

I DID NOT DIE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

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Topic: Novella

My novella is about a mine worker and his family. Set in both Lesotho and South Africa, it engages the effects of migrant labour on families in post-apartheid South Africa. Told through the eyes of the different family members, the narrative uses shifting points of view and moves fluidly through time to present an intimate but complex view of the lives of ordinary working class people. It incorporates witchcraft and ghosts to reveal the blurred lines between the realms of life and death. This collection is inspired by my own father who is a former mine worker. I am influenced by Joyce Carol Oates and Chibundu Onuzo's darkly realistic style, Véronique Tadjo's explorations of migration and death, the family chronicles of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. I am also inspired by female fantasy and horror writers such as those collected in Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's anthology, *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology*.

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Defiance Against Force

You, bowing, you, crying

You, dying, like that, one day without knowing why

You looking no longer with laughter in your eyes

You, my brother, your face full of fear and suffering

Stand up and shout NO!

-David Diop

Prologue

Speculations are rife on this day of my funeral. Some are saying it is my neighbour who caused my death. The bitter witch. She keeps peeping through the curtain at mourners as they visit my family. She is the only neighbour who has not attended my funeral or even come to help the other women with cooking preparations or show support at the night vigils. They suspect it was the higher raise I could have earned more than her husband at the mine. Some say it is because of my hut, the only house that has been connected with electricity. Others look at the colour television and argue that it's because no other household owns it. Or they point at the old faded *Achiever Award* by the Mining Production, framed on my wall. They say all these are evidences of why someone would want me dead. Hence they sneak in this long knife inside my casket. It is placed inside my right hand, wrapped around my stiff fingers to clutch it. It is well hidden away from the eyes of those who are circling around a mine worker's casket, trying to see his face for the last time.

It emerged from the shoes on the floor. The shoes shifted, opening the way. The children's floor bedding was in perfect view. It slid over the thin mattress which shrank slightly under its weight then straightened up again. Heat rose from the twenty toes ahead. On top of the bed, Nthatisi pulled the blankets to her shoulders. There was a frown on her face. Did she just see her sneakers by the wall move on their own? She leaned towards the bedside table to blow out the candle then, paused. Held her breath. She slid down. Crouched and began patting at her two children, pulling them up. They woke, screamed and ran from the blankets.

A snake was crawling on the children's floor bedding.

"Let's go!" Nthatisi ran to the door. She unlocked and opened it wide.

A crowd of neighbours had come out on hearing the screams. "It can only be your neighbour, Mamasepatsana! This is all her works!" said Nthatisi's friend.

Nthatisi had rushed to silence her. But the dogs of the accused responded, barking furiously inside their owner's yard.

Thinking back, she still does not know how they all managed to run out of the house. As she pushes the horrors of yesterday out of her mind, Nthatisi reads a letter from her husband. Her eyes mist as tears gather. A few drops of tears smear some words. She tries to make them stop so she can read the last words. "Oh," she whispers and blinks hard. She sniffs. The letter shakes uneasily in her trembling hands. Such indignities! Nthatisi raises her head to look blankly into space. She runs a hand across her cheek. It stays there. She shakes her head slowly. How would her husband understand that she now sells diphaphatha near a taxi rank in Quthing? That she makes less money than she used to make before? Her head drops and she squints at the smeared words.

After she finishes reading, she slowly folds the letter but allows the tears to silently run down her round cheeks this time. She puts the letter down beside her on the bed. Her fingers pat it once. She sniffs, swallowing phlegm with gratitude and guilt. She wipes her tears. She even decides to shelf her long time resentment for her husband. She had been miserable the first time he did not come home for Christmas. There was not even a letter. Now, Nthatisi feels the muscles in her face relax. Her husband has finally decided to do well by them. She takes the money into her hands. The notes feel weighty as she straightens them and her breath

catches. She slowly begins to take out one note after another. Her ears follow the rhythm of the soft whooshing sound of paper. She counts again and then again. Each time she counts, a feeling of calm fills her.

The devastation of last week seems distant. Faraway. The memory is like a photo. A woman alone. She sits and claps her hands after every thoughtful pause. Her wallet is missing. She suspects it silently dropped down while she walked from taxi to taxi, calling out for her diphaphatha to be bought. The R80 it held, gone. The profit she had gained, gone. An idea lights inside her head. She must give away her two children. Unburden herself from the responsibility of feeding another human being. But her heart, it reminds her she is a mother.

Now, Nthatisi feels a tingling along her spinal cord and her shoulders jump. Her eyes close. She inhales slowly. Her eyes open. From a pillow, she grabs a handkerchief and spreads it out across her lap. Lips turn down. Her hands keep straightening out the handkerchief as she muses over the snake and her wallet. She wonders. Could these things have been caused by someone else's works? Someone who does not want to see my family succeed? Nthatisi shakes her head. Tough times when they come they do not come with answers. She thinks. But on this early December afternoon, while the summer rain splatters softly on the thatched roof, Nthatisi knows the R2000 she is now collecting together and wrapping tightly with her handkerchief is a blessing. She can even smell the pleasant scent from the baked bread cooling over the table.

"Botho is coming home," Nthatisi says to herself after a slow exhale.

She did whatever she wanted to do. Nthatisi had begun to suspect her husband had abandoned them to take up with another family at the mine, where he worked. He was gone for a long time and it had been a year since she last heard from him. Nthatisi had looked at her two children and her chest ached with anger. They followed her singing, as she walked outside to take down a bed sheet from the washing line. Their voices were loud and their hands clapped. A silly nonsensical song, Nthatisi thought. It was about a girl, who pretended to cry from cutting onions whereas she was crying about a boy that her parents refused to let her see.

Nthatisi hauled the white sheet off and walked back towards the house. Still, her children followed her in song. She turned and hurled the sheet across their faces. Their song stopped. They stood, stunned as she shut the door.

When another year passed, Nthatisi agreed to go out with Jeffrey. An English teacher who pursued her after he realised she never hurried to get up from her secretary desk after school was out. It had felt refreshing, being touched like a woman. At her desk outside the principal's office, she and Jeffrey gave each other secret smiles. Other times, a chocolate bar would drop on Nthatisi's lap after Jeffrey sneaked it in as he rushed past her desk. Jeffrey would take her out to picnics where they lay on green grass behind high rocks where no one would see them.

"I hate spoiling you in secret," Jeffrey would say, making Nthatisi blush.

Sometimes, he would surprise her during month end and book a weekend getaway at Maseru Sun hotel. Nthatisi ended their dating when Jeffrey became possessive even proposing marriage. Jeffrey refused to let go. He started to follow Nthatisi wherever she went. Nthatisi began to feel scared. Once, when doing grocery shopping, she spotted Jeffrey in the same aisle pretending to look up at spices on the shelf. Again, she would notice his car driving slowly far back whenever she got off the taxi, walking towards her house.

On one early morning before the sun shone, Nthatisi rushed out of her gate to catch a taxi. She heard heavy footsteps. Someone was walking behind her. They entered her personal space. There was a familiar smell. She could feel their breathing against her neck. Nthatisi sneaked her hand up under her skirt. From her pantyhose, she retrieved a knife, opened it and turned around. She clutched the small silver knife, pointing it at Jeffrey. Jeffrey drew his breath in and took one step back.

“One day you will understand the importance of a man,” Jeffrey said, his upper lip quivering.

“Leave me alone sekweta towe,” Nthatisi spoke, quietly.

“Arg, you are a bitch maan! Who would want you?” Jeffrey waved his hand and walked away.

Nthatisi stood breathing loudly. She did not realise that the hand that was holding the knife was shaking. She turned back home in tears. She decided to start her own business.

Botho returned to Lesotho on a hot clammy day in December 1994. Even Mamasepatsana's six emaciated dogs were lazy to bark. They sat in the shade sticking their tongues out, panting from the heat. After he alighted from a taxi in Alwyn's Kop, Botho placed his hands on his waist and slowly looked around him. Seeing the wholesale stores, the large white building where people posted and received their letters, the busy hair salon with silver sinks and hair hood dryers and some small shops made out of shacks where people sold makwenya to taxi drivers and school children, save for the grey dullness, Botho remembered how the place used to look almost like a shopping mall. Turning back round, he looked down at his Mmese's red checked bag and picked it up. He placed the bag over his shoulder with one hand supporting it. From the taxi terminus, Botho walked determinedly to his house. The sun clung to his shoulders and neck. Still he walked. He walked taking in the sight of his home town.

The familiar urban feel of it. Only the small brick houses built separate from one another with corrugated iron zinc roofs, reminded him it was a village. His thatched roof hut stuck out like a shaggy black sheep, the only thatched house in the neighbourhood. Cars passed by on the grey gravel road. The pepperboom trees near the road provided a brief reprieve from the sun. On the right side of the road, Botho's eyes landed on the silver roof of his neighbour's house. It was Mamasepatsana's house. The zincs looked like they were melting from the heat. Perhaps her husband was away working hard at the coal mines. Botho mused, taking in the large grey brick face house. He still resented that Mamasepatsana's house was so close to his, looming like a pervert sitting near a young girl. Before turning into the narrow path leading to his house, he saw the *Blues Café* - a large blue building which was separated into a convenience store and a tavern. Inside the tavern, people sat near the bar drinking or watching the colour television, powered by a huge buzzing generator.

Outside at the entrance, kids crowded the stairs, craning their necks to watch the action movies or yell and scream between an Orlando Pirates and a Kaizer Chiefs soccer match. Botho opened his small rusty gate. It creaked and Mamasepatsana's dogs whined. He cast a glance at his vegetable garden. Beside it, there was a stack of grey bricks he had gathered a long time ago with the promise of building a house. His vegetables were frying. The garden looked thirsty and neglected. There were careless footprints which left the yellowed and brown leaves of plants crushed. This made Botho miss the delicious smell of the soil

whenever it rained. After all these years, he felt like his garden seemed to be accusing him of abandonment.

Walking towards the brown stone structure marking his hut, Botho began to feel his intestines split apart and his heart kicking against his chest. He would finally see his children. He would soon hold his wife in his arms and inhale her smell.

The door was ajar, a song of laughter played inside. Botho knew they did not see him standing there, his eyes watering as he took in his two children playing. Working at the mines in South Africa had kept him away from his family so long. He never thought he would see this day. He knocked and they jumped. It took a while for Botho's eyes to register that the little girl he once left as a baby and the toddler who was not yet born, were his children. Then the screaming began.

"Ntate! Ntate!" Itaoleng came running out to him, arms open wide.

Kamo followed curiously. Botho put down his bag to scoop up his daughter. The white yellow dotted dress made a ruffling sound. His daughter's skin felt rough at the arms around his neck. Her short uncombed hair looked like popcorn. She spread a smile.

"How beautiful you are. How old are you now?" Botho spoke quietly.

"Ten!" responded Itaoleng, loudly.

Botho drew her closer and tighter. She smelled like the sun.

"Ntate your beard is scratching my face," Itaoleng said softly with a pout.

Botho pulled his head back in laughter.

"Come, hold your father by the ears," he said.

His daughter kissed him on the lips and he lowered her down.

"Now, who do we have here? Ei moshemane, come greet your father."

Kamo moved slowly out of hiding from behind his sister. Botho reached for him and held him up in the air. He stiffened a little.

"So, it's you Kamohelo. You look so much like your mother. Do you welcome me, huh? Do you welcome your father home?"

Botho shook him a bit until he softened up with a smile.

Kamo agreed with a giggle.

“What?” Botho said with a tone of feigned anger.

“Eya ntate!” Kamo shouted, excitedly.

“That’s my boy!” Botho drew him to his chest, rocking him.

“Hold me by the ears.”

Kamo held his ears pulling his face forward and kissed him.

“There you go,” Botho said and turned his head towards the door expectantly.

His breathing slowed down. The air from his mouth tingled his open lips.

“Where is your mother?”

“She went to a wedding,” Itaoleng said.

“Oh, I see.”

Botho led his children inside. He hung his *Achiever Award* from the mine on the wall before settling down. He sat at the table with an enamel jug of water. He took an impatient swig and glanced around. The off-white blanket draped silently over the double bed accompanied with two pillows. A stack of suitcases created a wardrobe. In disciplined rows, different shoes for each occasion milled about on the floor.

“Moshemane, come take off your father’s shoes,” Botho signalled breathlessly to Kamo. He swallowed a gulp then cast his eyes down.

The cow-dunged floor had lost its greenness but looked well swept. He raised his head and turned his gaze. The round kitchen table still had all its six chairs intact. It took up most of the space. On the other side of the table stood the sparkling white metal kitchen drawer. It would be filled with groceries soon. The silver beam stood next to it. It would overflow with mealie-meal and flour soon. A table with two pails of water and another one with a two-plate gas stove. In front of the table, his daughter leaned, looking down at her toes. The attached gas cylinder would be refilled.

“I’m done,” Kamo said, confidently tapping him on the knees.

“Hela wena monna, na wa tseba ho bapala ditebele?” Botho teased him with a blow-by-blow boxing.

The little boy jumped on top of his lap in a frenzy to wrestle him. Botho lost himself in the giddy laughter of his son. He forgot the absence of his wife.

The heat was searing the first time Botho and Nthatisi fell in love. She had found work at a hair salon in Alwyn's Kop after she had had to drop out of high school. She had wanted to hold on, since she was doing Form Four and would soon complete school. But her father's employment at the mine had ended and her books often got stolen. Then she found herself a job at Suzie's hair salon.

"O thiba letsatsi," Botho said with a deep voice.

He had been loitering around, chewing the thought of leaving Lesotho to go work in the mines. He had had to drop out of school too to become a bread winner for his many siblings. Nthatisi had turned around to see who could be saying she is beautiful. She saw a very light skinned tall man leaning against the wall outside. Botho folded his arms trying to stop his accelerated breathing. He licked his lips, eyeing her from her feet to her face. A handsome man, Nthatisi decided even though she was put off by the freckles dotting his nose.

"You will compliment until you are tired," she replied, turning on her heel.

But the handsome man with a freckled nose glued himself outside the salon daily.

"I can tell cruelty does not suit you," Botho would say as Nthatisi came out rushing for a taxi.

"This sun will roast you until you're red I tell you."

"But me I know you know I'm waiting for you to save me."

"What do you want?" Nthatisi paused, turning around to face Botho.

The handsome freckled nose man bent down to wipe his shoe with a handkerchief. Then he swaggered towards her.

"I want to share a life with you."

"I have a taxi to catch."

"And I have a heart to catch."

Botho had caught her hand and stepped even closer. When Nthatisi reached his eyes, he never let go of her.

Were those brown dots always on his nose? Itaoleng wondered as she stole a glance at her father. He sat on a chair with her little brother on his lap. Both were immersed in a boxing game. She never noticed his freckles when she was very little. Now, standing there ten years old, she saw them. This was confusing. Itaoleng looked at his bag near the bed. She wondered what nice things he'd brought her. Father and son filled the house with laughter. Itaoleng did not know whether to laugh too. She felt giddy inside. She clasped her hands in front of her. Her back leaned against the table with the two-plate burner stove on top. She brought her eyes back to his face then dropped them down on the floor when he lifted his eyes. She had not seen her father in such a long time.

"Now aren't you going to serve your father something to eat?"

Itaoleng looked up startled and felt bad at the same time. Her lips drew a little apologetic smile. She continued standing. Her ashy toes curled in and out. She dug her chin into her flat chest, batting her eyelids downwards. Their mother was the one who handled all the cooking and she had not taught her yet. But Itaoleng did not want to fail her father.

"Mme cooked pap and cabbage ntate."

She grabbed a plate and turned towards the stove to serve.

"But I don't eat cabbage!"

Itaoleng froze in the middle of serving and turned around. Her father was annoyed. She was failing. Their eyes held each other. Her father waived his hand.

"No matter, I will eat."

Itaoleng dished with gusto.

"Here is your food ntate." Itaoleng handed her father the plate of food, stealing a glance at him and they both smiled.

The sun was already shedding its glow when Nthatisi arrived home.

“Botho!” she said, beginning to tear up.

Her breasts climbed up and fell down again. She felt her knees weaken as she stood quietly in the doorway holding the strap of her purse with both hands. To think this was the same man she had waited for all these years. He looked much thinner than she remembered. But despite his now full-bearded face, he still had his looks. Nthatisi bit her lower lip and looked down. Her right foot moved a bit. It began to feel slippery between her thighs. She looked up and became self-conscious. She kept blinking to avoid her husband’s eyes and lightly patted her afro on the side. Could he still see her the same way? Did she yet look the same way in his eyes? Nthatisi noticed his trousers were well ironed. She pummelled down the suspicion that someone could have ironed for him but the feeling climbed up her throat again. Could this still be the man that once said he wanted to share a life with her? Nthatisi looked down at her purse and her tears flowed out in a mixture of insecurities and happiness.

