

This work consists of

Part A: Creative Thesis *The Melville Singer* and Part B: The Portfolio

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By

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Introduction

This work consists of two parts, PART A, a Creative Thesis titled *The Melville Singer*, comprising short stories, and Part B, a Portfolio that contains extracts from my reflective journals that I wrote through the course of 2022, my poetics essay, four book reviews, a community engagement report and my reflection regarding the reader report. The Reflective Journal is in the form of a series of seminars from Seminar 1 to Seminar 16 as well as my reflections on the reading sessions held in 2022, facilitated by various teachers on the programme, in which fellow student Patrick Ngcobo and I participated. The seminars are presented in chronological sequence, without referring to the specific dates upon which they took place.

ABSTRACT

My thesis comprises a collection of short stories. I explore how the intersection of race and class, concepts that often have negative connotations in society, can be used in fiction to sustain a narrative, at times with the use of humour. Using the motif of race and/or class, I seek to demonstrate how these concepts can be harnessed to exploit the attitudes, prejudices and complexities of characters that come from different cultural backgrounds to sustain the narrative voice. My thesis is influenced by the ways in which Chris Abani depicts place in his short stories, with his short stories placing a reader to place, feeling its energy and smell and visualising it, and Ayi Kwei Armah's ability to breathe life into the mundane by writing about objects as if they are living things. Structurally, I follow Joseph Campbell's study of narrative conventions in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, discarding the conventions when appropriate. This technique assists me in drawing the reader into the story, almost as a participant in its making by leaving them in suspense and asking questions about the motives and action of the protagonists. Niq Mhlongo's short story anthology *For You I'd Steal a Goat* (Kwela Books, 2022), and Sipiwo Mahala's *African Delights* (Jacana, 2011) have inspired me to adopt both the very short and short story form.

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PART A: The Melville Singer

Take Me to Vilakazi Street

Though his mother had advised that they were going to be fine if they woke up at 7am at the latest, Thabo thought it better to wake up earlier. Just in case. After all he needed to prepare well. He needed to look his best. The last time he was there, which was one of his several visits over the years was in 2019, when he went to do the Ikwitz's garden, the matriarch, Janet, and her husband, Joshua, Josh in short, had commended his dress sense. He had put on a pair of black trousers, a white shirt, and pair of black shoes, well-polished, as if he was someone going to a formal interview. He did not

want to take a chance. After all, this family was her mother's employers where she worked as a domestic helper: ironing their clothes, cleaning the house, washing dishes and any other household chores they thought fit to assign to her. They also paid her decently. Earning R3500 was way more than the minimum wage that government set at R2500 for those doing domestic work. He also had a sense that the young woman who was introduced to him as Maya, who looked his age, their daughter, seemed to look at him with a particular interest that he could not exactly pin down. She in fact stole those looks through the window of what seemed to be her bedroom, several times while he was doing the garden. Even longingly, he told himself. But he simply dismissed the gaze as no more than curiosity from a sheltered suburban girl who was, of course, wondering whether he was going to be able to use the lawn mower properly. Not exactly like their trusted gardener Moses from Malawi who had taken extended leave and had gone to Malawi to attend to a family issue. It was obvious that Moses, just like his mother, who had worked for this family for 10 years, was a trusted helper. His mother had told him all this.

Something on that occasion happened, leaving him puzzled, even confused. While working he was somehow disturbed by a lingering awareness of the awkward looks Maya kept on giving him, though she did not express any emotion on her face. To him her expression appeared neutral. Confused about what all that meant, he decided to get going with what he was there for in the first place. Indeed, he soon put the thought about Maya behind him and focused on the job at hand instead.

But that was before the several calls between them since the university issue took a wrong turn for him.

"This must be it. I do not have to wear the same clothes I wore the last time," Thabo murmured to no one but himself in the family's back room, his bedroom. His younger sister Nosipho used the other spare bedroom in the main match box house as her bedroom, while mother used the main bedroom as hers. She used to share it with father. But no more, as the tragedy robbed them of a loving father, husband, bread winner and community leader. The dining room, part of which was a family kitchen, is where meals were served. That is where they also watched TV and used it as an entertainment area for visitors, mainly mom's stokvel friends and occasionally a distant relative from the Eastern Cape. That is where her mother hailed from. Whenever they were in the city to shop or do one other errand, they tended to rock up without first having informed his mother. Thabo thought that was strange behaviour by the rural folk. However, as the years went by, he got used to those random visits. They were what they were, he had concluded.

Dressed this time in a white sweater as it was coldish that Sunday, blue jeans and takkies, he was looking forward to meeting the Ikowitzs. He bought the takkies from Pep Store for R300 from the

R400 he had earned when he did the garden for the Ikwitzs the last time. He thought wearing his black and white Orlando Pirates cap would not do him any harm. There was no possibility that this family followed football.

“Possibly cricket or even rugby. Just like many white South Africans, when it comes to local sport. Therefore, there was no chance in hell that I am going to offend the family and risk my chances by wearing the wrong club colours. They could not possibly be fans of Kaizer Chiefs. Very unlikely” Thabo told himself while looking at the mirror. He was satisfied with the look.

The truth is he was optimistic that whatever they had called him for was something positive. He however wished that somebody had told him what it was all about, instead of him having to guess. It bothered him, but he thought it best to have a positive attitude. “Whatever it is that they have called me for let it be, I will cross the river when I get there,” he sighed.

But inasmuch as he wanted to banish the worry, a voice at the back of his mind kept on telling him that there was something unusual about this latest request from the Ikwitzs for this meeting. To start with, it seemed to have come from out of the blue. This thought seized his mind for a short moment. Unlike the last time when his mother was straight forward with the reason the Ikwitzs had asked her to ask him to assist with the garden in the absence of Moses, this time his mom kept mum about the reason. Whatever it was, however, he did not think that he was in trouble with them. That is what he told himself, to summon motivation. In fact, he had a reason to think that way. Thabo knew that he had not taken anything from the family without permission the last time he was there. Before leaving him working at the Ikwitzs’ household that afternoon, his mom had called him aside and whispered that he should not touch anything of theirs without permission.

