw the rise and the setting of the sun. We saw bodies thrown into the ocean. Some of us were relieved. I know I was glad for them because I thought they had escaped the worst. And also, this meant there might be extra bread for those who were left behind. Somewhere inside the thick walls of my heart, however, I hoped it could have been me who was thrown into the ocean.

I was a girl with dry knees and muscular hands. The sketched-out sea harboured all the pain and hunger I felt. I was called different kinds of names witch, slut, and so on. I was silent, I lingered in my two by two square cabin. Hands up, hands down, passively I shushed a roach to a hole. Which later I regretted because it was the only friend I may have had. My feet dangled in chains – the only accessory I became fond of. I knew that when I survived this, I would be the most remembered ancestor because I would have lived to tell the tale. Unless I stopped being submissive. Unless I disregarded the order – then I would die.

Flickering light on the window, pot steaming on the oil stove. Saucers and mugs set aside. Marking every chair with place mats, spoons and knives. A quick end to pain was maintaining a 'yes Madam nod' - while a man coiled his tail as he waited to sniff inside my bush.

They came in with their heads wrapped in high turbans. The clunk of their wooden shoes created a sparkle. They borrowed the colour of blood and stained their cheeks and lips. They swayed and twirled, they moved with such grace and precision. During the day they crossed their legs and sewed patterns on cloth to embrace their own brown walls. Winters were often cold, but when you sat next to the fire it became warmer. Madam Lady walked into the servants' quarters carrying a plate filled with chickens' guts and what looked like a finger. I had no words to ask what that was. She had dark circles around her eyes; she had not been sleeping well. I threw the guts and the rest in the fire. Madam Lady swore me to secrecy. That became a bond which no other girl on the mansion had with her.

When they were done I followed behind with a broom. I was looking for where the dirt might be. I often heard scrambled screams coming from downstairs. They told me it was a mad woman shrieking. I didn't dare to ask, but Madam Lady saw my reaction when I heard the shrieking screams. I assume that was the reason she had kept me closer to her – one mistake would mean some of my body parts would be given to someone to burn and that would be their bond.

Another week, another hour. It was the hour to fast and pray; I had no idea who I was praying too. I could not even pronounce the long precise chanting and calling on things. Every Monday before dawn we had to drink a medicinal drink to purify and cleanse the soul. I endured the taste. It tasted like chunky uncooked meat. We had to chew simultaneously. We chanted in the smallest room, with masks on the walls. We were covered in a cloth. And it was a ceremonial ritual to dip our feet and hands in salted water. When that was completed; there were drinks on table and candles flickered around the room. One by one, we walked in with plates filled with delicacies and cups of tea.

They carried the sun on their faces. They had not known struggle and harwork because we made sure that the sun remained where it should be. During summer, everything seemed grand, the fields were lush green. Roses were redder, lilies grew whiter.

I remember seeing the stairs that went to the cellar. Some girls were not allowed to go down into the cellar because it was steep, and they would also need a candle to go down there. Madam Lady didn't like wasting candles. Ducks quacked about outside the cellar. I stored the maize and Madam's wine.

Three seasons had passed, and I had still not seen the man of the house. Madam Lady had her frequent meetings with different men everyday. It was difficult to identify who the man of the house was. I shrank behind the walls as if I was not seeing that things had changed. Madam Lady was sleeping less and drinking quite heavily and every morning another man would walk out of the house. Some girls were ordered to eat certain foods, according to Madam Lady's laws...

These laws were not for people, and we were not people. We were mannequins. I knew, and I made peace with my plight of belonging nowhere. What didn't affect me should not bother me – that was my mantra... So, I had no place to open my sealed mouth and object. Guilt rotted me from the inside.

Monday came, and we were obliged to wear our Monday dresses. Wear our lies and accompany our guilt by reciting verses from dusty scrolls. I prayed a loud prayer but most of all I prayed a second prayer to be released from this death. Every girl stood facing an entourage of well-dressed women and men. They sipped whisky and tea, as they watched us stripping off our dresses while keeping our faces covered. Madam Lady said it was a way of keeping our identity unknown and safe.

But I knew that this was a symbol of nothing. I was a person without a face. Eventually I realised that they didn't want to see our faces because they would then be forced to recognise us and to remember themselves. I stood there before them with my bushy front alluding to the fact that I was a woman... Some girls were bushy some were thinned out, yet in our powerlessness and differences we stood together.

I remember when it tingled between my thighs. I was nine years old. It felt like I had been blind for a while. But then I realised it was because my eyes were shut. I opened my eyes. I wanted to know. I wanted to meet the tingling feeling down there. I wanted my fingers to see, to continue. It felt like a heartbeat pumping life down there... I pressed four fingers under my thighs, my body felt warm and tingly at first, like millions of ants rushing inside my body. I smiled. I thought I might have discovered gold and possibly I wasn't allowed to keep it. I stood up, locked the door, close the windows, shut the curtains.

I listened to see if anyone was at the door. The coast was clear for me to dive even deeper. I was a wanderer of my own body. It was exciting to explore, but I was scared. Even though I knew that every opening was locked – But God was there. He was very sneaky he would tell my mom. He told tales... His fury will be shown, one way or the other. My mom would know what I was doing. So, I stopped. But I couldn't I had finally found a place to explore. I promised myself I wouldn't do it again. I lied. Something felt awful – like I was not allowed to do this. Do you remember when you first allowed your fingers to explore this? Slowly I spread my legs and lifted my red dress. Quickly I adjusted my dress below my knees... The wrinkling of my dress mimicked my mom's face.

I thought God touched himself – frequently. Just like me. Whenever God could not sleep, he touched. Whenever he was too lazy to wake up, he touched. Like the plight faced by humans. Sadly, he became lost in the pleasure of passion which proved to be not a pap and vleis.

It forced him to forget how to do his job. Now he punished us for his sins. On the other hand, I realised that perhaps it was the only thing that he could not control. It occurred to me that this surprised him because he had planted many seeds on the ground and all at once they sprouted. Which led him to restrict his focus. He focused more on limbs, organs, ribs and blood circulation, but not orgasm. He didn't pay enough attention to it. He didn't know. Sometimes God must succumb to defeat because he had no idea what this thing do to his people. I don't understand it because God didn't understand it either and that image was of him. Simple as that. But still we were the ones hung, stoned and tortured for his misunderstandings.

It was like those wanting to define orgasm. Orgasm is like death. No one understood orgasm. You should see people trying to be clever defining orgasm, confusing the human race. In those few minutes of orgasm, death was the only thing that made sense to me. Some used this unique form of pleasure to manipulate and alienate those who could not defend themselves. Like me, and those who were like me. Shame poor Ona she didn't have the heart to stand it, she died within a week.

I understand that in prehistoric days when women went around naked, their duty was to satisfy their own desire. Probably, I want the memory of orgasm to be taken away from me... I wish I had never known orgasm. Because when I wanted it; the way I wanted it, I could not get it anymore. Instead they took it away...

My hands were bound in ropes. I could hear laughter and the tinkling of a teaspoon in a cup. The smell of rooibos and lavender filled the room. My face was covered in a black cloth. I was gasping for air. Trapped in the dark ends of nothingness. The heat made me sweat. An axe lay on the ground, next to a wooden table.

I knew my final destination was hell. The sharpened machete was ready to chop and break every little sinful bone in my hands.

It made me wonder: what would they do to pillows?

This was hell. I knew it. At times I was out of it, but I spoke of it and when I didn't speak of it, I denied it and when I didn't deny it, I defiantly hid it. I hid the meeting place. They too wanted this kind of pleasure. I realised how important it was for them to know how magnificent this pleasure was, since it had resulted in me being covered in a black cloth and broken.

I was too ignorant to know how to act. Years went by. I slowly lost my sense of self because, without memory, I forgot. I was enslaved most days because I was a woman who knew pleasure. Under their hats they stared at me.

They wiggled their tongues, convincing themselves of the only truth that only suited them. The first few weeks, I wiped muddy windows. Scrubbed the floors and made tea. I was like a dog now, licking its wounds, and I had first arrived with chains around my neck. My head was measured. In the beginning I thought it was for new clothes. The girl in my room, Ona, had hands that itched to make things. She made things like the mat with patterns under the bed. At night we talked. She told me she woke up at dawn and trekked from one dumpster to another collecting plastic. This mat was used for different things. When a quarrel took place between two neighbours, one kindly gave the other the handmade mat to bring about peace between them.

That mat reminded me of my sudden engagement. I was a virgin. I was picked and was expected to lay on plastic mat and open legs for that chosen man. No one ever questioned whether he was a virgin, or not. I remember as if it was yesterday. I wore my Ankara sewed dress and made my face blank. When I was told that the man in front of me was to be my husband, I thought, well at least there would be someone to help me reach the pleasure. Even though I was a virgin I knew what pleasure felt like.

As I strolled into the kitchen, I saw that I had a way of showing strength; I could carry more than a donkey. I was a spectacle to be glared at, and tortured, yet I had to continue in order to make someone's life bearable. Everything around me was slime. I sat when I ate and when I died. I died a different death everyday. The dust swirled around me, choking me.

Madam Lady called me to the dining room, she wanted me to rub her toes. I took off her wooden shoes. She stared at me and looked like she found what she was looking for. She took off my doek, her hands stroked my face from my forehead right down to my chin. She asked me what I thought of her toes. All along I thought I had noticed them but when I heard her asking me that question, I thought that in fact I hadn't thought anything. Over the past few years I had not been allowed to think, I was not even sure I still could formulate opinions.

I was sixteen and I had started to love pleasure when my life changed.

There was a knock at the door, and a man stood at the door in the home I lived with my mother. She did not appear surprised herself but looked sad and disappointed. I was told to pack my things and leave with the man who was going to become my husband. I suppose my mother wanted me to be safe in a man's hands.

I packed my handmade plastic mat and wore the Ankara dress, crying as I did so. There was a wagon standing beyond the yard. I could not say goodbye to my mother. I climbed in and this man held my hand. I am not sure whether he was inspecting them or sniffing. The ride took two whole days; we stopped in small towns to eat. I was instructed not to look up, not to nod or greet anyone.

We ate ... well the horse and I ate –and the man sat opposite me watching me stuff my face. The only touch I had known from him so far had been two days ago, when he had inspected my hands. I wondered what my mother had told him, and where he was taking me. If he was to be my husband, he should want to get to know me. He should want to hold me like a man holding a woman. I was confused. But I kept quiet. I kept my head down.

The wagon galloped on for a few hours more... We arrived at a small thatched hut with a chimney, and an expanse of ocean behind it. This was to be my home until of course Madam Lady came and took me to her dungeon.

There was dust everywhere in that hut. I swept the floors, shifted the chairs, watered the thin walls and washed the dishes. I finished dusting and the man told me to take a bath. I thought he wanted me to be clean. He made me wear a long dress and a well -tied headgear and told me to sit on top of the kitchen table where we usually ate. He asked me to read something from a brown long paper with words scripted in red ink. I read. He forced me to pray.

He watched me pull down my stocking socks down to my knee, he said I should move my hands as if there was a snake next to me. I wanted to laugh because I thought If I saw a snake I would be out of here like lightning. In all frankness I knew what to do with my hands. I knew how to use these thin fingers. I knew my body. He watched me moaning and groaning.

I knew that sitting there with my legs outstretched honoured him with an unimpeded view of down there. That gave me pleasure. I thought then I must have the most wonderful husband in the universe, with a desire to see me pleased. I heard him whisper that I would be the talk of the mansion. I didn't know what that meant. On the last Sunday of the month, a day after heavy rains stopped, I saw a big boat moving close to the shoreline. I was instructed to pack what I needed.

I found out after I had been with Madam Lady, she had gold stashed in plain sight. She bought and entertained men and women who had more gold like her. Every tie and petticoat in that small, secluded town were part of the dungeon syndicate. There was no way of running away, because if you did run, you would bump into a member of the dungeon and you would be hanged. I saw many girls coming and dying- not dying from hunger but from being stupid enough to thinking they were clever enough to escape.

Madam Lady called me to her bedroom. The curtains were still shut, but it was still for her, she usually woke later. Two girls were submerged under her blankets. I stood at the door, my head bowed, with hands clasped tightly behind my back. She told me to look at her when she spoke.

I did so, and my eye caught a framed paint on the side table next to her bed. She was speaking to me, but I couldn't hear a word she was saying. The face on the picture caught my eye. It was like looking at the younger version of myself. It was my mother. She was in the picture, she and Madam Lady were standing shoulder to shoulder, cheek to cheek, and they both smiled. The shock of it!

I was faint and scared. I went to the kitchen to make rooibos tea for Madam Lady, as I realised she had asked me. My thoughts were swirling. Was that why Madam Lady kept me close to her? I made her tea with something else that would eventually slow down her heart rate and shriek her bones. I found it hidden in the cellar, I remembered the bottle because my mother back home used to kill rats and cockroaches. That moment Madam Lady felt like a pest to be taken care off.

Back in the bedroom, I looked at the painting again, it was indeed my mother. She looked younger, but similar to those women wearing turbans sipping tea and whisky. She was one of them, I realised. Seven years in that house, the one in which my own mother had sold me to her friend. I watched Madam Lady as she drank the tea; the two girls were still lying in the bed. Slowly she drank again. I wanted to jump on her and bury her with her pillow, but I knew the tea would do what was necessary. I watched her the way they used to watch me. It was time for a new madam in the mansion.

Now and again I would go and check on her, but she still couldn't speak.

The girls and I now take care of the mansion; and we have stopped the dungeon horrors... No one knows what happened to Madam Lady.

We are going to have the best funeral

The dead ones gawked at me their lifeless eyes were pale. If they only knew I also needed someone to look at, to run too. This was too much to handle, because I had no idea I was dead. What I remembered was dressing up, looking at myself in the mirror, putting powder on my cheeks and smudging the lipstick on my lips. I had had problems with that lipstick I got from a friend. Turned out we were not really friends however, despite the fact that we liked rock music and we occasionally lay together on the same mattress, high on something.

I looked around the centre which had black walls. Everyone at the back shouted, ‘He just went up.’

I looked up, but there was only a ceiling. They said it just opened, and the light came in and he went up. I could understand if it was only one person seeing this, but it was thirty-nine mouths and heads who saw him ascending through the ceiling. I had to believe them. But of course, as usual I had a delayed reaction to the events.

My delay was sad and blue and late. I felt like I had cheated an opportunity gifted to me. I was not doing what I was supposed to do. I was thinking about her ... the assistant. I mean she went in and out of the sun and borrowed its light, she glimmered. I needed a chance to swirl, swing, roll and grind the dust of our shoes and pave a new path for me and her. You know what I’m saying? So those thoughts were interrupted by a group of people I was supposed to train. They thought someone went up.

‘He just went up! He just went up!’ The shouts continued.

I finally joined the chorus of screams I pushed the chairs aside, chairs that blocked my way. Some people reacted by running outside. Good reaction, I thought. This heart of mine slid out of my chest plate. I could not handle my shock I suppose. I managed to pick up some pieces of my heart on the floor. I pushed the organ back inside my chest.

The assistant raised her hands awkwardly to everyone. She was wearing jeans and a loose shirt. I thought she looked not half bad. The people started screaming again. But *I* had to remain calm. These people respected me. I could not help them if I was witlessly freaking out as well. The rest of my heart spooned itself out my skin.

‘He went up – are you sure?’ I heard myself asking. I mean it seemed like a good way to start to calm everyone. They nodded and simultaneously all said yes. They scraped up some courage, took a break from screaming and someone explained why: ‘He went up through the ceiling.’

I knew who they were talking about, but what they were saying about him confused me. I remembered seeing him, standing behind me. I met him briefly. He was part of the assisting team. At least that was what I had thought. We were all trainees – training them to – Oh my vanilla jam squash. I forgot what exactly my job entailed.

The first day I arrived, I stood in front of Lauren, the owner of this training programme. I felt exhausted and hollow. I could not fathom why I felt like I had swallowed ten pills of ecstasy. Everything was bewildering and baffling and absolutely deadly confusing.

Lauren was gorgeous, but she had no eyes. Yet, she could see me. Behind me there was a queue of people with gaping bodies. Then I thought it could have been the preparation of Rock 'n Dark festival. The festival was an event for those who preferred dark and sort of shameful things. At least normal society would describe it as such. If you were a man who was into men or a woman who was into women and were crazy about rock, heavy dark metal music and little bit of exotic costumes, then the festival was the thing you would want to be part of.

Anyway, I got the job helping to assist on the programme.

So, fast forward to a few weeks later, and we were faced with someone ascending through the ceiling.

Looking at this group of people I could see they were frightened. I had to be useful. So, I asked everyone to hold hands. A very normal thing to do when you are about to start praying, but what about those who didn't pray? Of course, something weird had just happened.

A guy I worked with disappeared up into a tight-sealed ceiling. Was I hallucinating? I know I came in intoxicated. Anyway, for some reason holding hands was not helping because some didn't have hands. Everything seemed to perpetuate fear and spiralling down into a dungeon.

I looked at the assistant as she rushed to the doorway. Her hand balanced on the door. Her head peeped out from the door, and she shouted, 'Lauren! Lauren! They finally took him! They finally took him.'

Oh, my chocolate mousse cake, I thought. This was serious. I rushed to her. I was holding and massaging the skin above my heart. I hoped she would clarify who they were. – I was not even sure I wanted to know. I dragged her. Her back was against the wall now. She was between me and the wall. She smelled like a blooming flower. I wanted to peel off her clothes and chew and suck her juices. But a young man had just gone up into the ceiling.

'What is going on?'

'Simbarashe told us they have been calling him for a year now.'

'And now he decided to take a trip to where?' I heard myself asking, my pounding heart between us.

'They took him.'

'Okay, this is crazier than crazy. I'm outta of here. I'm gone. You should do the same.'

'No! No! you can't leave. You have thirty-nine trainees to train.'

I looked at her puzzled, was she for real?

'Did you not see what just happened? And you want me to stay in this room, are you nuts?'

'Look, they only take people like Simbarashe.'

'You need to call the police, that is what you should do. Some mafia is kidnapping people. Jeez man!'

‘I’m not sure you understand where you are.’

‘Yes, I don’t understand, someone disappeared through the roof! Does that seem like something a person can understand?’

I’m not sure whether I shouted. This hot woman was so stupid, not realising that my heart was two steps away from the door: Lauren. Lauren, the woman who had hired me in the first place to come and teach these kids, who had bouncy gold curls, her body clad in a yellow summer dress. She ran towards us smiling. She passed me and the assistant, her elbows bent, she fixed her glasses over the space where she should have had eyes. She said something. I moved closer to hear.

‘Everything is fine, relax. Everything is fine. This was expected.’

‘But we saw him, I even felt the heat from below.’

‘We saw him: how do you explain that?’

These trainees were asking the right questions. I thought I should come in and ask some questions as well. Just in case there was any confusion about my involvement in this saga.

‘How can you be so normal about this?’ I sounded both truthful and worried.

‘Because you have too.’

I was as silent as everyone else was now. Lauren was saying something, but what she was saying exactly, we didn’t understand. I moved to my chair and took my bag, and was about to leave when she said the most terrifying thing that I felt my breathing stop for a moment

‘We are all dead. You have been dead your whole life. And we are planning your second funeral. Think of this place as a coffee stop before you reach your destination.’

Lauren smiled and pointed to me. ‘And Linda here is like you, she is one of you. She died a horrid death. She had a heart attack after taking some drugs. She is here to help you accept the way you died. Now, please be calm, okay?’

She smiled. Waved us goodbye and left. She left us standing there. I turned around to face the young trainees. I could see them precisely as they were; the not so tall and not so short girl had a hole in her stomach. I could see right through her. Worse, she was drinking water. So, you can imagine how hard it was to look at her.

Next to her stood a young man with his trachea cut in half, and he gently held his head under his armpit like a handbag. I stepped back, fell onto a chair; my own heart was outside of my body. It was neatly sliding off my hands. A thread of veins trailed from my dangling heart. It was pink.

I finally knew why I hated the colour pink. A surge of blood clots surged through my veins, a hose pipe of blood sprayed out of my nose and ears. It seemed like something normal though, something to just accept. It took a few minutes until only a few droplets of red liquid trickled out.

Like cows we grazed on. Like clothes blown in the wind. Like new-born babies we clung on our mother's nipples. I stood looking at them, the dead ones, as they stood looking at me. Everyone had something dripping, missing or hanging. This was our new normal.

'We are going to have the best funeral.' I said.

The girl named dis/rup/tion

Bird's-eye view shot reveals white tents. On the side of the tents can be seen barrels of water with pipes attached to water trucks; the camera enters the tent. There is a wall covered in plastic, and a drip hangs on the side of the plastic wall. Two chairs and a table take much of the space in the tent. The camera moves up to reveal her face. She is looking down. She has dark brown skin with a healed scar on her right cheek.

I left my home village like every young woman wanted to do. I had dreams; and my dreams kept me awake at night. My grandfather understood that I had to go to the city and work, the city being Durban. Being a working young woman was frowned upon in my village. But my grandfather gave me his blessings and allowed me to try and fail and come back. Yes, I was expected to fail and come back. But the truth is, I never told anyone why I really came back. I let everyone believe that Durban was too much for me, that it had drowned me. That was a lie.

Camera zooms on her face: She smiles. Her overbite redefines her face. Her eyes look up, as though she is remembering something. She breathes in and out.

In the mornings I went to the building that looked worn out. with rusty, peeled off paint with big tinted windows that acted as curtains. Mr Gregory, my boss, opened the locked garage door and handed the keys to the security guard. A big hall with thirty uncomfortable chairs and sewing machines greeted us. Each table had rusted, sewing machine that looked older than my grandmother's hands. The seamstresses welcomed me with smiles. I worked hard alongside them. We changed into our uniforms. The hall was narrow and colourless but the bold prints, tailored fabrics, the silk tweed fabrics with the vibrant colours lifted the atmosphere of the room. I felt the same. I felt like this could be me, colourless. There was no colour on the walls, it was dull, and it resembled the lives of the women. We all bent our heads as the sewing machines acted as a soundtrack to our hard work; we were crammed together. During lunch time, traffic hooted in the street. Lunch hours were usually the busiest time.

The women gathered outside eating their lunch. I joined in and nodded my greetings to them. Durban had the most delicious, spicy bunny chow and the most terrible smell from the sea.

Now the factory stood in the middle of the city. Tall buildings lined the streets, built in grids. City skyscrapers were smudged by the smog-filled sky, there was no sunlight, no trees and no birds. Just triangular and square shaped tips of congested buildings when you looked up. The building were close to the harbour. It smelled like an undrained toilet. I left the factory after work... I knew we had had a hard day when the sweat snaked down my spine. Mr Gregory made us work like flies without wings. He used his tummy as a pillow to sleep on. My back was stiff as an iron board, and my hands were dry as a biltong. I dragged myself to my locker, which was partly opened. I changed into my pants and t-shirt. I had no kids, although I had practically raised my siblings. Jomo and Jabu.

Her eyes focus on the camera. The camera stays on her face.

I thought the factory would become my life, you know. My purpose was to take care of my family. So, the money I earned was needed to mend holes in the wall.

I endured the security check, the security guard ran his hands around my waist and underarms, to see if I had stolen anything from the factory.

He rummaged inside my bag. What could I have stolen? I was just a seamstress. He let me pass out. A beeline of women strode out, to be greeted by the smiling sun. They waved goodbye to each other, some carried their bags on their shoulders, defeat was stained on their faces. But, for me this was my favourite moment of the day: leaving the factory and watching how busy people in the streets were. They were being pulled in different directions by their choices, all in a hurry to catch something. I found it exciting to mirror people, to see how their eyes twinkled how one leg followed closely behind. I always counted the steps I took. This had frustrated my brothers.