Botho raised his head and saw his wife. Her face looked like a mixture of coffee and milk. Standing in the door way, Nthatisi was blocking the sun. This was the first time Botho was seeing his wife after being gone a long time. He had waited, impatient for her to return home after he arrived, only to find her gone. Now her arrival seemed so sudden. Botho rose from the chair. He took his cap off and walked towards Nthatisi, clutching it next to his chest. Her curvaceous figure was outlined in a nude pink pleated skirt and a silky blouse. Her head was crowned with a big black afro. Botho's face beamed as he reached his wife. Their foreheads greeted each other. He brushed his nose against hers and closed his lips on hers. They had a cherry taste. He sucked them meeting his tongue against hers. All those years of absence became reversed. All of the waiting. All of the longing was healed in that kiss. Botho clasped his arms tightly around his wife and stared happily into her large eyes.

“Dumela moratuwa,” he whispered and Nthatisi buried her face onto his chest.

It melted her heart. Nthatsi loved hearing her husband call her moratuwa even after all this time. He was finally home.

“Let me prepare dinner,” she tapped his chest cheerfully and turned towards the stove.

Botho pulled her back and pecked her lips once more. She smiled and gave him the kind of look that said I can’t wait until we are alone too.

“It’s getting dark, light the lamp,” Nthatsi said to her daughter.

Her husband turned on the small battery radio for the evening story. Nthatsi decided to cook dumplings with chicken and ignored the pap and cabbage she had cooked earlier. When the food was ready, she served and handed each one their enamel plate steaming with dumplings and juicy chicken in rich brown gravy. Nthatsi beamed at the four of them all together. When her husband was not home, they often ate with their plates on their laps. Now, they sat at the table. They ate with their hands, bobbing their heads up and down to glance at each other with smiling eyes and full cheeks.

Two slept on the floor and two slept on the bed. In their hut, this was how sleeping arrangements were managed. As usual, Itaoleng began preparing the floor bedding for her and her little brother. Her parents were already in bed. When the evening story finished, they switched off the radio. Itaoleng's night dress was damp after listening to the scary story. She had made sure to hide herself completely with her blanket. She was ten years old now yet the evening stories always scared her. She would run up to her mother's blankets whenever the story got to the scary part. Now she could not. Her father was home. They were both silent. Itaoleng knew they waited for her and her little brother to go to sleep before they could start talking. She could not fall asleep easily this time. Her little brother was snoring. She kept fidgeting, turning her body this way and that. She did not know why sleep could not come but deep down, she knew she was curious about hearing her parents speak. Her father had been gone so long, what things would they speak about? They didn't speak. Soon there were smacking sounds from lips kissing, sheets shuffling and then a sound coming from a wounded puppy and then a cat purring. Itaoleng began to feel the sweat make her wet all over. Her breathing accelerated. She could not contain her curiosity any longer. She had to see. She raised the blanket from her face. Her breathing paused. Slowly, she lifted her head up to see bums bumping up and down and legs raised in the air. Her eyes popped out. She heard her heart say, goo, goo, goo. Like a cowering mouse, she pulled her head back inside the blanket. She deafened herself with sleep.

They talked with their eyes. Near their bed, they could hear their children breathing. They smiled with tired satisfaction. Botho kissed the tip of his wife's nose. Nthatisi brushed his slippery moustache.

"You remind me of when we first met," Botho said, inspecting Nthatisi's smooth face.

All those years being away from her, he had yearned for this. Now he had come home to her. She looked as if she had questions for him.

"You've been gone so long," Nthatisi said, slowly wiping sweat from his face.

"It's hard at the mine moratuwa."

"It's also hard here at home with the kids. Do you know your daughter was walking to school with a pair of torn shoes? I had to put in a hard cardboard so her feet would not walk on the ground."

Nthatisi's voice was almost raised. Botho sensed thick resentment covering her words. But he also knew this was his wife's way of saying his struggle was their struggle.

"Oh, my little baby girl!" Botho said, his index finger circling Nthatisi's nipple.

He shook his head for a while then stroked her chin. He had not meant to stay away so long leaving his wife all alone with the children. It had been hard to come back with nothing after he lost his job. He had wanted to make her happy and feel proud of him when he returned. But as a family man, to come back home empty-handed... It even shamed him that he promised to build his wife a house ever since they got married. Instead they still lived in a hut.

"I lost the secretary job. The principal from that school was impossible," Nthatisi said.

"Don't shackle your nerves with that. Things are going to be better now that Mandela has been released. Those hard painful times are over."

Botho felt soft warmth when his wife nudged herself even closer to him.

“Hmm and we have been blessed with these two beautiful children. Can you believe our daughter is almost finished with primary school? We have to work hard so she can start high-”

“Why are you cooking things like cabbage, what happened to the money I sent? I work so I can eat good food in my house!”

“I saved the money so we would be able to buy food for Christmas and I...I was not sure we would truly see you Botho,” Nthatisi replied softly, unable to speed hump the tears.

“Oh moratuwa, moratuwa. I’m home now and tomorrow we’ll buy lots of groceries.” Botho calmed his wife, cooing softly.

It touched him that his absence was felt so greatly. It showed him how much he was still needed. Botho held his wife tight and felt at home.

The pebble went up in the air. A hand groped out a batch of pebbles from the small hole in the ground. The pebble fell from the air landing back into the hand. The hand threw up the pebble again and pushed back the pebbles inside the hole. This right here was joy for Itaoleng, sitting in a circle with her friends under the peach tree playing diketo. Her friends knew she was wild and they also said she was disrespectful towards boys. Saying things like, “I’m jealous of the boys because they can whistle between their teeth. Why can’t I!? Her friends gasped and warned her, “Only boys do such things! And it is said you must drink your own urine if you want to know how to whistle!” They watched her. Itaoleng squatted with a Pilchards tin can between her legs and peed. The can felt warm between her hands as she raised it towards her lips. She put the tip of her tongue in and winced. Then she sipped at her own urine. But when she whistled, only air came out.

“Wa phapha!” her friends laughed at her and she laughed too.

Now, as she was raising her eyes to catch the raised pebble in time, Itaoleng saw her parents. She promptly pulled herself away from the game, her legs dirtied by the earth as she hurried to welcome them. They were walking towards the house carrying groceries. There was something familiar she loved about her father being home. That smell of peanut butter. It made her nauseous when she was full but just knowing it would be there... The tea sipped with milk. She and her little brother would now be allowed to sit at the table and eat together as a family.

Four animals left their kraals. They also left their female mates and their many, many younglings. Horse walked in front leading Pig, Donkey and Goat behind him. After walking a long time, the animals all arrived at a deep dark hole. This hole was owned by wolves. This was where the animals unearthed beautiful things in return for a monthly salary. They saw many different kinds of animals. Some were lining up to go down into the hole. They gave them wounded looks as they shuffled forward. The following day, the animals went to join the other animals in a queue to go down into the hole. Donkey was coughing badly, his braying made it hard for the other animals to hear each other. He revealed his big teeth clenched with pink gums on top.

“Donkey, come!” a wolf howled.

Donkey followed the wolf into a room. A doctor wolf felt his chest with the stethoscope.

“Why are you coughing?” He moved closer to him, his black muzzle twitching.

As Donkey opened his mouth to answer, the wolf doctor’s assistant held up a clipboard.

“Doctor wolf must not smell your stinky breath!” The assistant wolf growled. His long fangs hung over his long pink dangling tongue.

Donkey spoke from behind the board. The bony sides of his stomach contracted and expanded as he tried to raise his voice explaining his symptoms. His eyes watered.

Inside the hole, Goat looked at a dog twitching on the muddy ground. It was whimpering and whining on its back, its muddy paws raised in the air. A gash was open from its skull. Black blood poured out mixing with the mud.

“You stupid puppy!” a wolf shouted, looking down on the dog.

Goat watched the dog twitching until it died. The wolf took pictures of the dog.

“Get back to work!” The wolf said sternly, his yellow eyes changing to black slits.

Goat kept his big eyes on the wolf. He did not feel his urine splatter on the muddy ground.

When the animals crawled out from the hole, they were forced to see the picture of the dog pasted on the walls with the caption: STUPID.

When it was eating time, the animals all watched the cooks standing in a line with their plates. The stiff pap was scooped with an iron shovel and went phaa in their plates. It was served with huge chunks of chopped cabbage and a piece of cut fish. Horse and Donkey and Goat and Pig all ate together. Pig made gruff noises. They all looked at him. His snout was vibrating while he looked down at his food. The head piece of fish looked at Pig with one open eye from his plate.

“What’s wrong Pig?” Horse asked, his tail slapping his bums.

“They treat us like humans here,” Pig made a gruff, a silver snot dangling from his snout.

When the month ended, the animals all formed a long queue with plates to collect their salaries. During Horse’s turn, he peered at the wolf behind the glass window and held up his orange plastic plate. The money clinked down inside his plate in coins. Horse counted R80. Suddenly Horse moved from the window, crying. His neck bent down and rose up from his plate through a terrible whinny.

“You are like a child crying for its mother’s udder Horse! Stop it!” a bull mooed from the line.

“This is how things are here,” a sheep bleated.

Every animal turned its head away from Horse and looked ahead into the queue.

Botho wore his mokorotlo and rose from the chair. He walked out of the house and stood in front of it. He sighed, pocketing his hands inside his blue one piece overalls. His eyes were looking to his small ruined garden. He had abandoned it for too long. In a few days it would be Christmas in Lesotho. He wanted to make sure his neighbours knew he was home. He put on white boots. He took the spade leaning against the wall of his hut and approached his garden. After the fertile soil was turned producing its wonderful smell, he walked around throwing different kinds of seeds for spinach, maize, butternut and carrots.

“Moratuwa, can you boil me water so I can wash away this sweat?” Botho said, while taking off his boots before stepping back inside the house. His wife was baking dikuku. Itaoleng and Kamo walked out to play so their father would have privacy.

“I’m almost done,” Nthatisi said, blushing at seeing her husband hard in his nakedness.

“Come here.” Botho pulled her to him and they both giggled as he turned her around. He stroked his hand over her back. Nthatisi’s hand travelled between her thighs to grope his balls, and gently moved her finger back and forth between them. Making a moaning sound, Botho pumped into her. She held on to the bed grabbing on to the off-white blanket and almost pulling it off the bed. Thighs and bums made a clapping sound. Sweat soon covered them, dripping from their chests down to their thighs until Nthatisi slipped down on the bed. There was a tingling in the tips of her fingers. Botho lay breathlessly next to her and gave her a grateful kiss.

Nthatsi got up at dawn. She nudged both her daughter and son to wake them.

“Come outside with me,” she whispered and grumpily, they followed her.

They stood in the middle of the yard in front of the house, surrounded by darkness. Kamo and Itaoleng were standing on either side of their mother clutching their elbows, stiffening from the morning cold.

“Look up, the sun is playing!” Nthatsi said, pointing up into darkness.

“I can’t see anything mme,” Kamo complained, twisting his sleepy face in a sulk and rubbed his eyes to see clearly.

“Oh my boy, there! Look up clearly!”

They all looked again into darkness. There was a grey full moon and stars. Some were twinkling. Itaoleng swirled around and Kamo did the same.

“There! You see?” Nthatsi persisted, turning her head down to the kids then looking up.

“Hai, mme, you’re just playing with us. I only see stars!” Itaoleng said.

“Until you two see the sun playing, you won’t go back to your bedding I tell you.” Nthatsi threatened.

This was a ritual she did with her children. Every child in Alwyn’s Kop would be woken up to watch the sun playing on this special day. Nthatsi wanted to give them this magic. It had mattered more than anything when their father would not be home on this day. Now he was home sleeping inside the house. Yet, Nthatsi did not want her children to forget seeing the sun playing.

“Oh, I see it now mme! It keeps bouncing in and out!” Itaoleng said.

Kamo immediately jumped up and down, patting his hand against his mother’s leg.

“Mme, letsatsi! It’s playing! It’s playing!”

“Alright, let’s go back inside.” Nthatsi smiled and scooped up her son.

It was Christmas.

Kamo and Itaoleng came back from collecting dry cow-dung for their mother. Because it was Christmas, they knew she wanted her floor to look new again. They watched her mix the cow-dung cakes with soil and water outside. Then they followed her inside and looked on as she knelt down to spread cow-dung. Each time she scooped it up in a thick creamy dark green, and gently applied it moving her palm from left to right, the floor gained a new greenness.

“Hand me a fork,” their mother said.

After giving it to her, Itaoleng and Kamo squatted near her. They watched as she drew half circles in the moist dung with the fork. She hummed to herself. And as each half circle followed another almost towards the door, they stood up and left. They blinked from the darkness as they stepped into the sun. It beat down on their faces. They stood in the middle of the yard.

“Dogs!” Kamo said, pointing into Mamasepatsana’s yard next door.

Mamasepatsana was a woman who did not get along with anyone. Kamo and Itaoleng also knew she did not like kids either. Whenever she would be shouting with her deep gruff voice, they would run inside the house. They were also wary of saying her name out loud. To them, Mamasepatsana was a wonder. She liked to argue with their father a lot. They had also noticed her six dogs acting strangely ever since their father arrived. It was as if they smelled a scent of him being a stranger. The tall six dogs were all lined up next to each other staring at Botho under his tree. They were light brown in colour and their sunken chests showed bones. Long spits of silver saliva dripped from their mouths. They revealed their fangs as if about to bark. They hummed a soft growl. It replaced their mother’s sweet humming. Worried, Kamo and Itaoleng both turned towards their father, their mouths slightly open. Botho was listening to Sankomota’s “Fruits of Your Toil”. His eyes were closed. They watched him snap his fingers.

It was time for a Christmas lunch. They sat together chewing on fried chicken, rice red with tomato sauce, green peas in mayonnaise, carrot and beetroot salads. After having missed a few Christmases before, Botho had forgotten what Christmas truly felt like. This time, he and his loved ones were using spoons and the sound of spoon hitting against the plate was the only rhythm heard. Until Kamo disturbed it. He touched his sister's newly straightened hair. He frizzed it out to ruin the neat push-back style she had on.

"Horse's tail?" Kamo teased, already laughing.

Botho pretended to reprimand him only because he didn't want to hurt Itaoleng's feelings. She abruptly paused chewing. Kamo stole a glance at her bulging cheeks, unblinking eyes and frizzy wild hair on her head. The laughter was too much for him to contain it. He spewed his drink and stood up. Botho suppressed his laughter as he noticed his son backing away from his sister. He watched him clutch his head, placing another hand on his tummy and shaking his waist. It looked like he was dancing with laughter.

"This is your older sister, do you know that?" Botho said, coughing to hide his laughter.

Itaoleng turned to her brother and made a face at him. Botho winked an eye at his wife. This was what Christmas felt like.

Nthatisi went outside and kneeled on the ground. She dug out the soil to reveal a sealed container inside a hole. Her face beamed. She could hear her husband and children's laughter inside the house as they finished their Christmas lunch. She rubbed her hands together to shake off the soil from her fingers. After noticing the rainbow coloured jelly had turned rubbery and cold, she took the container inside.

"What do you all think is in here?" Nthatisi said, giving them a sly smile as she was about to open the lid.

"Mafatshe a thothomela!" Everyone shouted out back at her.

She laughed, opening the jelly. It trembled like the earth as she dished for them. It was time for dessert.

Music played on. Botho sat down with his legs crossed, holding a glass of kgemmere. His head tilted backwards in ecstasy, listening to reggae from his cassette tape. He closed his eyes and inhaled the sweet homely smell of dikuku. This was one of the things he missed the most. He did not hear both Itaoleng and Kamo walk in. When he opened his eyes, he caught his children looking at him with curiosity. He jumped up, twisted a knob on the radio to increase the volume and gestured for them to join him as he began to dance. He kept twisting his body this way and that. His moves became more animated, encouraged by his children's laughter as they tried to imitate him.

"No, do it like this Itaoleng, like this! See?" Botho said, raising his legs after each beat.

"No, I'm tired now Ntate," Itaoleng complained.

Then Botho turned towards her, snapping his fingers. He signalled that they should go down and up again with the rhythm.

"You must never be tired from dancing," Botho said, laughing and Itaoleng followed suit losing herself in the music.

Botho smiled seeing his wife also move along to the music. He leaned back, his shoulders trembling as if to say he would not be out-danced by his daughter. He bent his head in a throaty laughter seeing his son join them. He bobbed his head up and down in a craze. The little boy flapped his arms while hitting his knees together. His face was contorted into grotesque features. He kept on moving from left to right and back and forth again. If Botho could make this moment last forever, he would.