“No matter how small it is, such as half-eaten pizzas that the family always shoves into the fridge over the weekend.” She emphasised that point. “My bosses are very sensitive to things like that, especially Janet. So please *Mtana wam*, don’t dare touch even something as small as a sweet,” she had whispered in his ear before she left, directing him where to catch the taxis to Bree Street on Jan Smuts Avenue. That is, after his job was done. From Bree Street, Thabo knew his way to Mofolo. He only needed to talk to the taxi marshals and they would direct him to the right taxi in the rank.

Though Thabo understood his mom’s advice and concern, he was slightly offended that she even thought that there was a possibility that he would steal their food. But he remembered he had overheard her mother and her stokvel friends gossiping about how so and so in the township had lost their job by stealing such small things as a teaspoon from their white employers where they were working as domestic helpers, some of them losing their job by taking something as small as a fork

without their bosses' permission. In as much as he understood his mom's concern and advice, he thought her worries were misplaced.

Anyway, she must have forgotten how strict they have been to me and my sister, even from a very young age, especially my dad, he said to himself. "You steal anything from anybody, even a sweet from your friend, and I get to hear about it, you are dead meat." "Oh! Those were the days. I miss my daddy though." He spoke to himself.

As far as he was concerned, the last time he was at the Ikowitzs' house, he had done a good job of the gardening, as his mother herself had told him so on several occasions, sometimes annoying him as she sounded like a broken record. "Janet, who is especially difficult to please, was the one who complimented you the most for a job well done. Josh was also impressed and he said as much. Maya seemed to have taken a liking to you as she kept on asking her parents, weeks after you had done the job, when they were going to ask you to assist again. Tjatjara! Tjatjara!" his mother had told him.

That was in 2019.

This time Thabo noted she had simply told him that her bosses had asked him to come over and see them on Sunday. She did not say for what. And quite honestly, she did not seem to want to tell him what it was that they wanted to see him for. It was unlike his mother, he had observed. But he thought it better not to push her. However, he felt that whatever it was that they called him for, he was not in trouble.

He was ready and was even happy when he knocked on his mother's door and she responded, "I'm done *Mtana wam*. Give me just a second."

When she emerged from her room, he observed that she was dressed in her favourite dress, the one with green, white and blue stripes that she bought from the busy Hoek Street Flea Market in Johannesburg CBD in 2018. She had bought it for a song, though it was clearly an import. She confessed that she had bought it for only R20. Rumour had it that these imported, clearly quality big brand clothes were collected from wealthy fashionistas overseas, who gave away their valued possessions as they changed their wardrobes at the end of every year in the name of donating to charity in Africa. However, the donated clothes ended up in these mushrooming markets, scattered around South Africa's urban centres, of course, being sold for huge profits by traders.

"Most of the traders are foreigners from Africa". His mother had told Thabo and Nandi how she always managed to buy these stylish clothes for a song.

“You look great mom, especially with that blue doek and your favourite white takkies. Do not be offended if some crazy dude mistook you for a sweet 16. You really look very young, and it could be easy for men in the streets to mistake you for my sister. But they better not try to” “No Thabo. *Suka*. Don’t ever try to imitate your father’s flattery,” she said, chuckling.

Though it was true that his mother was indeed well dressed, as if she was going to an occasion of sorts and not to her employers’ workplace on her off day, there was another reason why he flattered her with those words. He hoped that she was going to hint at why it was that the Ikwitzs had asked for him to come over. He was also further baffled by the fact that they had obviously asked that she also be there. They could have just asked her to tell him that they wanted to see him. After all, he knew his way there. They had done this before, and they could still do it now, he thought. And at that very instant he experienced a very different thought and a profoundly sad emotion. He recalled the tragedy that befell his father.

*

Thabo’s father, Thom Khumalo, who was known by his friends in The Movement as Comrade Thom, was a popular local Councilor in the Johannesburg City Council. On October 13, 2016, he came home not feeling well after attending an end of year party for The Movement’s Council caucus in Sandton. He complained of stomach ache. However, nobody in the family took it seriously as he and Francinah retired to their bedroom. After watching *Generations* in the dining room, Thabo also left for his backroom, as did Nandipha soon thereafter.

At 3am, Thabo was startled by a hard knock on his door.

The ambulance did not take long to arrive. Three days later Thabo, then 15, and Nandipha 14, no longer had a father. As for Francinah, at 42 years old she became a widow. After the loss of their bread winner, who had won a council seat in the 2016 Local Government elections, the family faced a bleak financial future. The reality though, was that being a local government councillor would not make one a millionaire in South Africa. However, in the case of Thom Khumalo, the salary was much better than what he earned as a security guard at Pick ’n Pay, Campus Square, for the past 10 years. As a councillor he earned R25 920.25 per month after deductions, compared with the R5.495.50 that he took home as a security guard. This was a fortune for the family. Besides, winning the seat was not pap and vleis. Firstly, he had to outwit his rival in the Movement, Teddy Nyoni, in a bruising battle for the hearts of voters in the Mofolo Constituency, to get nominated to represent The

Movement in Council. After this he faced the DA candidate Lazarus Khoza and the Economic

Freedom Fighters' France Chauke. Both candidates put up a fierce fight for this single seat. But Thom Khumalo's involvement in community activities, especially being a chairman of the Community Policing Forum for a second term, worked to his advantage in the elections. He garnered enough votes to earn the hotly contested seat. Now this! His death was also painful to the community of Mofolo as rumours started flying left, right and centre, among his Comrades. Rumours spread that Comrade Thom had died from food poisoning.

Six months after securing his job as councilor, he had bought his family their house in Mofolo through a bond he took with FNB. This was a huge achievement, considering the fact that Comrade Thom and his family had lived in so many backrooms in Soweto that he had lost count. Tin shacks that leaked whenever it rained, tents that were an excuse for a home, sharing a two-bedroom backroom with another family of three.