The street was filled with students from different schools, in red and blue and yellow and brown uniforms. They passed each other, not acknowledging, only talking to friends from their own schools... Passing smoky factories enthusiasm inhaled deeply. I remembered being a student myself, using elaborative hand gestures to demonstrate a point and emphasise cool comments. I laughed out loud when I saw a group of boys with boyishly smug looks, and a cute clean shaven, faces. I remembered also wanting what all young girls desired – to be seen not just by the river boys, but also by the cow and stick fighting boys.

Now here I was at the age of thirty-five years, working in a building that was dangerous, with a don't care boss. All he did was sit there, munching on vetkoek which he bought from a woman called Londi. She was the same woman he had fired a few weeks previously for being lazy; and he was certainly unaware of what she had put in those vetkoek. I crossed the busy traffic... I passed her and greeted Londi, selling vetkoek. She packed up her vetkoek her hands in plastic gloves. She packed them neatly in a bucket, sweat covered her whole face, she wiped the sweat with the back of hand. She continued packing.

There was silence for a while. The camera tilts on its side, and pans toward her hands. She places two hands around her mouth and starts speaking in two different voices which alternate with each hand. One voice is husky and low, and the other is higher pitched, yet soothing.

'Hawu! Isishayile ntombi?'

'Ukushona kwelanga, uk'phela komsebenzi.'

She rubbed her eyes. *Ngibone*, I saw other women rubbing their eyes and also having the breathing problems Londi was experiencing

'You not well? I asked.

'I don't feel very well, she replied.

She was sad. There was a heaviness in her voice. I thought it was because she had been fired, but perhaps there was another reason.

‘Huh! might be the heat,’ I said. ‘I see everyone is complaining about dry eyes ...’

‘What kind of heat only affects only the eyes and skin?’

This was a good question; and I wondered why I was not affected by it as Londi seemed to be. We were both quiet. Londi lifted her skinny arms and her neck with both hands, as though now she were cold.

Now I asked: ‘Are you cold?’

‘I feel cold, *sengathi*. I’m in a refrigerator and in seconds it’s like I’m next to a burning bush or something. Hayi, I’m telling you, *imisebenzi ka Gregory*.’

‘Come on! Don’t say that. You know how quickly a silly thought can become a rumour.’

‘*Uthi mangithini Zakithi?*’

‘Look, I know things are looking rougher now but ...’

‘You call this rough! You don’t know anything.’

‘Londi, I know it was unfair how he let you go but ...’

‘You are not his spokesperson. Say it as it is: fired me for no good reason.’

‘Have you been sitting here since the rise of the sun? I asked her.

Camera shot: Her eyes look out from the side of the shot. They are striking, yet strange, she looks disengaged.

Londi looked underweight for a person who fried vetkoek. Her hair was thinning. Her pupils were slits in her eyes. I did hope she would feel better.

Walking away from her my footsteps were heavy as if someone was holding my back with a plank. There was something different in the air. It was still misty, yet the sun pierced my skin... At the traffic light, I stopped, waiting for a truckload of wood to drive on; the driver gave me a disgusted glance, his hands were stiff and firm on the steering wheel. A scooter hoofed on, behind the truck, the man on it, he looked like he had just woken up, as he was still in his pyjamas, two pigs followed behind with coiled tails. I was shocked by what I was seeing. Was this a joke being played on me or was this some kind of ceremonial event that happened in the city. I laughed, and then dismissed what I had seen.

I waited for the lights to turn green, but the traffic lights remained on red... The wind changed direction. My shoulders felt stiff. I tried to loosen them by rubbing firmly. Must be all the hard work, I did today I thought. The skies seemed closer than normal; and as I looked up I saw sixteen military silver aeroplanes scattered across the evening skies, which then faded between a blanket of clouds.

I looked to see whether anyone had seen all this. It was as if the whole human civilisation had disappeared into unknown walls. The streets and pavements were empty. The congested buildings had changed shape. I turned back to the traffic light, nothing was now in my way, but I was worried face. Just when I was about to step off the pavement, I saw two feet appearing from nowhere and I was faced with two men in white overalls. They told me I was not supposed to walking on the road because it wasn't safe, I argued and told them I was from Ethethe Village I fought stick fighting boys and I helped my grandparents raise my brothers.

They told me that for my own safety, I had to find shelter. I had to go back to where I had come from. I demanded to know what was really wrong. They said, they were not at liberty to say. But something was wrong in this city. The air was now misty at a time when the sun should have been shining, and there was a faint smell. I knew the smell quite well I recognised the smell. Having grown up in a village where we were used to digging holes a few meters away from our homes and that hole was shared with maggots and flies.

But I didn't think that *that* smell would come from the sea and that it would be so deadly. Fish floated on the shoreline. I decided to go back to the factory and wait there for everything to calm down. When I arrived, I could not believe what I saw. Bodies were scattered on the ground like rubbish bins on a dumping site. I don't know how I survived seeing this horrific sight. I think my ancestors were with me that day.

The camera pans to close up: her eyes twinkle and her eyebrows twitch.

I went back home to my village.

This all happened a week ago. When I arrived home, I found out that my grandfather had died. I had been running from something in my life, from disruption, and I now found out that the only person I trusted had left me.

She touches her face and quickly brings her hand down to the table. She looks into the camera again. The camera goes off, then comes back on.

I always thought that my grandmother, Gog Connie was dry and wrinkled as a prune. Her veins wavered through her fingers. She constantly complained of sore knees and ankles. When we were sitting around the coal stove, my siblings and I had to rub her feet with Vaseline. I ended up shutting out the complains and moans. When the pain continued I took I thought it normal. Old bones, old skin.

Her plaits move to the front of her face and they cover her eyes as well as her nose.

But I wish I had listened, really wish I had; and maybe I would have prevented everyone from feeding on each other. My grandmother had the disease of the bones, the weather whispered to her bones that it was about to storm in a day or two. I believed that her bones knew, because every cramp around her knees prompted us to simultaneously close the windows and grab the washing and blankets from the fence outside. And prepare for the sweet pouring rain. Rain was like a wet towel on my face, made me think of how fish, breath under water. Only men of a certain age were deemed ready to fish in the river. In the meantime, us women, with our uncombed coils of hair, tiptoed behind our mothers and grandmothers to work in the fields. Before it was time to plough. I woke up early in the morning. By the time the leeches of the house woke up I was already in the kitchen, making a fire to warm the house, cooking *umdoko*. The clouds were dark. I lit the candles. I mixed the maize meal with water until it had no lumps, until it was smooth as my grandfather's bald head. The room started warming up, the water boiled. I cooked *umdoko*.

The camera is still on a close up of her face. She pauses, and looks at her hands, nervously twisting her hands around. She sniffs. The camera pans closer to her face. The skin between her upper lip and the tip of her lower nose twitches.

The wind blew the door open, glacial wind, the pot on the stove shifted. My nightie pressed against my body. I shivered... I rushed to close the door. The wind was trying to blow everything away, even my memories. The curtains billowed. My eye caught Mrs Ngobese and her family staggering towards their bakkie. Mr Ngobese worked as a security guard he had come home two weeks ago with a new radio. I think they had heard on the radio that the clouds would be angrier this morning and had decided not to let anyone know. Instead they packed their clothes and-squashed into the bakkie. The tyres of the bakkie squealed against the asphalt and slid backwards and hit their kraal. The bang woke everyone in the house, and they all assumed that I had banged something.

The camera pans She looks down, the plaits fall over her face. She takes a deep breath. As she raises her hand, the camera picks up a freshly raw scar on her arm. It zooms in on the scar. She brings her hand down on the table, the camera zooms out.

That week Gog Connie had the most horrible cramps in her joints. She could not sleep. Jabu, my older brother, ran towards the kitchen wearing his short pants and torn vest. He was followed by Jomo, my other brother. Jomo shoved me aside, making me stand closer to the stove. He was whistling.

I looked at the sky through the window. Clouds were like an opera with streaks of writhing and caterwauling goats and what seemed like wood fences flailing about. Gog Connie shouted that we must cover all the mirrors and windows. That moment I was glad that we didn't have long mirrors like the Ngobese. Jomo and I did as Gog Connie had asked. I sighed and took a blanket and sat in the warm kitchen. The torrent of rain became louder, stronger. The roof began to shake from the wind. I knew everyone was thinking what I was thinking; What if the roof fell on top of us?

'This roof is strong as an elephant's trunk. Your grandfather built it himself. May his soul rest peace.'

Thus, Gog Connie reassured us. I didn't like people using the dead in everyday conversation. Let the dead be.

I should have listened to my thoughts. But who was I? I was nothing in my family. To my brothers I was a disrespectful girl that thought she was a woman. To my grandmother, I had to marry to be disciplined. To me, I was beyond their thoughts. Jabu ran to grab more blankets as we sat surrounded by the sounds of the storm.

The roads were barricaded with floods. The land we nurtured turned on everyone, the sun lowered its gaze and burnt all the crops... Each home creaked and cracked open, the floods swallowed each home, each house like a sinking ship tumbling in a wave. The plants were uprooted and swept away in the flood. I stood there watching those I loved paddling somewhere.

The sea had followed me to Etante Village and decided to drown my people, my family, by bringing the heavy rains... I knew I was not dead because I saw the people in my village dying in various ways. Some drowned, some were buried alive by crumbling homes and some...it was horrible.

I said the rain was God peeing angrily. But somehow, I had to sit in front of this camera with tubes on my skin. My name is Ukuphazamiseka, which means disruption. I am just a girl from Etante Village, the only one who survived the rains.

Ukuphazamiseka looks into the camera: The camera picks up something moving and skipping inside her skin. The camera moves in close, water gushes out from her skin. The camera falters and becomes black.

The car remote

It started with me being afraid to drive, and then gathering up the courage to drive, finally. But this is not a story about driving. The morning was cold. A cloud floated out of my mouth with every breath I took. I drove out slowly checking my mirrors. I could still hear my instructor saying most accidents happen because people do not check their mirrors, and the blind spot in particular

I drove out of the yard in a white Nissan, I went through the green traffic lights and I stopped at *Magwinya* house. I was chuckling with joy. I usually sent my roommate to buy fat cakes, since she was an early riser. But I thought that I really should check out the place myself. She always came back with stories about strange things that happened at the *Magwinya* house. My roomie always said we breathed the same air as ghosts –and things happened... So, the tales she came home with, well, it was like listening to someone who had swallowed coal stones.

I jumped out of the car and went inside the house to buy the *amagwinya*, the vetkoek. I was really in a good mood that morning... The wind dusted the birds' feathers as they sat on the fence. I was so pleased that I could finally drive alone; mostly though that I could make things happen.

It didn't take long for the woman inside to come out, her hands smeared with dough, her fingers pointed to the floor. I wanted to lick the dough. My grandmother used to let me help her clean her hands. I would sit on the floor closer to her knees and clean her hands with my teeth with the salty taste remaining on my tongue. The woman gave me the look, telling me that the *amagwinya* were not ready. Firstly, the dough had to rise. The dough had to rise when that was done, she had to beat the air out of the dough. Once that was completed, she had to let the dough rest for ten minutes. After that the oil needed to be hot. But she still had to fry the fat cakes inside the oil before I could indulge.

She invited me inside since I was the first customer. The smell of yeast and dough dispersed to the door, it made me even hungrier. I sat in a chair in the cardboard shack, while a bucket of fire kept belly dancing in the middle of the room. The big black pot was steady on the fire. Looking at her fist pounding the life out of the dough, I was reassured that she had the necessary skills for making the vetkoek. I had to keep distracting myself, to avoid thinking about the smell.

Finally, she gave me the three fat hot cakes I had waited for. The heavens opened; I felt like a little girl who had grown wings. But when I emerged from the shack, my fat cakes fell, rolling onto the ground, collecting dust as they rolled.

Something weirder than dreams took over. There was nothing wrong with my grip normally, but I had lost all control. I stood in shock, my skin prickling as my fat cakes rolled on towards the gate. I followed and found that my car was not where I parked it.

It had been stolen. Why? I spun in circles looking, standing in the cluster and mud. Dogs stopped barking. They too, seemed thoroughly shocked. The one time I had decided to drive the car it had been stolen. Words left me. Still caged in my frenzy, I hardly noticed an odd-looking woman, dressed in layers of blankets, peeping out of the door, from a house that had not been there before. It had simply appeared from nowhere. Her plaits fell to her shoulders, and she smiled. She waved frantically. I had no time to wave back with my thin brown hands...

‘Hello.’

She just stood there, poised. There was an air of fragility and calmness around her. When I looked at her, I felt like I wanted to be her for a minute; she wasn’t experiencing the panic and anxiety I was at this point. Smiling as she moved towards me, closer up I examined her face: she had two chins, no nose and four eyes. The hem of her blankets had white flaky stains, they trickled onto the ground as she approached me.

‘Oh! I just came back from the City of Snow,’ She said.

I just stood there, staring at her. She continued smiling. ‘What has happened? You look scared.’

Damn right I was.

‘My... my...car,’ I stuttered, finding it hard to get the words out, paralysed by the fact that the car had been stolen. Something that belonged to me had been taken without my consent.

Yet the sun continued to shine in an azure sky. It felt like my heart had been cut out of my body, but I could still feel the desperate beating of it inside the chest. My thoughts were like scattered rice on the floor. I kept thinking that maybe cars should have hands and pockets, so that when hooligans saunter near them, the cars could defend themselves.

The odd-looking woman still stood beside me. She was glaring at me. I finally asked her if she had seen anyone or heard anything. A teardrop trickled out from my left eye, I wiped it away. She smiled again, and then she took out a car remote. She pointed at the gate, where my car had been parked. She pressed the remote. A flashing gleam of light hit the spot where my car had been, and my car materialised right in front of us! I clutched my tummy and took a step back. I rubbed my eyes, and thought that perhaps my anxiety over the car, and my attachment to it had gone to my head. I rubbed my eyes furiously, the car gleamed in front of us, and I pointed at it with my shaking finger.

‘That’s my car!’ I whispered in disbelief.

The odd-looking woman laughed.

‘Amazing huh?’

She gave me the remote control as if it were a gift. I didn’t know if I should be cross with her or impressed by her abilities. Was this a practical joke, or was it a test? A test of what? I was still shocked by the thought that my car could be taken by anyone, at any time. I got inside the car. I put my hands on the steering wheel. I wanted to get the hell out of there, but I was also curious. I didn’t want to leave without saying something to this woman, without giving her a piece of my mind.

I got out of the car. The street was quiet, full of normal people going about and minding their own craziness. Some young girls had toned well in their dresses, and their skin shone in Vaseline... A curvaceous woman bent down to scrub the floor. An old woman, her legs were wide open, sifted grains to make *mabele* grain porridge. A man dressed in mining overalls whistled a tune as he walked down the street. He was followed by a woman clutching on her bag and a young girl swept a yard dressed in her pajamas, her head covered in cornrows, wisps of

dust floated above her. School kids galloped across the road.

I went inside the house, clutching my car remote. A smell of burnt pap cloaked my nostrils. I was greeted by a bed that looked like an abstract painting; bed sheets snaked on the floor, with greased pillows stuck on top of each other. The corner of the bed, sprung out bed springs and more layers of blankets, and in the middle of the room, there stood a three-legged table. On top of the table there was a ceramic tea cup set with steaming tea. The old woman sat on the bed dangling her feet in a dish. The galvanized dish had a hole and the milk pouring in from the wall disappeared without flooding the shack. The shack looked big outside, inside it seemed as if all the air had been squeezed out of it. My head touched the roof. I greeted both the old woman and an odd- looking young woman who was also squeezed in there.

‘How did you make my car do that thing?’ I sounded stupid.

The old lady pointed behind her. One thousand car remotes hung on the peeling wall. Every car remote had a previous owner. Apparently when you pick any remote from the wall and press it, the whole house turned upside down. The old woman told me I could then be sent to wherever the remote was from. I laughed at the ridiculousness of such a claim. She looked at me, her eyes disdainful. The odd-looking young woman, who I realised must have been the daughter sat at the table drinking tea, her hands folded in her lap.

‘Press any remote key and see for yourself, little girl.’ the old woman said.

She was daring me to do so. I was reluctant. What if this were all a joke? I pressed one of the car remotes. A huffing wind began to blow, pressing me against a wall, as the wall roller-coasted upside-down. The legs of the table pointed upside down. I thought it was over, but then suddenly out of nowhere I heard baroque ear-splitting music followed by loud screaming voices and the breaking of bottles. The house shook... The women instructed me to open the door, which now had a turned upside-down handle. I opened the door.

A spicy chicken gizzard smell enveloped me. Rubbish bins carpeted the road. A taxi was stuck. Some robots curved toward the ground. Next to me stood a man selling both brooms and herbal medicine guaranteed to win back one’s first love. We were in the city now and stood facing the tallest skyscraper there. There was a fancy bar on the ground floor, it had golden windows without curtains. People shoved one another, punched and swore. Everything was perfectly choreographed chaos. They meant to kill each other, these people and this seemed to be the accepted thing to do.

The odd-looking woman touched my shoulder.

‘You have seen enough. Let’s go back.’

She pulled me back inside the matchbox house. I could not believe my eyes. I was shocked by what I had seen.

There was a huge bang on the door. The old woman stood up and pressed her whole, body weight against the door. Her face was time-worn, her strands of hair were winterly white, she was perspiring. I rushed to help. The person behind the door pushed and hammered the door. I was instructed to press the car remote or witness my head rolling to the floor. It made me think of my fat cakes. I did as I was told, I too was sweating and out of breath. I pressed. Immediately we were back safely in the silence of the shack, the smell of *amagwinya* around us.

‘What the hell was that?’ I asked, alarmed.

They explained to me that the remote had transported us to a dangerous area which they had no control over. This was not the first time this had happened, either. This was because they had no idea where the car remotes were from or who they belong to.

‘Maybe, it is best to give each car remote a label’ I said, ‘when you’ve pressed the buttons and know where each comes from.’

‘That is a great, great idea.’ They smiled back at me.

I stood up, shook their hands goodbye, and returned to my car.

I stood next to my car and I pressed the remote. Suddenly my car was not there again. I realised I had taken a wrong car remote from the one thousand car remotes that hung on the wall. I knew this could not be good.

I stood on the brow of a hill. I looked down at foggy leafless trees in a fog, rusted chimneys from a row of houses. Roads meandered through the landscape like quilted patterns. The hills were divided by trees. I walked down. I had no idea what my plan was. I knew I should be pressing the damn remote to send me back home.

Instead, I trickled down the hills like unwanted sewage water.

The shredded path led me inside a home. Four tall cloaked man, with teeth carved like crocodiles, whistled as they saw me walking in. When they blinked their breathing became shallow and they had bloodied hands. They moved their faces closer and stared at me, revealing their carved teeth. When I tried to turn around to walk out. They grabbed me by my turtle jersey, my heels screeched the dust up. I trembled and sat down on a wooden bench. One of them whispered to me that they hadn’t had a visitor like me since the three suns. They would enjoy my skin, when it was boiled, they said

Their hands had long stiletto nails. One of them came up to me, and turned my head sideways, he smelt like decaying fish. My eyes saw a woman who looked like dry earth, her skin fell to the ground. She looked at me, her eyes were hollow. Other women inside the room were cloaked and covered the faces with oily hair strands adorned in forest greenery. They kneeled close to the stove, stirring a huge pot which held a gooey soup. They were graceful in their movements. The cloaked man circled around me. Gnawing on the body of a dying woman with only one leg. I realised this was no place for humans; something horrible and happened here. And me being here meant I would become dry and one-legged too.

My eyes shut; I couldn’t look any longer. I had to find that car remote from my pocket and leave this strange place. Maybe they thought I was strange too. I couldn’t speak their language and I wore different clothes, but was that enough to make me less human? I wondered what they saw in me or who they thought I was. But I was sure that the muscled man with a machete swinging in his hand was not about to answer my questions. Carefully, I put my hand inside my pocket and pressed the remote control which rested there. This place was not a place for people like me.

Before you could say Shaka Zulu was the king of the Zulus, I was spinning... My feet were on some kind of continuous treadmill. I was being chased inside a dilapidated building; the building was a maze of corridors with doors locked. I ran and ran. The walls were white. I pressed the remote again. I was transported to another building but still running.

'Dammit! Ukuthanda izinto!' I shouted.

The fear made me go icy cold.

'What if I couldn't get home again?'

I heard three men shouting behind me. The clink and clanking on the wall was suddenly silent. The shouting voices echoed through the walls and my breathing scared the crows away. I came to a stop. Suddenly there was a peaceful music playing now. The music carried an explosion of hope and calmness. My heart changed its beating. My shoulders relaxed as I leaned against the wall, trying to catch my breath. I took out the remote, looked at the red and black oval-shaped form. I carefully put in my back pocket. I peeped inside a room and saw an old blind man sitting on a cardboard pile of boxes. He was eating cheese with his dusty hands. I stood there, not making a sound.

'Are you going to stand there or are you going to say hello?' asked the old blind man.

A man with dreadlocks and broad shoulders and brown eyes, came out of the wall as well.

'Goodness! I thought. The river of Jordan between my legs would drown me. He was gorgeous.'

He might as well be the sweet sugar in a lucky packet, the sugar in the sugar. He was handsome... He signalled to me to come with him. He smelt like a garden. I held his hand, he pulled me through a wall. I found myself inside the most beautiful room. Everything in the room was made of gold clouds. The space was grand with a huge golden table. Suddenly as if sectioned in colour; the reds, the yellow, the golds and a beautiful mess of fresh greens. The wind blew in, the light remained inside. Two toddlers slept on the bed, I picked up the smallest child. He smelled like morning oranges that had just been plucked. I held him tight. I put him down.

'I smell an earthy being.'

An old man outside the wall kept saying that no one was allowed to be here. I looked at the brown man who stood opposite me. There was something soft and free about him. It felt as if a part of me was kept with him. I stood up to leave. A floating stick stopped me and pressed me down to the chair. The brown man raised his hand and the stick fell down. He apologised profusely. He didn't want me to leave. He clothed me in a silver gown and adorned my wrist with jewellery. He took the car remote and said he would keep it safe for me.

I saw fire in his eyes. I nodded.

He gave me food. I ate. The shower appeared whenever I needed it. I could not resist him. I walked towards the open window and gasped at the beauty I saw there. Mountains and valleys were woven together by a sparkling waterfall. The fields were a paddock of green grassland with small golden chalets ascending to the top of the mountain. It was like something only found in

dreams. The sun opened its arms to welcome me. Many suns passed. The brown held my waist, his chin was on my chin. He told me that if I stayed, I could rule the lands. I didn't have to go back. There was peace and gold. I turned around our eyes met. A basket of fish, bread and fruits lay on the table, together with an array of coconut drinks.

I took care of the kids. I didn't cook, but still I ate. One night I asked him where all the food came from. I wanted to help with groceries. He looked at me with his volcanic eyes, he laughed.

'I make things happen. What else do you want?'

This was the moment to say what was in my heart. I looked at him. He was kind.

I said, 'To go home.'

Without hesitation took out the car remote and handed to me.

The next thing I knew I was waking up in my bedroom, dressed in my nightie. I rushed to the kitchen. My roomie was there making pancakes. I could not understand. What I saw was the same story, my roomie had told me. I went to her and hugged her tightly and she said to me:

'We are no longer having *amagwinya!*'

When Mama Chiusali took a taxi...

They talked about her in the village. They didn't realise she could hear them. But she did. Mama Chiusali heard everything. She was very powerful, but she also knew that there were more powerful forces than her. There was darkness she couldn't dispel. Something deadly skulked around Mama Chiusali's house. Dark shadows loomed and stood at her gate looking and waiting for her to leave the protected house.