A camera man arrived. Botho had hired him. He wanted to capture the moment of having spent Christmas with his family. He planned to take the photos with him on the day he left for work. He needed something to help him carry on through the loneliness.

“Time for a photo!” Botho announced happily.

This would be their first family photo. Botho brought two chairs outside.

“Haiyeel!” he hollered, reprimanding the dogs fighting each other inside his neighbour’s yard.

A red dust flew up as they wrestled on the ground. They barked and whined. Botho placed the chairs near the fence dividing his neighbour’s house and his house. The chairs faced towards his house.

“This dust will cling to us,” Nthatisi complained, coming to sit down.

She sat down on the right and Itaoleng sat down on the left. Botho stood in the middle, his hands placed on his little boy’s shoulders standing in front of him. Everyone posed silently. As the camera man was about to press click, Kamo brushed his father’s hands from his shoulders and ran off to watch the dogs biting each other. There was blood dripping from their wounds. The camera man paused. Botho ran after Kamo. He brought him back crying and protesting. Everyone posed again. Kamo stood in front of his father with his head bent away from the camera. His cheeks were full of air, his lips pouting and his eyes red. Click.

“Another one?” the camera man asked Botho.

“I’m looking wrong?” Botho asked back, confused.

“No, he’s asking if we want another photo,” Nthatisi explained to him and smiled back to the camera.

“Oh, yes, yes hit us one more time,” Botho replied, nodding.

Itaoleng stood up and Botho sat down. He carried Kamo on top of his lap. Itaoleng stood between her mother and father. There was a small silver transparent plastic inside her hand. Earlier it had been full of cheese snacks. As the camera man was about to snap, Itaoleng held the plastic with both hands and raised it to her mouth. She licked at it. It had a salty taste.

She bit at it, tearing it. Her front teeth hung from the plastic. Botho beamed with pride, he had captured this moment. Click.

Christmas passed. Itaoleng had to go back to school. Her straightened hair was cut off because it was not allowed at her primary school. She would go to Standard Five now. When her father came back from work, he was so happy for her passing at school that he surprised her with a new uniform and new school shoes.

“Wait for me, I want to run quickly to *Blues Café* and buy Drink O’Pop,” her father said before she left for school.

When he finally returned, Itaoleng turned away from the table and watched him in wonder. He came in carrying a shrub of spring onion picked from his garden and a small orange sachet.

“Let me prepare lunch for my warrior. I want my warrior to carry the best scaftin to school. Do you know you’re my warrior?” he said, smiling as he put them on the table near the stove. He turned around to receive confirmation from her.

Itaoleng blushed, lowering her face into the backside of the chair. She watched her father wash the onion and fry it together with eggs. The smell of onion and oil filled her nostrils. She watched him spread the baked slices of bread with butter and peanut butter and sandwich them with the eggs and onion. He opened the orange sachet. He poured the Drink O’Pop powder in a bottle and diluted it with water to make an orange juice. After he was finished, he placed the scaftin and drink inside her new school bag. He walked to her and she climbed down from the chair to turn her back on him with her arms raised. He put the straps of the bag around her arms and she turned to him. He straightened the collar of her white shirt. He checked that she had perfectly tied the woolly black-and-white striped belt around her black gym dress. He looked down to see if she had tied her shoes the way he taught her. He looked up and nodded at her.

“Hold me by the ears,” he said, bending in front of her.

She held his ears and kissed him on the lips. As usual, Itaoleng walked the long distance to school. She was late. She felt anxious about the lashes she would get. But deep down, she felt pride. Her father had taken his time to prepare her a special school lunch. Often, her scaftin consisted of home baked bread without butter and a bottle containing the powder of Drink O’Pop to dilute with tap water during lunch or just fifty cents to buy five small makwenya

sold at school. Itaoleng pursed her lips. She clutched the straps of her bag. She walked, raising her feet from the ground to avoid the soil from tarnishing her shining shoes.

The vegetables were starting to peep out under the soil. Botho stood inspecting his garden. As he looked farther, he saw Mamasepatsana. She was standing in her yard looking towards him. Her face was white with Calamine lotion. Botho thought she looked like an angry ngwale. Mamasepatsana! There were often stories about her. Some said she lived with a big fat snake and its babies in her house and that no wonder she was the only one with the biggest house in Alwyn's Kop. They said to keep her snake happy, she fed it her own children every time she gave birth and that no wonder she had none. She had to sacrifice them to her snake so it would give her prosperity. And those scrawny dogs! It was said she sent her evil works to people through her six dogs. These stories! Some you believed them, some you didn't. But often, it made sense to believe them.

"Witches," Botho whispered to himself. Mamasepatsana had lived next door to him with her dogs ever since he moved into his hut. But the woman would never respond to his greetings or even raise her eyes when being greeted and she rarely came out of her big house. There were rumours that she was a very strong witch who did not like to see her neighbours succeeding. Now that he had come back from the mine, she stood there looking at him as if he owed her something.

Her hands were clutching her waist. Botho felt his heart quicken. He suspected the witch could be putting a spell on him at this moment. He knew many men who had lost their jobs because Mamasepatsana bewitched them. Botho danced his eyes around until they landed on a small green spinach leaf. A brown skinny worm shot through it. It created a hole on the leaf. It went back through the hole again and came out again. In and out, the skinny worm kept going. Botho frowned. He lifted his eyes. Mamasepatsana was still there. He dropped them and turned around. He walked towards the house. Slowly, his neck turned. Mamasepatsana stood looking in his direction. Botho turned away. His neck stood stiff until he walked inside his house.

Botho returned to South Africa on an early month of January in 1995. The Christmas holidays with his family in Lesotho were over. As he left, his son ran screaming after him but he did not hear him. Only when he took a last glance at his hut did Botho realise his little boy was crying for him. He turned his head quickly and kept on walking. Despite tightening his heart, he blinked hard a couple of times as he heard his little voice. At Alwyn's Kop taxi terminus, he climbed into a taxi to Mohale's Hoek. This was the route he always took until he crossed the border. He stared outside the window and rubbed his thumb against his chin. Cows and sheep grazed in the fields. A dark brown horse mounted a light brown horse moving its pelvis up and down. The light brown horse made a whinny. Botho smiled a little.

In Mohale's Hoek, he took a taxi to Maseru. He glanced at the sun setting behind the mountains. He looked back at the window in front of the driver. It was dark now. They had entered Maseru. A white Tazz drove into their lane and stopped. Some people gasped and two women screamed. Botho saw his daughter laughing and running in front of the taxi. He held tightly onto a chair in front of him. When the driver managed to brake in time, Botho realised he was trying to stop the taxi himself.

"Voetsek!" the driver yelled as the Tazz drove out slowly into a footpath on the side of the road.

Botho's chest was heaving. He took his hands off the chair. He looked to the left and the right. He glued his face against the window near his seat. He blinked and bulged his eyes. Darkness. He swallowed and frowned. A young man sitting next to him looked at him. Botho averted his eyes and cleared his throat. Inside his shirt's pocket, he took out a photo and kept his eyes on it. It was him with his wife and children together. He felt his breathing slow down and the muscles in his mouth relax. His index finger brushed his wife's rosy lips and immediately he wished he was right next to her. He made a clockwise brush over his son's small face and released a soft chuckle. He shook his head. He looked at his daughter quietly sitting down with her hands clasped in front of her. Her eyes looked intense. Botho brought the picture close to his face and looked at it for a while.

"My warrior," he said inside. "You are here with me," he whispered while exhaling.

Botho crossed the border into South Africa. He began to feel electrified with expectations. He took a bus to Bloemfontein.

“There comes a time when a man must spit his mother’s breast and go work. It’s time for work banna! It’s time for work!” a man wearing a security uniform exclaimed as his co-workers climbed in and gave him greeting signs.

Botho agreed with him. The bus was cramped with nightshift workers but he was grateful to be sitting down near the window. He could make out the maize plants swaying farther in the dark and wished he could see his own small garden back home this green and luscious. In Bloemfontein, he took the long-distance train to Johannesburg. When he got off at Park Station the next day, it was a bright afternoon.

“Gauteng,” Botho whispered to himself.

He flinched when a white woman passed near him. After a while, he chuckled to himself. It would take some getting used to this. He did not have enough money for transport and he now felt hungry. He stood tossing up coins inside his hand. He decided to buy makwenya from a woman sitting under a yellow umbrella on the other side of the road. He crossed back again and stood next to a young man polishing people’s shoes as they passed. After he accepted money from his customer, Botho noticed the young man’s lips moving while looking at him. But he kept nibbling at his makwenya and looked straight ahead.

“Hayibo baba! I asked if you are going somewhere?” The young man pointed to Botho’s red checked bag.

“I’m going to Rustenburg,” Botho replied feeling relieved.

He had thought the young man had been asking to polish his shoes.

“Oh, you must ask for a lift on the road,” the young man advised.

At dusk, Botho finally managed to get a lift to Rustenburg from a van with a white elderly couple.

“Climb in,” they said.

Botho felt relieved that the van had a hood on the back. They did not warn him that there was a black bulldog inside. Before he could climb out, the van had already started moving.

The dog growled softly. Botho froze, crouching. Inside he had stopped breathing. The dog tried to take steps toward him and suddenly Botho remembered how he would feel if a stranger stepped into his territory. He relaxed his face. He snapped his fingers and made sucking sounds with his lips. The dog growled. Botho leaned forward now, dropping his knees. The bulldog reached him. Botho snapped his fingers. He sucked his lips as if playing with a puppy he loved. His eyes were smiling. The dog suddenly rubbed against him and dropped down in front of his knees.

Its stunted tail was vibrating. They both fell asleep. At dawn, Botho took one glance at the bulldog and jumped off the van. He wore his red seanamarena pinned on his right shoulder. He winced, grabbing on his Mme se ke ile bag. Soon he was walking on a dirt road. He stopped to take a piss. He glanced up and saw the mine. It was brooding in mist. As he walked, Botho began to feel heavy in his legs. His eyes still watching the mist and metal structures lurking underneath and tall ones poking out; he tried to speed up a little. His feet seemed to take longer to step. His toes were numb from the morning dew. He could hear himself breathing. He stopped walking. But he picked up his feet again. He walked.

Suppose you get an opportunity to climb out of a hole. Somehow, the men in suits have discovered you are good with handling electricity. A fast learner, they label you.

“Botho, this is for you,” the mine captain says, handing you a parcel after you emerge from a hole.

You walk towards the hostel with the parcel under your arm. You greet the other miners before you sit down on your bunk bed. You open the small brown box. You find four text books inside. You take them out. They look thick and feel heavy. You notice a note inside the box and it reads: *Dear Mr. Botho. We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted for part-time study in Electrical Engineering. Included are the set work books you are required to read. The semester commences on February 1, 1995. Sincerely. Damelin College Admissions.*

You laugh a little and shake your head.

“Me, going to school!” you whisper to yourself.

You lie down on the bed, still holding one of the books called, *The Electrical Engineering Handbook*. It is big and heavy like a large brick. You page through it. The pages feel slippery between the tips of your fingers. You see different illustrations. You turn a thick wad of pages wanting to get to the middle. You turn back and start turning the first pages again. You draw a silent bellowing laughter and curl your toes in and out. The scent of musk mixed with newness fills your nostrils. You drift into sleep with the book covering your face.

Three men wearing black suits come floating and stand near your bed.

“Come,” they speak at the same time.

You rise and follow them outside. You see darkness and feel cold. The three men float and you follow. Only you cannot feel your feet touching the ground. The three men float until they reach the mine. The round and tall metal structures are shrouded in mist. The men disappear inside the mist. They appear as suddenly, now surrounding you.

“Get in,” they order.

Looking down, you see a hole. You get inside the hole and feel yourself floating down, down. Claustrophobia squeezes and squeezes you. Darkness makes you blind. The stone walls surrounding the hole blow a cold sensation against your arms and back. You float down. Then, heat and wetness. You smell mud. After a long time, you glance up and see the three men in suits standing on the edge of the hole, looking down at you. You find yourself standing on top with them.

“I fixed some lights and changed the burnt wire.” You give them feedback.

They hand you sweets and push you back inside the hole. In the morning, you open your eyes but only see darkness. Your body is drenched in sweat. Something heavy shortens your breath. Your hands grope for your face. They feel a slippery book and remove it. You get up with a sweet taste in your mouth.

After coming out of the hole, you walk hurriedly to the hostel. There is faint laughter and talking when you get inside. Deciding not to take a bath, you pick up one of the books and sit on the bed. The room goes quiet. You read.

“What can you tell us from those books, chief?” One man asks.

You chuckle, glancing at the man once.

“They definitely want to be read,” you respond and continue reading.

The following day, after coming out of the hole, you rush in a sweat for your books again. You wish you could read a little in the mornings too but there is never time.

“Hawu Botho! Aren’t you even going to smoke with us first?” Another one of the men asks.

“There is no time baba,” you signal at your wrist without raising your eyes.

“Eh, madoda, we have a professor in our hostel!” One man exclaims, rubbing his big belly.

A thunderous laughter bellows around the room. You wince, stretching your neck down into the book. There is a word called *Electrorheological*. You look at the word but cannot pronounce it. You place your index finger on the word, tracing at the letters. Your lips babble. Laughter rises from the other men. You feel tears sting your eye balls. You come back again after coming out of the hole to read your books. The other men continue speaking and laughing, sometimes even singing. They no longer try to include you in their conversations.

While reading about the difference between *Quality Factor* and *Power Factor*, you get stuck on the word, *Circuit*. You look at the word until you feel itchy from your sweat. You will never confess that the books are not easy to understand.

“How did they deliver the books to you baba?”

You do not hear someone asking.

You raise your head, pondering the definition of *Voltage drop*. Your eyes fall on a man and you notice his lips moving. He looks much younger. You suddenly stand up shouting and slam the book on your bunk bed.

“Can’t a man read in peace!” The room startles and gasps in shock.

You walk out. When you come back, you cannot see your books. You look and look but cannot find them. You give your bed a kick. Scratching your head, you remember you left them as a stack on the floor near your bed. You are sure of this but, you look around. You feel ready to commit murder.

“Where are my books?” you call out.

The room echoes with deep chuckles. You turn around. Some men are lying on their backs rubbing their swollen bellies. Their feet dangle in smelly socks. Some are immersed in their family pictures.

“Where are my books?” More laughter. No answer.

“Do you see this zol?”

Your eyes land on one man who isn’t laughing.

His eyes are hard and he looks much older. He is smoking a fat roll of marijuana. The room goes quiet. He speaks slowly.

“I got this good zol here because one of my friends told me how cold it gets in their hostel, no matter how hot it is outside. And now, they will have something to burn for their brazier and keep warm.” The man drags on his joint and blows out.

You feel dizzy. You sit down on your bunk bed still looking at the man who is slowly being shrouded in mist.

“What you are is a mine worker,” the man says and takes his hard eyes off you.

Under the bed, you reach for your koto. You head for the older man. As if he has prepared himself, the man raises his molamu horizontally to prevent your koto from landing on his chest. Qhu! The sound of wood against wood. When you realise the older man is struggling to keep his grip, you try to force your koto down on him. You raise it up and hammer him on the ribs with the carved knob at the tip. He cowers. Then recovers and charges back with his molamu. You sprint back before he can surprise your face. Instead your koto meets his molamu. Qhu! The old man manages to take the opening and leaps off his bunk bed.

“I will teach you a lesson boy,” he says, gathering determination on his face.

You don’t want to speak. The two wooden sticks separate but soon meet again. One more time. Qhu! But the old man with his left arm raised, moves quickly near your chest shoving his bruised belly into you. He breathes heavily. The gap between you closes. The two wooden sticks struggle. He clutches the neck of your T-shirt into a fist. You toss a punch into his eye. He loses concentration on the grip of his molamu. You notice an opening and crash your koto against his skull. Almost, just almost. The other men begin to pull you away to your bed.

“Ho tla nkg a ho sa bola ka mona ke ya le jwetsa!” you howl, turning your neck while being pushed.

“How can you do this?” your voice comes out in a whisper.

You feel your head ache so much you think it might crack. You lie down. After your chest slows down, you take out your family photo but immediately put it back. You place your arms under your head. Tomorrow you have to wake early to go inside the hole. You are still a mine worker.

“I’m pregnant!”

Botho’s jaw tightened. He sat on the bed. He looked down at his feet, hot inside his boots. He had just come in from his shift at the mine. His body itched for a bath to wash away the stickiness. He yearned for a drink to wash the dust out of his dry throat. He wished for a massage to put him into a sound sleep. But here he was, listening to Jemina. She pranced up and down in front of him, saying she was going to have his child.