Before getting the house in Mofolo, the family had lived in a one-bedroomed shack that had at least a big enough dining area which Thabo and Nandipha could share as their bedroom. The problem with this set up was that although the stand owned by a notorious landlord in Soweto, only known as Bra Biggie, at 8000 square metres was a mini farm, the living conditions were not ideal for a family. Bra Biggie, known throughout Soweto for his ruthlessness in dealing with his tenants, had built 50 shacks. His double-storied house stood at the front, and the shacks built next to each other, consisting of single rooms and dining areas, stood behind his mansion. Ten toilets and two showers were positioned inside two large tent structures. This meant that one hundred people had to share ten unisex toilets and two showers. This clearly made life very uncomfortable for the tenants.

Even more of an inconvenience at the corner of his stand Bra Biggie had built a nightclub that played music the whole night, ranging from jazz to amapiano, depending on the mood and the taste of the DJ on a particular night. The place became very busy and business was obviously good for Bra Biggie, but every night the tenants experienced a cacophony that passed for music.

However, there was no chance for tenants to lodge a successful complaint to Bra Biggie. He would target a complaining tenant at a time when such tenants least expected. For example, a man simply known as Masondo and his family of five found themselves thrown out of the homestead in 2013 at 12 midnight. Masondo had dared complain about the noise from the club, and how his son who was in Matric and his daughter in Grade 11 were struggling to study due to the noise coming out of the Biggie Night club. That was enough to drive the landlord berserk.

“Take back your lousy rent money and get the fuck off my property right now. You cannot come here and speak crap about me and my property when I have done you and your fucking family a favour by accommodating you, when your government of The Movement is failing you. How ungrateful could you be? Just pack up and fuck off.” His security guard thugs threw Masondo’s family possessions outside the shack. He changed the locks to the shack as the family shivered outside during a cold winter night.

It was said his modus operandi, clearly aimed at planting fear in the minds of those who would dare complain about their living conditions, was to cause drama in the middle of the night by evicting tenants he was not happy with during those odd hours. He knew that they could not go anywhere in the night and would spend it outside their room. This, it was claimed, he did to teach them, and anybody thinking of doing the same in future, a lesson they would not forget.

“Could we at least be allowed to be here till the morning?” Masondo pleaded as he and his family huddled outside their home. “You can sleep outside here for just tonight. You must be thankful to your children. By 9am I want to see you off my property. End of the story.” He looked at his thug security guards and nodded. And then he added, “If it had not been for them, I was going to see you off my property right now.” At that moment he looked at the shivering children and feigned sympathy.

Thabo, along with other tenants had woken up to find their neighbours facing eviction in the middle of the night. They felt helpless and thought it better not to say a word or intervene between the tenant and the landlord. They knew very well the consequences of doing so as they had witnessed several such severe actions from Bra Biggie against tenants who dared challenge him.

And so, when Comrade Thom bought the Mofolo house, there was much relief and celebration by his family. Eventually they were living in peace and dignity, away from the likes of Bra Biggie and his shacks and the Biggie Night Club.

*

The taxi left early enough for mother and son to reach Bree Street Taxi Rank at exactly 9.30am. There was no conversation between mother and son in the taxi, who sat next to each other, while a talkative fat woman sat on the window side of the seat. Thabo sat between his mother and the fat woman who spoke shit all the way from Soweto to Johannesburg. Francinah and Thabo listened to her without uttering a single word in reply. However, they did not give a hint to the rest of the passengers or to each other, that they were listening to her bilge for the 30 minutes distance

between Mofolo Township in Soweto and Bree Street Taxi Rank in Johannesburg CBD. The 'shit conversation' took place between the driver who was short and fat to the extent that he appeared to be buried between the steering wheel and his seat.

"These fat midgets like talking *kak* in this taxi," Thabo almost shouted, in frustration and anger. But the words were only heard by him in his head. He was glad that he did not erupt.

"*Mojolo* is for everyone. Married women and unmarried women are just as bad when it comes to cheating. You cannot tell me that you do not want fresh honey. You too must feel tired of eating pap sun rise and sun set, Monday to Monday," the fat short man behind the wheel of the Quantum taxi carrying sixteen passengers said loudly. Some passengers sitting close to him laughed, as did three or four passengers seated behind Thabo and his mother. The rest of the passengers seemed either to be focusing on their cell phones, faking interest in a conversation that was going to make everyone in the taxi feel awkward and uncomfortable, or staring out of the window, seemingly unaffected by the exchange of words between the driver and the fat lady sitting next to Thabo and his mother. Then suddenly a petite woman, seated behind the driver who all along had been fiddling with her phone, seemingly oblivious to the conversation, decided to join in.

"I used to also believe that it is only black men who cheat on their wives until I saw the chaos happening along Oxford Road, just before one, reaches Rosebank driving from Johannesburg," she said loudly, as if to get the attention of everyone.

"Yes, tell them sister", said the driver, "Tell them so that they know that cheating is not only a black thing. White men do it too."

"If you want to see *umhlolo*, drive there around 7pm. You will be amazed by what you will witness, just in front of your eyes. The road is lined up with women wearing mini-skirts that are so short that one can actually see their package. The women line up the road seeming to be waiting for something. That something is the white man driving a luxury car slowly along Oxford Road. As soon as the women notice that the driver is a white man, especially an old white man, they suddenly smell money. The free street drama starts right there. They spring into action. They drop their pants down and at the same time showing their bra-less boobs for the benefit of the driver, especially those that believe they are well endowed. The funny thing is they never do that when it is a black driver, even though all of these women are black. They actually practise discrimination, apartheid of a special kind. We often make the mistake to associate apartheid with whites but blacks practise it too. You don't have to look beyond the women on Oxford Road to be convinced. It's true, they discriminate openly. When it comes to the issue of money, with all the talk about a white man being the enemy, they will

sleep with the enemy for money. They will only shout enemy this and enemy that at political rallies in the daytime but in the night, they drop their pants for the enemy. This is Mzansi for you, this is what it is," said the petite woman.