Last Friday she encountered one of these. She received a call but all she could hear someone was on the line breathing. She had taken a taxi but hadn't arrive at her destination.

On the Saturday when she woke up, she saw the shadows peering in at the windows and she knew it had happened again. Her scars opened, but no blood came out. Wind roared like a beast outside; a weeping scream was heard at the end of the road. Another family had lost their loved one. Who was it this time? A young schoolgirl? A husband on his way to work? When will this ever stop, she wondered.

She looked at her clock beside her bed. She had had the same dream, one that had taken away her smile. It was seven in the morning: the right time to wake up, open the windows and let the sun stream in, but in Mama Chiusali's reality it was different. Her curtains were shut. She lay in her bed, head resting on a pillow. She looked up to the ceiling where there was a brownish patch. It appeared every morning, but it now looked bigger than it had two mornings ago.

She blew air up in the ceiling, and quickly grasped her bed sheets, the ceiling scabs fell off, and faded in the air. The ceiling became whiter than chicken feathers, she then carefully rested her hand on top of her tummy, she took a deep breath. exhaled, but a frown remained knitted between her brows. This was her life with a routine she could not run away from for years.

The house had been owned by her grandmother and had been passed down to her because she was the only relative left. Her grandmother had woken up one morning, not breathing, as still as a skeleton. No one knew what had happened to her. No doctor could say. No sangoma had an answer. No Zionists prayer groups were able to say what had gone wrong. Mama Chiusali had tried so hard to make this a home for her children and grandchildren but this house still retained the same doors, the same windows and the same curse wanting to eradicate every Chiusali clan.

She lit a candle. She looked at the flame and she saw her face turning into millions shapes of her ancestors. The flame grew bigger and rounder. *And there is nothing you could do...* she heard the whisper in her ear. There was no one around. There was a wardrobe in the room, windows speck of dust on the cabinet where the bottle of perfumes and candles stood, all looked normal, as it had been; even the phone ringing became part of this sameness.

She stood up, put on her slippers and dressing gown and made her way to the bathroom. Her house was quiet, it smelled like burnt rubber in moist soil. She finished taking a bath. She smudged herself from head to toe, blowing smoke around the house. Mama Chiusali wore her colourful print dress and sat on the stoep drinking tea. The gate opened slightly. But no one walked in to sit next to Mama Chiusali. She missed those days when people visited when a local fisherman would bring her fresh fish from Umdloti river; she missed her neighbours borrowing sugar. Lately no one waved at her when they passed her slightly opened gate and orange brick walls. She wore her worry like skin.

She sat on the bench reading her Bible. The phone rang for the third time. She kept reading until the phone stopped ringing. Mama Chiusali lived alone, her children were grown, and had been married off. She was not in contact with them. She did not like to wonder why were no longer in contact with her. Mama Chiusali remembered when the stoep had been filled with laughter and the fragrance of ripe peaches blended with the smell of dust from the trucks passing by, the coal boys shouting '*Malahle! Coal!*'

She had never understood why the *malahle* boys sold coal in the middle of the blazing summer. Funny that they were always on time, then, but in winter it was a different story. The memories continued: Mandisa, her first born, leaning on the fence singing more sweetly than a hummingbird. Mpilo, her second born, playing catch in the grass with his cousins. Fruit and different kinds of fizzy drinks on the table on the stoep. She remembered she had baked scones for everyone and prepared seven colour salads along with the chicken stew *noJeqe*. The children's sweet voices echoed. The light from the sun shone on every child in Mama Chiusali's yard.

'Let's play Who are you are,' said Onica. They gathered around the circle, and held hands, but first they quarrelled over who would be the first to start. 'Okay, I will go first,' announced Onica.

'No, I will go first. My name is Mandisa I am the first born and the wisest. Clap twice, twice. Taa taa ra... Taa taa ra' They responded by clapping excitedly.

'My name is Onica, I am the queen. Clap four times four times. Taa taa ra... Taa taa ra... Taa taa ...'

'No that is not how it is played.'

'I am the Kween, I change things.'

We will tell uMamkhulu that you decided to be a boss.'

'Go ahead' Onica had folded her arms, 'UMamkhulu will be on my side because she invites the clouds so that it rains inside.'

Everyone became quiet including Mama Chiusali's daughters, they gave Onica strange looks. They soon burst out laughing at the remark, but Mama Chiusali knew there was some truth in what their cousin had said. Her memory cut into by the phone ringing again. Minutes turned into dreadful years; light disappeared to shadows. Darkness made itself known; a flock of pigeon birds sat around the fence.

She remained sitting on the stoep, drinking tea. A car stopped, and a young man stepped out and waved to her. He was not allowed to walk in. She stood up and put the cup of tea on a tray. She went inside the house and took out her scarf... The hired car was outside and ready to drive her wherever she wanted to go. Mama Chiusali was afraid to take public taxis. She climbed inside the car.

'Sawubona Mfana.'

'Yebo, Mama Chiusali. Having a good day?'

'Don't take the Umdloti bridge.'

‘But that will take us an extra hour Mama Chiusali.’

‘Do what I say and please don’t stop for anyone on the road. Don’t stop even if you see a small girl crying’

They drove in silence. Finally, the boy, Kino, had to ask.

‘Is it true what they say about you, Mama Chiusali? I mean, you seem kind and you always mind your own business. I cannot think that the village whispers are true that you are a witch.’

‘How is your mother doing, Kino?’

‘Well, the medicine you suggested helped her. Now she can walk. I mean for seventeen years she has been in a wheelchair, unable to walk or stand. Thanks to you she now runs around as if she has never walked.’

‘I think you have your answer, Kino. We are here. Wait for me.’

‘No problem, I will find shade.’

‘Don’t park your car under that tree, a storm is gathering.’

Kino nodded. ‘*Ngikhuluma kwesikhathi*, two cars will be stolen, right under your nose if you leave your car, lock it. *Sezwana, do you hear me* Kino?’

Kino stared at Mama Chiusali as if she had a screw missing. Mama Chiusali walked into the police station. She was led to an empty office to wait for Officer Ndlondlo. Her knees were together, withered hands flat on the desk, her skin covered by the bright colours of her fabric scarf.

The hissing breath was hard and soft. Her nail tips looked like a burnt ash. She shifted on her chair, hearing the sound of truck passing by. The weight on heels pressed on the dirty floor. When the wind blew the silky fabric draped around her body, covering every loopy fold of her skin. She looked around the room, smelling the lavender incense aroma in it the door opened, the investigative officer walked in with a glass of water and sat down.

‘Here is your water Mama Chiusali.’

‘*Ngiyabonga. Thank you.*’

‘I apologise for keeping you waiting. Can you believe there was a hijacking right outside the police station? People these days!’ Mama Chiusali nodded at him.

‘So, Mama, could you tell me what happened? In your own words.’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘You not sure, Mama Chiusali, you are the only surviving witness, who can tell us *kahle kahle kwenzakaleni, what really happened*. Mama the villagers of Mutirikwi have said many things about your behaviour. Do you know why?’

‘Maybe you should ask them. They might help you Officer. After all, they are the ones talking about me.’

‘What do you remember?’

‘What I remember is something that should not be remembered. But everywhere I turn, they talk about my scars, they follow me, they watch me, they want me to break down and ...’

She was interrupted right then. Mama Chiusali didn’t want that day to happen to anyone else. She touched the scars around her neck; her wrinkled and veined hand lightly patting the scarred area. The scar felt fresh; it felt like a smooth, dull feeling, if one could taste the feeling, it might taste like a week-old coffee. Brushing the wounded area with her fingers was a reminder of how she had nearly lost her life.

Mama Chiusali sat opposite the investigative officer, with his badge blinding her; making her skin prickle. For a whole month she had received calls from the police station to come in and answer a few questions. On a Friday afternoon Mama Chiusali had been involved in an accident that took many lives. This had been the third accident to take place in the village in the space of four months. The aircon blew icy air onto her and she shivered, pulling her scarf closer around her shoulders.

‘Mama Chiusali, I’m sorry for taking up your time with this, but we would like to know if you remember anything else about the accident. Is there something you may have not told us, maybe that perhaps slipped your mind?’

The investigative officer leaned forward; as if he wanted to discuss something private with Mama Chiusali. He was pleased with himself.

‘I think I have said everything I remembered.’

‘Mama Chiusali, what is it that you remember? Tell me again.’

‘You mean about the accident?’

‘Yes, Mama Chiusali.’

The investigative officer leaned back, holding his coffee and rhythmically tapping his thumb on the handle of the mug; he crossed his legs. His other hand held a pen. The room filled with lavender fog. He looked at Mama Chiusali, thinking that a serpent was lurking behind the walls. Mama Chiusali tried to explain about the shadows that loomed when she passed Umdloti Bridge, that the bridge shook under her feet, the stones from the river floated in a cloud of dust before her.

These things had begun after they had buried her grandmother. One evening she had walked back to the house after chatting to her neighbour. She had found a human skull wrapped in a newspaper at the foot of her gate. That night she dreamed that a dismembered figure stood before her, muddy water flowing from the ears and the mouth, the nose a well of muddy water which flooded the village... The muddy water rose up from a well and swallowed everything around it. And then she had woken up.

Now, comfortably wrapped in a scarf, she sat opposite that caffeine-drinking officer.

Would he believe her if she decided to tell him what had really happened?

‘*Mfana wami*, I understand you want solutions. I also want answers, but I am not sure what would you possibly get from me.’

The investigative officer chewed his pen like a dog amputating a bone.

‘Mama Chiusali do you remember anything about the accident that happened a year ago, close to Umdloti Bridge?’

‘All the accidents happened at the bridge, *Phoyisa*.’

‘And you were in all the taxis?’

‘*Yebo kunjalo*.’

‘And you were not harmed.’

‘*Yebo kunjalo*.’

‘You came out with a neck scar, *Kuphela*?’

‘*Ushaye khon ’impela*.’

‘Tell me how is that even possible?’

Mama Chiusali felt her blood regrouping surging throughout her body; the blood reached her cheeks she felt red and terribly elongated.

‘That morning, I was in a taxi going to town. We passed Umdloti Bridge. The sky was the colour of splendour with all different kinds of birds and flying flowers about.’

‘Flying Flowers? You mean butterflies.’ Mama Chiusali nodded. There was a slight pause, then Mama Chiusali continued, ‘The taxi smelled of dandruff and exhaust fumes.’

‘Maybe there was something wrong with an engine.’

‘I thought so at first.’

‘But you thought it wasn’t actually that it was something else?’

‘There was a girl in the taxi wearing a tulip dress. I thought she looked beautiful. I remember because she had skin that was like glazed brown. It was glowing. She was beautiful.’

‘And then what happened?’

The wall behind the officer creaked open and tiny spiders crawled out followed by worms, spewing and spreading on the wall. Mama Chiusali shifted on her chair and looked right at the officer with the smug look on his face who had no idea that an insect gathering was congregating behind him.

‘Can I have some water?’

The investigative officer looked at Mama Chiusali and looked at the clock, and finally stood up. He left Mama Chiusali alone. She looked around the room, and every wall had a pounding heart. She had to leave the room at once. The weight on her heels pressed down into the dirty floor.

The door opened the officer walked back in with a glass of water. He sat down. Finished his coffee and closed the file. Then looked straight into her face.

‘Mama Chiusali, there was another accident just a few minutes ago. I am afraid we have to finish here.’

‘You’re letting me go?’

‘Yes ma’am.’

‘Oh!’

The officer stood and left leaving Mama Chiusali still seated. The rain pattered against the windows, thunder rumbled outside, shaking the table. Branches smacked against the roof. Mama Chiusali left the police station. Outside a large cloud moved towards her, people ran for cover and umbrellas were gone with the wind. She quickened her pace. She found herself standing in the middle of nothing. She was alone in a gigantic green field. She heard a voice.

‘You were not in the taxi, Mama Chiusali.’

‘You can no longer harm me; people have noticed something is going on.’

‘Yes, they have, and they think it’s you ... they call you a witch. You know what they do to witches?’

‘I’m not scared of you.’

‘You should be Mama Chiusali, or we will do what we did to your grandmother.’

‘You are bluffing. You can hurt me, but you cannot take my life, I’m the only relative left with this kind of gift.’

‘This thing can end here. Give me what I want. Don’t be stubborn like your granny’

‘Give me more scars and kill more people, but there is nothing you can do to me. And I am tired of this life here, I am happy to see my ancestors.’

The sun came out.

Mama Chiusali stood in front of her door. She opened it, walked in, took off her shoes and waited for more scars, and the continued ringing of the phone.

Hallucinating Vaginas.

Lust by Rina

My routine from work took me past the big smelly drain. I crossed the traffic light at the corner of Exclusives Books and passed the buildings that were taking forever to go up and reached the vegetable stall. I always bought a sack of potatoes. That day, the clouds were grey; the sun was shoved behind a plague of fat clouds. I realised then that I had, unfortunately, left my umbrella back at the office. I am a lawyer.

I had had a stressed client in the office. He was commercially appealing but blinded by certain morals and values that didn't have monetary gain. But he was my client and it was my job to ensure he was stress-free because if he kept stressing, his heart would begin racing, his hands twitched, his breath became jagged, even his tie would become loose with all his pulling and stretching of it. His nerves were his undoing. Therefore, he would end up not revealing the entire truth in court. And that was dangerous because that would mean, I wouldn't be able to bury all the unburied bodies if he became stressed. I tried to keep my clients stress-free so that I could somehow win any and every case.

On the other hand, I was stressed, because it had started pouring. I disliked it when rain found me unprepared. I stood next to the vegetable stall and cursed the pouring rain. I was glad that at least my feet were not caught in muddy puddles. I wore comfortable shoes to withstand any kind of wet. I leaned on the stall staring at the rain as it disappeared into the puddled ground. However, a squelching sound caused me to turn my focus to the pavement where I had walked a moment before.

I saw her. She was running through the puddles. Those muscled legs sparked a certain interest in me. She wore a white silk shirt and a tight black pencil skirt, her heels squelched, clinking on the pavement. She wore no bra – her nipples could have been sculpted by Picasso himself. The wet shirt stuck on her round mounds. She covered her dreadlocks with a bag. It looked like she had just returned from the salon. It baffled me why I could not look away from her and was feeling moistened somewhere. I swear I was not breathing; my lips turned dry.

I imagined my lips right there on the pebbles of her soul. Wetting the dark areola, biting as it hardened, sliding my fingers from her chest, circling her navel. While I fantasised about this she ran towards where I was standing. She bumped my shoulder and threw Said, 'Sorry.' She exhaled. I looked to the passing cars and people without faces under their umbrellas. My chest became tight, I became breathy. She brushed the dripping shirt. Her hands went up in the air and lightly patted the tip of her nipple up and down.

A skyrocket of swell shoot fire out of my vagina. If I kept looking at her lightly patting her chest. I was going to lose any sense of dignity – if I had any left.

Look away! Look away right now! You little whore! I reprimanded myself silently. She pulled the shirt out of the skirt. I saw a glimpse of her navel and pulsating small hairs. Damn can't she just wait to do this at her house, I thought.

'Oh, this suck,' she said.

She looked distraught. Her breasts jingled. I hugged my handbag to my shoulder and shifted a distance away from her. Her hair smelled of citrus and lavender. My body sent mixed

feelings to places I think my gynae didn't know existed. I crossed my legs and took a deep breath. I had no control of this body and I had no idea why I was acting like a virgin losing control... Even my weave had shifted I stepped out from the cover of the stall into the rain. She shouted.

'It is still raining!'

I turned to look at her and could smell her coconut-cinnamon lotion. Her smile lit her eyes behind her glasses. Is this how people fall in love? Or in lust?

'I love rain,' I said.

I responded, and she smiled... Oh god she's a killer, I thought. I turned and left.

At night the gleaming light from the stars streamed through the half-closed blinds and brought me joy. I glanced around my flat. It was dark. I switched on the side lamp and open the windows for the stale air to get out. And for the light to come in. Then I saw her. The same girl from the rain this afternoon was standing downstairs, close to my building. She still wore what she had had earlier on. I rushed downstairs it was still pouring. I opened the glass door, pressed the building code and opened the butler doors.

The smell of rain punctured the air, she stifled a yawn and glanced at her watch. The street light provided enough light to gaze at her perfect figure. She trembled. I stared at her stockings, which were slightly torn. I wanted to rip them off her and feel her skin. To stroke the back of her thigh. That tight skirt would present certain problems. It moulded her curves faultlessly, but that skirt barricaded my desires. She stepped back while I gawked at her.

'You the lady from the stall.'

'And you the lady from the rain.'

'It is late ...'

'You look good in your pjs.'

'Uhm yes. Thank you.'

Her round breasts bounced inside the shirt as she tied up her dreads.

'Sorry. You're probably wondering why I'm here.'

'No.'

'No?'

'No... I mean yes. Are you stalking me?'

'No, Jeez... No, I'm not that bored.'

'You think people that stalk people are bored?'

‘You left these at the vegetable stall.’ She held up the bag of potatoes.

‘And you decided to bring them to me. Why?’

‘I assumed you might need to cook.’

‘Not that it is any of your business, but I’ve already had dinner.’

‘Tomorrow then.’

‘Should I call someone for you?’

‘I didn’t mean to offend anyone.’

‘Not anyone. Just me.’

‘I just brought you your sack of potatoes.’

‘And you expect me to say, what exactly?’

Okay... that sounded bitchy. We both fell quiet. The passing cars underscored our silence. I was just as confused as to why she was there and why I was leaking between my thighs. Thank goodness for my pantyliner. This person, who I didn’t know, had a strange effect on me. She brewed fire and excited my holes. She turned and disappeared into the night. The squelching of her heels slightly faded.

I stood there perplexed trying to figure it all out... I clutched the sack of potatoes in my hand. I looked at it. I went back to the flat. I put the sack of potatoes on the counter. I never forget things... But this time I had. Blame it on a horny vagina.

I took a shower. The warm water was lovely. The lights blinked.

After the shower, I came out dripping water leaving wet footprints on the floor. On the kitchen counter my potatoes had been sliced into chips. The oil was spitting in a pan on the stove. I switched off the stove. I dragged the rubbish bin closer to the stove to throw out the potatoes. The lights blinked again. I washed my hands and trudged towards my bedroom. I slept, thinking that being single and horny was such a tough combination.

At the office the next morning, I stood checking my files for my next appointment. The firm was looking into hiring another African lawyer... They wanted more brownies in the office. Which didn’t overshadow the fact that this firm was built on my people’s hard-earned sweat. However, I could not forget the eye-catching woman from the rain last night.

I opened the bathroom door. It was silent. I liked it when it was this peaceful. The early lights from the harbour twinkled through the bathroom windows. The only thing on my mind was the bloom of her glorious brown skin. I wanted to delve deep into every ounce of her body. But the way she appeared, and then disappeared, almost like a ghost.

I fixed my hair and wondered what was wrong with me. I had been single for three years, and the last partner I had never made me feel so clingy and needy; and clearly, she was pining for me. But her fullness, her roundness, her curves, her skin, the hair on her navel. Just thinking about her fed the swelling down there. I needed to be probed and I needed more than solo action. I had always knew how to pleasure my temptress. Oh well this shall pass too, I thought.

There was a knock on the bathroom door.

‘Just a minute, almost done.’

I washed my hands and unlocked the door. The door handle pushed down, and she walked in. Like a lion circling her prey she moved closer to me, shoved me against the wall. She raised my skirt while pressing me against that wall. The nipples of my breast hardened under my shirt. The light in her eyes was as hungry as I was. Hungry to devour her. I was a gift and she was unwrapping me. I cupped my hands around her face, her mouth opened, I met her lips. She tasted like lemon. An earthquake of desire vibrated through me.

She was entwined with the sun. A touch of her hands, squeeze, and I was on fire and I burned. My legs were a triangle – easy access for her face to dive deeper into me. I could feel her breath between my thighs, I trembled. I raised my leg and pulled her closer to my honeyed fruit. Her wet tongue kissed the pounding clit. I curled. I wriggled up and down. She suckled my pinkness with her mouth and pulled and suckled some more. I moaned. She closed her whole mouth to my vagina. She teased with her tongue, her teeth bit, her lips pulled. She blew air in my wetness. She licked. I moaned. I begged.

I screamed, and my heart raced, pounding as I moved toward climax. I clutched the wall, she had so much power and control over my body. She stood up, inserted her fingers inside me, lubing me. I could not handle it any longer. Every muscle in my body was a ticking bomb.

A warm fuzzy splash sprayed out of my cove. I screamed, and I erupted like a volcano while she continued rubbing and kissing my lips. I collapsed on her shoulders. I lay there, my heart beating. She kissed my neck, my shoulders and slowly took out her long fingers. She licked them. She looked me in the eyes. I had never been fucked like that. She went to the sink and lathered her hands with the soap. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I was still catching my breath. She took a towel and dried her hands.

‘I brought you new panties. I thought you might need them.’

She left me standing there still trying to locate my brain. The door swung open. Like dust, she was gone. I collected myself, the flare of my skirt was pulled above my knees. I picked up the red lace panties she had brought and put them on. I pulled down my skirt.

I stood there alone... I walked out of the bathroom.

Everything and everyone around the office looked so normal. I worked tirelessly. I met new clients, old clients. Happy clients. Sulky clients. Clients I won cases for and those who wanted their money back for misrepresentation. Being a lawyer was an end-end game. Anyway, the end of the day rushed in like a horse in a mare. I took the same route, walked on

the same pavement, passed the same vegetable stall. Patrick, who manned the stall, greeted me with another sack of potatoes.

‘Oh! Shame man. Thank you. I still have potatoes from the other day.’

‘You mean last week.’

‘No, I mean yesterday. I bought the sack here and I forgot it and you gave it ...’ Damn I don’t know her name.

‘The last I saw you was last week. You wore that beautiful power suit. It hugged you in your best places. You are an African turtle. You know...I have been ...’

‘Okay, fine I will take another sack of potatoes.’

‘Oh, my sister...African *kween*...Thank you for your support.’

‘Always.’

‘Can I call ...’

‘Bye Patrick.’ African turtle wow.

As I walked I felt desire. I hoped it was not the African turtle comment, because that was not inspiring at all. I straightened my back. The lacey underwear shifted, twiddling my bud as I walked. The air around me changed. I walked briskly. I saw a narrow passage, warmed by steam from the restaurant above. I took the turn, leaned on the wall and I needed to take a few breaths. I put down my handbag. I can get home and fuck myself there, I thought, so why the fuck am I this horny in the street?

Finally, I reached my flat. I closed the door. I quickly headed to my treasure drawer. I took out the biggest, longest vibrator.

‘Hello Mrs V,’ I said.

The heat tightened, I took off my blazer, unzipped my skirt, unbuttoned my shirt. Clipped off my bra, my round, long breasts dangled lovingly on my nut-brown skin with ready nipples. Everything around me pounded, I was ready to explode. The sweat trickled down my neck into my butt crack. The panties I was wearing were black lace. Not red. I had to take them off and feed my throbbing bud. I had never wanted to release this badly. The volcano spurted on my skin. Warmth enveloped every corner of my body... I looked at myself in the mirror. I had learned over the last three years of pleasuring myself limited self-hate. I loved how I felt, especially when I was horny. My skin glimmered. My hair became fuller. My eyes dilated. My throat yearned to be choked.

Her thin hands came from around my back and cupped my dangling beauties. Her hands slid down, snaking to my navel. Her tongue found my neck, she licked me and bit my earlobes. I moaned. She took a breath. Vibrations churned up to my legs, I trembled. Her fingers skin brushed my back, sliding down to my buttocks. She squeezed and then stuffed her face inside

my butt cheeks. I dripped wetness. She licked me. Her tongue felt like the coffee in the morning.