“We are going to be parents, Botho!” Jemina flicked her weave this way and that, batting her eyelashes.

Botho thought she looked like she had flies sitting on top of her eyes. The woman was crazy.

“How do I know if you are not lying to me,” Botho pointed at Jemina’s stomach.

Jemina paused her prancing and looked at him, aghast.

“If you don’t want trouble for yourself as an immigrant in this country Botho, you will do what’s right for your baby!” Jemina said.

Botho looked at her for a while then looked away to take off his boots. Ever since he had left his wife and kids, he had taken up with this woman. To him, Jemina was just someone to take away the loneliness and boredom of being away from his family so long. He had meant to only see her once in a while. But the longing for warm cooked meals and a soft body in his bed, persisted. He decided to spend all his savings on buying furniture for his one roomed-shack. He did not go home and missed a few Christmases. Instead, he bought his wife a phone and posted it to Lesotho. Now, Botho faced the possibility of feeding another mouth. That meant saving. Worst of all, it meant he would not be able to look at his wife in the eyes.

After a few months passed Botho still found himself often sitting on the bed, staring into space.

On this December morning he now sat, thinking. He could hear splashing sounds as Jemina did the washing outside.

“You must go out and look for work Jemina!” Botho said, loading airtime on his phone.

“Am I not doing my share? I cook, fetch water and put a 20litre bucket over my head which has eaten my weave, iron your overalls and clean! Bona nou, I am busy washing your blankets with my own hands and my poor nails have suffered!” Jemina cried, waddling inside to confront Botho.

She held out her hands to show him her chipped nails dotted with faded nail polish.

“Look! Just look!”

“Wa loya!” Botho replied with a bass chuckle and Jemina waddled back outside.

He shook his head slowly. She is so different from Nthatisi. He thought to himself, pressing the yes button on his phone.

“Hello, hello can you hear me, Nthatisi?”

“Yes, I can hear you Botho,” Nthatisi responded weakly.

Botho could hear the tiredness in his wife’s voice. He knew she had probably come in from her job of selling diphaphatha. A business she’d started since he had left. He imagined her sitting on the bed inside their hut and rubbing her toes. He knew she had hid her phone probably under the pillows because she thought the kids might end up breaking it. He had laughed when she told him that.

“How are you moratuwa?” Botho asked, almost whispering as he craned his neck to peep at Jemina.

“No, we are fine, empa e le tlala feela. And how are you?”

“Ahem, no, all is well indeed. Eh my... moratuwa, eh...I will not be coming home for Christmas again.”

The line from Nthatisi’s side went quiet for a while.

“Hello, hello. Are you still there?”

“Yes, I heard you Botho.”

Both lines went quiet.

“So, you liked the phone hey?” Botho cursed inside his chest.

He hated the way he had just sounded like a child.

“I still have to get used to it.”

“Hmm, I was thinking you should come to Gauteng next year. I will send the money for transport.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Moratuwa, bye, bye. Mosadi wa lekgowa is already complaining about airtime. Please greet the kids, I will call again.”

Botho felt a little relieved but worried after switching off the phone. His wife had not even asked why he would not be home this Christmas.

These mines are like pimples. They spring up everywhere. I woke up just as the train was coursing through Johannesburg. Back home in Lesotho, I left my two young children with a neighbour. My hawking business has halted. My husband asked me to visit him in Rustenburg, where he works at a mine.

“I need to talk to you about an important issue.” That was all he said.

At home, I kept having palpitations, thinking he might be dying or seriously ailing. But now that I’m here, I have calmed down. The sun is already setting, creating a canvas of reddish pollution mixed with dust. I walk dragging my large green suitcase towards the hostels.

“I am looking for ntate Botho,” I enquire to a group of men playing morabaraba outside.

“Botho lives at a nearby informal settlement. Many other miners live there with their families,” answers one man, giving me a curious look.

I walk on again on the dusty streets cursing under my breath. Why did my husband not mention he left the hostels? Now I have to suffer like this. My black platform heels are covered in red dust and my silk two-piece dress is clinging to my sweat.

“Do you know where ntate Botho lives?” I ask, when a little boy comes running to pick up a ball in front of me.

He points towards a small tin shack on the side of a road lined with others. The door is closed and I begin to get anxious that I will have to endure more suffering waiting outside for Botho. A television is playing inside. I knock. I knock until another woman opens the door. I come face to face with a pregnant woman wearing high heels and jeans. She blinks at me with long fake eyelashes. We greet each other with silence.

“Are you selling something?” She finally speaks.

Instead, I continue looking at her.

“Is this where Botho lives?” I ask finally.

My eyes feel as if they are swimming in dust. I want to close them and sleep.

“Botho is at work, who are you?” The woman rubs her tummy and continues looking at me suspiciously.

“I’m his wife.” I push myself inside.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing mosadi?” She turns around, stunned.

The suitcase drops on the floor. I turn around with my hands on my hips. The tiredness is suddenly gone and anger has arrived. I want answers. Slowly, I walk up and down scanning the place. The double bed with a pinkish duvet makes me think of my old double bed with only an off-white special blanket used as a duvet. The small second-hand wall drawer reminds me of my clothes that are packed in a trunk and suitcases placed on top of each other next to a wall. Ceiling boards create a wall for the shack. There are two pails of water placed over an old table and a green primus stove next to them. I feel a glimmer of pride when seeing the old-fashioned silver pots. My own pots are left looking shiny and new. It’s clear I’m not a slob like the owner of these dull looking ones. From there, my eyes travel down on the floor which is covered in black plastics masquerading as a carpet to hide the sand underneath.

My chest begins to ease down a bit. Back in my hut, my floor is spread with cow dung. In my hut there is even a decent table with chairs. Again, I glance in the direction of the bed where there is a crate covered and decorated with a white cloth to look like a bedside table. It has all kinds of colourful nail polish, different eye shadows, dry used up foundations, and lipsticks. On the floor next to a wall, there are different kinds of high heels and a stack of *Drum* magazines. I inhale deeply. My chest rises. I own two pairs of high heels. A luxury my husband treated me to a long time ago. Still looking down, I speak softly.

“Botho forgot to tell me he came here to play house with a letekatse.”

“What?! I’m not a slut! Botho and I live together and were going to be a family. Just get out you lying opportunist!” This woman answers, pushing me.

I am standing still, looking at her.

“Ke tla o raha mosadi, ke tla o nyesa!” I warn her softly yet she dares to throw in a slap.

I smack her back, throwing her off balance. She comes screaming at me, clawing her crow like nails.

“Get away from my man! This is my house, get out!”

“Stop scratching at me and fight. You don’t even know how to fight but today I will teach you.” I say, throwing a slap after a slap.

“Hey, hey stop this!”

As soon as I hear Botho’s voice, I stop. He comes running in towards us. The screams fetched him from outside. He stands between the two of us, holding out his hands to separate us. I move to stand in front of his startled face.

“Botho, I am tired. Where can I sleep?”

Botho moved towards the bed, took a pillow and began patting at it. He did not exactly know what he was doing. He had brought his wife to Rustenburg to find a way they could handle this situation together. Or so he thought. He had planned to fetch her from the train station to prepare her calmly. He did not know she would arrive on this day or how she even found his shack. It was dark now. Yet, he had not eaten or taken a bath since coming back from his shift. After he rushed in and separated the two women trying to kill each other, he had felt like a criminal, interrogated by his pregnant mistress and unable to look at his exhausted wife.

“Who is this Botho? Why does this uncouth woman claim to be your wife?” Jemina asked, choking on her tears.

Her hands waved in the air. Her pointy stomach reminded Botho of a watermelon. He spoke to his wife instead.

“You will sleep here moratu-”

“Answer me Botho!” Jemina cut him off with a screech.

Botho paused from puffing up the pillow. Nthatisi walked to the bed and stood near him. Botho immediately moved away mumbling.

“Let me light the primus stove and boil you some water to bath. You will wake up feeling well rested.”

Nthatisi sat on the bed and joined her hands together. Botho watched Jemina slowly push her feet back and forth on the floor. She sat on the other end of the bed, giving the other woman her back and rubbed her tummy.

“Is there food inside the pots?” Botho asked. Jemina raised her eyes. She looked at him without blinking.

Botho turned around and opened the pots. He found newly cooked samp mixed with brown beans in one of the pots. He hesitated to ask Nthatisi if he should dish up for her. He dished a plate for her without asking anyway. He walked towards her staring down into the plate. He handed it to her and turned around without waiting for a no thank you or a thank you. He took

his plate from the table and went to sit on a crate near the door. The candle light was too bright there. He ate silently without raising his eyes like a shy hungry orphan.

The samp and beans had little salt and were not soft enough. It was so typical of Jemina to cook shit. Botho thought to himself, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with anger.

He decided to ignore the taste and gobbled the food up. He was trying to avoid the sound coming from Nthatisi's plate. Her mouth was turned down. She kept tapping at her food with the spoon and spreading it towards the edge of the plate. Jemina was examining her chipped nails. Botho suddenly sprang up from the crate. He went to put back his finished plate. He turned around and almost jumped. Nthatisi was holding out her plate.

"Botho, this woman who says she's your wife does not want my food!" Jemina said.

"Thank you, I'm full," Nthatisi said.

Botho focused his eyes on the brown plate of samp and beans and thought indeed, it did look like shit.

In all her curvy nakedness, the other woman stands in a bath tub. She slowly splashes water over her thick thighs. They glisten in slippery wetness. Only the sound of water can be heard. She is so focused on herself that she does not notice the envious look I have been giving her. She arrived today in my shack, which I share with this mine worker and invaded my life. He made me pregnant this man but he will take care of me. Yes, he will. I rise slowly from the bed. I go and stand near his floor bedding as he's about to cover his face.

"Botho, I'm not going to share my bed with this woman! Why does a heavily pregnant poor me have to suffer all because a woman has arrived in my house claiming to be your wife?" I ask, patting my chest to emphasise my unfair treatment.

Before I can open my mouth again, Botho's voice suddenly fills the shack.

"Jemina! Go to sleep, right now!"

I drag my feet back to the bed. I climb inside the blankets and sit blinking with one fist placed against my cheek. If Botho had gone on a nightshift, I would have silently blown out this candle.

Nothing was cooked for supper. Botho looked at both women. He had just come in from his shift. His wife sat on the bed looking down. She brushed the tips of her fingers against each other. His mistress was painting her nails. She sat with her thighs open to make space for her pregnant belly. What does a man do when things are like this? Botho wondered. It had seemed like a sensible idea at first. His wife would leave Lesotho and visit him in Rustenburg. He would explain about a terrible loneliness which caused him to find himself living with another woman. Pregnancy was not meant to happen but he was a man who prided himself in being a family man. Such things were part of life and hence they could be handled with maturity.

Botho put his hands on his waist. He sighed, looking back to the unwashed dishes abandoned on a table by the wall.

“Jemina, I want my food!”

Jemina blew air over her nails to make the red paint dry.

“I cook for you all the time while the woman who says she’s your wife just sits around quietly with her anger rising like dough of yeast.”

“Now!” Botho cried, causing Jemina to jump and creep up quietly to the pots.

Nthatsi did not look up. It was as if she was not there. Botho felt his heart break as he looked at his wife. It felt like his presence did not mean anything to her. He summoned up some courage and went to sit next to her. He heard Jemina begin to slam the pots against each other. They made a malicious banging sound. Botho ignored the trying sound and held his wife’s hands.

“I know you want to leave but please stay until the month end so I can give you enough money.”

Nthatsi was parting her lips to reply when they both heard a deafening scream and saw water flow down the other woman’s legs.

Jemina had given birth to their son, whom she named Peter. She insisted she wanted her child to have an English name so he would easily get a job. Botho got a headache. Whenever he said he wanted to take a leave and go home, Jemina cried.

“You don’t love us, do you?” Jemina would accuse him and Botho was forced to stay with his mistress all these years.

His resentment grew as Peter grew up.

Now, Botho looks up in disgust. He sees Jemina give Peter another handful of chocolate éclairs.

“Dudli, dudli, you always want more wena,” Jemina coos, pinching one of the fat cheeks of the six-year-old little boy.

“Give those sweets back to your mother damn it!” Botho clinks his spoon hard against the plate.

Jemina and Peter jump at the sound of his voice. They turn to find Botho shaking. Some particles of food have popped over his lower lip. He hates the way Jemina keeps pumping up his son and calling him dudli, dudli. The boy is now a greedy, lazy bastard.

“You are forever chewing, always wanting sweet things! Hawu, konyo, konyo all the time! Can you never say no to anything that goes inside the mouth?” Botho says without looking at Peter.

He still cannot look at him. Yesterday, after knocking off from his shift, he found him alone at home lying on the bed with dusty feet.

“Jemina went to play cards next door,” Peter had mumbled at him with a stock-sweet inside his mouth.

Botho clenched his teeth and said nothing. It irritated him that Jemina had let the child call her by her name because being called mama made her feel old. He walked towards the stove. He opened each of the lids from the four pots and felt a drop of sweat run down from his forehead. It hung on the tip of his nose.

“She has not yet cooked!” Botho whispered to himself.

“Jemina said I could serve myself,” Peter said, licking the green stickiness from the palm of his right hand.

“You finished all the food in the pots!” Botho turned around, his eyebrows lifted. There were sucking sounds from the bed.

Peter only lifted his eyes and dropped them back to the stock-sweet. His tongue circled the green ball. Botho felt himself tense up. He hurried to a washing basket and took out a pair of trousers. He pulled out a belt and went straight ahead to his son.

“You are a bull dog that needs a hard kick on the mouth!” Botho said, his voice shaking.

Peter could not stand up fast enough to run. The belt crashed down on the boy and whipped his stomach. Like a fat worm, he kept rolling side to side. The belt thrashed at his buttocks and came down on his shoulders and whipped his back. Botho felt like he was hitting at a hard rock that just wouldn’t break. He hit and hit. Between Peter’s pathetic screams, he did not hear Jemina walk in. Peter escaped and hid behind his mother. He held onto her skirt. He stood there with his big round belly thrust forward, cheeks looking like falling dough, eyes watery and lips pulled downwards until he opened them to cry. Botho knew he would have a hard time loving Peter. Every day, Botho watched his son as he grew into a big fat young man.

Botho returns to Lesotho after a few long years, bearing gifts. The year is now 2000. Inside his Mme se ke ile red checked bag, Botho is carrying a small bicycle for his son and a big doll for his daughter. And for his wife, a small colour television he bought from the *Ellerines* furniture shop as he crossed the border at Maseru. When he later arrives at Alwyn's Kop with the TV on his shoulder, Botho convinces himself that everything will be alright. Some things have changed in Alwyn's Kop. The tavern is now connected with electricity. Botho smiles and winces, thankful to finally arrive at his house. His wife and children are home. They greet him with surprised looks. He drops the bag at the door and puts the TV down on the table, heaving. He turns around with one hand placed on his waist. Still, there is silence from everyone.

"Dumelang," Botho greets, breathlessly.

"Why are you two quiet? Greet your father," Nthatisi says to the children.

"Dumela ntate," Itaoleng and Kamo both respond awkwardly.

"My warrior! Come, see what I bought you!" Botho says to his daughter, bending down to open the bag.

He takes out a big doll trapped inside a transparent plastic and hands it to her.

"Ke ya leboha ntate," Itaoleng says without raising her eyes from the doll with yellow hair and blue eyes.

It sways a little inside her hand. Botho looks at her acne dotted face, his face slowly dims. He realises his daughter now needs a bodice to support her chest. He claps his hands once and points at the bicycle, "Moshemane, this here is for you!"

His nine-year-old son grins at him and brushes his hand over the bike. Botho glances at his wife who is sitting down at the table, busy sorting brown beans on a tray.

"You also bought a TV ntate?" Itaoleng says, causing Botho to take his eyes off his wife.

"Yes, yes, let me connect the generator now." Botho goes outside to connect the generator he once bought promising himself it would be used for his TV some day.

The generator drones with a buzzing sound as Botho walks back in.

“How do we play the TV ntate?” Kamo asks but his sister is already pressing the buttons.

“No, here is the button, you see? You press this thing, it’s called a remote,” Botho says, turning the TV on.

“Hei! o moqhaka Itaoleng!” Kamo teases his sister as the screen lights up with people singing.

Botho releases a silent sigh of relief. The children sit down on the floor, captivated by the TV. Nthatsi is still looking down. She is slowly picking out small stones from the beans so they will be clean to cook for supper. Botho feels a pang, standing there with his hands in his pockets, waiting for his wife to raise her eyes so they can smile at each other.