Thabo almost laughed with everyone in response to her words but he restrained himself when he noticed that his mother was offended.

"And you know what my sister," replied the fat driver, "you must also add that all those men who pick up those prostitutes on Oxford Road are happily married to the white madams. You cannot blame them though. Like I said they are simply tired of eating pap seven days a week, sun rise to sunset, Monday to Monday. It is as simple as that. It is a fact of life that we have to accept. You can blame *boMageza*. Taxi drivers are cheaters and this and that, but the reality is every man cheats. It is just that us *bomageza* we do it openly," the Fat man behind the wheel added in excitement

Thabo silently decided to give the driver the name *Mojolo*, the one that likes having fun with women. He was not sure what name his mother must have given to him as she too was opinionated and did not mind voicing her opinion publicly, especially when she disagreed with a sentiment someone said publicly, most times, but not this time. He kept on praying silently that she better not open her mouth this time to partake in this shit conversation. But he knew that she was listening to every single word uttered by these three loud mouths. After all, she kept on looking at her phone blankly, even though there was no message there. That he was sure of as he stole a glance. At that moment he felt that the taxi was moving rather too slow. He wished that they would arrive at Bree so that they could catch another taxi to Forest Town, a distance of 15 minutes via Jan Smuts.

He had been to his mother's workplace several times in the past 10 years that she had worked for the Ikwitzs. He remembered each detail each time he visited. For example, first time when his mother asked him to bring her cell phone that she had forgotten at home and needed it to communicate with her fellow stokvel members. Of course, in between performing her domestic service at the Ikwitzs, it was her turn to host the stokvel the next weekend and she needed to constantly send WhatsApp messages to each of them, as to what they needed to bring to the meeting at her house. She had been a member of this savings club for as long as Thabo could remember. In fact, it was through this savings scheme that he and his sister Nandipha were able to go to school. This supplemented his mother's salary, particularly after the tragic, sudden death of their father. Now he was done with Matric. He was in fact excited the previous year, in 2020, when he got a letter from Wits confirming that his application to enroll to study actuarial science was successful.

In fact, the other time he visited his mother's workplace whose fine details he still remembered very well was in 2020, and there is a good reason for that. He had gone there to pick up his mother's pay slip that the Ikwitzs had printed so that Thabo could attach it to his application for a NSFAS bursary as proof of family income. For all the years that Francinah had worked for the Ikwitzs, it was the first time that they prepared her a pay slip. Otherwise, they simply deposited her salary into her Capitec account every end of the month. But this time, she had asked for the pay slip so that Thabo could stand a chance of getting his application for the bursary to succeed.

But suddenly Thabo felt sad just as the taxi was making a left turn on Isak Ka Seme Street, heading into the Bree Street Taxi Rank. He remembered how his joy, within a short space of time, turned into a nightmare in 2020. He said to himself, silently, "If only the Ikwitzs had prepared the payslip in time last year, I would be at Wits, like others, such as Maya. I would not be hanging around at home and around Soweto without a purpose. After all I passed well, with three distinctions in

Mathematics, English and Accounting as well as B grades in Life Orientation and IsiZulu. After all, I was the top achieving student for the Matric class of 2019 at Mofolo High School. But now even those who achieved lower marks than I did were at university just because their parents earned good money. And they have a father. Life is unfair".

But he also remembered that he could not blame it on the Ikwitzs because indeed they had prepared the payslip when the closing date was close. And indeed, he and his mother managed to meet the deadline. He immediately received an acknowledgement of receipt. Three weeks later he received the news that his application was successful.

He naturally was ecstatic at first that indeed he was going to be a Witsie, his childhood dream. The first in his family, including the extended family, to get a university education, let alone at the prestigious Wits. Little did he know that the struggle was in fact, had just started. His nightmare of waiting for the funds had just begun. It was then September. The money had still not been released and he had long missed the registration deadline for 2020. He had in fact lost the 2020 academic year.

He suddenly had a strange feeling as the taxi abruptly stopped in front of Bree Taxi Rank for Thabo and Francinah, and four other passengers, to get off and get connecting taxis to their respective destinations. He had a feeling that now he was about to have an opportunity to reverse this setback. He did not realise that he was suddenly smiling.

"Mtana wam. My son, it is not good behaviour to listen to adult stuff, let alone getting amused by it. This is not what I taught you. And this is not what your father would have liked to see of you," she

whispered in his ear as they alighted from the taxi getting into Bree Taxi Rank to get another taxi to Forrest Town. Thankfully, Thabo thought, none of the other passengers heard Francinah's admonishment of him. Thabo was of course first surprised, and then embarrassed. He was not sure whether he was embarrassed on behalf of his mother or with himself. He decided to let it go and not try to defend himself.

As the taxi stopped, he noticed Zoo Lake Park, 200 metres ahead of them. His mind for a moment was immersed in the view of the blooming Jacaranda trees. They were all covered in purple. In fact, to him, the view looked like the top of the trees were covered by a gigantic, beautiful purple blanket, stretching for kilometres away. He noted that this was in sharp contrast to the last time he disembarked from the taxi at the same spot on Jan Smuts Avenue in 2019. The leaves had fallen from the trees and were fluttering on the ground in February 2019. They looked to him like a heap of lifeless flowers denied water for a long time. He wondered how things could change within the space of one year. Now in 2021, suddenly the trees had regained their life and glory. He wondered when he was also going to regain his life and be at university, studying actuarial science and breaking the intergenerational poverty that had gripped his family, including his extended family members.

They walked a few streets and they were soon at the gate of the Ikwitz's' home. His mother unlocked the small gate with a spare key that she always had with her each morning that she went to work. They were soon in. They were welcomed by Josh, who was standing in front of the door of their house, expecting them.