She pushed me to the bed. Snatched Mrs V out of my hands. She parted my legs, her body moved nearer, closer to mine. My breast lay roundly flat on my chest, my nipples touched hers. We were glued to each other. She fitted like a glove into my body. She was loving. Her clean-shaven vagina met my bushiness. She moved on top me. This was leading to a complete start of climax. I cried. I moaned. She slid Mrs V inside my wetness, an easy slide it was. The motion and the squelching sound my vagina made was making me crazy. Her hand moved in and out. My back arched. I stretched my legs. I hugged her. Held her in my arms. I kissed her. Her hand was steady clutching Mrs V, as she moved inside me like she was Muhammad Ali in a boxing ring.

I kissed her. Her mouth was ready to be glorified. I loved it. This made it real. My tongue wrestled her tongue. I tasted me inside her. It felt like I was at home inside her mouth. Her breath was fresh. She cried. I shuddered. She thrust. I licked her soft neck. She groaned in pleasure. My fingers found her nipples. I pulled them. I pitched them. I wanted to taste her. I wanted to give to her the way she gave to me.

Mrs V moved quicker and with shorter movements. I coiled. My thighs met Mrs V halfway and together with my bum we moved down. And again, I repeated that motion. She moved with me her sweatiness bathe me. I felt I was going to blow. She took Mrs V out and licked me, tickling my swell. I was coming. I was on my way. I could not take it anymore. She tickled again. I bit my lips. She pulled my swollen vaginal lips with her teeth. The pain of pleasure. This was it. I am going to blow and wake all the sleeping owls.

‘I am coming!’ She licked faster and faster. ‘Fuuuuuuuck!’

Everything opened. I squirted. She screamed. I stretched my legs. My arms fell limply on the side of the bed. We both exhaled and lay side by side... My bedroom smelled of sex. I turned on my tummy- I looked at her. Her dreadlocks spread on my pillow. The light streamed through her skin. Her chest went up and down with quick breaths I looked at her, I didn’t want to forget this feeling of being loved. The best sex I had ever was with someone I didn’t even know. Would I be ruining things if I ask her name?

‘Beer or wine?’

‘Wine. Please.’

I walked to the kitchen, I turned to look at her. She lay on my bed; she was so beautiful. I walked to the wine rack. ‘Red or white?’

‘Red.’

‘I liked Red as well. By the way, what is your name? Where do you come from? I will go first. My name is ...’

She was gone. No one was on the bed. I held two glasses of wine in my hands. Blown out of my mind with emptiness. I wanted to cry. There was an envelope on the bed with a red ribbon around it. I put the glasses down. I tore the envelope open.

‘I wish you hadn’t ask who I was. That was the code for me to leave.’

*PS: You were the best human fuck.
Lust by Rina.'*

The alien prostitute

The inside of my nails itched. At times I thought this body was adjusting to the human body but now I was no longer sure. It has been almost ten days now. If I had listened to the body, maybe things would have been different. I had been worried because I thought the itchiness might be a deadly chemical that would annihilate all earth's inhabitants. As if it were almost like a caterpillar: it protects itself by exuding toxins. I don't know why I care so much about these humans, they're hideous to look at ... Well, at least at the beginning that was how I felt...

I looked at the watch. The watch he gave me. The golden colour of the watch looked like the room I was in. My eyes lingered on my arm, watching how the shape of the bones protruded through my skin, looking at how long my fingers were. It was magnificent to witness, and to think that between the skin and the bone, lay the pulse of a heartbeat.

I'm amazed at how magical the human body is. It *is* ugly. In the beginning I gagged in disgust. Some bodies were paler than others; some more brawny. The saddest thing, though, was that they only had two arms. What did one do with such limitation? At times I simply recoiled at the sight of their bodies, but you can't deny the ecstasy and the pleasure those bodies gave and received. Later on, I realised this must have been the way they survived.

Now and then my bottom pressed hard on the wooden chair. I shifted to find a good position. I took a deep breath to feel my buttock re-entering the body. The satin dress shifted, showing my legs.

Not everyone around me looked, but those who gawked at me, would look away when I stared back at them. For me it was easy to deal with these humans. I had no worries. I touched the back of my legs. I remember being told that having hands and legs was important—the thousand legs I had gave me better chances to live.

I was young when I arrived on this planet called earth. I had four hundred limbs. I could crawl. I could fly. I could jump. I could run like no other. The first time I arrived, I landed under the sea, and spent seventy years under the water. I fitted in that world perfectly. But I was not learning much, and I wanted to engage with those things sailing on the boats. I was intrigued by the dwellers with only two legs. The only thing I did was hide from the bigger fish, and you can imagine my distress when I fell into the sea and all my limbs disappeared, and I became the smallest pink fish in sea. It was appalling...

My spine was a broth of fire. I was aroused. Good thing the tablecloth hid my legs. I had legs that thick and long. Although I believed that what really mattered was what took place between those legs. And what could those legs do. I chuckled at the thought.

I was thirty minutes early. He was usually punctual. It was my third meeting with him. He thought I liked him; but actually, he liked what *I* did to him. He dressed like a hearse driver, a hat and a matching suit. I had decided to arrive earlier, so I could familiarise myself with the new space, to remind myself where the knife went, and where to place the fork. But also, the most important thing was the exit. You never know with these humans.

I sjamboked his black ass once until he bled: the sight of blood was dessert for him and butter for me. But one night sent a message, we had to rethink the sjambok because he could no longer stand for long periods at lecturing at the podium, and that embarrassed him. Plus, when he thought of why he could not stand, he became aroused all over again. Fucking fucker. He liked dancing naked in front of the kitchen sink naked. Sometimes I sat on the chair and let his hands doctor my body.

The other girls didn't understand how I did my business. Why did rich, educated and powerful men want only me? I didn't understand why they were shocked, because this was not the only man I had slept with.

That night I decided to wear my so-called nude dress, which matched the colour of my skin. I liked my chocolate skin against the sheen of this dress. He liked it. His nipples prickled. His neck tensed. His manhood thickened. He was uncontrollable, as if ants had crawled inside him and chewed up his insides. I pleased my clients. I treated them with care... He devoured my nakedness. He licked me like a dog, and I chewed him like a bear munching on a fish.

He begged to know which country I came from. He could pick up my unusual accent... He once thought I might have come from Russia; another time he said he thought I was Scandinavian with Scottish blood. Fucking fucker, I was black with thick legs.

The waiter brought a menu and asked me if I was ready to order. I had never been to this restaurant before and I didn't know what to order. I told the waiter I was a bit early and I was waiting for someone. I just ordered water. The caramel ceiling had chandeliers that hung down low to my head; a statue that stood on the side of the creamy wall looked familiar. I smiled; I've been here before as something else.

I felt like I was in a movie. The waiters in their bowties holding towels for guests and wearing white gloves made it feel that way., I thought that somewhere a mob of people would come in shouting 'Alien!' And then I would explode and burn out all the expensive luxury in this room. Everyday I'm convinced that humans tire themselves over material things.

I never forget that I'm really called Anuria and grew up under the shade of a wing surrounded by moon. But my clients called me Ranua.

I shifted in my chair. I played with the mrambonima beads in my dry, woven hair. I stopped. I looked at my hands. My fingernails itched, they felt like they were burning. My tummy grumbled. I looked at my hands, they were turning green, the greenish colour reached my wrists. I hid my hands under the table. Seeing my hands that colour freaked me out. Finally, these humans would know what I was. An alien. A fucking alien prostitute. My panic made me recall the images I saw on the television of how they hung people who were different

from them. The back of my knees became gooey and swollen. I picked up the bottle of gas water and held it against my knees. It numbed the swelling. I called the waiter over. I had beads of sweat covering my eyelids, because something was really wrong.

‘Another bucket of gas water, please and hurry, I said urgently. I was sweating but he stood there, just looking at me.

‘Ma’am.’ He said. I thought my face had melted away, the way he stared at me.

‘Is something wrong? He looked scared, really scared, I could hear my breathing changing, I wondered whether my eyes had turned back to their original size and colour.

‘Sorry Miss, but...’

‘What seems to be the problem?’

‘What is gas water?’

I managed to smile. ‘Sparkling water.’

Oh, sorry.’

‘No, it’s fine.’

The spacious room held everyone’s air. Plates of red steamed crabs, grilled calamari and dorado fishes were being placed on each table, and buckets of wine on ice.

The waiter brought olives and two different kinds of sparkling water; I quickly drank them both to numb the itchiness. It worked all the time. I thought I had mastered the difficulties of surviving in human form. But I had not been prepared for this. This body seemed to be in a war, the pain needed to be released. If I change back into my original form, the restaurant would not be big enough for me.

The waiter smiled as he came in and poured me more water. The towel hung loosely off his shoulder. I started wondering about him. What were his dreams, where did he come from? Did he know who he was or what he could achieve in life? It had been long since I used my power to read what lay inside every lash. Not using that power enabled me to get closer to being ‘normal’. To being fully human. The waiter asked whether everything was alright. I nodded and thanked him. He was attentive, and I understood why.

You’re probably wondering where I’m going with this ...

The world turned surreal when I saw her.

All she did was walk in the room. My chest tightened; I held my breath for a moment. I knew that by the end of this evening I would be swimming in my own sweat. My eyes watered, my vision became blurry for a second, ants crawled inside my skin.

I was aware of every swell between my skin hairs. Every bone in my body became numb. My throat swallowed a river of saliva; looking at her vandalised my body temperature. She took off her earrings, necklace and rings. She placed them inside her bag. I saw the shine, my eyes screamed out of my sockets. The loose skin of my folds dangled and became pruned by her perfume.

She sat down opposite me, picked up the brown menu. Its colour accentuated her thin long fingers which were animated by yellow acrylic nail polish.

No ring, she was not married, or maybe divorced. Naturally no ring meant fuckable.

She crossed her legs. As she did so, I glimpsed her beautiful, brown, toned, but thick thighs. I stared at her. I wanted her wholeness to be tattooed in the membrane of my eyes.

But I didn't want to be rude. My tummy was in roller skates, tumbling down a hill. She shifted on her chair. I looked away. She smiled as she picked up a cup of tea... She crossed her legs. I saw her looking at me. Her eyes had a clear destination in mind. Our eyes locked.

The palms of my hands tingled. I pressed down my hands, my bra wire dug into my skin. I put my hands under my nude dress to pull the wire away from skin – digging harder on my sweaty skin.

She turned and looked to me and every layer of fat melted in a plume of heat. My breasts sagged south. My tummy rolled... Stretch marks snaked down my back.

I looked down at my wine. I looked at the waiter who had been serving me since I had arrived thirty minutes before. He was talking, but I couldn't hear the words. I looked down at my hands, flexed them open and closed. The wind blew in. I turned and looked to the window. It was open, which made my skin sprout new marbles. I ran my fingers on my arm and it felt like a bad tar road to KwaNongoma., Instead I ran my hands through my hair. I knew I needed to find my legs, and I made my way to the bathroom. I stood up, and the damn chair decided to stand with me. The screech made everyone look up and down at me as if I were a lost puppy.

"Are you okay Miss?" The waiter asked.

How should I answer that question? I just stared at him. The hysterical blink took over. Every time I pressed my feet to the ground, the stilettos threatened to fall off my feet.

'Excuse me, where is the ladies' room?' I asked.

'Straight down, your second left Miss.'

I reached the toilet, closed the door, my bladder was almost bursting I unzipped my skirt, took my panties off, sat down ... and nothing came out. I tried to push the pee out. The bladder burped. *'Fucking human body.'*

I took toilet paper and wiped myself. It was like there was a wolverine with claws. down there. I couldn't bear to wipe myself... I did what a normal person would do, I flushed the smelly toilet. I moved to the sink, looked at the mirror, it had fingerprints on it. I splashed water on my face, and as I looked up, there she stood, behind me.

'You look ridiculous as a human ...'

I quickly turned around, trying to find words, my sagging tummy trembled. My neck tensed, and down there the wolverine sharpened his claws. Her voice swallowed all the air in the room. The walls narrowed every time I smelled her...

I found myself locked between the sink and her body. I opened my mouth for air to come out, my lips were dry. If I would lick them now, it would definitely send mixed messages to Kenya, for that was her name. She moved closer, she gazed into my eyes. She bent to take off her heels. She was now the same height as me, and my face stared hers. Our locked eyes. Her breathe brushed on my face. She gave me air that I didn't need. I wondered how she knew, was I that transparent? She positioned me back to facing the mirror. Her eyes had changed colour. They were red. The definite colour of fucking.

She raised her knee, which pressed on my butt cheeks and moved closer to my swollen clit. The wolverine had slashed all the pipes, the dam had flooded my thin panties. My back tensed. I opened my legs for easy access. I shouldn't have, but I could have drowned. I didn't mind, this was kinky stuff she might like. She grabbed my hair. Her breasts were round and perky, and they were pressed against my back shoulders.

'Kenya,' I said.

I had been running from Kenya for years now. The human behaviour trapped us, trapped me. The humans were a weird species that romanticised stars, they sent signals to us without realising it, the *Gruragru* of each star sent their trusted alien to earth to study the humans, study the ways of their lives. The mission was to adapt for ten years and go back home to report on life on earth, but I remained in hiding, kept changing my form, kept running away from Kenya.

'Kenya,' I said again.

I couldn't remember the last time I had felt like this. Only my kind can make me feel things ... She smelled like fresh sewage, and it relaxed me. Fuck she was using her powers on me. On their own, doors slammed shut and locked. The windows shut. This was not a good sign, my toes tingled. I tried to shift my weight to my shoulders, but I struggled, she was overpowering me. You see I have not been using. I could not release myself from Kenya's spell, her eyes were balls of fire which turned green.

I tried to break free, but she pushed me into the sink. My tummy pressed against the sink, she opened the taps and splashed me. The water had no gas, so my human skin melted off my face, revealed parts of me, my true nature. She splashed some more. I begged for her to stop, my teeth fell into the sink, my green fangs protruded. I felt something sharp, hard and long. Her tail slithered from behind her fantastic human legs... The bathroom reeked of hate and death. You bitch, I thought.

The tail pointed between my eyes while her hands tightened around my neck. In a few seconds, I thought, I am going to get fucked, I am going to be sliced open and flushed down the sink. Everything froze, my toes coiled, the shoes on my feet became scratchy, my knees became wobbly. The dam between my thighs turned into little suns. My eyes didn't move, and my heart kept beating faster as if it knew every beat could be the last one.

'You are a disgrace to your kind,' she hissed in my ear.

I knew she was right, but I had no idea that they were so angry with me. I knew they were hunting me down. I didn't want to go back. Now and then I would see a shooting star in the sky, and I knew that that was one of them going back home. So, they have sent the most vicious monster to kill me, I thought. No one ever fought Kenya, either you lost your three thousand limbs or disintegrated into space. I was writhing in shock and anger now. 'You are a disgrace to your kind.'

My slippery neck thinned as she kept her grip on it, and then I saw black.

Ketata the first Witch

The spell changed Morale into a different person, who had a new family every five years and changed lives equally often. She had lived a life of an old woman who knitted all day, a young white girl who galloping on a horse through fields, as well as a homeless boy who lived in town smoking Whoonga; the local street drug. But this time she was a woman with bouncing mounds on her chest who wore glasses. She hid her body in below the knee, kitchen dresses with matching court heels and spent her free time searching for a new book releases online, her cousin dawdled on Tinder.

Morale was the first witch to survive the war of the witches. Morale had seen flames in her dreams. She levitated in her sleep and she collected all the meat bones she had ever eaten. But she didn't know why she had such a strong urge to collect bones. Before, her great aunt had been burnt to death, she had cast a spell that shielded Morale from remembering the burning of witches. Many died around her, but she alone survived the fire. She has a tiny burn mark below her rib. Her great aunt had chosen Morale as the one who would prevent the war of the witches from repeating in years to come.

But being a woman came with certain needs. Air that surrounded Morale changed and stars appeared around the sun because Afonso stood in front of her house, making her skin crawl with relentless desire. Morale was used to the change of temperature and the narrowing of walls. Since she had noticed him at the library four years ago, Morale knew she wanted him. It felt like she died and transcended this earth to a place where God had been hiding.

It seemed like Afonso shared good few things Morale liked. He was very well read. He had a deep accent that melted all the ice in the fridge. He also wore glasses. With his dimpled face, he made Morale weak with desire. Such people should be arrested for their incriminating beauty. They both shared the love of natural hair. He saw Morale leaning her weight on the door as he stood outside her house. The dress she wore flowed loosely on her curves, but Afonso could see how air passed through her thighs and rested on her small tummy and moved around her ribs, to her chest and rested on her neck. Afonso's great-grand mother taught him as a child to manipulate the ends of the wind.

Morale pressed her body to the wall door. Afonso looked at her. She felt her dress slightly swelling to allow the wind to rest on her body. The wind got stuck on her wetness. The moistness between her thighs became a river of joy. She rushed back inside Kgono's house, the wind followed her. Kgono's window was covered in a curtain. It was not easy to see that there was someone standing inside looking out. Which was what Morale did, she peeped through the window.

Afonso stopped the wind. He knew that she was at the window, appreciating his beauty. His charcoal skin glistened like pearls. The only thing she wished was for him to peep through her rabbit hole and blow continuous blows until she shuddered. Morale would have liked that so much. It felt like God had forgotten to close the tap of water. Rain poured on Morale but after some minutes she realised-it was not rain. It was her, she was sweating. She could nip her bud right there on that window.

'Since when do we stand in the window only to daydream?' asked her cousin Kenelwe from behind her.

‘Oh, get over yourself.’
 ‘*Kahle kahle*... what are you looking at?’
 ‘Nothing.’
 ‘Or, should we say who?’ Morale tried to ignore Kenelwe.
 ‘Leave me alone. Be quiet.’
 ‘Oooh! It’s your lover boy. Mr. lover man *shabba*. Mr. lover man *shabba*,’ she teased.
 ‘Oh, stop it, Kenelwe.’
 ‘You heard he does not come in uninvited.’
 ‘What’s that suppose to mean?’
 ‘He is a *muthi* boy.’
 ‘Oh! come on, that’s a hearsay.’
 ‘Is it?’
 ‘Have you seen him flying on a broom?’
 ‘Of- course not he is not that old fashioned.’
 ‘So, what then? What does he use? What?’
 ‘Don’t be full of yourself. I’m only teasing. When are you going to tell him?’
 ‘Tell him what?’
 ‘Oh! Sweet cousin of mine, that is for you to find out and for me to bake wedding cakes’
 ‘That is not funny.’
 ‘But it could be.’
 ‘Kenelwe, just leave me alone.’
 ‘Go.’
 ‘And tell him what.’
 ‘That you are smitten by him. That you want to grind him- that you want *ukumgwinya*.’
 ‘Oh! that is disgusting.’
 ‘Not when you are also wet.’
 ‘Stop Kenelwe.’
 ‘I’m serious.’
 ‘It is not easy.’
 ‘What? The grinding or the sucking. Usually I would start with the grinding to taste myself.’
 ‘Kenelwe!!!’
 ‘The only thing that’s between you and him is that bloody window of yours. Just go.’

Kenelwe was right. There he was at the gate, while she stood at the window. Morale gathered all the strength she had. Her plan was to make him dance his eyes through her eyes, to breathe every second of breath with him. She put on the lipstick and fixed her Afro into a bun knot. And she walked outside with intention. Afonso darted his eyes, seeing hers while he high fived the person he was talking too. The hop in Morale’s chest matched the rapper’s bouncing car with intricate colours cruising lower and slower that moment *kuthi makafe fi!* He looked at her.

He said, ‘Hi.’

Morale froze.

He said, ‘How are you?’

Morale froze again. He walked towards her as if he was the face of a perfect jazz band, wearing a leather jacket and a black beret... Morale stood there in her perfect lipstick as if she was a golden horn and he was coming for it. She cleared her throat.

‘Hello Afonso.’ She found her voice ready to connect with her larynx.
‘I wanted to speak to you about making an appointment with your boss.’
‘At my house?’
‘Oh snap. Sorry. I was in the area. And I saw you. Now that I am here I thought ...’
‘Yeah... yeah Of course. It is not ... you were Uhm ...uhm okay sure.’

Morale worked at a company called A Beard Cosmetic Care Box The following week Morale was asked to deliver one box to Afonso’s house. She pressed a button. When she entered the house, she was greeted by grand piano, shelves of books, white walls. This immediately turned her on. The house had many sliding doors and wooden chambers. There were high rise windows with two staircases. It was a maze of a house.

Afonso placed his hand on her back and ushered her in. He offered her something to drink. They spoke about books and their ambition for the future. Morale commented on how huge the house was. The silence between them undressed her. She shifted on the sofa and her eyes darted around the place. The sun streamed through the sliding door. He suggested that he could give her the grand tour of the house. Morale’s muscles relaxed when she walked behind Afonso. His back shoulders contracted. The muscles across his back rose and fell as he went up the stairs. His pants nuzzled his butt cheeks. And so now Morale had a clear view of Afonso’s buttocks as he climbed the stairs.

He played the right subtle music, which relaxed her with its tones. Morale realised something else about Afonso. He had a certain magnetic and elusive aura that ensnared her. A come *sondela* magnet. She could feel a twitch from below. She had to leave. Morale looked at the time, she stood up. Put whatever she was drinking on the table. Grabbed her scooter helmet and prepared to leave and slave for a living. Afonso held her hand. He closed in the space between them. He faced her. He was sure of himself. Morale playfully picked up the pillow, threw it at his face. Afonso grabbed her arms and tickled her while they laughed together.

‘You have not aged. Not a bit *Ketata*.’
‘Say what?’
‘Sorry, I speak in parables don’t I.’
‘I guess so.’
‘What does *Ketata* mean?’
‘It means the first witch.’
‘Oh... So, you think I’m witch? You want me to burn, well I can burn up anytime you around I guess.’
‘I think, your body is bewitching me, your eyes are definitely bewitching me. Your legs are putting a *ferusa* spell on my dick.’
‘Well, where I come from, we call that after sex talk.’
‘You have no wrinkle, nothing.’
‘Gosh! Afonso, why I would I have a wrinkle I’m thirty-three years old.’ Morale laughed
‘Well, technically you’re three thousand and thirty-three years old.’
‘Oh gosh, you silly!!’
‘You know what they say about you?’
‘I’m more interested in what you have to say actually.’

His beard shone. He licked his lower pink lip. He gazed at her. Morale's breast pressed on his muscled chest. She could feel him hardening. Her dreams were becoming a reality, next thing the release of garments, flew out, like a butterfly out of a cocoon. A shirt, a dress spread on the floor like rose petals. His touch was delicate, together it was as if they were moulding a Chinese vase with clay. The sun streamed through the sliding doors.

Morale woke up covered in pure white sheets. The smell of the previous night lingered. She took a deep breath. She ached for more lemongrass nectar from Afonso skin. She felt like a balloon floating into the sky. The room was spacious, with walls painted white, with just a wardrobe and a bed for furniture. She recalled how he had grabbed her, how his soldier found her uniformed and made her bang on the headless bed several times. Morale closed her eyes as she was possessed by the musky perfumed air in the room. She heard footsteps coming up the stairs. She quickly pretended as if she was looking outside and admiring the valleys which surrounded the dam just beyond his house

Beauty in a glass, she thought.

'You are so beautiful.'

He enveloped her from behind. His hands glided from the nape of her neck and gently caressed his way under her shirt and his hand found a home to rest. While the same hand slid. Morale pushed her round-shaped figure closer to his chest. She felt how awake his erection was. She could smell the cigarettes on his shirt. Afonso smelt like damp earth. Morale glanced at the clock on the wall, she turned to Afonso, her eyes were like a magnet that only connected to his pupils. She was no longer a river of joy, but a Victoria Falls of passion. The clock on the wall blurred, the room zoomed in a thousand steaming suns.