Legs rise on either side welcoming cool air to penetrate between my thighs. I concentrate on the tingling as the wetness builds up. The wetness flows out curving downwards inside my buttocks. I spread my legs further apart. Between my thighs, folds of skin flap open and elongate like ears. The bean in the middle bruises and hardens. I curl my toes in and out. My eyes roll inwards. I widen my mouth into a smile but only the corner of my top lip curves. My breath catches and accelerates. The skin on my body feels hot under my palms as they caress my long sappy breasts and go down to my stomach. I begin to sweat. I lower my hands between my thighs. The chirping of crickets outside in the dark fades. The howling of the dogs sounds faraway. I arch my waist, my lungs expanding. The tip of my index finger pats my bean. It points out even more. Four fingers clap and rub against the outer lips. The other hand dips two fingers inside the sticky vibrating hole. Wetness flows. My breath quickens. Something wants to spill out. Almost there. My breath catches. There. A grumbling noise suddenly enters my ears and ruins my concentration.

I push the two fingers in and pull them out in quick motions. But the noise persists. The wetness wanes. I keep slapping and rubbing the ears and outer lips but my hands hurt me. Everything shuts down. I take my hands away and throw them to the side. I drop my legs and spread them straight. The house is filled with the noise. I sigh. I turn my body and climb out of bed. I grab my red seshweshwe from the chair and throw it on. I ignore my shoes and walk out clicking my tongue. I kick at a rat as it is about to enter my house. It flies and hits against a small rock. It won't be creeping up into any house any time soon. The grumbling noise feels more aggressive outside. I glare at the dogs and they stand up sickly and whine towards me. They accompany me as I charge towards the fence near my neighbour. I know he has come back from the mines with a new TV. But why do people have to be so boastful? It irks me.

"Ntate Botho wee!" I yell his name and after a while, this worm comes out shaking his head and throwing his arms as if he can't be more annoyed than me.

Two of my lanky dogs walk close together in front of me. Three dogs sprawl and trot like cheerleaders in front of the two close dogs, leading the way towards my neighbour. They bark at him, often turning around in jumps to nod back at me.

"What is it Mamasepatsana?" my neighbour asks, halting near the fence. Another one of my dogs growls from a little distance away.

“Ee boo ntate Botho! This buzzing machine of yours is making my life difficult!” I say, waving my hand at the generator outside his hut.

“Are you going to tell me how to live in my own house mosadi towe?”

“Does it make sense to listen to a noise that even makes your intestines dance?”

“Nxa! Fok maan Mamasepatsana! I’ve had enough of you!” this man says, disregarding my peace.

“Don’t complain when I make your life difficult ntate Botho.” I promise, spewing down and pat my dogs. They turn back swaying around me.

We move together, their lanky torsos in rhythm with my sway. Their paws keep pace with my strides. Their breath is hot on my ankles. We quicken our pace. Do not look back.

My neighbour calls after me, waving his hands, “What do you think you can do to me you witch? Fok! O moloi maan!”

I wish he wouldn’t take my promise so lightly.

At night, Nthatisi sits on the table with her hand against her cheek. She blinks at the lamp light in front of her. Her husband arrived home today from the mines. The gift he bought her was a television. It is now turned off. Nthatisi can hear the soft breathing sounds of her two children asleep on the floor. Her husband begins to snore from the bed. She blinks. It is still so hard to forgive. She bites the inside of her lower lip at the corner and chews it. Their daughter will be starting college soon and her college fees will need to be paid, while their son's primary school fees still need to be paid. Nthatisi wonders, how will her husband manage all these when he now has another child outside their marriage?

Midnight, Botho wakes up smelling smoke. He coughs against the smouldering air clamped around his lungs. He sits up and looks around in the darkness. The darkness is thick with smoke. His wife turns around in her sleep. Earlier that night, he fell asleep while she was still sitting at the table with the lamp light. He knows she is still angry with him for seeing another woman. He leans down from the bed to get a closer look at his children. Both their blankets have been pushed towards their legs. His son is lying with his hands and legs spread out like a cat, while his daughter's one arm is abandoned across her little brother's forehead. Their snores follow each other.

Botho can still smell the smoke. It forces him to inhale shallow breaths. His heart starts to jump. His body feels an overbearing hotness. It develops into clumps of sweat. Suddenly, Botho's eyes catch the amber of yellow licking at the hem of his son's blanket. Before he can fully register the flame, it sneakily devours the edge of the blanket then rises in a fully formed fist before it spreads itself ready to burn. Frantically, Botho shakes Nthatisi's body out of sleep.

"We are burning inside our hut!"

Nthatisi springs up and Botho follows her out of bed.

"Bana!" Nthatisi screams at the flames' audacity.

Botho grabs a full pail and throws a wash of water over his children. The flames withdraw as the water seeps and soaks. The children wake up screaming. Botho hits the floor with the pail and hastens towards Nthatisi.

"I told you to remember to blow out the light or else this would happen!" Botho raises his hand to his wife's face but quickly pulls it back.

"You are a witch!" Nthatisi cries.

Her anger contains itself in the hastiness to quieten her shell-shocked children and sort their damp blankets. She sniffs. Botho climbs into bed and turns to the wall with the blankets over his face.

When the sun shines in the morning, Botho trails an electric cable from the *Blues Café* tavern and connects it to his hut. He takes a star screwdriver from his pocket and puts together a

plug for the TV. He connects each cable to its rightful place. He creates a light switch and screws it against the wall. He puts a light bulb up on the roof. Botho focuses on the cables but they no longer lead to the wall. They travel into his brain and spark a memory. He closes his eyes as the memory fires, becomes alive. It is 1979. They want to test an electric cable to find whether it has electricity or not. He is sitting alone at a distance far off in the shade. He yearns for a drop of Coca-Cola. They call him. He hears one white man called Dalton stopping them from calling him to the cable.

“Don’t worry yourself with this kafferkie man!” he hears the other white men tell Dalton.

This is his first time digging gold at Western Areas mine. An 18 year old youth. Kafferkie, a small kaffir, is what he is. They instruct him to cut the cable with a saw. This saw has a rubber on the handle. He does as he is told. He places the saw on the cable. It is huge and long. It runs from underneath the ground. Deep into the mine. He begins to cut. They start moving backwards, holding hands. He is cutting. A feeling of fear. Body is sticky with sweat. A distant loud bang. Deep underground, the cable explodes. His ears and eyes close. Silence. He opens his eyes to see blurry shadows moving slowly towards him. He is shaking, his knees feel weak. His eyes are watery. He blinks and opens his eyes wide to see the shadows changing into humans. One of them pokes him with a plank. Then they circle around him. Dalton is crying. A bottle of water? He shakes his head. He is not shocked by the electricity. Ancestors maybe? He wonders.

Now, Botho opens his eyes, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He forms a tight fist with his hand until his breathing slows. He looks around the house and plugs the TV in. He stands next to a wall to switch on the light bulb. He has harnessed the electricity.

“Jowee! Look at Botho! Botho is smart!” Botho boasts happily to his children and steals a glance at his wife.

She smiles a little. Botho drops down the screwdriver and walks to her. He cups her in his arms, going round and round in a circle. He stops and tightens his grip bringing her closer. He whispers inside her ear, “Everything is going to be alright.”

The burly man with reddish hair and reddish beard circled his desk impatiently. His hands fiddled with a front zipper on his pants. He was shaking his head.

“No Botho damn it! You will not get a raise. And I told you to bloody stop coming into my office!” Tito van Wyk growled.

This was the third time Botho walked into this man’s office to ask for a raise. When he finished his shift down in the mine, he took the same route and walked towards the small white trailer. Botho did not even know whether this red-haired man was the underground manager or not. His name, Tito van Wyk was written outside his door in official letters so he decided he was the right person to speak to. He also knew he slept with some female miners. They would gossip about him through giggles. There was a rumour that he had a small penis and would chase the women from his office after he came too soon. To hide this, the curtain was always drawn not only from prying eyes but to create dimness in the office.

“Too much bum! Hurts my pelvis! Get out of here!” Botho had heard Tito van Wyk shouting blame at a woman who ran out giggling, almost bumping into him as he was about to knock.

“Two families need my support. And all the time I work, work but money not enough,” Botho told the man who now fixed his tie and put his hands inside his pockets.

Botho had to hold his nausea down whenever he glimpsed at the man’s tidied desk. The office reeked of fucking. Botho blinked to adjust his eyes to the dimness then looked up at Tito van Wyk.

“Fuck it man! Do you want work or not?” Tito van Wyk said after a long silence.

“I want pay for my work,” Botho said.

“I want pay for my work.”

Botho stared at Tito van Wyk. Was the man repeating his words to mock him? He felt his anger rise.

“Money you pay is not enough; my work is danger for me.”

“Money you pay is not enough; my work is danger for me.” Botho again heard Tito van Wyk repeat his words.

He looked at him suspiciously. As he was about to raise his voice at him, he noted confusion on Tito van Wyk's face. He tried another approach.

"Do you have family?" he asked.

"Do you have family?"

His words again came out of Tito van Wyk's red lips.

Did this man think he shits cow-dung? Did he think he walked in here and suddenly showed him his arse? Botho wondered, his ears feeling hot. He blinked at Tito van Wyk. Finally, Tito van Wyk raised four fingers to indicate how many children he had. But his lips only made a mimic of the words, *four kids*. Botho thought he looked stupid. Tito van Wyk grabbed his family photo behind him from his desk, walked close to Botho and shoved it in his face. Botho backed away in surprise. He searched Tito van Wyk's flaccid face. It was gathering patches of redness. He continued talking, this time slowly in a gentle tone because he wanted Tito van Wyk to hear his words and take them seriously.

"And as a man, you want to provide for them right? You want them to be equal to your moneyed friends, right?"

"And as a man, you want to provide for them right?" Tito van Wyk shouted, turning back from Botho, walked back to his desk and kicked at his black plump chair.

The chair turned on its side and bounced against the wall.

"You want them to be equal to your moneyed friends, right?" Tito van Wyk howled again, this time he bent over his desk and dragged his computer along with sketches of mine drawings and a condom down on the floor.

Botho began to feel scared now. It felt as if Tito van Wyk was in a protesting action against himself. Botho shifted, putting a hand inside his white overall.

"Are you trying to make me crazy?" he asked but Tito van Wyk was looking at him with a red face and bulging eyes.

His lips were shut tight and he seemed to be trembling. When he opened them, the voice and words that came out of his lips again were those Botho had spoken.

"Are you trying to make me crazy?"

It was as if Botho had somehow entered and taken over Tito van Wyk's mouth. He watched, amazed as the man turned to the wall and unhooked a 2011 calendar. He tore at it many times. He gnarled his teeth. Clapped his head as if trying to shake something out of it. Botho saw him look at him in tears, his eyeballs were pink. Then he finally began to speak in his own voice. His voice was shaky.

"Listen man, your job is to produce, produce. There will be no negotiations here, this is big business." The colour of Tito van Wyk's face matched his red hair and red beard.

Botho looked down to Tito van Wyk's feet which were spread apart. He felt himself swallow something bitter. Why did he have to stand here, begging from this joke? A man who has never worked hard for anything in his life!

Botho nonchalantly brought out his hand from his white overall pocket. A black scorpion jumped from his fingers and clung to Tito van Wyk's fat stomach. Botho stared at his hands in wonder. The scorpion was climbing up Tito van Wyk's stomach but Botho realised that the man was not aware of the creature waving its tail. Instead he was looking uneasy about the look of amazement Botho gave him. Botho was about to speak but stopped when Tito van Wyk opened his mouth. The scorpion crawled in. Botho rubbed his eyes. He would not be bewitched; he would not be made to lose his mind. He took his hands off his eyes and flashed Tito van Wyk a disgusted look. He pocketed his hands and frowned. He spoke slow and low.

"What if the first newspaper you read tomorrow has your name in front telling us about how you sleep with employees?"

It took a minute until Tito van Wyk burst out laughing through fits of coughs. Tears came out of his eyes again. He put a hand over his stomach.

"What is this? You think. You can threaten me?" Tito van Wyk stepped closer to Botho still coughing. His index finger was pointing at his own meaty chest.

Botho lifted his face.

"No raise, no work."

"That's it, get out of my office," Tito van Wyk spat and the scorpion came out and clomped on the floor in slippery wetness.

Botho turned and left the office of the burly man with reddish hair and reddish beard.

Botho walked to his shack in long strides without raising his face. He held a paper in his hand. He was drenched in sweat. He heard laughter when he reached the door. He threw it open. The laughter stopped. His mistress was sitting on the bed. A friend of hers was on her feet plaiting her hair. They were both watching the soapie, *Generations* on TV. They turned back their faces to greet him with shock.

“Get out of my house,” Botho said, pointing his thumb to the door and poured himself a glass of water.

He always hated it when Jemina filled his space with her gossipy friends. The woman let go of his mistress’s hair, took her comb from the bed and left silently. Botho exhaled loudly and wiped the water from his chin. He walked to Jemina and thrust the paper at her. He turned around looking for something. Jemina stared at the paper.

“They laid you off at the mine!”

Botho found his Mme se ke ile red checked bag. He began packing his clothes.

“Botho, why are you packing?” Jemina looked bewildered.

She put the paper down on the bed. She stood up, her hair wild and frizzy on one side and plaited in four lines on the other side of her head.

“You are going to your wife and leaving me all alone aren’t you?” she said, while following Botho as he collected his clothes.

“I’m going back Lesotho,” Botho said, breathlessly turning to look at his mistress. He pulled the bag up to his shoulders. As he opened the door to leave, Jemina screamed, “Boothoo!”

The shoe hit against the door just as he shut it.

When Botho arrived home in Lesotho, he found his yard full of shit. The year was 2012. There were hairy maggots popping everywhere. Some clung to his vegetables. In the morning, he left his hut and looked around his yard with a frown.

“Sies!” he said, almost stepping over a thick yellow puddle.

He stepped back. Steam rose from the puddle like hot custard. Botho glared at his neighbour’s house. How is it that someone who can’t stand other human beings is capable of invading other people’s spaces like this? Botho wondered, feeling his blood boil.

“Hei wena Mamasepatsana! Come out and scruff your dog shit off from my yard!”

The small woman appeared at her door holding a large silver bowl. Her six dogs leapt up and trotted towards her. They waved their tails and followed each other in a circle near the black stoep. Mamasepatsana stretched her neck to peer at Botho. Botho spat.

“One of these days you’ll come collect all of your rotten dogs dead, I tell you!”

“It would have to be your dead body first!” Mamasepatsana rasped as she tossed out dirty dishwashing water from the bowl. Her dogs sprinted and whined in disappointment. She disappeared.

“You would swear some people see my family as a toilet,” Botho spat at the sight of shit as he inspected his vegetables.

To him, they appeared to have been suddenly stunted. He walked back towards his house. The house was quiet. His children had grown up. His daughter was away at college and his son was now attending primary school. In him, the change was now more unapologetic. Even his wife could tell something was wrong without him having to say he had been laid off work at the mine. He was not certain if he was not telling his wife to protect her or because he was unable to look her in the eye since she had found him living with a mistress. Now that he was home, Botho pushed all thoughts of his mistress out of his mind. Perhaps he was not communicating with his wife because he just simply did not care anymore. They met at the door as she was leaving for work. Botho snapped, “Fix my bread and tea.” He did not turn to face her.

Nthatisi hesitated before dumping the bowl containing the diphaphatha she was going to sell and did as she was told. Thump! Went the sound of the bowl hitting against the table. The silence stretched.

Do not think I do not wonder about it. Like how better my life would have been had I not married for love? Walking from taxi to taxi with a yellow bowl over my head under this heat. Yelling to passengers to buy my flat round scones.

“Diphaphatha ka mona!”

It seems I have become immune. The taxi drivers brushing my behind as I pass by. The exasperated and tight stares of people wishing I would go away.

I allowed love to mislead me. I tell myself as I raise the empty bowl over my head and wave back at the ladies, walking home. The cheap thin pad underneath my vagina keeps sliding and running towards my bum. My pantyhose feel tight and irritating. I am sweaty and my feet are bruised.

The shadows have thickened. I get inside my house and find my husband slumped on the bed with arms akimbo. He is still wearing his dirty blue overalls. Ever since he was retrenched, he no longer seems to care about anything. All he does is hang around useless men playing dice. I light the paraffin lamp and sit at the table to count my profits. After spilling the coins and notes from my wallet, I glance at my husband and keep my eyes on him. The saliva drooling down his chin and his rude snores makes my blood curdle. How easy it would be now to squash all that strength. My eyes travel back to the lamp and blink as I force myself to calm down. I’m unable to think where I can find a better spot to hide my money. I am so tired.