"Good morning Francinah and Thabo. Come in right away. We were expecting you anytime. Janet and Maya are already in the dining room waiting for you. We will get into it right away and we will be quick as Janet and I will soon leave for a farewell party for our colleague who is retiring."

All this time, Thabo was meticulously surveying Josh's face and tone to try and find a hint as to what this was all about. But he got nothing. If anything, Josh's voice was neutral. It did not give away any hint. Thabo's heart beat a bit faster. He started doubting his earlier conclusion that he was not in any trouble of sorts with the Ikwitzs. He hoped that whatever it was, it was not something that had made the Ikwitzs upset, to the extent of threatening his mom's job security. After all, the family depended so much on his mom's salary, to at least cover the bond loan repayment on their house

The rest of the expenses were partially covered by the stokvel savings that his mother had invested in. Even though this portion of the income could not cover everything, at least it covered the basics.

“Good morning Francinah and Thabo. “Welcome and please take your seat” said Janet as she stood up, shaking Thabo’s hand firmly, while giving Francinah an ambiguous glance. Maya stepped forward, looked at Thabo briefly, smiled, and gave him a hug. It appeared to linger there for a bit longer than what an ordinary hug would be, Thabo thought but dismissed the idea quickly and focused on the issue at hand. But Maya was not done with him yet and when she moved back, she spoke. “Thabo, where have you been hiding man? You are a stranger. I have not seen you for ages. The last time..... we spoke, I mean, it was on the phone.”

Maya spoke with an unsteady voice. At least that is what Thabo thought he discerned. It was as if she had not told her parents that in fact all along, they had been talking to each other regularly on the phone. There was an awkward moment of silence, which was broken by Josh.

“You guys will have all the time in the world to catch up as both of you will be together the whole of this afternoon. So, you will play your catch-up games then. You have all the time in the world. But Janet and I don’t have all that time as we are leave soon to the Jouberts,” Josh interrupted Maya, as he appeared to want to say something, if not of substance to break the awkwardness.

“Sorry dad,” said Maya as she took her seat next to Thabo. Smiling. That, at least, made Thabo relax a bit, though he remained anxious about the purpose of the meeting. He also felt uncomfortable by how close Maya sat next to him, but there was no time to ponder the issue right there and then as there was an important matter to be discussed with her mom’s employers.

Though Thabo did not know the finer details about the meeting, he had no doubt in his mind that he was the central character in the script of this family drama that was about to play out, right there. And it struck him as a serious drama, with almost two entire families sitting at the same table, the employers with their daughter and the employee with her first-born son. How could this be a small family matter? Was he ready for this?

Well for the first time, he felt less confident than had felt in the morning. But he was here and there was no way of avoiding it now. He had to face whatever it was that brought them together at that very table made from an oak tree. Not even President Cyril Ramaphosa’s family gatherings for Covid-19 related information, was as serious as this one.

Could this be something to do with the frequent calls that Maya did? Maybe they did not like them speaking regularly to each as it appears as if they did not know that Maya and he, spoke regularly all along, a fact he did not know until a few seconds ago when Maya seemed to confirm that. Not in so many words, but nevertheless confirmation that her parents did not know that she and he spoke regularly all along. He could tell this by how she seemingly spoke in an unsteady, unsure voice. This was not like Maya who always spoke with confidence in front of her parents, and anybody for that matter. She was the confident type brought up to be confident and speak straight looking someone in the year. But just a few seconds ago, another Maya spoke and not his friend. This made Thabo even more uncomfortable, but hid it from the rest seated around the table. At least he thought so.

Just then, Thabo noticed Josh shuffling a bit as if what he was going to say next was something that made him feel uneasy. The few seconds of waiting for Josh to open his mouth and utter his first wow was the most challenging Thabo had endured in his 19 years of being on this earth. At least, that was the way he felt. He stole a glance at his mother. Her face betrayed nothing as she seemed to be in deep contemplation. There appeared to be no emotion. And if there was, she was good at hiding it.

“Thabo, the reason we asked Francinah to ask you to come and see us is because we are disappointed with you. Maybe let me put it this way, by both of you, Francinah and yourself.”

He cleared his throat before proceeding. Thabo kept quiet and waited. He did not know how he was going to defend himself against whatever it was that had made his mother’s employers so disappointed that they had to call the whole family together on a Sunday morning to express their disappointment.

Could it be the calls that have enraged them? But why because those were not harmful. Maya and he during most of those calls, spoke about how life was for him in the township and how Maya was enjoying being at Wits, and occasionally, with Maya referring to the vague ‘plan’ that Thabo to be honest, had long dismissed as delusion on the part of his friend. And quite frankly, he had come to think that Maya’s ‘plan’ was simply a way of placating him from his disappointment of not being at Wits.

“I am sure you are wondering what I am talking about. Janet, can you please explain to Francinah and Thabo what this is all about.”

“Francinah and Thabo, what Josh is talking about is the issue of you Thabo not attending university” Janet got straight to the point. Thabo was taken aback and immediately responded even as he regretted that he should have waited till Janet had made her point. After all his father had taught him that when

adults are speaking, let them finish to say what they are saying without interruption. But here he did it. "But I passed and was even admitted" replied Thabo.

"That is precisely the point, and that is exactly why we have been disappointed by both of you", continued Janet, before directing her words at Maya.

"Please Maya, explain the reason we are holding this meeting."

Josh looked at their daughter and nodded to indicate that she may go ahead. Maya smiled as she first looked at Thabo. She then turned to look at Francinah with a hint of seriousness.

"Thabo, here is the thing. My parents take education so seriously that even when I told them that I was going to enroll for a fine art degree, and not medicine, even though I was accepted for both at Wits, dad and mom simply told me that it does not matter what education I got, so long it is education and that it is what I love, and I just have to get on with it. So, hearing six months down the line that you were not at university, even though you were accepted, simply because you did not get your NSFAS scholarship on time, made them disappointed. Even angry actually with you and Francinah for not telling them." explained Maya while looking at Thabo with a knowing eye.