'Afonso, *kusile, Kuyomele ngihambe*. It's morning, I have to go.'

'Do you want to go?'

'Do you want me to say no?'

'I want you to say what you really want to say.'

'I have to go to work.'

'I cannot believe that after so many years we are together again.'

'What are you saying?'

'Come on you know! Quit playing.'

'No really! What are you on about?'

Afonso realised that he had said something he was not supposed to reveal. Now he was faced with a pounding organ between his thighs and swelling desire to choke in her fluids. Clearly, he was losing the sanity of his intentions. He never in a thousand years thought he would be magnetised by an original witch.

'No... I mean I wanted to taste you for years now...'

'*Mcim* come on it has not been that long. It has been four years.'

'But why do I feel like I knew you longer?'

'This is after sex talking... you, silly man.'

Afonso pulled her chin to his lips. The freedom of letting go was gluing them together. Afonso's air felt like sharp needles in a wet sponge; these were enchanting, exquisite, sweet,

probing kisses. Morale could not escape, could only surrender to the magic, to the fluidity, to the foreign language of bliss.

You feel so good, really good Moral.'

There was no time to correct the pronunciation of her name. At that moment, he could call her Moria, Moneo, Monica, Momo, more and more of anything in his deep, heavy, Portuguese/Tsonga accent. Afonso's trembling torso tensed up as he buried himself between Morale's hour of need. It was as perfect as he ever imagined, perfect swell, perfect wet and the perfect underscoring moans. This was what Morale needed. She wanted him to devour her. She tightly wrapped her legs around his neck as he glorified her. The intensity built almost like filling a glass of water until it overflowed. Everything tightened, her breath became more difficult, she grabbed on his knotted hair, she was paralysed on the bed, she didn't want to speak or think she was face to face with god and she just fed him a good meal.

The only thing she wanted was to be in his arms for longer, to nurse her pounding heart and racing pulse. Neither of them moved. For a moment they were one. Happy and satisfied. Well, at least Morale was.

Afonso stood. He unbuttoned his shirt. He unzipped his pants. The pants fell onto the ground. Morale gleamed with joy. Mmm round two, she thought.

But Afonso had other intentions. He jumped into the shower. The steam filled the room. His mind swirled with conjuring thoughts. He stood under the shower head. The water splashed and warmed him up. His shoulders relaxed. He closed the tap and dried himself with a towel. He stepped out of the shower with its mosaic tiles and placed his wet feet on the mat. He then looked at the mirror. His beard held the residue of a thousand drops of water. He wiped his face. His hand brushed his beard. He patted the beard and hand combed it. He took the brush from the wall cabinet close to the door, and neatly brushed and moulded his beard in a shape he desired.

In the next room, Morale was on a mission. Her stomach grumbled. She lightly stepped downstairs wearing Afonso's shirt. She noticed how she never recalled seeing so many framed pictures on a wall, she stopped to look. She picked on a black and white faded picture. The person in the picture looked extremely similar to Afonso. But the people in the picture looked like years forever behind. She put it down and picked up another with a group of people in it. Ancient yet very recognisable faces on the frame. And still the person that looked like Afonso was there. It must have been his paternal ancestor, she thought. She put it down. In the kitchen she toasted some bread and went back to the bedroom. The wind rested between her thighs as she tiptoed back to the bedroom.

Morale opened the cupboard: the smell of leather, knitted jerseys and jeans enveloped her. There were neatly packed shoes, and in the second drawer on her left, she saw neatly packed happy socks. She picked up a sock.

A wall creaked opened. A hollow wall flushed out dust and rotting smell. She was confronted by a stone arch stained in ancient tribal patterns – a secret passage. She stood in confusion, looking at the stone design, with decayed bones decorating a lower side wall. The passage lit up. She heard the rattling inside. She walked down, guided by the light. The stairs going down were steep. She reached a spacious room with a long table in the middle of the room,

with her framed face in a picture. Around the candle, white sand recouped itself around the table. She stood astounded and took a step back.

With her mouth opened, she inhaled the dust and feeling dazed her eyes became blurry, and she collapsed on the floor. The last thing she saw was someone in a cloak with unnatural colour eyes. While on the ground she opened her eyes. The cement floor was cold, and she stood up and walked back the same way she came in. She was out of the cupboard, glad to be kissed by rays of sun from the window.

It seemed as if she were standing safely outside the cupboard. She stepped back. The room suddenly turned into shrieks of madness. The bed floated, the lights flickered. The bed sheets spun on the bed the pillows tore in middle and the feather circled the bedroom. Morale froze, and eyes plucked out of her sockets. There was something else in the bedroom. Hushed whispers peeled from the cupboards. Breath so faint, yet hoarse echoed through into the room. Then sound got louder. Morale raised her hands to her ears and bent her body.

Afonso opened the shower door, the steam streamed out like a runaway ghost. He wrapped himself in a towel. Morale stood up and sat on the edge of the bed. He unglued his eyes from her. He opened the wardrobe took out what he planned to wear. It looked like someone had touched his clothes, lying where they had been tossed on the floor. Morale took her bag, moved closer to where Afonso had been standing. She could smell his lemongrass tint of perfume.

‘What the hell is going on here?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t fuck with me?’

‘Come on! Look, I have to go to work.’

‘Are you some kind of devil worshipper?’

Afonso was taken aback, he glanced at the slightly opened cupboard.

‘What did you see?’

‘Oh my God! I slept with a devil worshiper.’

Afonso tried to calm her, walking towards her.

‘Don’t fokken touch me, don’t fokken touch me!’ She screamed.

‘I’m a wizard, you also, a witch... the first witch.’

‘You fuck me then you insult me!’

‘*Ketata*—you’re not safe.’

‘Leave me the fuck alone!’

‘I know about your dreams, the bones you bury behind the house.’

‘No one knows about that, not even my cousin, Kenelwe.’

‘I know you feel the wind, I order the winds to do things to you and it did.’

‘This, mambo jumbo ...’

‘*Ketata*—.’

‘My name is Morale.’

‘You don’t remember because no one could ever break the spell. What you saw inside the cupboard is real. And the other witches are after you. They want your family’s magic. And I came to break the spell and I did...my job here is done.’

Afonso stood up and put on his shirt and pants. Morale shook in reaction to what she was hearing. Suddenly, like someone paging through an album of pictures she saw herself in many faces, and Afonso was always there. Morale's voice trembled.

'How did you break the spell, if you say no one could ever break it?'

'It was not easy... it needed a lot of patience, and commitment. It took me three thousand and thirty-three years to get you. It was worth it.'

'How did you break the spell?'

'I fucked you.'

'Go to hell, you blood sucker.'

'Now, I get the gift of hundred witches and that means I am mortal Ketata!'

'You crazy.'

'They wanted war and you being the original, it was impossible. So, all the spells are open now for any witch. How fascinating is that I get to live forever.'

'Is that why you did this?'

'You an original. You are unlikable but damn you are fuckable now.'

'You an ass hole.'

'Which you licked. Wait when I tell the shapeshifters and werewolves about how you moaned while I sucked all the spells from you.'

The feathers from the pillows gyrated from the floating bed, and the windows cracked. With that Morale opened the door and ran, the wind blew, her teary eyes smarted. In her hands was one of the photos she had seen earlier. She walked down the street, filled with questions. She recognised a familiar face in that photo, a face that had her features. The woman in the picture wore the same wooden bracelet she owned. She had been told it had been passed to her from her great aunt. Could this person in the picture who was standing next to Afonso be her aunt? A sob stuck in her throat.

She didn't look back as she walked. Her shoulders were stiff. Morale crossed the traffic lights, she stopped at the stop sign, raised her finger in the sky to signal a taxi from a distance. The taxi that stopped in front of her looked just the way she felt; used, with paint peeling off and cracked windows, she felt like a crooked wig that had no middle line. She opened the taxi door and she was greeted by people with head skulls and hollow eyes.

Erupting Daggers.

Bury me, don't bury my face.

It was October. The leaves had already fallen when Rubindzai found the cut-up body. The woman's flesh spread over the ground like melted plastic. Her insides lay out for everyone to feast their eyes on. No one knew who she was, no one could identify her, although her face was still intact. Her eyes opened, and her mouth gaped for ants to come as they please. The face was exactly as it had been when she was alive

If she could only get closer and touch her eyes, to perhaps see who had done this to her. No parent, no government, no friend had hired Rubindzai. She was not a detective; she was not a forensics expert and she was below the law. She was a seventeen-year-old girl from the dilapidated flats.

Rubindzai had been raised by a single parent, Ma-Rosalina. They had moved to the high flats to be closer to sea. Almost anyone with pockets that had holes managed to stay in that building, which was rather a drastic shade of colour, causing the fire brigade to think that the building was on fire. She thought the building was warm and kind. It was a home to those who needed it the most, like the nests of birds... Rubindzai and her mother were only able to afford living in the building because winds blew carpets away, shifted tables and the barely closed windows cracked open. What was left of the building was a reminder of a flaked scrape of paint on the wall. Nonetheless, it was the home she had grown up in. A home with walls that didn't tire to hug her.

During the day Ma-Rosalina sold newspapers around the suburban area where lightning never struck. And at night she worked as a security guard. Nothing scared Ma-Rosalina – whether it was a green mamba slithering by, days of torrential rains or the volcanic dust on their doorstep – the doorstep that had no mat. It didn't scare her. She *was* scared of one thing though: losing her daughter to something she could not clean or dust away.

When Rubindzai was born, it was not long until her mother noticed that her daughter was different. Her daughter never slept. She was always talking to someone at night. Ma-Rosalina thought maybe this was how kids grew. She ignored it.

One morning when Rubindzai was three Ma-Rosalina made soft porridge with tea. Walking into the bedroom she saw that her daughter had round marks on her back, as though they had been pounded into her flesh. She screamed, but she quickly stopped screaming because she knew if anyone saw this, she would be rebuked and called names that would suffocate her at night. She feared for her daughter's life. She took soap and a towel with warm water and scrubbed Rubindzai until the marks oozed out a leakage of blood. She quickly put the toddler in the bathtub and whispered a small prayer. What was odd, Ma-Rosalina thought, was that the marks rubbed off normally.

By the age of eleven she was selling peanuts, lollipops and Christmas cards at the beach. Rubindzai found ways to help her mother earn a living. Rubindzai could see what normal people couldn't see. One day at the beach a vision appeared to her: she saw small legs peeping out the rocky water. A brown body circulating inside the waves. She blinked twice and felt dizzy. Usually when she got her visions, she would be short-sighted for a second and

she would need to sleep. But she had no time to sleep during the busyness of the December holidays. She rushed to find her mother to report what she had seen. And, possibly, she hoped that her mother would prevent it from happening. She stood up. On her way she bumped into a girl with two Afro ponytails, wearing a yellow swimming costume. Exactly like the one in her visions. It was her! This was her.

A beautiful, young brown girl with pink gums, she could have been six or seven. But the visions were never wrong. Within an hour this brown girl in front of her was surely going to drown. Rubindzai knew this and she knew how. She locked eyes with the girl. Rubindzai lowered to her size and touched her pointy Afro ponytails. The young girl shifted her weight to her mother. Rubindzai wanted to touch her eyes before she died. The squealing shocked Rubindzai. Could she have been wrong about the visions? A sharp voice like that of a foghorn shouted behind her.

Only then did realise what was happening. She was bleeding from her back shoulders, but she hadn't felt any pain. The blood gushed out, and everyone that surrounded her could not believe what they were witnessing. Some thought it was a shark attack, but the sea tide had been unusually low for two years. The pavement promenade changed colour in seconds from the flow of blood. Rubindzai stood there while they gawked at her. Then she heard her mom's voice... 'Make everything look normal'. She thought, how does one make this moment, with blood whooping out of her like a burst pipe normal?

Rubindzai fell onto the ground, people grunted and yelled. She was now surrounded. The beach body guards rushed to the scene, bearing with a huge silver foil sheet with which to cover her. They assumed this must have been some kind of a tsotsi attack. Rubindzai laid on the ground covered in foil. Rubindzai's mom stood in the distance and just watched everything as it was unfolding. The ambulance took centuries to arrive.

She realised sadly that her mother had no idea how haunted she was. She was manipulated by her visions. It was a torturous experience; her wound marks would swell in response to what she was seeing. Her mother would bandage her. And that should have been fine. As long as no one were to speak of the visions. There was nothing anyone could do about it. She was alone, and she had to live with the effects of the visions.

That night Rubindzai stood in front of the mirror, saw the reflection that resembled her in a wrong way. In a way that would make her visions rise from the dark ends of the earth and shove her head in a bucket of ice. She put toothpaste on her toothbrush, she brushed her front teeth, she didn't brush the teeth at the back. She didn't like her back teeth. In actual fact her back teeth should not be there.

No one would see them. She hardly laughed or opened her mouth wide enough for them to be seen. She was not a hyena. Her teeth had been rotten since she was born. It was as if they took a turn of their own. She became a stranger to her own thoughts. Every part of her body died while she lived. She spat in the sink. It was a quick brush.

Time was not there, and she couldn't handle any emotions. She asked questions, but she was not sure where the answers would come from. So very not sure whether the answers would surface from breadcrumbs on the table. Slowly she realised that life was like a plastic garbage in swirling dust.

On the window her eyes could see what she desired. The outside splendour. The orange flowers blossoming, swaying next to a spread of green plants. One building, opposite the kitchen window had a garden on the roof. Rubindzai felt that somehow, she would blossom to be something to be admired. Hoped all the madness of the day was just a passing thing.

She badly wanted to be fine. Because she thought she could be fine, she felt fine, her breathing was fine. Rubindzai was fine with not having conversations. Fine that things were looking fine and feeling fine and appearing fine. As long as her mother was fine she was fine. Doing what her mother wanted meant they would be fine.

Rubindzai stared at her mother, at the nets of wrinkles around her eyes. She looked defeated, and flustered and thin. She sat opposite her at the four-legged table which had no cloth. The golden glaze of the table and the minuscule brown patches on it added to its texture. The legs of the table were shaped like a horses' legs. The wood of the table was of oak... The hinges of the door had squeaked loudly when she entered the room, which intentionally disrupted the wounding silence. In the morning an empty vase sat on the table.

Ma-Rosalina stood with her dry hands on the sink which was piled up with cups, spoons, knives and greased plates smeared with leftovers. She had once seen Rubindzai standing at the windows, engrossed by the activity outside. She had then bought darker curtains and no longer allowed her daughter to stand next to any of the windows inside the flat. Sometimes, Ma-Rosalina thought it was best to remove all things that reminded Rubindzai of what she could be missing. But still she was anxious: what kind of future would her daughter have? The plan was simple: her mother had decided she had to remain quiet and remain unseen by the outside world. She believed that if Rubindzai had less contact with the world she would be safe. No friends from church came to visit, no family came to invade their space. Emigrating to South Africa made them become family. It was good in the beginning but also that had to be disregarded.

She always found dignity in befriending distance, there was no unwanted seed sprouting in anyone's garden. Ma-Rosalina called on her daughter to sit on the floor, she finger combed her thick hair. Rubindzai felt both disgust and pain of how lonely her daughter must feel and what kind of mother she may have been. The unspoken words between them were loud and bounced off the walls.

Rubindzai became less and less recognisable in her mother's eyes. Days became like somnolent leaves on the ground, withering, slowly. When she was sure that Rubindzai was asleep and the lights were off, she snuck out of the bedroom to vacuum bread crumbs left on the table with candles that announced their own importance.

She would tiptoe carefully until her hands held on to a feather duster and bucket filled with Handy Andy water. She always thought that dust envied her for always shining the table. No fingerprints on the table, if she had seen a fingerprint, she scrubbed in silence. Until she found exactly what she didn't want. Dirt.

Ma-Rosalina went back to the sink, she focused on rinsing the plates separately from the mugs. The window in the kitchen showed the sea view and more: the buildings, the palm trees, the lights from every window. A flock of birds flapped by.

In the mornings it was often foggy, with pigeons cooing outside. There was the smell of salt in the air. She stood. She planned. She made decisions for her and her daughter.

Rubindzai come from two different worlds. One world was about living like only have one tomorrow left, and the other world lived like it owned the tomorrows. Both these worlds have taken something from the child she should have been and Ma- Rosalina would choose how those tomorrows would be used.

October leaves have buried insects and covered up skeletons. In her blue security uniform, a dangling knobkerrie on her side, and holding a packet with a loaf of bread and milk, Ma-Rosalina was coming home from work. It was still dark. She was thinking about her daughter's upcoming birthday... For seventeen years she had not experienced the life of a young person. Ma-Rosalina turned around a nearby corner, it was a shortcut to get to the main centre. Someone was following her. Her skin prickled. The road was quiet.

She was familiar with silence. With stalls of empty vendors, a pile of wet boxes from the morning dew. The smell continued with her. The smell called her name. She shifted the plastic to the other side of her hand, to give rest to the other tired arm. She dragged herself on. She passed derelict buildings. They all appeared the same, yet condemned, they seemed baked by million suns and frosted by years of glacial winds. The faint wind brushed her battered body, she stepped on something, she yelled in pain, the pain vanished into thin air. She stopped walking.

Worries, thoughts and concerns silently floated around her like a ghost. She held her head up. She slithered forward; the light had neglected her. It was just her and her staggering. She heard a backing cough someone was still behind her. Mucus slid up and down his throat. The man behind her spat thickly on the ground. She thought nothing of it. Suddenly, someone grabbed her from the back. All the weight flooded to her knees.

Silence was no longer the best friend she wanted, while trapped, in a grasp of some stranger. Her head spun as she gasped some more. She tried to pry her fingers away from him, but the grip was too strong to wriggle out of. Snorts came out of her, her lungs burned, her tongue twisted. Every limb fell lumbering from her neck to her sides. She couldn't breathe. She fell on the ground. Every sound silenced her.

Rubindzai was dressed. Curtain windows were opened, and she was ready to open the door for the police to enter. Finally, the knock on the door came. She already knew what the police were about to say. She nodded at them and took her handbag with her and they closed the door behind her. It was like she was seeing the sun for the first time the air felt cool to her skin. People were amazed at seeing her outside. She carefully followed behind to the car because she was going to identify a body.

She had seen visions of her mother dying. For her it was like a horrid movie she could not turn off. She was not able to save her the way she could not save those deaths she had kept seeing since she was born. But stepping out of the door meant a great deal for her. This was a new day, of being true to who she was and that meant finding the person who killed her mother.

MoonEyed Maiden

The take over began when a ruthless king killed a maiden named Zoyasana. *Amabutho* his regiments were instructed to say to the king's advisors that the maiden had been ill, her body withered, and the earth blanketed her. The village advisors' lips hung to the floor. Their worries flooded the river dams. The wasp stung them until they were blind because they had too many lies to spread. The king's advisors were garrulous, they spoke until their hearts became what to fear. These people looked through the king's eye. They had seen what no eye should have to see. They hid in a place that smelled of cow dung; but the smell choked them until what lay below the ground came out.

The village king saw the moon-eyed maiden when he was hard on rocks with *amabutho*. The moon-eyed maiden glowed as she swam in the dark water. When she emerged her dark skin glistened. She looked at the moon which glimmered. Her face was the shape of a perfect human goddess. The village king placed the shield aside. Intrigued, he plunged into the water around the rocks. He jumped the gaping crocodile. He demanded to know where she came from. The moon-eyed maiden refused to tell him, and that insulted the king.

The night before the village king met the moon-eyed maiden, he had sat on his throne being served his favourite dish. He ate while listening to his people pleading and begging him to seek a wife, it was time. The village advisors Udotinsangu, Ubhendimpela and Unsumansumane warned him that the people were waiting for their king to show them that he was not just a king but could be a man as well. They wanted their king to show them that he not only could be a man, but also, they wanted him to win every battle, showing them that his heart was made of steel and blood.

This led to the king training his men like wild beasts. He didn't allow his men to marry before the age of sixty-five. His men had to slither like snakes and attack like lions. The king didn't like any of his men to be snails. He made the comparison of women on their monthly days in the market. He usually joked that you couldn't see any woman bleeding unless you laid them on their backs.

The village king called his advisors *amapipi amancane*, small penises, because he believed they carried his secondary thoughts. The king's focus was centred on winning the battle against the Nhlavini tribe. He heard they were unbeatable; the Nhlavini tribe conquered everywhere they invaded. They were currently heading down from the north to south where the king's land was.

The king's advisors sat around him in their oversized robes, looking at their feet addressing him:

Toothless man: KofayabeNguni you have followed the footsteps of your father quietly may he rest.

Man, with bad breath: Now it's time to walk in your own steps. KofayabeNguni. The people have been waiting, it's been ten long years.

Toothless man: KofayabeNguni the field is growing the land is fertile. The banana and the corn can grow together like neighbours. Every homestead needs softer hands. Hands stolen from a beautiful flower.

Bald-headed man: Your gracious one, my Kofa. Ruler of all the sun and those below us.

The amapipi amancane didn't have a lot to say. The village king looked at them with satisfied eyes. He signalled to his headman and trusted guard. *Amapipi amancane* knew anything could happen. The village king could order that their necks be cut off. *Amapipi amancane* never knew whether they had spoken out of turn. They remained; shaking in their chairs. Bereaved by what their King would decide.

The king's headman and trusted guard galloped closer to him. They bowed on their knees. Which left *amapipi amancane* hoping that not one of their heads would roll on the ground that day. They knew what the king's headman was capable of. The king once decided to slay a thousand girls because the king had dreamt that these girls would bring the sickness of the fish to the village. The headman raised his spear and shield which was made from the only tree that grew from the waterfall in the mountains. He saluted.

Kofa: Send the word to the women who raised virgins to plant the mating seed. After four moons the sprouted flower will be my wife.

Headman: Ruler of us and below the dust. I'm here to serve you and you only.

Bald headed man; *Yebo*. The greatest of all.

Toothless man; *Yebo*. The greatest of all.

Man, with bad breath: *Yebo*. The greatest of all.

The night of the first moon, the maidens, adorned with music beads, walked in a beeline, swaying and swerving to the sounds of the drum. Women boiled sorghum beer that might last for years. They glimmered in joy, the singer and the dancer covered their bodies with red earth and wore leather clothing. The drums were banged, the fire burned higher and higher. The villagers formed their own beeline in front of the king's home, bearing gifts for him. The drummers continued, the thundering sound echoing in each villager's heart. This was the king they wanted, a king that listened to his people. Women ululated, and shook their buttocks, their hands swaying in the air. The louder the drum, the higher the voices. Six cows were slaughtered, women were ready with boiling pots, and there were stews with vegetables grown from the garden. The singing and clapping was heard all the way to the maiden's cove.

Mvelo's mother: I have been waiting for this day since I was a girl.

Welamfula's mother: Were you chosen?

Mvelo's mother: *Hhayi suka* it does not matter. Did you see how beautiful it is outside? What an amazing day for our people. The king finally will choose.

Welamfula's mother: Indeed. This is a great, joyous time for our village... indeed *Makwande*.

Mvelo's mother: Yes! Indeed. *Makwande*.

Welamfula's mother: *Awu! Hhayi bo!* This is a disgrace *phela* to the tradition, you cannot knit without knowing whether the flower is growing.

Mvelo's mother: *Ma-Zoyasana*, has your daughter joined the other maidens to prepare for the king?

The mothers of Scebisile and Langalihle quietly knitted a new mating blanket, silently hoping their virgin daughters would be chosen instead. They looked down and kept quiet. No one said anything, they all waited for *Ma-Zoyasana* to respond. Silence again. *Ma-Zoyasana* face sagged with worry. She didn't like this tradition. She had tried for years to make sense of why their girls should be reduced to just being bearers of sons. She thought of her *Zoyasana*. She spat on the floor and rested her hands on her head.