The two dices spilled out of a hand and crashed down on a board. They did not yield. The dices collected back inside the hand and shook furiously. They spilled from the hand and tumbled down on the board. Still, they did not yield. Sweat poured down Botho's frowning face. He was now what they call, mahlalela.

"Eh bop!" Botho said, watching the two dices turn but disappoint him.

The board was surrounded by a group of men. They were huddled around in a clearing near some houses and bushes. This was mostly to hide from the police. Botho's frown deepened. This was the fifth time he threw the dices and still he was losing. No luck.

"Eh monna, what do you think you're doing?" "It's over ntate!" the men around him barked with red eyes.

One of them collected the dices but Botho reached for his hand, scratching at it as the man pulled away.

"Hayi maan, hayi maan," Botho complained and bashed at the board causing the coins to jump.

"You are finished ntate," the man said, echoed by the others.

Botho looked into his eyes as if to say, say that one more time.

Some men were smiling with their eyes, suppressing their laughter. Botho turned around and walked. He made a dismissal show of waving his hand back at the group. The sun was setting as he clenched his molars and walked back to his house. When he opened the gate, he noticed his son returning late from school. He clicked his tongue. He walked in after him.

"Where have you been?"

"I'm from school ntate," Kamo replied, putting his schoolbag down.

"You want to tell me all this time you've been at school, all this time until the sun is almost vanished? Who do you think waters my vegetables? Or do you like seeing them disappointed like this?"

Kamo had paused in the middle of taking off his school jersey. Botho pulled out the leather waist belt from his pants. He saw his son draw in his breath.

“I’m sorry nta-”

“Come here.” Botho grabbed him.

The belt beat down and beat down on him. Kamo screamed and jumped, trying to loosen himself. The belt persisted until Botho dropped it and punched the boy. It was easier to maintain anger and walk out rather than face the blood that dribbled out of his son’s mouth. The blood stained his son’s white shirt and grey jersey. Botho frowned.

Nthatisi found her child shell-shocked. The little boy was sitting on the floor, his bruised lips unable to close. He looked like he was scared to close his mouth. The upper gum on top of one of his front tooth had broken and hung loosely. Nthatisi had just returned in the evening after a day of selling diphaphatha. She tried to place the big bowl she was carrying on the table. But the sight of her son's face stopped her. She stood, squinting at the boy who was now beginning to weep.

"Ntate hit him with a fist for coming home late from school." Her daughter answered her silent questions, standing up quickly to light the paraffin lamp.

She had found Itaoleng sitting on a chair and ogling at her little brother. Nthatisi immediately filled a wash basin with water and poured in Dettol, grabbed a towel and without a word, began washing the blood off her son. Her lips were pursed. She wondered what had possessed Botho these days. Was she not trying to do her share?

Later when he walked in, everyone was quiet. No one lifted their heads to look up at him. Even the television was silent. He did not greet. Before Nthatisi got in bed, she sneaked her hand in the back of a suitcase and shook her wallet. After she felt its light weight and no clinking sound, she climbed in bed and covered her face. Her daughter began to fix the floor bedding. She could hear her husband take his food which was left covered on the table. He sat down to eat while the children tucked themselves in their blankets. Kamo slept right away. Nthatisi felt like her chest ached every time he hiccupped. She felt nauseous hearing Botho's chewing and the loud sound of the spoon hitting against the plate. She sniffed and heard him turn on the television. Nthatisi turned towards the wall.

Itaoleng became a naughty girl. She was on a semester break from college and had come home for the holidays. She sat in a bath tub, glad her father was away playing dice. She felt sad for him. He no longer danced. But at nineteen years old, Itaoleng's little girl days were over. After she finished bathing she hastened out, carrying the bath tub and spilled her dirty washing water. She noticed the sun had begun to tilt calling the shadows to spread out wider. She hurried out of the house wearing her black bomber jacket and hid inside the outside latrine.

She pulled out her mother's old makeup bag and a pair of high heels from underneath the jacket. She put on red lipstick, two pink dots on the sides of her light skin cheeks and slipped on the heels. She wrapped her flip-flops and the makeup bag with the jacket and hid them down on the side of the toilet. Her breathing quickened. She swallowed and scanned thoroughly for her father through the small holes dotted on the zinc door. All was clear. Itaoleng ran, holding a giggle. She was going to meet her boyfriend. When she came back, it was dark.

The stars shone like diamonds above her. Crickets' cries pricked at her nerves. A stone! She needed a small stone to save her. Her heart beat fast. She walked raising her feet carefully around the yard, often glancing towards the door in case someone spotted her. She could feel sweat sting her armpits and her knees wobbling. She followed the moonlight as she searched for a stone. She picked one but threw it down because it was too big and would expose her. Finally, she found a tiny stone. She brushed the caked soil off it. She breathed in deeply and placed the stone under her tongue.

I will not get a beating. Itaoleng kept telling herself as she knocked. When the door finally burst open, Itaoleng delivered her prepared speech in a hyper tone.

"I have been reading with my friend Dieketso who lives on the other side of the road," she said, averting her eyes from her father's suspicious gaze.

Her one hand was pocketed inside the bomber jacket. The other hand was busily rubbing her midriff to conceal the slight bulge where she had stashed the heels and her mother's make up bag.

"This is the last time you enter my house at this time! Do you hear me?" Her father warned.

Itaoleng immediately nodded in agreement grateful that the stone which was stinging the underside of her tongue, had worked. But the following evening, Itaoleng repeated the routine again. Her little brother was the one who opened for her this time. Her parents were already asleep. She tiptoed to her blankets. Her father shifted a little on the bed and she paused. When he began snoring, she dropped on the bedding, covered herself and slept wearing the bomber jacket hiding the heels and the makeup bag underneath. Itaoleng promised herself to stop being a naughty girl.

The smell of burning stiff pap called him inside. Botho had been tending his ruined small vegetable garden under the hot sun. He placed the spade against a tree trunk and turned back to glance at it as he took off the gloves. Soon, the spinach would grow in abundance there. He would make sure of it. On that other side, he needed to find sticks to support the stems of tomatoes which were beginning to show. This was Botho's way of trying to forget his recent obsession with dice. Now, when other men hollered at him for a game, he just had to think about the shame of stealing his wife's hard-earned money and focus on his garden. Still, working on the garden was not enough; there was always a need for a release.

"Shoo!" Botho said, smelling a stronger scent of the burning pap and walked towards the house.

He stopped at the door, sweating from the heat. His daughter was dancing along to *Channel O* music videos on TV. Itaoleng gyrated her hips with her eyes closed. She lifted her leg shaking it and slapped her thigh. As she lifted her bum up and dropped it down, Botho had grabbed her by the arm. He turned her around and smacked her.

"You burn my food! Come in as you please in my house!" The second slap turned Itaoleng towards the table staggering.

She held onto it before she could slip and fall and saw the dishes which she had not finished washing. She kept her eyes on them. Some plates were still not yet dried. The pap had turned yellow. It seeped out a pungent smell. Itaoleng took the damp cloth which was still hanging from an almost dry bowl. She wiped the bowl. Botho stopped, looked at her and suddenly yelled, "Hei, wena letekatsana! I am talking to you!"

As the belt went swoosh, Itaoleng circled the table on the other side and climbed on the bed. She stood on top of the bed. Botho stood in front of the bed. As the third slap was about to land, Itaoleng hit him with a fist on the cheek bone. Botho held **onto** his cheek and closed his eyes.

"Itaoleng, I am your father!" he whispered, tears forming in his eyes.

The pap was turning dark; its nauseous smell smeared the whole hut. Botho walked out.

Itaoleng stood on the bed feeling pain in the knuckles of her right fist. Her shoulders were back, chest out, knees weak and her hands clenched. The strong smell of burning pap made her cough. She climbed down off the bed and took the burning pot off the stove. She continued with drying the dishes which she had not been able to finish. She swept the floor and scraped the pap out from the burnt pot. She cooked another pap and moroho. She scooped herself a plate and sat down.

“I am starving,” said Kamo, walking in.

Itaoleng put down the spoon, jumped up and walked to the stove to dish for her little brother. “Is this enough?” Kamo nodded and they both sat down to eat.

Itaoleng took a spoonful and looked up at Kamo hunched over his plate, tossing food in his mouth.

“Ntate beat me so I hit him with a fist,” Itaoleng said and they both paused chewing, their spoons held up.

Itaoleng’s tears came out along with a brown paste that dripped from her mouth. It cascaded down her chin and slowly dribbled small droplets on her chest.

The silence was becoming painful. Nthatisi had been running out of ways to stretch her silent treatment. Nonetheless, she would endure. Now, she felt like giving out a loud long laugh. Her marriage was falling apart. She still had not recovered from the shock of being greeted by a swollen belly from a woman inside her husband's shack back in Rustenburg. Since then, nothing had cured the silence between them.

How was it possible that everything was cracking and she seemed to be the only one still holding herself together? Nthatisi finally turned to face her husband in bed. His eyes were open and she looked into them. Their foreheads were almost touching. They could hear punctuated snores from their children's floor bedding.

"I slept with another man." Nthatisi's voice was raised.

"Long before I had no idea when you would come home, I went out with a man called Jeffrey. He wanted to marry me but I told him I was only interested in getting rid of my loneliness. When he started to fall in love with me, I stopped seeing him."

A long silence stretched between husband and wife. Botho's lips were trembling and he felt himself get hard. He moved closer to press against his wife's forehead. Hard. Nthatisi's breathing accelerated. Their lips met. Botho raised himself up and grabbed Nthatisi's lips between his fingers. He twisted them. Nthatisi's breath became short. Her hands pushed against Botho's chest. She grabbed his nipples and twisted them. Botho let go of Nthatisi's lips and dropped his mouth on them. Mouth pressed against mouth. Nthatisi moaned, pinching hard at Botho's nipples. Botho thrust his tongue inside her mouth, mounting her. Her breasts felt hard. He raised his face. Husband and wife looked at each other. Botho dipped his face between Nthatisi's breasts and they both began crying.

Who would want to get back in a hole? Your suffocating mother calls you Peter or embarrassingly, dudli, dudli because you're fat. Your father never calls your name when speaking to you. There is an unapologetic greediness about you. In high school, you bullied your friends into bringing their school lunches for you. Their names were Sfiso, Shoota and Sizwe. Your stature was imposing and people often felt intimidated. You liked that. You would demand that your friends give you their homework to copy answers. This was how you got through matric. You used to sell peanuts and sweets with these mamparas. You would sell in the schoolyard and inside the trains. If they made more profits than you, you would manipulate them into lending you their monies. You would lie about your father not having left any money to buy food. But you never paid them back.

"You guys like to think I'm here to nurse you milk bottles, you know that!" you would reply as an answer to their debts.

You did not care. You took their earnings. Mission completed. All these and you never got yourself in a fist fight. After high school, your father died. Your mampara friends went to tertiary and you were left behind roaming the streets. You became street smart. You soon learned that you have to take what you want in this world. Being a child of a mine worker will not get you anything. The mamparas went on to own cars and houses and businesses. You did not own a thing.

You started by confiscating Sfiso's BMW. After you found out he owed some mashonisa big money, you promised to help him out of the web without selling off his car. If only he would give it to you, mahala. Then you disappeared. That way, Sfiso's car got hijacked.

"You guys like to think I'm here to nurse you milk bottles, you know that," you said to him, reminding him of who you were after climbing inside his shiny car.

As the tyres screeched, the mampara was left standing in a shroud of dust. After that, you arrived at Sizwe's house driving a BMW. At first, it seemed like a friendly visit for a whole week. But the week visit became a month until a month became a year. Sizwe's resentment grew into silence as he watched you finish his food. One day, you showed Sizwe a title deed bought from someone Sizwe had made a deal with.

“It’s my house now,” you said, surprising Sizwe. The mampara stared at the paper then looked up at you with his mouth agape.

“You guys like to think I’m here to nurse you milk bottles, you know that,” you said, reminding him of who you were.

You stood with your arms folded as you watched your mampara friend struggling to move his possessions out. After that, you invited the businessman, Shoota to your house. To talk business. When your mampara friend arrived, you realised he was beginning to get fat. He settled down on the couch and you did not waste any time. You held up papers to his face.

“I now own 90% of your company,” you said.

He examined the papers and looked up at you, stunned. Then he roared with laughter and walked out. You were left shaking your head. You felt sorry for your friend because you knew his rock bottom was coming. The following day, you walked into Shoota’s office with a smile. You found him already clearing his desk.

“You guys like to think I’m here to nurse you milk bottles, you know that,” you said, reminding him of who you were.

You watched your mampara friend walk slowly out as if the floor was covered in ice. And that’s how you owned a hotel called Lonmina. Your manipulative ways were incredible. It was an art. Now, you were all grown up and a business man. You have since left your annoying mother’s breast and moved your business to Cape Town. Yep, life was good.

Until now. There is something familiar about the brown freckled lady’s face in front of you. You frown at her across the desk.

“My surname is Botho,” says the interviewee introducing herself. Her voice is deep, that of a man.

“Botho is my surname too!” you exclaim at the young woman.

“I know my son,” she says with a straight face, her voice sounding familiar.

You wonder why you feel like you have heard it before. Then you realise it reminds you of your childhood. You search the woman’s face, confused.

“Lady, do not waste my time. I am a very busy man. Are you here to play games or do you want a job?”

“I am your father, Peter.”

You burst out laughing. What is this, you wonder. But the lady is not amused. She is staring at you and you glimpse a familiar look on her freckled face. She repeats her words, “I am your father, Peter.”

Now it is undeniable. Her voice is that of your father. You can never mistake that voice. It is as if your father is speaking to you from his grave. You swallow, grow cold but start to sweat.

“Do not be scared,” the woman says. You feel like your father is speaking to you.

Your eyes glisten. Your buried childhood memories rise up again. How your father saw you as a useless child, an embarrassment. How he made you feel unwanted and unloved. You look down at your trembling hands. You manage to find your voice.

“My father was a man damn it!” you shout and rise from your chair. Your utterance is absurd, you know, but what else is there to say to this woman who has stolen your father’s voice?

Your belly towers over the interviewee in a white shirt and red tie. She does not flinch. She is sitting cross-legged, her hands clasped quietly on her lap. She raises her eyes and looks into yours.

“I know,” she says quietly and continues. “This was the only way I could speak to you my son.”

A sudden incredulous laugh escapes from you.

“Sit down, please.” You plump back on your chair.

“I know I was not a perfect father but I did love you Peter.”

“I don’t believe you,” you find yourself saying.

“Believe it!” the woman says with a force.

Your heart is pounding. You unfasten your tie and lick your lips.

“Now, I’m not proud of the way you’ve made a name for yourself. But I am proud-”

“What do you know? You think it was easy being the child of a mine worker? The needy. That’s what they call you when you are down there. What? Did you want me to turn out a mine worker like you?”

The woman leans on the desk and you almost see your father’s face. She shouts, “I only wanted to tell you to treat your workers with humanity!”

“I managed to crawl out of that hole without any humanity from anyone. What matters is that I came out, do you hear me?” you shout back.

The woman retreats into her seat, giggles and claps her hands once. She gets up putting the strap of her purse over her shoulder.

“Well, I’ll see you on Monday then.”

She walks out. You stare after her. You try to make sense of what has just happened but it is as if you are spinning, spinning. The office grows dark, walls closing in a vortex. You keep asking, who would want to get back in a hole?

A brick lay on top of a brick and then another brick lay on top. The grey wall had now grown to Botho's waist. When he first started building a small room next to his hut, he was not certain whether he was trying to make it up to his wife and kids or whether he was merely occupying his mind with something. After he was given a letter saying his job ended at the mine and that he would not be hired at any mine, Botho had gone back home to Lesotho and became a man he did not recognise. The man he was now was a man who punched his little boy and beat up his daughter who in turn punched him back. As the bricks formed a wall, Botho knew his immersion was about escaping the silence or something he couldn't quite explain.

Botho sighed. It was not yet noon but the heat felt incredible. On the ground, a small red radio leaned against the hut. Sipho Gumede's "When Days are Dark, Friends are Few" played.

"Ntate! Ntate! Do you want me to dance with you?" Kamo asked, his voice raised over the music. He came and stood near Botho.

Botho began putting on brown leather gloves and lowered his head to his son. Then he grabbed a trowel and looked back at the brick wall.

"Can't you see I'm working here? There, go water my vegetables and work like a man."

Botho turned from the wall, bent down and circled the big knob on the radio to increase the volume. His son left him alone. He straightened up and turned to the wall. A brick lay on top of another brick. The wall now reached Botho's chest. He took the radio from the ground and put it inside the back pocket of his trouser. Its long silver aerial propped up against his back. At noon, Botho's daughter approached him.