"In fact, had Maya only last week not casually mentioned that you were in fact not at school I and Janet would still be in the dark about you not being at UJ. In fact, when Maya told us this, I was about to ask Francinah about the progress with your actuarial science degree, that I assumed, you were doing at UJ because I know that it is not an easy degree to study. It is tough and that is why today we in fact have less than 200 actuaries who are black South Africans. I even remember a few years ago, the only qualified black actuaries working in the financial services sector in South Africa were Zimbabweans...."

"Not UJ dad", Maya interrupted, "but Wits where I am studying."

"Ok sorry, Wits, and I think I am getting old" Josh said, before continuing, "I would not have known about your plight. Francinah never told me, and you never said a word to me, even though you have my number. Anyway, we don't have much time left. What we have planned to do is this: you are going to Wits next year. And I will pay for your studies," said Josh.

Janet gave Francinah a tissue to wipe tears that flowed freely down her cheeks. Thabo was left lost for words. He looked at Josh, turned to Janet and then to Maya, and his sobbing mother. He fought hard to hold back his own tears. Maya stood up and hugged him tightly. When she eventually let go of her grip

Thabo felt a bit embarrassed for having lingered there longer than he thought was necessary. Or was it, Maya? It really did not matter right there. The surprise was pleasant. He needed time to take it in. It was then that he thought about Maya's so called 'plan'. Right there he wanted to hug her, but remembered it was not her who was going to pay the fees, but Josh. He felt embarrassed. But was saved by Josh who continued right at the right moment when Thabo was finding it harder and harder by the second not to look at Maya and give her a knowing gaze. And in the process inevitably risk giving away their little secret. Secret between two friends.

"We will pay for your registration fee and accommodation, and in the meantime, we will assist you and your mother to apply for the NSFAS scholarship for next year. You do not have to pay us back. In addition to this, we would like to offer you part-time work, mainly tending to our garden to save for pocket money for next year while you are at university. Our gardener is currently in Malawi and are, frankly not sure if and when he will come back. It has been a while now. But even if he comes back, you will still assist with the garden and other chaos every Saturday. By the way, we were happy with the way you worked the garden the last time you were here, and Maya said as much as well." He looked at his daughter and she nodded in agreement.

Now having regained her composure Francinah spoke, still deep in emotion though.

"I know that my son is so touched that he does not know how to thank you...".

"Well, we are late and are leaving in a minute. Maya, you will show Thabo around the house, the storeroom and so forth. Give him the spare key for the small gate as well. He does not have to start right away as he can start next week Saturday if he likes," Josh interrupted Francinah.

"Actually, I can start today sir, if that is OK with you."

"Well in that case, it is up to you", he replied. "But with us it would still be fine if you started next week even. Anyway, Maya will show you where the protective equipment and so forth are."

"Maya, see you later. We should be back before 9 this evening. Make sure you lock all the gates by 6pm as is normally the procedure. Francinah, see you tomorrow," Josh said as he got the Suzuki Jimny out of the garage and drove out with Janet. Thabo noticed that it was parked next to a Range Rover and the green VW Beetle that belonged to Maya.

“Thabo and Maya”, said Francinah, “I am also leaving as I am meeting my stokvel friends as we are having a braai this afternoon at one of the members in Phiri Township. Thabo, I will see you at home later today. Do not come when it is dark as sometimes taxis are a problem at Bree Taxi Rank on Sundays.”

When everyone had left, leaving both of them alone, they both looked at each other in the eye in a moment silence. It was Thabo who spoke first. “My friend, thank you. I now see the plan.” Maya moved forward, stretching her arms out while smiling. They hugged. This time longer.

“My apologies my friend I made your collar bone wet. I mean your jacket. I did not mean to cry on you. But it happened. I am sorry I am clumsy.”

But Maya did not let Thabo loose. Instead, she tightened the embrace and spoke

“It is Okay. Do not be silly. You are human Thabo with emotions. In fact, that makes me love, I mean like you more,” she giggled. She slowly detached herself from him, and stood not far from him, looking him straight in the eye.

She spoke. “Right Thabo, it is time to work and I will assist you if you do not mind.”

“Not to worry my friend. I can manage on my own, and besides you know I know this garden very well, and I hope it still remembers me too, and”

“No Thabo, nonsense. It is not up to you. I am right away going to the storeroom to get the tools so that we can start working right away,” Maya interrupted Thabo as she quickly walked towards the storeroom. Thabo got embarrassed when he realized that all along, he was focused on Maya as she walked toward the storeroom before disappearing only to emerge with the garden tools.

Thabo got busy cutting the lawn at the back of this huge house built on a 4000 square metre piece of land in Forrest Town. Maya helped him by loading the grass cut offs into black plastic bags. At the centre of the garden, there was a swimming pool. Next to the swimming pool stood a lapa, used mainly to entertain guests or when the Ikowitzs had a family braai, often on weekends. At the corner of the stand was a cottage that is used by Moses.

Thabo noticed that the two-bedroom cottage was bigger than their house in Mofolo. He then focused on the swimming pool. After seeing that Thabo seemed to be interested in the swimming pool, Maya asked him whether he would like to swim. But at that moment Maya’s phone rang.

Thabo was saved from embarrassment as the reality was that he could not swim. Neither his home nor his school had a swimming pool where he could have learned to swim. There was, nowhere where he could have learned to swim in the whole of Soweto in fact. The communal swimming pools in Soweto have been so neglected that they are now used by homeless people to bath.

“Oh Shit!” exclaimed Maya. “Thabo excuse me for 15 minutes. I had completely forgotten.”

Maya rushed in the direction of the gate before turning suddenly and dashing into the house from which she emerged holding what looked like a remote for the gate. Careful not to be seen to have prying eyes, Thabo, as he continued cutting the lawn, stole a glance toward the gate. He saw a Bentley car driving in as Maya opened the gate with her remote without moving from the front door of the house to meet the visitor.