Tears poured down her face. Her whole body shook. The women continued on as if nothing had happened. Those that knitted kept doing so. They ignored her. Ma-Zoyasana had a daughter like no other. She could swim in swamps and come out with a net of fresh fish. She was used to lying beside the stream listening to croaking frogs. Even the moon now and then shifted closer to be nearer to her. And when the headman ran to deliver the news that the King was seeking a maiden to be his wife, to the homestead that housed virgins only, Zoyasana was not among the maidens. He didn't notice, of course. No one knew or cared to even ask where she had gone, except her mother.

When the fourth moon appeared, the other maidens were overjoyed by the disappearance of Zoyasana. They wanted her gone, for reasons only their hearts knew. The maidens lay on the grass mats as the mud painters buttered their bodies starting from their hair, moving to their faces, necks and shoulders down to their arms, hips and legs. The maiden helpers crushed mint leaves with cow dung and red earth and rubbed the bodies as they moved their hands all over the maidens. They were preparing the bodies, wanting them to shine and glow and attract the King. They soaked the maidens' hair in the mud mixture and called in the melody catchers to play a song to help the maidens relax. The music played while they continued talking.

Mvelo: The moon-eyed maiden. (Laughing).

Scebisile: She is bewitched. (Laughing as well),

Welamfula: She should follow her heart though. Aren't we all doing that? (She was not laughing.)

Scebisile: Our hearts belong to the king. We were prepared for the king since we were born.

Mvelo: Yes! Without his protection the Nhlavini tribe would have cooked us.

Welamfula: *Hheyi kodwa* Inkosi took a long to seek a wife.

Mvelo: I am glad he did, because if it was last year, I was sure I was not going to be selected.

Welamfula: Why? I mean do you think the king will select you now?

Scebisile: For sure Inkosi *ngeke ibuke ngakuwena*. The king will not even glance to you.

Mvelo: Because we now have a fair chance without the bewitched eyes.

Welamfula: *Memeshane kaze wakwenzani U*—bewitched eyes...

The king's home had a veranda which was blanketed in grass. It was believed that when the king became a man to a woman, the veranda would bestow abundant blessings to his people. The twist was that—the king would not know about this until his heart agreed to seek a wife. No one should force the king to do so; he had to want to change his life.

When the forest had swallowed scurrying rabbits, scampering hares, skittering mice and the soft-blowing winds had hushed a sleeping lion cub then *amabutho* with their spears would start training, until dawn. The night of the fourth moon had hardened the village king. His manhood grew stronger. His heart danced to the idea of being loved by a woman, nurtured by softer hands. But his warrior heart wanted to be in the forest with *amabutho*. At times the king behaved like a boy who had just discovered his penis.

The moon was shaped like a leaf and it lit up the way for the young warriors. It was almost time to head back to the village. They thought of the sorghum beer and the splendour of maidens waiting in their clay-coated bodies parading around the fire. *Amabutho* held on to their spears and shields and ran back to the village. They left the king behind to take his bath in the river. Tonight, was the last night as a king who had not known a woman... His headman and trusted guard begged to stay with him, but the village king refused.

Headman: *We bafu!* If anything happens to KofayabeNguni, we will be buried first.

Trusted Guard: Do you think I don't know that?

Headman: *Manje sokwenzenjani?* Then what are going to do?

Trusted Guard: We do what KofayabeNguni had asked.

Headman: But our duty is to be on his side.

Trusted Guard: Our duty is to respect KofayabeNguni.

Headman: Our duty is to keep KofayabeNguni alive *mani*.

Trusted Guard: Why? do you think he is not going to be alive.

Headman: You are his trusted guard, you bury his enemies and I keep his secrets.

Trusted Guard: You are right.

Headman: Yes, I am.

Trusted Guard: Let's just wait here.

Headman: You need to be as close to him as much as possible.

Trusted Guard: Do you know anything that I don't?

Headman: No time for questions, I only know what you know.

Trusted Guard: Let us just wait here we can see him. Oh! there he is... what is Kofa doing?

Headman: He is seeing something.

Trusted Guard: Move your big head mani... I cannot see. Is it a lion? Or tiger or a baboon. This forest has too much of baboons—

Headman: No. It's Zoyasana.

Trusted Guard: *Ini?* The moon-eye maiden... with KofaYabeNguni? *Hawu suka madoda! yadli Nkosi... Uyamlala?* Move your head mani! I can't see. You know that those Nhlavini tribesmen bewitched me so that...

Headman: Hawu! KofaYabeNguni *Uyamlala ...*

Zoyasana felt like she was dying. The village king pressed his body weight on top of her. Zoyasana tried to stand, but she was pulled back onto the ground... She looked into his eyes. The village king stabbed her several times with a spear. In the distance, two of his warriors stood in shock. They watched their KofayabeNguni, their village king, as he repeatedly punched holes on Zoyasana's body. She felt cold, all then all the coldness went away when she closed her eyes. Lightning zigzagged out of her eyes. It threw KofayabeNguni, the village king, far away, right into the trees. The branches kept him from falling, as he monkey-dangled.

The lightning then found the warriors and struck them... They raised their hands to cover their faces. It didn't help, they were thrown to the ground by the force of it... The whole village became dark. Every drum became silent, the singing and clapping stopped. The villagers screamed in fear at being in the dark. Every light was burned off. The maidens in their hut stood up and screamed for help. They froze in wonder and fear. No one could see what the others were doing. One of the advisors, Unsumansumane, was in his hut was having a moment with his wife when the light vanished. Even the stars that shone through his window were gone. The music of groaning men, screaming women, crying kids and barking dogs shook him out of his wife.

Wife: *Hawu baba bengingakaqedi*, I was not finished—

Unsumansumane: *Uyanya yini? Usho ngoba ungezwa ukuthi kukhona okwenzakalayo?* Are you crazy don't you see something wrong is going on?

Wife: Maybe you could learn to save your wife from all the saltiness she has been having than being the saviour of the whole village.

Unsumansumane: I must find KofayabeNguni. We will talk later.

Wife: I don't want to talk later. I want to finish.

Unsumansumane: Give me *Umabona ebusuku* the torch, it's under the mat.

Wife: *Usudukelwe ingqondo wensumansumane*, have you lost your mind Nsumansumane? If the villagers see you with *umabona ebusuku*, you are a dead man. *Ungumlotha wendonda*. Do you hear me? I am not ready to dig a hole for you. I don't want KofayabeNguni to outcast me because you accepted a deal from the soft skinnies.

Unsumansumane: Keep quiet!

Wife: No, you keep your foolishness quiet, your stupid fool.

Before the King summoned his headman to call the maidens to plant the mating seed. He had a visit from strangers which were later known as the soft skinnies. The soft skinnies were not from the tribe of Bantu. Not even the Nguni nations from the south knew where they were from. They were soft-spoken, speaking in a strange tongue; and their long hairs swept the floors. They came in the night unannounced. They had wings that brought them to the land of KofaYabeNguni. No one knew what they wanted because the king dismissed them away. He didn't recognise his ancestors in them.

But three people were mesmerised by the opportunity. When the soft skinnies packed their little bags and turned to leave, Udotinsangu, Ubhendimpela and Unsumansumane followed them discreetly. They listened to their cry. The soft skinnies wanted a rich land to build a home and, in exchange, they would give their wealth to the king. The soft skinnies reached for the silk bag which had items the advisors had never seen. They promised the soft skinnies that they would pass the message onto the king. Then the three advisors met at Nsumansumane's hut. Nsumansumane's wife had brewed the freshest sorghum. And they came up with the plan to soften the king's heart enough to marry.

The king found his way back to the village with his two men. He looked for his ancestors, they had turned their backs on him. He went to his hut. For as long as the sun was shadowed by a dark cloud, he would remain inside. Hours passed, his advisors finally knocked and greeted him by bowing. He didn't acknowledge them. They were not allowed to say a word until the king signalled that they were permitted to speak. They backed out through the doors of the king's hut.

The people remained gathered in the darkness. The gossip had started. Some thought the king had been stung by an insect that carried darkness; some assumed the missing moon-eyed girl had caused this. The king stayed hidden, not addressing his people. Days became strands of hair.

It had been three days since the village had been plunged into the darkness... Maiden's Ma-Zoyasana stood in her hut. She knew something had happened to daughter. She walked outside... She could feel her daughter in air. The air pulled her toward the forest – no villager had been allowed to enter the forest –but the wind pulled her legs and hands, until she was standing at exactly where her daughter had taken her last breath. She felt her presence; she had not moved. She was as beautiful as the full light, fireflies gathered around where her body had been buried by the king and his two men. The mother trembled and fell to her knees: she wept.

Ma-Zoyasana: Zoya Ntombi *yami*, who did this to you? Who has taken my pride away from me?’

Zoyasana: Mama, it didn’t hurt.

Ma-Zoyasana: Zoya Ntombi *yami*, I am not ready.

Zoyasana: Mama, you have to overthrow KofayabeNguni because he is not going to stop. He is not the king.

Ma-Zoyasana: Zoya, come back. You are not making sense.

Zoyasana: I will be there, you will see. You have given me your eyes to see. I have heard so much. We are ready mama.

Ma-Zoyasana: We? Zoya? Uthini?

Zoyasana: Mama, take my eyes, keep them under your warm breast and cross the river of the crocodiles... Don’t worry, I have asked the crocodiles to help your cross. Don’t look back until you reach the Nhlavini village.

Ma-Zoyasana knew her daughter was no longer of this world. But for the king to so easily take her life away was more than hateful. He deserved what would come his way. She had to trust her daughter. She dug into her daughter’s grave. It was not deep. She saw the stab wounds covered lightly in soil, she dusted her face and closed her mouth. Her body was warm. She took a deep breath and quickly, without thinking, snatched out her glowing eyes, and clasped them to her breast and walked to the river. A line of crocodiles were ready for her. She stepped on top of them, the crocodiles wiggled a bit, their scales felt like rocks. The crocodiles moved steadily, making sure the parcel they carried arrived safely to the other end.

She stood in the dark for a moment; a voice kept encouraging her. When she arrived, Ma-Zoyasana was greeted by a mass of female bodies, led by someone she almost recognised, but the woman had hollowed eyes.

She stood in front of a brave but venal warrior force made up only of maidens who were ready for combat, with keen hearts and soundless breaths. It was quiet, as if the forest was a graveyard of the unburied. She took the eyes from her breast and handed them to the woman who appeared to be the leader. As soon as the eyes were placed correctly, the moon lowered... Their women’s spears glimmered, their shields were made of crocodile skin, they looked like they had won many battles and left hearts hanging for the vultures. These were *amabutho ase mbokodweni*, from the Nhlavini tribe, they had come from the north to overthrow KofaYabeNguni. Ma-Zoyasana looked at them. She saw her daughter Zoyasana, among them. Her daughter stepped forward.

Zoya: Mama (She kissed her mother lightly on her forehead and held on).

Ma-Zoyasana: Zoya Ntombi *yami*.

Zoya: You will be safe here.

Ma-Zoyasana: *Uyaphila?* You are alive?

Zoya: The light stays here. I can’t explain anything. Just know from now on that you are the queen and you rule these lands and the lands below. We are your warriors.

A mass of moon-eyed maidens went down on their knees, and they shouted

‘Kofa Yabantu! Kofa Yabantu, Kofa Yabenguni!’

Every crocodile from the river near and far came out raised its tail, opening their mouths. The moon rested on Ma-Zoyasana’s head. She felt ready for war. She raised her hands.

‘*Manguni,*’ she said.

‘*Amahle,*’ they respond.

Sorana

No one had any idea how the sun had split itself into three discs. But Nuri knew how to survive the blaring heat. As a young girl she played in the river and made mud houses. She sat on the rock wearing Capullanas; a Capullana was worn by young women in Sorana. She looked into the light of the suns as they moved closer and closer to the tip of the trees. Each home had their own tree with a branch that nested a brotherhood of eggs. Life here was full of abundance; the river snaked through the hills and the valleys connected all the tribes of Sorana. The village had plenty of rain.

Before sunset the Soranas danced, gathered inside the caves, and got drunk as they offered their stories to the caves. The river stream ended where the tar road of the highway began. No one went beyond that point. Except Khulu Arango and the warriors, they were the only people who were allowed to cross the threshold. Either than that no bird or ant went near the highway because the village had been looped in a protective fluid, which was secreted by the caves after each story. The fluid balanced the heat temperature from the sun and manipulated the weather. Outside the circle of the loop, the city of people were an ash away. The vegetation was scarce, the heat burned fiercely. The village was not visible to the city and that was how the Soranas survived and didn't burn to ashes.

The city people were known as Amansundana; their skin was scaled like snakes and cracked like a dried-out wax. They hid themselves in long cloaks, and mainly stayed indoors, waiting to be consumed by the heat. The Soranas knew about the city of buildings and lights, and that it no longer had a water source.

Nduna Zumela had selected the Mandini warriors to paint themselves in clay and wear black cloaks to appear as Amansundana. They crossed the fluid covering with the help of Khulu Arango and left water drums and mangoes where the river ended, and the meeting of the highway began, without being noticed. At first Nuri thought it was dangerous to put the hidden village at risk of being found. But it had been five years now the plan worked like an organised terror. The village stayed hidden in a jelly-fluid loop.

The village was mapped out with colourful thatched yellow, red huts, closely grassed to each other, and with its cast of colourful characters.

Take Bab'Mawala, a local business man. A man of hidden stones, who wouldn't know if or when the stones would come crashing down on him. Bab'Mawala owned one hundred cows, sheep and goats. He had a chicken farm, Ginqi Itshe Farm. His chickens were the best in the village, thriving under the three suns. The chickens laid three eggs per hour. He was a man with many businesses, and before the fluid loop and the burning of people began, he travelled frequently to work in the city.

Every Sunday evening, after dinner with his three wives; Ma Bira, Ma Dira, Ma Mira, they would say their goodbyes. Bab'Mawala would then head to the city for a week. He would come back home with sweets for the village kids. They would run behind him shouting for more sweets.

One night, after arriving back in the village, he asked for permission from Induna Zumela to slaughter a cow, a donkey and chop the tallest tree while they boisterously shared laughter,

and listened to stories from Khulu Arango, while sitting inside the coolness of the caves. The light from the fire illuminated their expressions. Khulu Arango stood, looking at everyone and said:

'Re ma so ve ve ra. These caves are keeping us colder and warmer. Each story stays in these caves.'

Everyone listened as she continued. Her hands pressed on her waist. Nduna Zumela picked up his sorghum beer, foam stained his upper lip. His fifth wife stood next to him, ready with a cloth to wipe his lips. Meanwhile his dogs panted on the ground.

The caves are like a dry mouth begging for water and a story becomes that water,' said Khulu Arango.

'Our ancestors have done this from generation to generation. It is who we are,' Said the pregnant Ma Zulu, grabbing her swollen belly. They all nodded and clink-clanked their mugs, while dipping pap into a bowl of boiled chicken soup.

'The caves give something back to us all the time,' commented Khulu Arango.

'What do they give Mama Arango?' Bab'Mawala asked of her.

Khulu Arango walked to the end of the cave and ran a hand over the smooth wall. Mucus dripped from the walls of the cave staining her hands. Everyone looked and wondered in their drunkenness if Bab'Mawala's wives had added something to their drinks, which may have resulted them in seeing the wall secreting amafinyela.

The sharing of stories, singing and dancing went on late into the night. At last it came to an end. Bab'Mawala, agreed to lift everyone to their houses. The women and their young maidens, who also worked in the corn fields, looked forward to getting a lift from Bab'Mawala.

Bab'Mawala turned on the bright headlights of his 4x4 and stopped right in front of Khulu Arango and the others. Bab'Mawala rolled down his window. The women all greeted him. He saluted them women. He turned to Khulu Arango and said:

'Khulu Arango please sit in front with me.'

Khulu Arango nodded her head happily. There was a small commotion among the woman on hearing this request. Khulu Arango could read their thoughts. Their buttocks bounced in back of the van. She stared out of the window, wondering why she was not looking forward to sleep. Lately she had been dreaming about ants and tail dogs crawling toward her doorsteps. She turned to Bab'Mawala, and then looked from the first wife to the third one. They bent their heads. The mingling sound of silence and the roaring sound of the engine was not helping the drive. Two of his wives were also all squashed into the front seat listening to their own thoughts and bearing the beating of their hearts.

She asked, 'Awu! Bab'Mawala how is your daughter?'

‘Nesa is fine, Khulu Arango.’

‘*Auuu, Ukukhula kwengane kuwubala*, I never see her in the cornfields,’

‘She is doing great, she visited the City.’

‘Wow... I didn’t know that.’

‘*Kanjani, mama ngoba indaba, ayihlali phansi?*’

‘*Hhayi, phela thina izindaba asinendaba nazo.*’

‘Nesa, is happy there, but she never calls when she’s there.’

‘Seems like everyone is heading to the City, recently.’

‘That’s true. Business is good there. I can understand why people go there. But those who visit don’t come back the same.’

‘Or they don’t come back at all.’

‘I come back *nje!* I went to the City three days ago and left right after dropping everyone who wanted a lift there.’

‘Really? How do your wives cope when you’re away?’ Khulu Arango looked at the wives. Their heads were still bonding with their hands.

‘By making girls.’ He laughed. Khulu Arango raised her eyebrow. ‘Ehmm... to be clear, I think the City might not be built for women. Women have lily-livered hearts and amorous minds.’

‘*Awu! So ini na ro*, some may argue and say that men don’t have minds at all.’

He dropped his wives first and told the first wife, Ma Dira that he had to rush to the City again as he had a morning meeting. The lights of his van disappeared in the darkness, and with a newfound irritation, Ma Dira stormed in the common lounge area and called the other two wives. Her doek was off and the blanket hung off of her shoulders. The other wives were not used to seeing her without a doek. Ma Dira’s hair looked like a squashed pillow with holes.

‘What is the matter?’ asked Ma Bira, the second wife.

‘I know we have been on each other’s necks lately.’ They nodded. ‘But he is not happy.’

‘You mean with you?’ asked Ma Mira, The third wife.

‘I don’t want to quarrel with you. I’m just worried.’

‘So, what you are saying is that, you want more visits from him; truth be told, we all do.’

‘*Bafazi*, please listen, we have bigger fish to fry than squabbling on like kids. In fact, there might not be more visits if we let this continue.’

‘Let what continue?’

‘He wants a son.’

‘Ma Dira, but we all know that! Oh! And that reminds me. I keep forgetting. I spoke to the herbalist who can tighten our ... you know! Umama Mawele said that that was how she got her four sons ... because it was very tight. *Ivaleke Tsi!*’

‘*Hawu! Ngempela?* Tell us more.’ Ma Bira threw her shoulder blanket on the chair and pulled herself closer to the table while looking at Ma Mira.

‘She said, the herbalist will give you the longest grass that grows on top of the cave and only his eyes are allowed to see that swaying grass. It disappears when the eye of a commoner sees it. And she went on to say that you have to mix the mud from the caves and dip the grass ends in that, then put them under your petticoat while you are cleaning or ploughing the fields or whatever we end up doing as *abafazi*. The longest grass must stay between your legs until such time arrives that you lay down with the husband.’

‘*Njengoba, engekho nje?* He is always gone for a week...’

‘*Bafazi*, please listen. This is serious!’ exclaimed Ma Dira.

‘Of course, it is serious. Your doek is on the floor ...’ They burst out giggling.

‘He is looking for another wife.’ Through their answering silence Ma Dira knew that this was no longer her own worry.

The following week on Friday night, While Bab’ Mawala was driving back from the City. He was listening to the radio. Suddenly the radio switched off. He turned up the volume, but there was still nothing. When he reached the end of the highway, he could not see where the river was. He stopped his SUV and looked around. Without warning, the moon changed into the three suns, and a fierce light beamed down on him. The ground steamed like water in a pot of fire. He panicked, pulled out his cell phone then realised, of course, that no one had a phone in Sorana. Nduna Zumela had voted against it when he suggested during the annual village meeting.

The phone in his hand began heating up, burning his palms, he tossed it out of the window. He was shocked to his core. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Few minutes ago, it was night and now three peach orange mounds were high in the sky.

Few other things took place in those minutes when the three suns took shape, then it all started to happen. New-borns and toddlers woke up in silent instead of crying and calling. The high-rise buildings in the City, which had bright sparkling blue pools, now served water to everyone. They dampened their beds with the water and slept on soaked blankets. Roadblocks were everywhere, the locals of the City were dying, while dripping in sweat.

Some were dying because their blood boiled and burnt their insides. Bab'Mawala continued sitting inside his SUV. Finally, he unfastened his seatbelt and got out of the car. He stood at the spot where the highway ended, and the river began, but the village was nowhere to be seen.

Instead a mirror carried his reflection on concave surface: a pair of eyes looked back, trapped... He extended his hand to touch the inwardly curved surface, but his hand bounced back, dripping with fluid.

He restarted his car and tried to drive through the loop, but it stretched away inward and his car bounced back. The wheels screeched, and he spun onto the centre of the highway. The heat of the tar road burnt the rubber of the tyres. Bab'Mawala was trapped in the burning City. He felt the heat beneath his feet, he knew the sun had continued splitting further, burning up the ground. Those that were buried below surfaced, their bones roamed around the City buildings. All the lively bustle of the City stopped as it perished, and the City slowly crumbled into soil.

Five years later Sorana was protected in a fluid loop that shielded everyone in Sorana to not burn.

In five years, children had been born, and the elderly finally took their permanent sleep, except for Khulu Arango, the custodian of tradition. She built the caves with her bare hands, she sang Mandini songs to the caves and told plenty of stories. The village of Sorana was still beautiful, it was surrounded by a garland of grassland, and still had its cluster of colourful thatched houses. There was a grove of trees with the caves on the other side. Further down the hilly meadows, it was green year-round.

Nuri grew up into a curious woman. She knew that the highway was forbidden, but she couldn't dampen her curiosity... Khulu Arango sat beside Nuri, sifting through groundnuts to make soup for dinner. Their village was hidden between valleys and hills of Sorana. No one was allowed to linger in the caves unless it was time to offer stories. Khulu Arango always said the caves were like tombstones that cemented the past.

There was a well in the village, which served as a common meeting area for the villagers. The water made the villager's skin smoother and knotted their stomachs, so that they did not feel hunger as frequently. The dew drops moistened the soft ground. Kids played nearby as dust swirled around their small bodies. Men sat on the rocks with their legs apart, smoking their pipes. In winter the winds bellowed like a hungry old man in the mountains. Owls and bats stayed warm in the caves.

At night stars serenaded the pitch-black sky, while every woman and girl child of Sorana gathered around the fire bucket, their faces silhouetted in flames of gold. They listened to Khulu Arango telling stories and laughed while all the men munched on their meat and bones, and women ate their corn and groundnuts. Khulu walked behind Nuri and touching her shoulders, she looked at everyone and said:

'It is time to worship the caves. Who is going to lead us in a story today?'

A young boy in a T-shirt and shorts raised his hand. He held a husk of sweetcorn in his hand.

‘Tell the caves the story.’

‘Re ma so ve ve ra.’

‘Re ma so ve ve ra.’

The boy walked toward the corner of the cave, he touched the cave walls, and simultaneously felt warmth and coolness. The fluid oozed. ‘There was a king,’ he said Khulu Arango picked up the story and continued:

‘And his name was Juga Nsundu. The king of Matatabula. His heart was made of stone. When it rained he cried like a baby because his feet and legs would melt in mud. His twenty-six wives had to rule the village until it stopped raining... He had a large family. The king called a medicine man, then women in the area, and looked far and wide to find medicine to stop the rain. It was the healer from the forest who was finally able to do so. She looked into the king’s eyes. She rolled her eyes and howled at the moon. Juga Nsundu, the king of Matatabula, asked what was wrong and demanded the healer tell him.’