"Ntate! Ntate!" Itaoleng called. Botho lowered the volume seeing his daughter waving her hands frantically for him to hear her.

He was now standing on a ladder. The wall had reached his neck. He peered down at her from the wall, waiting with a brick in his hands.

"Do you want me to dish lunch for you?"

"If you like." Botho turned the volume high again.

Through the corner of his eye, he could see Itaoleng looking down, drawing with her bare foot on the ground. She turned around and went to sit under the peach tree. Botho pursed his lips. A brick lay on top of another brick and then another brick lay on top. After a long while, Botho took a break. He found his lunch covered on the table. His daughter was washing the dishes. He sat down to eat and turned on the TV with a remote. He flicked the channels until he found a wrestling show. He looked down inside his bowl and mixed the pap with the creamy sour milk. The spoon hit against the bowl. He raised the full spoon to his lips. His eyes watched at the screen and his lips closed on the spoon. He chewed with anticipation.

“Yes, yes, don’t be weak man hit him, hit him! Crush this fool!” Botho began hollering in-between the fighting he watched, leaning forward. He sat at the edge of the chair. Small white particles of food jumped out of his mouth.

When his bowl was empty he called his daughter but she did not respond.

“Itaoleng! Do you not hear me call you?” Botho shouted, causing Itaoleng’s shoulders to flinch.

He held out the bowl to her as she turned around from the dishes.

“I did not hear because the TV is too loud,” Itaoleng replied, taking the bowl.

Botho tightened his grip. Both their eyes locked.

“You’re full cheek!” Botho said, releasing his grip on the bowl and watched his daughter as she walked slowly back to the dishes.

“It’s because you can hit me now, isn’t it?” Botho said, watching her hands pause from washing the bowl and her shoulders tensely rise.

“Nxa!” he clicked his tongue, facing back to the screen.

“I hate you!”

Botho heard Itaoleng scream. He flinched back from the TV to look at her. He took the remote and decreased the volume. He watched as plates of different colours flew in the air and then hit hard at the floor. A red plate cracked, a yellow plate split apart and a white one fell near his foot.

“I hate you!” Itaoleng said once more, this time quietly and Botho saw his daughter’s eyes change to hardness.

A fat black and brown snake circled around her neck. Its black forked tongue kept slapping at her cheek. Botho felt his heart jump inside his chest. His eyes grew wide.

“Itaoleng!” He whispered.

He could hear her breath blow out. It flapped the neckline of her spotted dress back and forth. Botho was the first one to look away back to the TV. When Itaoleng walked out he listened carefully to her footsteps until she was gone. He increased the volume on the TV and continued to yell at it. Later, when he knew his wife would be returning soon, Botho went out and began with his work. A brick lay on top of a brick and then another brick lay on top. The wall almost reached his face now. Still, the heat put on a good fight. There were white spots in the corners of his eyes. He beat one brick with a hammer. He raised his eyes briefly and noticed his wife opening the gate.

“Dumelang,” Nthatsi greeted, her voice raised.

Botho did not lift his head. The hammer beat down louder. Nthatsi went inside. Botho built his wall until dark.

She could not keep up the pretence. Nthatisi's in-laws came for a visit and she knew they thought her husband had money. Her lips were still aching from last night after her husband angrily twisted them and because of that, she would not bother with smiles. But her husband was ready to keep pretending. When his sister arrived with her husband, he hurried out to buy a 2litre Coca-Cola and a tray of chicken pieces on credit from the local *Blues Café* shop.

“Won't you prepare these for us moratuwa,” Botho asked, handing them to Nthatisi.

She looked at them without reaching her husband's eyes. She tightened her mouth even though it hurt. She grabbed the bottle and poured the coke in two glasses. Botho took the drinks to their visitors, sitting outside in the shade under the peach tree. Back in the house, Nthatisi folded her arms and watched at her husband through the window.

“Are the glasses clean enough?” Botho asked, sitting down.

“Ah, no, the glasses look sparkling sbhali,” his brother-in-law responded, sipping his drink gratefully while his sister rolled her eyes.

“Say sbhali, what happened back at the mine?” his brother-in-law asked and slurped his tongue.

Botho held out his wide tough hands. They looked calloused and dry.

“Jeer, sbhali, it's hard. You know, from a young age, I promised myself that these hands of mine will feed me. But instead they feed white people. They build their country for them. Do you know that I could have been an electrical engineer?”

Nthatisi held back tears and moved away from the window. She went to sit on the bed and began to fold clothes her daughter had just taken off from the washing line. She raised her eyes as her sister-in-law walked in then dropped them back to the clothes. Itaoleng was washing herself in a bath tub beside her. Nthatisi noticed her squirming in embarrassment when she saw her aunt enter. The sister-in-law plumped herself on a chair and faced Nthatisi with a smile.

“You are going to give that scarf to me aren't you?” Nthatisi paused in the middle of folding the blue silky scarf.

Botho had chosen it for her a long time ago. She had been unable to choose between this blue one and a green-coloured scarf.

“Ehee,” Nthatsi laughed silently and kept on folding.

Splashes of water from Itaoleng’s bath interrupted the awkward moment. The sister-in-law looked in Itaoleng’s direction. The young woman was sitting on her haunches inside the tub while splashing water between her thighs.

“Hmm, I’m sure it has ears now!” Itaoleng’s aunt said, her eyes searching between Itaoleng’s thighs.

She giggled. Itaoleng closed her thighs quickly and frowned.

“I hate it when adults speak as if they are my age mates.”

Thwack! Went the sound of the wet towel which Nthatsi grabbed from Itaoleng’s tub. It smacked the young woman across her face. Itaoleng lost balance, falling against the side of the tub and tipping it over. The water splashed over her aunt’s dress. It created a dent on the cow-dunged floor.

“Shoo, now look my outfit is ruined!” The aunt got up and left the shell-shocked mother and daughter.

Nthatsi sat straight backed, brushing her hands down her skirt. She glanced at her daughter who sniffed and wiped her eyes.

“When I get back, I want to find all this mess gone,” she said quietly getting up.

Outside, Nthatsi heard Kamo teasing his aunt.

“Hawu! What happened rakgadi? Did they baptise you?”

Nthatsi smiled a little. Her sister-in-law’s husband was the only one who chuckled. Botho gave his son the look. But that look made Nthatsi shudder; she had never seen Botho look at any one of his children that way.

“You need to stop being such a clown. Get away from here and stop counting adults’ teeth,” Botho said to his son.

Nthatisi saw Kamo turn around and lazily kick some pebbles. She almost went to hug him. She had never seen her son shrink that way. As she opened the gate, she felt sad that Kamo was no longer the child who would find happiness in laughter so much so that his body would shake as if marinating in the laughter. Nthatisi found her friend Mampe washing dishes in her kitchen.

“I just do not know what is happening to my family Mampe. Everything has changed so much,” Nthatisi said, sipping her tea.

“But I have been telling you Nthatisi, this is all Mamasepatsana’s works. Everyone knows she’s a big witch here in Alwyn’s Kop!”

Nthatisi was about to reprimand her friend as usual but she swallowed her words and said, “I think I believe you.”

It was already getting dark when she returned home. She found Botho standing against the wall of their hut. He was smoking a cigarette. The in-laws had left. She folded her arms and moved a little closer to her husband. He looked at her.

“Did you really have to go buy those things with credit?”

Botho took his eyes away from her and dragged on his cigarette.

“Did you really feel the need to please them like that?”

“Damn it Nthatisi!” Botho yelled, tossing away the cigarette stub.

Nthatisi took a step back, holding her breath. Botho spoke softly.

“I keep trying to gather my dignity and place it inside my pockets but my pockets are so full of holes. I...I just feel like I’m going through life carrying this plastic with dreams inside and not realising there is a small hole underneath where everything I work hard for keeps falling out.”

“What is going to happen to us Botho, to our family?” Nthatisi neared her husband again.

“I’m going to fight for my job, moratuwa.” Botho said, pulling Nthatisi to him.

Nthatisi dipped her face onto her husband’s chest. He had not called her moratuwa in a long time.

He heard growling sounds. Botho stood outside in the dark leaning against his hut. He could also hear murmuring voices of his wife and kids inside. Crickets chirped. Botho ate the bones of his brain thinking about the loss of his job at the mine. The unfairness of it all. His thoughts became disturbed by the growling sounds as they grew to sound like humans fighting over something. Then a squeak and then a bark. Botho noticed six dogs creep inside his yard. They crawled in underneath the fence dividing his hut and Mamasepatsana's big house. He sometimes suspected she was the reason he now sat at home. The dogs began digging, tossing the soil up from the ground, while growling at each other. Botho moved from the wall and walked looking down. He bent down and picked up a stone.

"Voetsek Mamasepatsana!" Botho swore at the dogs with their owner's name, hurling the stone at them.

The emaciated dogs squeaked and ran with their anxious tails glued between their legs. Botho's chest was heaving up and down. He heard his breath seep in and out. He saw Mamasepatsana standing near the fence looking at him. Botho drew in his breath and stood still. A white snake fat as a neck appeared from behind her back. It slithered down her left shoulder. It turned and dipped between her breasts moving up to necklace her throat. Its whiteness seemed to light her face in the dark. The snake cocked its head and dangled out its black forked tongue to lick Mamasepatsana's face until it looked soft and smooth. The tongue drew back inside, leaving the forks hanging outside the lips. For the first time in his life, Botho thought Mamasepatsana looked beautiful. Her face glowed with innocence. He began to get hard. The head of the snake cocked towards Mamasepatsana's right shoulder, snaking out its body from her neck. Then it disappeared behind her back again. Mamasepatsana opened her mouth slowly. It drew into a smile. Her eyes looked blank and hard. Her skin seemed to shrink and harden until it formed the haughty face that Botho knew. Mamasepatsana tilted her head backwards in a shriek of laughter. She clapped her hands once.

"Am I a dog now?" she said loudly.

Botho pulled out a cigarette. He lit it and blew out smoke with his eyes closed. He opened them to find Mamasepatsana gone.

The year is 2012. Botho leaves his wife and two children in Lesotho. He goes back to work in South Africa. He has been reinstated after being laid off a few months. Even his allocated days on his passport have expired and so he decides to enter into South Africa by crossing the Mohokare River at Maseru. After getting off a taxi, he realises police in brown uniform are milling about. One policeman passes and he looks away. The heat still lingers after the sun reclines behind the mountains.

Botho puts his Mme se ke ile red checked bag down. He lights a cigarette and through the mist, looks at the bustling around him. The traffic flowing in and out of the border is clamped with huge company trucks, taxis, small vehicles and yellow Maseru cabs. Hawkers are selling mekorotlo and cooked mealies. A little distance away, a forest of trees rises over the river. They glisten menacingly in deep green. Long lines divided between groups of families and workers keep crossing the border. Botho feels envious of their freedom of movement. He drops the cigarette stub, crushing it under his foot and looks up at the sky. He is waiting for the day to grow dark.

“How do these waters of Mohokare look today mme?” Botho asks at an old woman passing near him.

“Hei, they look cruelly deep ntate, cruelly deep!” the old woman responds.

She balances the bag over her head with her hand and turns her neck to face Botho.

“What do you say na mme?” Botho forces a smile.

The woman balances her hand over her bag again, turning her neck and hollers, “Cruelly deep!”

Botho turns back with his hands on his waist and looks down at his bag to squash the doubt in his stomach. He looks up. Dusk is falling. Hawkers are packing up. Cab drivers drive their small vehicles in a clearing to park them in a hive of yellow. The milling about slows as people race against the dark to get home. Botho grabs the bag and sneaks towards the river. The trees envelop him in darkness. He breaks through the foliage and sees the brown water. The sun has not quite stolen its light from the water yet. Botho takes off his shoes and ties their laces up around his neck. He pulls up his pants to his knees. Seeing his yellow chicken legs and yellow feet with the hairs bristling over his toes, he clutches his waist and surveys

the river. The freckles dotting his nose glisten. The water whistles at him in passing. He twists his mouth. What he is about to do is risky yet it has to be done. He lets out a weak sigh. The water really is deep. His hand shades his eyes as he peeps up at the extinguishing sun. It is silent except for the crickets. It's time.

He grabs the bag and lifts it up to his shoulder. He tiptoes over the pebbles. The water has lost its shine and now greets his right foot with a wet quiet darkness. The foot draws back at the coldness. Botho's face winces as his two feet enter the water. His hands are raised on either side to balance the bag. He wades through the unrelenting heaviness. Before he can reach the middle, the water has dressed his thighs. Eyes on the other side. Now the water clutches his waist. Eyes on the other side. Steady, steady. Botho reaches the deepest point. The water tightens his chest. Steady. Eyes on the other side.

Eyes on the other side. Steady. Surprise! A group of bats surround him. He stands still. The bats create a dark tent over him. Sweat runs into Botho's eyes and over his lips. His lungs contract. He blows to stop the salty sweat from entering his mouth. The water makes his body feel warm. The bats sing a vibrating clucking song over him. Around him. He tries not to think about his grip on the bag sitting on his shoulder. Eyes must not look up. Must not look up. Botho closes his eyes. He remembers his wife saying, "Your struggle is our struggle." He tries to picture both his son and daughter's faces. The bats' song interrupts his thoughts. Eyes must not open. He remembers dancing with his children. But he remembers he stopped dancing with them. He wishes they could've spoken more. Things will get better once he gets to the mine. They have agreed to increase his salary. He hears silence.

His eyes open. The bats have left him alone. The water sways him. He tries to move forward in darkness. Slowly. Slowly. Other side, other side. Slowly. Suddenly his lungs expand. The water has undressed him and is holding onto his waist. Faster. He starts to wade through impatiently. Almost there. Must not look back. The water now clutches his knees. He pushes faster, almost running. His body is cold. His feet come out of the water and step over pebbles. His teeth are chattering. He throws the bag down and drops to his knees. Must keep moving. His freezing fingers clumsily unfasten the shoelaces around his neck. They drop down in front of him.

He sits down and wears his shoes. He stands holding onto his waist. He has crossed into South Africa. Botho breathes. He can still smell a tinge of the bats' scent around him. He grabs his bag and walks in search of a taxi to Rustenburg.

The next day, Botho stands near the mine in a queue with other miners in white overalls. He looks down at his white boots and shuffles forward with a heavy disappointment. He has just heard the news that there will not be a salary increase. The sun feels overbearing. He looks to the side a little distance away. A thin red dust cloud rises and flies away. Botho steps out of the line.

“hayibo uyaphi ndoda?” the man who was standing after him asks.

Botho walks. Everyone in the line turns their head to the side to watch him. Botho picks his feet up. Two white men stop walking when seeing him pass near them. Botho feels blood rush at his ears and walks faster. He notices the gate opening for a van and races it until he’s out of the gate. He keeps running. His heart rings inside his ears. He sees the clear path before him and runs towards it. Botho runs until the mine is out of view. Some dogs bark at him when he reaches the informal settlement. He kicks the door of his shack open and meets the shocked faces of his girlfriend and his son. He does not look at them.

“Why scare us like this?” She exclaims. Botho does not answer.

He takes off his koto from the roof and hauls off his seanamarena from the bed.

“Botho, what is going on?” Botho does not answer.

“Botho, where are you running to?” Botho does not hear.

He runs. He arrives at a train station and takes a train to Pretoria. When he gets off, he runs. He runs until he reaches the union buildings. The sun is beginning to set. Botho is now holding a small cardboard. The cardboard has the words: *NTSHWARE JWALO KA MOTHO*, written on it in green ink. He sits there in front of the union buildings holding the cardboard. His red seanamarena is fastened over his right shoulder and drapes around him all the way down to his calves. Another hand is holding his koto. Botho does not feel himself drifting off into sleep. A drizzle splashing over his face wakes him up the following day. He opens his eyes and sees an overcast sky. He can hear the sound of cars speeding up and down. He rubs his eyes and rises from the damp grass beneath him. He feels disoriented and looks around. The large brown building seems to sneer at him.

The green immaculate gardens make him feel dirty. He turns his head back around and sees two black shiny cars on the road driving towards the union buildings. The cars have dark windows. One window opens from a car at the back and reveals a man in a suit with a frown

on his face. Botho wonders about the man and looks down. He catches a glimpse of his cardboard near his feet. He remembers suddenly asking a hawker selling ice lollies in the train to give the box to him after they were sold out. Then he asked a young boy from school to lend him a koki pen. He tore a piece of cardboard from the box and wrote in big letters.