From the luxury car emerged a man who could not have been older than him and Maya. He was wearing a baseball cap, a pair of blue jeans and a blue T-Shirt. He was of middle build and middle height. His hair was black and cut short. In fact, the only thing missing for him to pass as a policeman are handcuffs, a pistol tucked on his waist, and a blue uniform. He also sported a moustache that looked like that of Hitler, Thabo thought.

Thabo did not like Maya’s choice of man, having concluded that this man was definitely Maya’s boyfriend. He in his mind had decided that May was not the type to date a policeman. He had also concluded that there was no way a police man could with their salary afford such an expensive car such as the one the Hitler man drove anyway. Not even with bribes.

Maya must have invited him as she knew that her parents were not going to be around that afternoon. “Clever girl,” he whispered to himself. But he was a bit disappointed, and frankly annoyed.

“But anyway, it is Maya’s indaba. I am here to work and earn pocket money, and not to judge who white girls choose to be their boyfriends,” he whispered to no one but to himself. But as he said this, he seemed to be more annoyed with his statement, a fact that even puzzled him. At least he chose to believe so.

The man walked toward where Maya was standing. They both entered the house in silence as he did not see their lips moving. From there could not see them from the point where he was working.

He decided he was going to keep an eye without being intrusive. So, he moved and positioned himself strategically to a point where he could see into the house. Just in case. After all this is Johannesburg and things are not as they appear. Not always. But he told himself whatever gaze he was going to exercise he needed to make sure that it was not intrusive. He did not want Maya to think that he was a voyeuristic, creepy character.

He basically continued working while keeping an eye on the goings-on in the house. He told himself that he was not going to move too far from this spot as he worked to avoid the of risk losing sight of what was going on in the house. He inexplicably felt a sense of protecting Maya from this Hitler man no matter what. From where he was working, he then saw that they were seated in the dining room with Maya giving Thabo her back and the ponytail man facing Maya. The man was also in full view of Thabo. Thabo wondered what they were discussing as the man looked serious and seemed to be listening un-amused to what Maya was telling him.

She seemed to be throwing her hands in the air while talking, as if she was angry about something or admonishing the poor guy. He did not feel sorry for him though. He deserved everything my friend was dishing out to him, he believed. Thabo again moved slightly closer, but from inside he gathered that his view was slightly obscured from those inside the house, a fact which suited him well.

Thabo however from where he was had a full view of what was happening in the house. He felt a bit uncomfortable, thinking that he must give them some privacy. But at the same time, he was wondering why Maya did not talk to her boyfriend in the privacy of her bedroom. He thought it was weird. As he continued cutting the lawn, he obviously could not hear what they were saying. A part of him said he needed to move away from the window so that his view of them would be obscured even further, pretending to give Maya and her man some privacy, while in reality he could see everything in the house from the outside.

But another part of his mind said, if Maya indeed wanted to have some privacy with her man she could have spoken to him in her bedroom. Maybe she wanted to feel safe speaking to him in the dining room where he was able to see them. Just in case. Just at that moment, Thabo saw Maya stand up and move in the direction of where her bedroom probably was. He thought well, it seemed like the lover's tiff had been solved, and soon the man was going to follow Maya to the bedroom.

But the Hitler man remained planted on his chair. He did not look happy. He even looked sad. Just like someone who had found his girlfriend in bed with someone else. Could the man be angry because he

found his girlfriend talking to this black gardener that he did not even know? Could he be angry because she was assisting him in the garden? Whatever was eating the man, it was something big. It was big shit.

At that moment Thabo saw Maya emerging from her bedroom holding something that looked like a frame or picture.

Immediately Thabo concluded that he knew what had made Maya's man angry. He must have been out-negotiated by Maya on the price of a painting that she was selling to him. This seemed to make sense, Thabo thought, because even though Maya was in her first year of fine art study, she was already in business selling some of her paintings for a decent amount of money. Maya had confided in Thabo in one of her several calls to Thabo. So, this must be the source of the man's anger. Talk about doing business with your lover. It always ends badly, this business of mixing business with pleasure, one way or another. When a deal goes this way instead of that way, one partner will take it personally, Thabo concluded.

Soon Thabo saw the man standing up with the painting in hand. With Maya behind him, she stopped at the front door while the man and his painting walked alone to the car.

Thabo thought that was a bad way of doing business on the part of Maya. She was supposed to be showing enthusiasm to her customer boyfriend, especially after a deal had been concluded.

Thabo saw the gate open and the Bentley man leaving. Maya started moving back to join him and Thabo quickly focused on the business at hand, pretending that he had not been watching every bit of the drama that had played itself out in the dining room of the Ikowitzs in the past 20 minutes, with Maya and the strange Hitler man as the main characters in the story.

"So, Thabo tell me about your life. What are you doing with it?" The question must have caught Thabo by surprise as he stopped cutting the lawn and looked at Maya. She was looking at him too, as if waiting for an immediate answer.

"Well, I am the first born as you know and my little sister..."

"No Thabo. Cut the crap right there. I am not talking about the story of your family. That I know pretty much that it is only you and your sister. Looks like your parents were as lazy as mine where, it matters the most. In my case it seems they were just happy to have me, and each time I ask Josh and Janet about it, they just look at each other and laugh in a dismissive fashion. To be quite honest with

You, the story of family is boring, especially between you and me right now. Instead, tell me a more interesting story about you.” Maya was not smiling but expectant, right there.

“Well, since I could not go to university last year, I spent most of my time at home reading. No. My life is not that interesting anyway.” He then continued cutting the grass, but Maya stopped him by firmly holding his right-hand arm. She smiled, but again appeared serious as she spoke.

“Is that all you are telling me, really? My friend, that is boring too. What I am asking you about is the really interesting stuff for our age. Are you getting me my friend?”