Nduna Zumela stepped forward to continue the story. He cleared his throat and touched the wall behind him.

‘The healer told Juga Nsundu, the king of Matatabula, that he would be killed by his own blood if he didn’t sacrifice all his cattle to the caves of Matatabula. Juga Nsundu, the king of Matatabula, thought this was an insult and had had the healer from the forest banned from practising healing. Ten years later his own sister gave birth to snakes. That morning, the king woke up with snake bites all over his body. He couldn’t speak. His body swelled, turned red and he drowned in his own fat. *Re ma so ve ve ra.*’

The villagers drank sorghum beer because they had thirsty spirits hovering around. This was one of the stories contained in the books that Nuri liked to read when sitting on the riverbank, dangling her legs in it. The water wrapped itself around her like a blanket. Nuri liked the story of the king, but there was another story that intrigued her: the story of the caves. She stood up, walked to the corner of the cave, kneeled down and touched the rocky wall.

‘Re ma so ve ve ra.’

Everyone said Ncosi.

‘A long time ago there was a mighty king of the Mandini, who lived in villages along the river, just where the mountains and forest began. Everyone had a home, they grew their own crops, had their own cattle there was food for everyone. The young people took care of the older people and the older people taught the young ones the way the ancestors lived and the way the drum was beaten. They told stories so that nothing would be forgotten.’

The young boy beat the drum; the people’s hearts listened, their blood beat loudly in their veins. Khulu Arango picked up the change in thought and tone. She continued the story.

‘One day a group of warriors arrived in boats, rowing down the river. They called themselves the Amansundana, and they were welcomed as foreign guests and given food and a place to sleep. But at night the leader of Amansundana and his warriors stole the cattle. Burned the Mandini houses and took the woman and locked them in their boats and set fire to their homes. The king of the Mandini and his warriors tried to stop them, and a bloody fight ensued over three days and many warriors were killed. The leader of the Amansundana fled with some of his remaining warriors. The Mandini villagers discovered their king had died in battle. The king’s mother survived, also did the youngest king’s daughter, a baby at that time.’

Khulu Arango stood up, walking around the fire as she spoke. She made sure everyone was listening. She continued. The stars lowered their gaze to fire.

‘The king’s mother, together with the remaining Mandini, rebuilt the villages and tried to restore the peace. The young princess grew older and her grandmother prepared her for the day that the Amansundana would return. She would have to face them with her people. She would only be able to find the power to defeat them if she could find the magic water that was hidden in a cave on the other side of the magic forest. And so, the king’s mother sent her to a journey to find it. She prepared for the journey with the help of friends, and after the hot summer, they were on their way. The journey was not without danger and some of her friends did not survive, but at the beginning of winter, high in the hills, where it was cold and dark, she found the caves. When she entered one, she found that there was water coming out from a wall, it was dripping onto a golden stone. She washed her hands and touched the stone, it lit up and its golden shine strengthened her. Then geysers started erupting from the floor of the cave, which filled it with hot steam melting the snow and ice on the mountains, the dark clouds drifted away, and she became the strongest young woman who had ever lived on this earth. No one ever threatened her and her people.’

‘What about the Amansundana?’ The young boy in a t-shirt and shorts asked Khulu Arango.

‘No one ever saw them again.’

Everyone listened in awe. What an amazing storyteller Khulu Arango was. They cheered her on and drank some more. Some used stones as pillows while those who had wives were dragged back to their thatched huts.

The following morning was quiet, the deep orange circles in the sky burned down.

The woman of Sorana worked hard, ploughing the corn fields. Their knees dug deep into the moist ground, ploughing, just so that they were able to have something to eat and defend themselves from what might still be roaming beyond the loop that enveloped the village’s. Khulu Arango kneeled next to Nuri. Her hands were covered in dust, and her back was aching. She was one of the hardest workers in the village. Usually Khulu Arango hummed a tune to lift the spirits, and now and then Nuri harmoniously joined in the humming. Today was no different from any other... Nuri picked up the bucket of water, collected from the previous rainfall. She drank. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

The suns vomited lava. The fields dried out. Rain had been scarce the past days. The people of Sorana depended on it for growing their mangoes. Nuri wiped the droplets of sweat on her

forehead. Her hands wanted to plough some more. She brought a bowl of water to Khulu Arango. Khulu Arango was still humming.

‘The sun is scorching,’ Said Nuri

‘It is that time of the season. It should be hot.’

‘I was thinking you could summon the rain... maybe?’

‘What makes you think I can do such a thing?’

Nuri held on to her words, beads of sweat testament to the heat’s fierceness.

‘Remember, Mfera child. Nature is powerful, not humans. Nuri nodded. ‘Don’t nod when you don’t understand.’

‘Why do we work so hard? When you can call on any fruit to fall from the sky?’

There was silence between them, the sound of ploughing was a soundtrack to their silence.

‘You’re not satisfied. What’s eating you? I’ve been meaning to ask you this for some time. ‘I would like to go to the highway with the Mandini warriors.’

Khulu Arango was silent, thinking deeply. Finally, she said, ‘Fetch me that bowl.’

Nuri handed her a bowl of water. Khulu Arango gulped down the water. She looked to the skies. The heat burned her. Her skin was wrinkled. She looked older with every passing minute. Would she ever rest, Nuri wondered

Nuri took the bowl from her, preoccupied with her own thoughts.

‘Hheyi wena... Nuri, qubeka ugaye lapho.’

‘Please Khulu Arango, I want to go with the Mandini warriors to the highway!’

‘I have told you since you were a young child that the highway is not for you and me. It is cold and unbearable. It is dangerous. The cars speed like they forgot to put brakes in them. People do not care anymore.’

‘But how do you know that people are still alive under this hell of heat? Even though we have the caves to retreat to and tell stories to, the heat still burns. We have lost three pregnancies already. What if the cave is not enough?’

‘You speak like a sick person, you need to be quiet.’

‘What if Bab’Mawala is still alive out there?’

‘Shut up! Hear me and hear me well Nuri Mfera child. You will never go to the highway. It is for your own good. If you do not listen, the fields of Sorana would be brown as the soil and

every cemented brick will start its crumbling journey. And I believe my ancestors and your ancestors will not be ready for what's to come.'

There were others like Khulu Arango. Those who had been born before her. Others who wrote about what happened in the caves. Those who had existed through her. Those who found shelter under the branches of trees. Those who could breathe underwater and warm themselves in hollow caves. They laughed with the wild beasts of the forest. They flickered like fireflies. Khulu Arango was a different seed.

Khulu Arango exhaled, picked up the hoe and began ploughing the earth. Silence descended. She felt Nuri's gaze. She had seen Khulu Arango glow like the sun in the night. Khulu Arango was the beholder of great stories. She had lived many lives, travelling to many foreign countries, sailing many oceans. She once was the rain. Khulu Arango kept ploughing and didn't speak further. Nuri felt defeated, and her head in a tall beeline of corn meals.

After waking the next morning, she went to collect wood to prepare soft porridge. She and Khulu Arango shared a hut and kept a wood pile behind the hut.

Nuri had never worried herself by asking questions about where she was from. Khulu Arango was both her mother and father, everyday she become what nature intended her to be. Khulu Arango found Nuri wrapped in a blanket left on the side of the river. Khulu Arango believed that the river gave birth to Nuri because the fish from below gave her water and the snake wrapped itself around her until Khulu Arango found her.

The smell of the streaming river enveloped Nuri. Already Sorana women were vigorously scrubbing their washing. Young men returning after their morning stroll from the river. By the time Khulu Arango woke up, the thatched hut was filled with the smell of lemony steamy porridge. Nuri brought a bucket of water for Khulu Arango to wash her hands, face and her *ghumghum*. Nuri fetched a blanket and sat inside the thatched hut and waited for Khulu Arango to finish. It was still dark, stars glimmered, and fearless birds of the night flew freely.

Khulu Arango looked at her.

'Nuri...'

'*Yebo*, Khulu Arango.'

'Do you wish to be someone else?' The question surprised Nuri.

'Someone else?'

'*Yebo! Bo...Hawu!* Running around, waiting to be chosen by a man. Like how the maidens would run to the City in the past,' nodded Khulu Arango.

'*The City?*'

Something shifted inside Nuri. She had heard tales from the maidens when bathing in the river. Wig-wagging about how *the City* had once been an oil machine. Nuri looked at Khulu Arango and tried to read between the lines. As usual Khulu Arango knew what she was thinking.

‘I am only asking because, you’re no longer a child. Your breasts can become a pillow to a working man, and your hips curve out to the side of the mountain and the grass is long enough to be cut.’

‘Khulu Arango, if that is what you want me to do and if you feel it is the right thing to do, I will do.’

‘No! *Mfera* child, you only telling me what you think I would like to hear. You will have to rethink that answer. You are not thinking.’

Nuri listened to the soft sizzling of the fire and the sound of crackling burning wood. Khulu Arango had sent Nuri down the river bank in the early hours of the morning. She had met a group of young boys who felt it was time to find a wife.

Their eyes were focused on Nuri. They tried to woo her by stick fighting and showing off their praise-singing skills, but their efforts were in vain. She kept kneeling down to do the washing, ignoring them. She was more eager to listen to Khulu Arango’s stories than worrying about marriage and courting. Sorana women believed that if they chose a boy from a good family, then they would have a good life. A life that consisted of bearing sons. But that wasn’t enough for Nuri.

She finally answered Khulu Arango: ‘I think, my purpose is different. It will happen as nature intends it to happen.’

‘The City was never what it was today. It was not meant to be burning.’

‘But it *is* Khulu, the women in the river are talking.’

‘Oh! *Mfera* child.’

‘Khulu Arango, I grow because of your stories. I become who I am because of Sorana women and Sorana girls before me. Because of the caves. They fill me up. I become stronger. *Ro so ni, Re ma so. Ve ve ra.*’ She laughed. She looked at the fire. ‘I cannot explain it. What I know is, I cannot sleep without listening to the tales of my people. How they lived deep in pure magic and stories.’

‘*Re ma so. Ve ve ra Mfera* child. We are strong.’

‘Your stories make me. *Re ma so. Ve ve ra.*’

‘They’re not mine Nuri.’

Silence followed. Khulu Arango took a spoonful of porridge. Nuri did the same.

‘You are indeed different, Nuri. You have a life. And with your life comes the burden of keeping it alive. But there comes a time when you have to let the life go so that you can give back life to life.’

Nuri seemed to be confused again. Khulu Arango stood up and left to fetch her shoes. When she came back Nuri was still sitting down.

She pointed to a bowl filled with ripe mangoes. 'Let's go trade these mangoes at the market.

Maybe we can get new curtains. Hurry now'

Nuri and Khulu Arango walked to Sorana market. The market chaos could swallow anyone, if they weren't on their toes. The market was dustier than all the dusty roads combined. Each stall consisted of twigs and grass, topped with a mound of thatched roof which sloped towards the brown soil. The result was that the market had the appearance of an endless sea filled with mounds of rocks. The corners of the market were occupied by vendors who sold tomatoes for those who enjoyed tomato soup. Colourful chains of fabrics hung on rails, adding to the festive mood of the market.

Mandini women also traded their *ndini* cloth for mangoes and Mfera women who traded their baskets and mangoes for mud clay pots and tomatoes. A fisherman whistled in a high-pitched voice and flapped his dead fish in the air, attracting stick-fighting boys and pipe-smoking men to trade with him. Nuri had hoped to get new *Capullanas* before settling into her mango stall.

As usual the street resembled cow intestines, everything was slippery, woven and intertwined. An old man stood with a gang of flies around him, chewing the ends of a sugar cane stick, shouting out that he was selling sugar beans, sugar canes, a group boy walked by carrying woven baskets on their heads and in their arms. The hilly roads were packed with wheelbarrows transporting sweetcorn, hand made sandals and young girls passed by with brooms clutched to their chests.

Nuri walked behind Khulu Arango, now and then stopping so that Khulu Arango could bless those who asked for blessings. Every second someone called for their attention; Nuri and Khulu Arango didn't know whether to continue walking or stand in the middle of the road in order to shower everyone with the blessings they were asking for. This was Nuri's home, her village. She loved nothing more than listening to the sounds of chickens and inhaling the smell of freshly woven basket on a Saturday morning.

Nevertheless, Nuri knew who could outsmart the chaos. Like the old man she spied, wearing an oversized hat, a striped T-shirt and short pants over his dark charcoal skin and sweaty armpits. His slippers were cut through with long toenails waiting to be cut with a lawn mower. He worked at the Ginqi Itshe chicken farm, and so held two chickens by their necks. Women with babies on their backs surrounded him. He was outsmarting the chaos indeed, by changing his voice to mimicked how a woman may sound; he also did that when an old man passed by as well as young kids. He shouted out as a kid saying things like: '*Please I am a fresh chicken, buy me, and cook me in boiling water. I promise you will enjoy to eat me.*' He was a spectacle. It worked for him. People stood in front of him to buy his chickens. Even if it was not part of the plan to buy chickens, they bought them. Because of the way he sold them. He was doing this since Nuri was a young girl. Everyone had grown fond of him. The market where it would not be a market if he was not there.

Kudo approached Khulu Arango from the other direction. He walked like he was a dream that Nuri wanted to wake up from.

Nuri turned away and grimaced when she saw Mabongi and Khonzile as they fixed their beads: Women wore beads not only as fashionable jewellery, but as a way to express feelings and send messages to one another. Some of the beads were made of white clay, which usually meant purity, but it also could mean they had sore eyes from waiting too long in vain at the river looking for a lover. However, Nuri didn't understand why they needed to dress so swanky in their colourful beaded necklaces and bracelets when all they were doing was trading mangoes at the market.

Kudo saw Nuri and Khulu Arango and raised his hand in greeting. He saluted the tap-dancing man with his chickens. Kudo helped Khulu Arango to carry the buckets of mangoes.

Kudo was a spear and shield kind of man. He was strong, from his toes to his skin hairs. Young maidens, and sometimes their mothers, threw their petticoats and their head doeks at his feet. But he was a dutiful young man, helping Khulu Arango to carry buckets of water from the river to her hut and helped her cut the grass in the garden. Gifted with broad shoulders, defined triceps and the bulky muscles that were sculpted by the caves. His clothes were made of crocodile skin. He has defined what a man should look like.

'Re ma so ni ve ve ra,' he said.

'You look well, Kudo,' Khulu Arango smiled and asked: 'How is your mother, Kudo?'

'She is well. She has a new stall of her own now, down the hill. Thank you for helping Khulu Arango.'

'She is a great weaver. I am glad the caves helped.'

'How is the sun treating you?' Khulu Arango asked.

Kudo was taken aback. The topic of the sun never came up easily with the villagers, because they didn't understand it. As long as it didn't interfere with their lives. The sun could separate into ten more suns. They would not know or be bothered.

Kudo stood glaring at the marks on his skin caused by the rays.

'It gets stronger everyday, Khulu Arango. I worry though.'

'Re ma so ni ve ve ra Kudo. You have met my granddaughter Nuri?'

'Everyone knows Nuri.' Kudo looked at Nuri. He extended his hand. 'I liked how you narrated the stories in the caves. I feel like every time when you speak, the earth settles and obeys, would you say that was why we are still alive from the three suns.'

'We tell stories for those who listen.'

'We are alive; the caves should be thanked.'

'I think everyone is saving themselves.'

‘But I think... I mean the cave is protecting us.’

‘See, you are confusing things, I’m not talking about the caves.’

‘But the stories exist because of the caves isn’t that so?’

‘Are you asking, or you already have the answer?’

‘Nuri Mfera ...’

Khulu Arango interrupted. Nuri looked at her Khulu and looked down at her dusty sandals.

‘It is okay Khulu Arango. It is wonderful to ungree with a woman.’

‘Disagree! Not ungree.’

‘Well, I am a Mandini.’

‘Then it is best to stick to our Sorana tongue than breaking our necks on a tongue that demands so much space in our brains.’

It had been a while since Kudo had been so challenged by anyone. He felt vulnerable in the face of Nuri’s fearless manner and raw honesty. Kudo realised that Nuri wasn’t sugar coating her words, but like a sneeze that tickled the nose- Nuri proved to be a flu waiting to take over Kudo because the more Kudo looked at her, the more he felt like disappearing inside a rabbit hole.

Nuri was both beautiful and pure in spirit. Her voice was made from water lilies.

Nuri couldn’t help thinking that there was something Khulu Arango was not sharing with her.

Kudo helped Nuri lay the table at the market with precision and care. She placed the mangoes on the table, building a mountain with each mango placed. She knew how hard Khulu Arango had worked to grow them. The aroma enveloped them. Kudo was intrigued by Nuri; she was different from the village young women.

Two other market young women Khonzile and Mabongi competed with the hyenas in their chatter. They sat down and stretched their legs, engrossed in gossiping about which young man might be stronger than Kudo.

Nuri often found herself excluded from such talk. Clouds moved lazily without destination, there wasn’t a hint greyness in them. She soon pressed against her neck against the heat of the three firing balls. Mabongi darted her eyes towards Nuri as she stretched her hands and submitted to the heat. Kudo looked at her as she stretched her arms wide. This baffled Mabongi.

‘Heey Kudo! The warrior of my walls... you must teach me to use the assegai.’

Kudo laughed and gently rubbed off the sweat on his forehead.

‘I think everyone should learn anyhow. What do you think Nuri?’

She ignored them and attended to her trading and she piled another mountain of mangoes on a plates.

Mabongi walked over to Nuri.

‘Who do you think you are *vele*?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Exyuuuse me for what? Don’t think you clever. Because you can memorise stories. Not all of us have grandmothers like yours.’

‘You really have a problem you need to sort out. Maybe you should lay it out on the table. Like grown-ups we can talk it out.’

‘Mciiim.... You... a grown shame. Stay away from our man. You weirdo.’

Mabongi turned and left Nuri still wondering what had caused Mabongi’s worries and concerns. .

Mabongi swayed her hips, knowing that the men in the market would be watching her as the beads around her small waist followed rhythms of her hip.

‘*Yazi mina*, Khonzile, the day I will marry the president, the world will know. I will be the talk of Sorana *ngiyakutshela*.’

‘Mabongi, even the chief will marry you because you claim you still a virgin.’ Khonzile laughed.

‘*Haibo!* Memeshane! Who said I’m only claiming that? I *am* a virgin. We can even let Khulu Arango here examine me.’ She pointed to Khulu Arango, who was sitting under the shade of a thatched roof.

‘We all know you are a virgin. But we never saw you at the dance of *intombi*. Never.’

‘I choose not to come. I thought it was no problem since, *niyazi akakaze alibhade*.’ Now both girls looked at Nuri.

‘Are you a virgin, Nuri?’ Khonzile asked.

What was wrong with these girls, thought Nuri. She replied, ‘You do like asking personal questions, don’t you?’

‘Are you a virgin, yes or no?’ Kudo stopped what he was doing and listened.

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘You think you are special, maybe.’

‘Maybe it is none of your business.’

‘It is, when every *tshebe* of a man growls at you and salivates over you. So why have you not come to the reed dance?’

‘I have much more things to worry about than virginity testing.’

‘Like what?’

‘Oh, would you stop. I already know what you think of me.’

‘Like stories, maybe.’

‘The truth, yes, like stories. The same stories that are saving you from burning to ash like the city people,’ she replied coldly. Khulu Arango pulled Nuri aside.

‘Do not let them get to you. Do you hear me?’ Nuri nodded. ‘Remember the story of the ant. All the time.’

‘I am sorry Khulu. I should not have said.’

‘Don’t worry. Sometimes, they need to be reminded what is at stake.’

Khulu Arango held Nuri’s hand. Mabongi twirled and gave her thigh a high five slap looking Nuri up and down as though she were prey, like a hunter hunting. She spat on the ground and sashayed back to her stall.

The conflict between Mabongi and Nuri had begun donkey’s years ago when Bab’Mawala stopped engaging with Mabongi and grew interested Nuri. The neighbours ululated when Bab’Mawala had picked Mabongi. He had brought ten fat featherless chicken to mark his interest at Mabongi’s family and his territory. Then Bab’Mawala saw Nuri. She kept to herself and that intrigued him.

Bab’Mawala was drawn to her silence and distance. Nuri didn’t like gossiping. She always walked behind Khulu Arango. *Iqhikiza ne ntombi yakhe*. They spent their days making the village greener. Creating stories for the caves. Bab Mawala looked forward to watching them as they passed his yard, and when he drove away in his car. He liked how the yellow *Capullana* flowed so effortlessly around her curves.

Nuri would sit on the rocks in the morning and like a mirror, the river carried her reflection. He had seen young women carrying heavy buckets of water, piles of wood on their heads... They took pride in balancing the bucket of water on their heads.

They managed to attract more admirers and whistles by manoeuvring their bodies. Their bodies called for attention. They would elegantly sway their hips from side by side keeping their backs as straight as planks. They knew they were noticed by young boys who were on their way to the mountains to herd cows.

But none of these maidens captured his heart like Nuri. The morning before Bab’Mawala’s disappearance the young maidens including Nuri, had received a lift from Bab Mawala. They had been trading at the cornfields and preparing for the storytelling that evening. As usual Bab’Mawala had asked Nuri to sit in front with him and told the other maidens to sit at the back.

‘What is it with her, anyway?’ Mabongi had asked looking at the women, the wind blowing their clay-smearred faces.

‘They say, she is the child of stories.’ A young maiden from the Mandini tribe said, ‘Stories What!’ exclaimed Mabongi as she clasped hands with Khonzile.

‘She is even darker than the night itself,’ added Mabongi. ‘Therefore, there is no way, Ubab’ Mawala, would find her attractive surely!?’ whined Mabongi.

‘*Hhayi bo! Yimbi bo ingane, Imnyama njenge lahle...*’ Khonzile chipped in.

‘*Phela, watholwa egodini lamanzi.*’

The young maidens burst into laughter. They found themselves hand clasping again. Mabongi seemed to be worried about not getting Bab'Mawala to choose her as his fourth wife. She knew that she was different from Nuri. Every boy from Sorana was head over heels with her dancing pear shape and adored the vibrant beads she wore, which complemented her fair complexion. But her reputation was ruined when he ended up not marrying Bab'Mawala... Behind the boiling pots and sweetcorn sizzling on the red charcoal, they called Mabongi, ruined goods.

The day after visiting the market, when both Khulu Arango and Nuri had stocked up on fresh vegetables and fish everyone in the village was quiet and content. In hindsight the splitting of the sun had changed many lives. Yet Nuri was baffled by how the caves protected the village of Sorana.

Nuri was left alone inside the thatched hut. She heard the flowing of the river and a passing convoy of birds. She picked up a bucket filled with cow dung and dancing maggots and set to buttering the floor.

She was used to the smell of the mixture, sometimes she thought that she could even hear the maggots inside the bucket as she dunked her hands in. She smeared the floor thinking about her inability to dampen her curiosity. She wanted to respect Khulu Arango 's wishes.

But somehow her heart had grown wings. She smeared around the corner of the table, she shifted the table and spread the cow dung evenly on the floor... Nuri's new Capullana was stained with cow dung. She reached the door, reversing on her knees. Her feet hit something soft. Nuri turned to see what it was, but it was a matter of who it was.

Kudo stood behind her... Kudo thought it was wonderful to see a woman taking care of her own things. He watched Nuri handling the cow dung with grace, muddying the floor without squirming or complaining. A home would be a home if her careful hands were in it, he thought. Kudo stood there with a spade and a box of tomatoes. His presence added to Nuri's foul mood. Kudo was two hours early. At least that was what she thought.