Botho bends down and picks the cardboard up. He places his koto underneath his arm and holds the sign with both hands at the frowning man. The frowning man shakes his head until the car disappears. More black shiny cars keep passing Botho. They enter the union buildings, while others rush up and down on the road farther to his right. Botho keeps turning to show his sign to the passing motors. The day clears. When Botho turns to his left he sees two security guards approach him.

“I am not going anywhere!” Botho says as the two men reach him.

“You have to leave these premises or you will be arrested.”

Botho looks at the two men and turns around. He walks towards the traffic on his right. He walks until he steps off the green grass and stands near the road. He holds his sign and sees a young girl in the back of a car. She is holding a cellphone out of the window towards him. Botho looks at the girl with a blonde ponytail without concern. He turns around and walks up the immaculate green grass. He takes a piss. The girl holds the cellphone at Botho until the car moves along. Botho walks back down to the traffic holding his sign. A dizziness seeps through him. He licks his dry lips. They sting the underside of his tongue a bit. He feels hungry.

It is a clear day with an intense sun.

“What am I doing here?” Botho asks himself, conscious for the first time of the curious looks from every car passing up and down near him.

He sits down, shielding himself with the cardboard. He does not feel himself falling backwards into the green grass. His snores vibrate the cardboard covering his face. When the day becomes dim, Botho opens his eyes and rises clumsily. The cardboard falls off his face and clings to the blanket at his midriff. He takes it and stands, his other hand holding onto his koto under the seanamarena. He moves up near the traffic. People are still peering at him from their cars. Botho starts to feel embarrassed and turns back, walking up the green grass. He looks at the reprimanding union buildings and feels his heart flutter. The cars continue

going up and down until dark. The following day Botho sees a woman beckoning him to her car. He approaches the woman's car with annoyance.

"The lord says love thy neighbour," the woman says handing out a wrap of two sandwiches to Botho.

Botho wonders what the woman is going on about and grabs the sandwich out of her hand. He turns around sinking his teeth into the white bread.

"Hello there, hellooo!"

Botho turns around to see a woman stepping out of a car. It is parked on the side of the road going towards the union buildings. The woman walks up to him, struggling to balance her high-heeled shoes on the grass. Her small frame is dressed in a black pantsuit. She straightens the hems of her waistcoat, wearing an eager look on her face. Botho swallows and watches her curiously.

"Uhm, I'm just curious sir," the woman says, reaching him and tugs her hair behind the ear.

Botho looks at her then away. Across from them, a car has stopped and the driver holds out a bottle of water. Botho's thirst returns, more intense than before. His throat feels parched. His lips burn. He turns away from the woman and runs to the car. When he briefly turns his head, he sees the woman hurrying back towards him. He grabs the bottle and passes her as if she is not there. He drinks down the water, grateful as it wets his throat.

"Sir I was just wondering..."

Gulp.

The woman follows Botho like a fly, her yellow hair falling into her face. Botho stops walking. He exhales loudly, taking the bottle away from his lips. He slurps his tongue and flashes the unrelenting woman an angry look. She looks away from Botho's hard eyes and stares down not sure whether she should continue with her questions. She gestures a little with a manicured long fingernail at Botho's cardboard.

"The words on your placard, how do you say them in English?"

Botho looks at the woman as if to say he cannot believe she does not get it.

"Treat me like a person!"

The bulging eye with a downward drool looks at her. The other eye is shut tight with no eyeball beneath.

“Dumela mme, how can I help you?” The woman says, sitting behind a high desk. It reveals only her face, her drooling eye slowly looking up at Nthatsi.

Nthatsi had frozen at the door when she first saw her. This dimly lit place is nerve-racking enough without having someone like this greet you. Nthatsi thinks. She steps inside. She catches her breath and takes her hand away from her chest. She clutches her purse with both hands. Her lips part but words cannot come out. What if she just turns around now? What if there is really nothing to find? Lightning flashes in front of her eyes as outside the overcast clouds boom. Maybe it is not a good idea to turn around after all. She must not be a coward. She has to know.

She fixes her throat.

“Eya dumela mme,” she greets the woman back, walking towards her desk.

As the woman stands, leaning closer to hand her a form to sign, the clouds roar with a flashing light. Nthatsi flinches with her eyes closed. She opens them again, feeling embarrassed. The woman waits for her to speak. Nthatsi holds her breath and looks up at her.

“I’m here to inspect a body.” The woman nods and gestures for her to sign.

The pen feels slippery in her sweaty hand.

“You can sit there. Someone will assist you shortly.”

Nthatsi sits on the edge of a chair, holding her purse on her lap. Her feet keep tapping against the floor. She moistens her lips.

“Eh, mme, where can I find the toilet?” she asks the woman behind the desk.

“On your left through the corridor.” Nthatsi stands up before she finishes speaking.

She throws herself on the toilet seat and diarrhoea explodes. A few minutes later she comes out and finds a serious man waiting for her. Rain has started pouring outside.

“Please follow me, mme,” the man says and leads Nthatsi in long strides up a dim corridor.

She follows, feeling a sudden heaviness in her knees. The softness from the maroon mat sucks her feet down. The man turns and waits for her at the door. Nthatisi's throat is dry. Her blue blouse is damp against her back. Before she reaches him, she stops walking.

"Excuse me ntate, I need the toilet." Nthatisi turns around, running. After a few minutes she returns. She can hear the rain thrashing against the roof.

"I'm ready," Nthatisi says, wiping her hands down her skirt.

She surveys the bright room, shaking a bit. Silver metal drawers gleam against the walls. The heels under her shoes make a clucking sound against the white tiled floor. There are white tags with numbers pasted on the drawers. The clouds rumble once more. The man hastily moves forward and grabs a handle on the middle drawer.

"Wait," Nthatisi says as he is about to pull the handle.

"I need the toilet again." Again she turns and runs.

After a much longer time, Nthatisi clicks clacks across the room then stops. Her breasts climb up and down. The man has pulled out the drawer to reveal a body wrapped in a white sheet.

"The mortuary will be closing in a few minutes mme," he says and Nthatisi senses impatience.

He is used to this. It is all just daily routine for him, like a machine. Nthatisi thinks. She moves closer to the body and gestures for him to reveal the face. Nthatisi sees her husband.

"Botho is dead!"

She turns away and runs blindly into a corner. She slips down against it and clutches her knees. Her shoulders jump up and down as she moans. She can hear the machine man pushing the drawer back and walking out. At first, the rumours did not bother her. She tried hard to ignore them. When she was at a taxi terminus in Quthing selling diphaphatha with other women or when she was fetching water from the communal tap or even when she read a small snippet from the *Lesotho Times*. She had called her husband and forced herself not to over think things when his phone went to voicemail again. She began inhaling shallow breaths. She could not sleep at night.

Mine workers dying, was not a new thing in her country. When her husband first took the job she read the statistics. She pushed them out of her mind. With her husband's death, the results seemed out of the ordinary. There were whispers of a protest, police and other silly stories people made up. Yet the rumours about a mine worker from Lesotho found dead in South Africa near the union buildings were starting to get to her. She travelled to Maseru to come see with her own eyes. She had not told any family members. She did not want to come with anyone. She had wanted to be alone.

"Eh, we are closing now, mme." Nthatisi raises her wet face to find the machine man looking down on her.

"Leave me alone!" she screams at him and he flinches, looks like he is about to say more but then turns and walks out.

Nthatisi drops her head back over her knees. Now that she has seen him what will she tell her two children? How will her daughter continue with college? How will her son understand the makings of a man? How will she go on without her beloved? First she was a wife now she is a widow. Nthatisi unfolds herself, trying to rise. She stares at the fridge drawer that was opened just a few moments ago but is now shut. How she yearns for Botho to emerge and go home with her. She walks slowly down the dim corridor, hearing the thunder. The woman with one drooling eye appears suddenly. Nthatisi turns around, screaming and runs up the corridor.

What do you do with this feeling? All I know is that the TV no longer plays because somehow the generator got tired. Mamasepatsana's dogs from next door no longer come to mess up our yard. The Lesotho rains have not poured to give us a break from the heat. Kamo barked at our mother once, "Stop calling me like I'm some little boy! I'm Kamohelo!"

That shocked her. She stood near the stove wringing a dry dishwashing cloth in her hands.

"Do you still remember when I used to read you and your sister, *Benny and Betty*?" my mother said, her voice small and shaking.

Tears were forming in her eyes.

"No mme! That was a long time ago!" Kamo replied, turning back from her and walked out of the house.

I had to forget about doing my second year at college and other things. Ever since we buried my father, my mother keeps watering his small garden. Ever since we buried my father, Kamo chews his nails, thinking about getting a job in Gauteng. Ever since we buried my father, I sit in the sun, chewing on soil. I watch my mother water meaningless shrubs. Except for that day when I sneaked into Mamasepatsana's yard and stole her peaches. Before I jumped the fence protecting her yard, I had made sure to leave my flip-flops behind. I wanted my legs to stretch in case she caught me but mostly from her dogs. I raised my skirt up and held it like a bowl with one hand. I stood on tiptoe and raised my arm to a branch with many yellow peaches. I shook the branch fiercely. The peaches dropped into my skirt. Some fell on the ground and one hit my head. I looked into my skirt and counted five peaches. As I raised my hand up to the tree again, Mamasepatsana caught me. She screamed from her door, "Witch! Get out of my yard!"

I jumped and those scrawny dirty dogs began barking at me. I ran holding the skirt. I laughed. The peaches kept falling. I held one and let go of the skirt to save myself. When I got inside the gate at home, I felt like going back again to Mamasepatsana and hurl the peach in my hand at her. She has too much hate. They say she's the reason my father died at the mine because she's a witch. I don't know what to believe. Sometimes, I feel angry at my father for dying. I want to scream. Sometimes, I do feel like I'm screaming. But only in my head. Sometimes, I despise my mother. I want to run. Maybe running is sitting here on this patched

grass with my eyes closed. I can hear the water pouring down from the watering can. The sun burns my face. I catch a whiff of the apple scent from the Sta-Soft on the clothes flapping up from the washing line.

“Itaoleng, you look so much like ntate!” I hear Kamo’s voice saying.

I open my eyes and bring my face back to take a bite on a piece of hard black soil. Kamo sits next to me. He pulls out a piece of long dry grass, puts the end of it inside his mouth and looks into the distance.

“What is your feeling about our father?” he asks quietly.

I feel stunned and think. “I feel that I judged him too harshly,” I answer.

“What is your feeling?” I look at him.

Kamo spits out the grass and holds its ends with both hands.

“He was hard to understand sometimes. But... he never left us... you know,” Kamo says, looking back at me.

“He never left us,” I repeat.

Epilogue

There are night vigils. Prayers and hymns. Some become defensive.

“Even though some like to point to people as witches, there is no such thing as witchcraft here,” a woman called Mantuli says, chanting through a prayer she has suddenly started while the other women sing.

The women now hum. They are standing in a circle near the door of the room where my body lies. In this room, my wife sits weeping quietly on the mattress. The mattress is near my casket with one lit candle at my head and one lit candle at my feet. Outside at the fireplace big pots of meat and samp boil. The men slaughter a sheep under the moonlight.

“Yes, that’s because you and Mamasepatsana are friends right? You collaborated on a spell together to kill our brother because he had a job at the mine!” a sister of mine says between her teeth.

Suddenly screams erupt. A yellow snake writhes on the floor. It is masumu. It writhes determinedly towards the room in which my casket is placed. Before it can fully enter my son quickly closes the door. He crushes it, slamming its head again and again until it is dead. The women have backed away from their circle, chests heaving. They glance shocked eyes at each other.

“These are the evils of witches we speak about!” another sister of mine shouts, looking at Mantuli.

My son takes the snake outside. Mantuli follows him, leaving.

But the following day she comes to help with the brewing. She goes to the fireplace. She stirs at a drum of mqombothi, mumbling her lips. Thick smoke rises around her and the firewood crackle from the flames.

“You are speaking your evils into the beer! It’s because Mamasepatsana has sent you to cast another spell isn’t it?” the women catch Mantuli.

“Will I ever know what you women are talking about? Ha ke moloi nna!” Mantuli tries to stand her ground.

She continues stirring, her lips now mumbling a tune. But the women persist. They circle her. They tightly fasten the throws around their waists to prepare for war.

“Heibo mosadi towel! You think we did not notice you gossiping with that witch Mamasepatsana while standing near the fence!” They are already pushing at her.

They push her until she leaves my yard. The following day it is my funeral. The men put up a big yellow-and-white striped tent outside in my yard. White plastic chairs are placed in rows. People sit on the chairs. Two tables are put in front to create a long table covered with a white long lace. A vase of water and glasses along with two bouquets of plastic flowers are placed on top. Two priests and one man wearing a brown suit sit at the table. In front of the table, a little distance from the people, is my dark brown casket. On the ground near my casket there is an old thin mattress. My wife sits on the mattress with a throw towel covering her knees.

Her shoes are placed near the mattress. Two women are sitting with her. One keeps raising a glass of water to her lips. Another fans her face with a handkerchief. The congregation begins singing a hymn. People rise on their feet. They clap their hands and sing along. My wife covers her eyes with her handkerchief and bends her face. An uncontrollable moan rises from her. The two women rub and pat her back.

“Hold it just there,” the priest in magenta robe says, standing up with a raised fist.

His other hand holds a bible with a black cover against his chest. The singing stops. People lower themselves and sit down. There is silence. The priest clears his throat.

“Shoo, this place was hard to find!” my mistress from Rustenburg says, entering the tent.

She is holding a little boy by the hand. Our son. The priest closes his mouth and frowns. The necks of people on the chairs turn to the back. My mistress walks with her neck straight, looking for an empty chair. Murmurs and gasps begin. Some secretly poke others, their eyes wide, while others put their palms over their mouths and shrink their shoulders. My mistress notices an empty chair in the front. She sits down and sees my wife refusing to make eye contact with her.

“Eh, my people, lets pray,” the priest says, finally.

The other priest in a white robe stands up.

“Let’s bow our heads and close our eyes,” he says, raising his arms in the air.

My mistress draws the child next to her. She lowers her chest, hugging her arms around him and cries. She wails loudly, making it hard for people to hear the prayer.

My wife sniffs and takes one of her high-heeled shoes near the mattress. She throws the shoe across the space. It sails through the air and hits my mistress on the head.

“Ouch” my mistress cries out.

She fixes her blond wig which almost came off. She pats it to quell the pain throbbing and glares at my wife. My wife screws her mouth, looking down. My mistress turns her head quickly. Everyone still has their eyes closed. She breathes out slowly. They probably think she was consumed by the spirit of the prayer. The prayer stops and a song begins. People rise and clap to each note. Some tinkle their bells and others hit their bibles like drums.

“Close it right there!” the priest in a white robe says, patting sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.

People sit down again and listen.

“Our brother’s life was robbed by jealousy! Yes, I said it. Jealousy!” he preaches.

“Amen!” a chorus of women responds.

“There are people who do not like to see others succeed. Even here! Right?” the priest says, pointing his finger from left to right at the congregation. Some fan their faces with their handkerchiefs, others lower their eyes.

Soon the people scurry away after burying my casket in a grave and finishing all the food cooked for my funeral. They whisper to each other that I was killed by jealousy. Witchcraft, others believe. These speculations continue and continue. But they are mistaken. I know who took my life. It is now dark. Eyes open. Body rises. A long silver knife tight in my hand. An owl hoots. I levitate around thick mist. I leave the mist. There are houses below. Dogs howl. People scream at a television. A baby cries from his sleep. The night is moonless. Rain splatters then pours. I leave Lesotho and arrive in South Africa.

It is dark. I reach the union buildings. There is a gust of chilly wind. I run with speed through the gardens. One tree uproots and falls down, making a cackling sound. Branches rustle. Red flowers, white flowers, purple and pink flowers break and die. Green hedges become untidy. Leaves fall, littering the neat grass. A nose falls off the statue of a man sitting on a horse. It

splits in pieces against the ground. The building looks like it is breathing, almost alive. The tall trees, peeping from behind, swing back and forth, making a humming sound. I hover in front of the building. It blinks, the windows break and glasses shatter down on the ground. I climb up to the top of the building. I sit on my haunches on top of the roof. My tongue licks at the knife in my hand. This is where it all happened. I can see my placard. The wind sweeps it around, as if kicking it. I am waiting to stab at the police who shot bullets into my body. They will soon arrive. The liars wearing red T-shirts will get here too. I will shove their T-shirts down their throats before I slaughter them. They will bring the fake justice commission that my wife now tiredly attends. There will be people taking photos of the white paint that marks my death. I will throw their cameras at them. Stab each of their arses as they run. The shareholders from the mine together with the president will follow. I will gouge out their greedy eyes. Stab their chests. I want to witness their hearts as they beat. Stab and stab. But for now, I wait.