Nuri wondered whether Khulu Arango had sent him to guard her. *'Like a dog without a tail, following where the tail was promised.'* Thought Nuri. Kudo always came around the same time to mow the grass, Nuri thought that maybe he should let the grass grow on its own. Without his interruptions of course – man-handling, man-creating, man-shaping and man-explaining how plants combined with the soil made flowers bloom easily. With his spade, he dug more holes than necessary in the ground, rearranged a bed of flowers, and destroyed a colony of ants. Probably that was why Nuri was not so fond of Kudo.

Kudo stood behind her, his jaw tight.

'Re ma so ve ve ra.'

Nuri sighed at the thought that Mfera tongue could be useless at times. She thought how could someone greet someone by saying 'Tell the story to the caves.' What made sense to Nuri was *Re so ni* which meant blessings not *Re ma so ve ve ra*. Nuri pulled the bucket of cow dung and continued smearing. Kudo stared at her.

'I think I finally know the answer to how people get old.'

‘So, we are getting clever now?’

‘They think too much, like you. Nuri, you think a lot. Sometimes you should *itosa* like a blooming flower in winter.’

‘In case you have forgotten, we have three suns. There is no time for *itosa*, for relaxing.’

‘May I have water then?’

‘You have just arrived, and you want water?’

‘I was thinking ...’ Nuri, stood up and picked up the bucket.

‘I am on my way to the river.’

‘I’ll come with you.’

‘Don’t you have flowers to cut?’

‘I’d be happy to cut some more if there were any left.’

Nuri looked around the yard. Trees were trimmed to perfection. Each flower petal sparkled. The grass was mowed, and the barrel of water was filled.

‘Fine, but you will be helping me with the washing of my clothes.’

Nuri expected him to protest but he didn’t, and that surprised her. They walked down the hill, passed the river, stopped where the water had gathered, forming a dam. Warm steam evaporated from the river, Nuri’s skin glistened, and the nape of her neck was damp. Kudo dawdled in his shadows, otherwise the sun rays would burn his uncovered shoulders. Arriving at the river, Nuri put the bucket down and gave Kudo a glare. Kudo raised his broad shoulders in a shrug and bent down on his knees to raise his pants up, showing his muscled calves. He stepped inside the river.

‘I will look out for snakes for you,’

‘Onlo has done that already. I just want you take this bra and scrub on the rock and rinse it inside river. That is why you came with me.’

‘Fine, I will do it but on one condition.’

‘And what is that?’

‘*Re ra vanhu* Nuri’

Nuri smiled at hearing her tongue.

‘*Nhu va re ra*—you can speak the Sorana language?’

Kudo nodded. Nuri was puzzled by the confidence in his voice when he said her name.

‘Every tree child knows its roots.’

‘I suppose you know the story of Onlo as well?’

‘It is good to hear it again.’

‘*Kwasukela sukela.*’

‘*Ncosi.*’

‘In the stories; a wise girl named Onlo who had misty hair and feathered talons was the first story keeper who fought the beast of shadows by baring her fangs and sharp teeth. She stood below the shadow beast while it swung from ground to air. Onlo called out to earth and the sand to form a figure in a size larger than the shadow beast. The sand spew out from the rocks with incredible force, it blasted the shadow beast to the ground. The beast loosely

dangled its black tongue as it fell to the ground. The earth opened up and took what remained.'

Nuri was glad they had something in common.

A group of kids came running down the hill, their arms waving, shouting to Nuri and Kudo to come. There was someone lying on the ground.

Nuri dropped the clothes she had been washing and with foam still on her hands, she ran to the dusty rocky road. As she got close to the body on the ground her stomach shifted uneasily, and she shivered. Khulu Arango lay on the ground shaking from pain. Her legs were burnt, there were patches of yellow and orange open wounds. Her flesh was open around her toes, the yellow fat around the wound curled...

Khulu Arango was surrounded by the Mandini warriors. Nuri knelt beside her. With heavy eyes she asked the warriors to pick her up. They walked up the hills to the yellow hut that belonged to Khulu Arango. With every bump and turn she moaned. Nuri wondered what could have caused this. They reached the hut, and the warriors lay Khulu Arango on the mat, and rested her head against the stuffed feathered pillow.

Nuri rushed to the herbal garden. Bab'Mawala's wives brought buckets of their own herbal mixture and gathered around the house to provide assistance. The debacle forced the chief to investigate as well. Nduna Zumela rushed in with his walking stick and his curved fragile back, and his panting dogs followed behind him. He always walked around the village of Sorana with his dogs.

The grass was trimmed short between the rectangular beds of aromatic leaves. The garden was scented in mint. Nuri cut the lady fern with a pair of scissors, rolled the leaves between her palms, she added rough salt and mixed it with the soil from the caves. Kudo brought a bucket of alfalfa. He covered Khulu Arango's wounded area with them, and the mud fern mixture covered her legs. Nuri rubbed lavender oil on her chest and back, which helped to dose her to sleep. She left Kudo with Khulu Arango with instructions not to allow anyone to get in.

In the kitchen, everyone stood around, worry and consternation on their faces...

'Can someone tell me what the hell happened in there?' Demanded Nuri.

Nduna Zumela raised his baritone voice to ask the question.

'Watch your tone, young lady. We know this is upsetting. But rest assured, we will find out who is involved.'

'Where are the Mandini warriors?'

'I told you Nuri, we will work this out.'

'My grandmother nearly died and you're telling me to wait. I am sorry if you find my tone disrespectful. But I am not waiting while you comment on my manners'

'Nuri please calm down.' Ma Bira touched her shoulder. Kudo came out from Khulu Arango's bedroom.

'The Mandini warriors are outside,' said Kudo.

‘Threat! Threat! This is what it’s about!’ Ma Zulu shouted.

Nuri dashed outside without answering.

‘Can anyone tell me what really happened?’

With weariness one warrior stood up from squatting on the ground with his assegai still grasped on the side. ‘Nuri, we replaced the water drums as instructed outside the loop, the next thing we heard Khulu Arango screaming. We have no idea what happened.’

‘But that is impossible.’ Nduna Zumela said, coming out from the hut.

‘The only people who can cross the threshold is Khulu Arango and the warriors.’

‘Are you certain about that?’ Ma Zulu asked.

Nduna Zumela’s forehead united in a brow. Nuri paced around.

‘The people we kept feeding did this.’

‘We don’t know that.’

‘Then how do you explain this?’ Nuri pointed to the room where Khulu Arango slept.

Kudo broke silence.

‘Something happened, and we have to find out what.’

‘Awu me Kancane mfana wami. How will knowing help us?’

Nuri leaned against the windowpane, she could smell the sweetly purple scent of lavender.

‘He is alive.’ Nuri said.

‘Who?’ asked Nduna Zumela.

‘Bab’Mawala.’ Kudo said.

The room fell silent. It felt cold as the wintry blanket. Bab’Mawala’s wives suddenly remembered their duties, just in case he was coming back after five years. He might be hungry. His boiled chicken should be ready. Nduna Zumela allowed them to leave like sheltered creatures. Nuri looked at the warriors. Their faces expressed fear and doubt.

‘Take me to the highway.’ Kudo took hold of her hand.

‘Are you sure? That is a good idea.’

‘What? Are you planning to stop me?’

‘No. But I am coming with you.’

‘It’s your own grave.’

Nduna Zumela nodded and asked his wives to tend to Khulu Arango while Nuri was gone. Nuri’s heart ached like a bird that had lost its wing. The clouds gathered in grey ominous shapes. Nuri hung her knitted grass bag on her shoulders and walked down on the hilly muddy roads. walking past the babbling and burbling river with anxious hearts. Frogs croaked nearby. She worried about Khulu Arango.

The warriors followed, also with aching hearts. Now, and then a soft wind blew... They heaved on, in silence, as the winds buffed their faces. Kudo wanted to do more than just

follow behind her. He felt her pain, and he wanted to own it rather and gift her with more pleasant days, like when she smiled to Sorana women at the market, when she bought Capullanas, when she lay in the cornfields. He wished to bring back those few hours when she had smelled of cow dung. Tucking sound brought Kudo from his bellowing thoughts.

Suddenly the river started to change colour. Frogs turned upside down, rotating... Flowers were trampled along the road. Sprinkles of water hemmed the grey tar road. Nuri saw a yolk yellow loop in front of her. Which prevented her from crossing to the other side. She saw her reflection in it, and the Mandini warriors behind her. The warriors went into formation. She looked up at the glowing loop, it continued up into the sky and disappeared through the fiery ball clouds. Nuri took a step back. This was where the river ended, and the highway began.

‘Re ma so ve ve ra.’

In seconds, the beams stretched outward, circling the three suns. The loop opened. Nuri wore her yellow Capullana she stepped onto the steaming highway. The air was dry, stale and warm. There were two lanes of nothingness in front of her. She had never seen such big open road with no shrubs nor any greenery, no scurrying rabbits or skipping hares. There was no honey smell lingering in the air. Instead ash and dust floated through passing winds. Scraps of cars littered the road, rotten mangoes were spread on the road, and the water barrels crushed ashy skeletons. The three suns had fallen over the city, there were patches of oil spilled on the ground, pieces of trucks and motors bikes rusted around them. Kudo tapped Nuri’s shoulder.

‘There is nothing else to see than this.’

What Kudo was saying was self-evident; on the side of the highway was a mountainous pile of disintegrated buildings, burnt out trees, windows with shattered walls and rusted iron bars, all swept by winds the red dust continuously soared above the city and accumulated on what was no longer left.

‘There are no survivors.’

‘It has been five years since the sun.’ Nuri looked at the sun.

‘The sun is not doing anything to us.’

The Mandini warriors were quiet, realising what Nuri had said was the truth. The Sorana stood in the blazing heat but it didn’t burn them, nor did the toxic air poison them. Nuri turned to Kudo, there was fear in her eyes.

‘But Khulu Arango was burnt. How? Something is not making sense.’

Back in the village in Khulu Arango’s yellow hut, things were not as Nuri had left them. The Amansundana roamed around Khulu Arango’s sleeping bed. Khulu Arango opened her eyes, recognised who they were and what they wanted. This was not good at all. Pieces of their skin blew away with the soft wind. Amansundana looked straight at Khulu Arango,

bewildered. They glided towards her, poking her wounds. Dust circulated around Khulu Arango's yellow's home. Nduna Zumelas' wife was frozen, as the other wives' bodies melted to the ground. Smoke erupted on Amansundana's feet.

'Please leave us, this is not worth it. Please.' Khulu Arango begged

'Show us the caves and the girl, Khulu Arango.'

'You are not this man?'

'You speak as if you know me. You think those mangoes and the water you think you gave saved us?'

'What were we supposed to do?' The Nsundana pressed on Khulu Arango's wound, and when pus oozed out she yelped.

'You left me out there! alone to die.' Khulu Arango looked at him.

'But you survived.'

'I made a deal.'

He shook the cabinet that held Khulu Arango's ornaments.

'No one makes deals with nature. There is no sun that will bow to any man. Stories protected you, son of Mfera. Listen to me, the caves shielded you. The way it shielded us all these years, and now you want to annihilate the only thing we have that will allow us to survive.'

'If that is true... why then did the caves not open the loop? Huh? Five years!'

Khulu Arango took a deep breath. Amansundana simultaneously raised their hands to pull off the flesh from Khulu Arango's legs. They removed their masks. They devoured the skin with teeth carved like a crocodile. The Nsundana licked the pus oozing down his hand. Khulu Arango screamed.

'This is how I survived.' Khulu Arango kept screaming, her heartbeat was faster than usual, suddenly shook. The lower back trembled with cold. She found her words.

'Pleaseeee... Pleeeeeease... you don't have to do this.'

'You taste good Arango... you are my addiction.'

'The caves will drag you to the sun.'

'It was clever of you to protect the village, but you forgot one thing. You did not protect a heart's desire.' Khulu Arango became quiet. Everything was quiet.

Nuri felt that something unsettled in air. She and the warriors went back through the loop, returning to the village. The grey clouds huddled above them. The meadow of Sorana village was before them, followed by a view of the sunken village which nested between a wide spread of grassland.

A flock of birds flew by, before freezing and dropping like stones, they came crashing down on the ground. Nuri screamed, the warriors instantly grouped around Nuri, their assegais glimmering in the sun. Nuri's heart was pounding... She breathed shallowly, looking around, seeing that the strength of the warrior surrounded her. Amansundana from the city were doing this. There was no other explanation. But why? How did they come in? Was Khulu Arango okay?

The storm wind swirled above. The trees thrashed in the furious winds... The choreographed wind passed Nuri and the warriors and skedaddled down to the hills to Sorana. The wind blew every wooden fence over and blew the cow dung from each hut. Clothes were blown off lines. Plants from the ground were uprooted. Birds perished inside their wings.

Nuri was shocked as she watched cows circling in the air and slamming the ground. They all shrieked in fear. Something was happening that was beyond their worst nightmares. The rain that came was different from anything else they had experienced. This was not a good sign: she knew what kind of storm this was, and it carried a message that was loud and clear: that it aimed to drown every Sorana. Each home looked like a gang of dead cockroaches with scattered blankets. A golden green snake slithered along the white sand, also in need of a new home.

She could see her home. The roof gaped open, and the trunk of a tree was growing from the thatched hut. Nuri ran as fast as she could. She fell to her knees, hitting a stone with her knees, and crying out in pain. She beat the ground so hard that it made dust rise. She repeated the motion. Her dark complexion became darker. She screamed, pushing away anyone who tried to calm her down.

Kudo wrapped his arms around her as she crumbled into pain. Nuri's knuckles felt large, she felt her spine spasming, she crumbled in Kudo's arms. Her eyes closed, she was praying for the caves to warm the barrels of her arching heart.

Nduna Zumela and his dog stood in the rain. Everything was chaos his feet lifted thousand cements sack when he walked towards Nuri. The rain poured. He opened his to speak. He could not finish what he wanted to say, because the whole neighbourhood was now standing in front of the yellow thatched hut. Giant boils swelled on their clay smeared faces coughing blood.

An ear dangled on Mabongi's face, without blood oozing. Ma Zulu held her new-born close to her chest. The left hand- held a plastic which inside carried her toddlers' eyes. Amongst the neighbourhood Nuri recognised the man who sold fish at Sorana's market.

He was covered in locusts, and next to him stood the man who sold chickens at the market, his skin had grown feathers and chicken beaks grew out of his back. On the hill sat the young maiden that sold Capullana fabrics to Nuri, she vomited a colony of ants... It got worse: as she looked hairy dog tails sprouted all over Nduna Zumela's head and when he tried speaking, he barked. The Mandini warriors glimmering skin marks and assegais pulled Nuri away from everyone.

'Nuri let's go! Let's go! Let's go.'

'Wwwwhat is that? *Re ma so ve ve ra! Re ma so ve ve ra! Re ma so ve ve ra!*'

'My goodness,' exclaimed one of the Mandini warriors.

'Did anyone know the weather would change like this.'

'Did you see those cows?'

Kudo held Nuri's hand.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I don’t know what is going on Kudo. I feel something really wrong is happening.’

‘Do you think something happened to the caves?’

‘I don’t know.’

Since Bab Mawala’s wives left earlier to prepare for the arrival of their husband they didn’t see everyone they knew turning into monsters. The windows of Bab’Mawala’s house were large, almost the size of MaZulu’s thatched hut. The sheepskin on the floor warmed the soles of their trembling feet. The renovated high roof was few years old. It looked similar to city houses.. Bab’Mawala’s house was still intact. It was as he left it. The winds hadn’t touched his home.

The wives waited inside their home, seated on the bench table, ignoring what was happening outside as the storm blew people’s homes away. They took their fears and shoved them under the carpet, while they prepared for Bab’Mawala’s needs. They cooked chicken and pap. They laid the table ready for when he would walk in. It had been five years, and they had to show that they were waiting for him, even though the banging of walls and the passing smell of fire made them worry. A few minutes later there was a knock on the door.

The third wife, Ma Mira stood up and opened the door. Amansundana stepped inside with their long cloaks trailing behind them. They smelled the freshly cooked meat as they huddled at the door. The stench of burnt flesh entered the dining room with their arrival. The first wife, Ma Dira remembered a story Khulu Arango had told them about Amansundana. She had said they were faceless with black cloaks covering their head and feet. In the story they bulldozed small villages.

Fear got hold of the first wife, Ma Dira stood up, grabbing a nearby pot filled with soup. She was about to fling it toward the intruders when the wives heard their husband’s voice. After five long years he stood at the doorway. Entering his house, his eyes adjusted to the dim light of the candles. They all felt afraid.

‘Baba!’ Ma Bira, the second wife, rushed to her husband to embrace him. When she moved closer to him, her flesh changed to dust within seconds. As if the three suns had been brought inside the house.

Rotating light beamed from Amansundana’s feet and hands. It turned the remaining wives to stone sculptures, their arms raised to their eyes, and their mouth frozen into the shape of the letter O.

Kudo shouted to the warriors to step back and not touch anything. They headed back to the caves.

Nuri shut her eyes and hummed in pain. Kudo and the Mandini warriors cocooned Nuri like a warm blanket, while their assegais glimmered in the sun. The forest swallowed them. She pushed through, the branches snapping away from them as they walked, pushing them aside so they could see through the forest paths. The dry air was suffocating them. They realised they had reached the ancestral forest.

With every step she took the earth swelled up. The wind pushed Nuri, and she fell on the ground. Looking up, she thought she was seeing a trunk of tree twisted in a weird shape, but to her surprise, the details of the eyes, lips, and nose became Khulu Arango. Nuri walked closer to Khulu Arango. As she walked the leaves on the ground turned peppery white.

Nuri called her name. Khulu Arango withered inside the tree trunk, soon she would nest with the birds and squirrels. There was a menacing silence in the forest. Nuri's eyes remained on the ground. She could not bring herself to move. She blinked the tears that ran down her face. She saw Kudo walking close to her. Nuri wringed her Capullana dry. She collapsed on the nearest rock. She could not stop shaking. She covered her eyes. Her hands were a dam of salty water.

A multitude of stars gathered around the branches. The tree began to glow. Behind the mountain a dark mist swelled up to the sky, the ground moved... She could not believe her eyes. The tree was bare like a bald man.

Nuri and the warriors took what they could pick from the fruit trees and licked dew drops from the leaves. They crossed rivers and dams. They found monkeys dangling off tree branches, giraffes chewing leaves and elephants dunking their trunks in water. A locust leaped from one branch to Nuri's shoulder. A butterfly crown fluttered its fragile wings around Nuri. Kudo squeezed Nuri's hand. She felt warm, again.

For the first time since Nuri had met Kudo, she found herself really looking at him, studying him. She had never seen a man like him in Sorana. He had such a powerful presence that she quivered before him. His face captured her interest, it was brown and kind. He was not affected by the things of the world.

Kudo assigned the warriors on guard duty. He could see how tired Nuri was. The pain danced in her eyes. His feelings were deepening, he had had no idea that he would come to care for her so intensely. He tried to shake it off by looking away. She stood in the openness of nothing. As a Mandini, his job was to protect her. Kudo looked at Nuri. Nuri was beyond beautiful, Finally, Kudo found his voice.

'Re na yo yi ta Nuri!'

Kudo, together with Mandini warriors, took a step back formed a circle and threw dust into the air. When the dust dispersed, it revealed them in their Mandini attire with their tribal skin marks made highly visible. Kudo's muscles bulged with strength, . He had bright eyes and long grey dreadlocks. He stood in his truest form, wearing the Mandini fabric, holding an assegai. He knelt down, he bent his head. The floor where Nuri now stood was of shining wood. Everyone fell to their knees.

'*Re na yo yi ta Nuri!*' The warriors raised the stick and repeated '*Re na yo yi ta Nuri.*'

The Mandini warriors pinned their assegais to the ground. The ground trembled. A light from the assegais circled both Kudo and Nuri. A tornado of dust blew up from the ground, the earth opened, and down they all went into a dark pit-hole. The gaze from the stars became smaller and smaller as they fell. Particles of dust tapped against them Nuri closed her eyes

tightly. The gravity pulled them into a dark abyss. The Mandini warrior squeezed their assegais, they caught light providing, what was needed. Kudo held Nuri's hand, the fall felt like it had lasted hours. Finally, they landed on a bed of grass, rats skittered through their burrowed holes.

'Nuri are you alright?' Kudo asked

She nodded.

They walked underground, invading the rats' homes with their every step. At first Nuri's eyes were blurry, since the cave they found themselves in was bent, and she inhaled further dust stirred up from the walking.

The caves were warm, there was a sense of security to be found in them. Her long Afro shone with dust and small stones. Her breathing was inaudible. The warriors' skin marks were illuminated by the light from their assegais.

She saw the rock art painting on the wall of the caves. The rock art stretched and shimmered in mellow yellow. The painting was of a young girl being followed by a lively stock of cattle, and a mass of people and different kinds of animals that belonged in the air and ground. This was something Khulu Arango had told her about.

They were now barren with lack of energy they were rescued by a tribe of men who wore sandy brown robes and stood tall, bearing long sticks. Behind these men, a festive light flickered, drums banged, the sounds many different languages were heard. People walked from burrow to burrow, carrying with food. They wove themselves into the fabric of the scene. Nuri recognised maidens she had known from the river. But there were also people here were not like her. They had marked faces, these were the Qu nation, been built under a colony by red ants. The Qu were unique people, with an ability to choose an insect to communicate with, and they had chosen the ant.

Each tribe precisely was sectioned in a hole like a meerkat's burrow holes, they spread on the cave wall. They met the shaman of the cave, who collected shredded snake skin. They borrowed their tongues and drank their sorghum beer. They sat on their dried cows' skin. Nuri realised that these were Soranas. They rested where the sun had been resting, warming themselves there.

Nuri could rest here with a peaceful heart. She sat on a stone, in the centre of which the fire stones bellowed. She held a mug of soup and glanced at everyone singing in different languages Only if Khulu Arango was here as well. Her eyes caught Kudo's glance.

'Are you okay?' She paused, and Kudo looked into her eyes. Nuri looked away.

‘Thank you,’ She said to him.

‘You are the last storyteller. It was our duty.’

They were quiet for a while, while swaying their bodies and tapping their feet to the beat of the banging drum. ‘I have never seen you dance.’

‘Argh, I left that to Mabongi and Khonzile.’

‘I bet you could have been the best.’

‘Neh, not really.’ There was an awkward silence.

‘I didn’t know about the other caves. Did you?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Every tribe had caves to offer their stories. Some stories came in drums and singing.’

‘And now we hope the people will save themselves.’

‘No. Kudo you were right. The stories are saving us.’ She touched his hand, their eyes locked. His face was close to hers now.

‘Nuri, I want to tell you something—’

Nuri pushed her body closer to Kudo, the singing harmonised with the drums and the ululations.

The Mandini warriors sat their assegais on the ground. When dancing they became loose and free, smiling; they had nearly forgotten that they *could* smile.

Nuri’s Capullana freed its knot, wrapped itself around Kudu’s waist, like a snake it slithered and squeezed both Kudo and Nuri. The Capullana pulled them closer to their bodies. Their skin changed. They felt their lungs smouldering, their air thinning out, both their eyes glowed, light beamed out of their gaping mouths.

Beams of light streamed through the cave openings, the silence was loud, everyone had stopped moving. They didn’t dare blink and stood like rock statues. The three suns landed at the entrance to the caves which they melted to the ground. And there was Bab’Mawala standing on top of the cave, he was chewing on a leg with his crocodile mouth He slowly turned away, smiling while he dragged one-legged Mabongi away.