He fidgeted and smiled in embarrassment, having clearly understood what Maya was getting at.

“Ok. You are talking about girlfriends and stuff?” “Hebo Thabo. Speak my friend. Don’t be shy. It is only me and you here, and we are adults. I will be blunt with you if you continue to pretend that you are not getting me.”

Maya, while talking, moved even closer to him, bending her ear as if she wanted to properly hear his answer. Thabo hesitated, not knowing what to say.

The reality is Thabo did not have a girlfriend. But at the same time, he did not want to come out as some shy guy who could not get along with the female species. What they call *sishimane* in Soweto and other townships of South Africa. The one who has no clue how to win over the heart of a woman. But he did not want to lie either, by claiming to have one.

“Maya, to answer you, I do not have a girlfriend,” he stopped and then added “currently anyway.”

“Liar! Liar! Such a handsome boy like you, there is no way you do not have one. Or are you telling me something else?”

“Like what? I am honest and I used to have one... ”Till the moment you discovered that you were gay.”

“No. I am not gay at all. If anything, I love women, I mean one woman at a time,” he corrected himself before continuing. “Quite honestly, I would love to have one....”

“But?”

“They are just too expensive for me. I cannot afford them.”

“No Thabo. You misunderstood me. I do not mean that you should find cows to pay. You are too young to marry. I mean a girlfriend. Someone you love and spend time with as you are figuring out your life, education and a career.”

Thabo laughed and immediately proceeded to explain his point for the benefit of Maya.

“The fact the matter is, I cannot afford to buy data, ewallet them money whenever they want it, and buy them airtime. I am simply too broke to afford those sorts of things.”

“But Thabo who says you must buy all those sorts of things?”

“It is them. Each time you go out with a black girl from the township, it is given that you are expected to take care of those things.”

“I do not understand still why you have to do those sorts of things as those are a responsibility of their parents. Not a boyfriend. A boyfriend is for sharing love and the joys of life. Well, sometimes to console each other in times of sorrow, granted, but not to buy those sorts of things. Anyway, I want to understand you properly. Is this what my black friends on campus who are from the township always complain about, what they call Black Tax? But it cannot be because even the girls complain about Black Tax as the male students do.”

“No Maya. Black Tax is different. It is where a more successful family member or community member is expected to assist those less privileged than them with necessities, to uplift them as well.

Girlfriends are not part of that. In fact, things like girlfriends are implicitly excluded from that practice,”

Thabo turned suddenly to look at Maya as if he had just remembered something he needed to bring to her attention.

“And then what Thabo?”

“Nothing really, I just wanted to ask you something. But actually, it does not matter.”

“No Thabo my friend. I am not going to let you get away with it. Ask me right now. I know anyway. You want to ask me whether I have a boyfriend or am a lesbian. The answer to those two questions is no. Well, as to the former, I had one until 45 minutes ago.” Maya laughed as she saw the confusion on Thabo’s face.

Maya then spoke with a seriousness he had not seen before.

“It is a long story and you will have to be patient with me while I take you through what led to this drama this morning in the dining room.”

Thabo nodded to indicate that he was waiting for her to continue.

“That prick you saw crawling into my house I asked him to come here so that I could dump him properly. Once and for all. I am sure when he was driving to my house he was expecting something else, without knowing that I had prepared good news for his ears instead. You should have seen him when he got into that fucking car of his driving home with a sullen face. I almost laughed aloud but restrained myself. I did just that exactly 45 minutes ago. I mean the dumping of the spoilt brat moron, who thinks that driving around campus in a Bentley bought by dodgy tender money entitles him to every chick’s pussy. Sorry Thabo for the use of that word. I did not mean to, it is just that that prick has freaked me out. I, now hate him with passion because he is detestable. I actually feel disappointed with myself for having even considered dating him in the first place,” Maya said.

Thabo thought he saw her eyes getting wet.

He listened without interrupting, but was in shock. Maya composed herself, controlling her emotions that seemed to be bursting out of her.

“You see, I met the moron, fucking John “Mr. Bentley” Thomson at The Canteen at Wits three months ago. I was waiting in a queue to buy a burger during lunch time. It just happened that I did not have cash on me, and the cashier could not accept my card for buying something for less than R50.

The moron saw what was happening between me and the cashier. He asked if he could pay for the burgers, mine and his, with his card since he apparently had the same problem. I accepted and told him I was going to pay him back his fifty bucks. But guess what. He said no. But I insisted on paying him back his fucking R50 each time I saw him on campus. I tried without success, and it was so frustrating.

But then one day the creep said he was at Joburg Theatre, and if I was around, he would love to have his R50 back as he was short of petrol money. I first doubted the story but felt that I needed to give him back his money and finally get rid of him in my mind. There I went, driving my Volksie like a mad woman as I felt relieved that I was going to finally put behind me the R50 curse hanging over my shoulders.

But even as I drove there, I was worried that he might change his mind about accepting the money, in which case we were going to be back to square one with the issue. Can you believe it? I found him standing in the foyer of Joburg Theatre with his friend Themba Hlatshwayo and Themba's girlfriend, who was introduced to me as Nicole Richards.

You see Mr. R50 and Themba are in the same engineering class at Wits, and their parents run a joint venture BEE construction company that fixes the potholes around Johannesburg.

At least that is what the tender was awarded to them for. They got this lucrative tender last year from the Johannesburg Roads Agency, and hence Mr. Bentley cruising around campus looking for a woman to fuck, well sorry again to be vulgar my friend. My emotions are taking over again. Anyway, the whole issue about me paying him back his fifty bucks was a hoax. Instead, he handed me a ticket to watch the musical *We Will Rock You*, with an all-South African cast.

To cut a long story short, I dated him three times thereafter. Nothing serious, but going to eat out at restaurants, that sort of thing. But, then last month on my birthday, Mr. R50 asked to see me in the campus parking lot. When I arrived there, he was standing beside the fucking car, smiling like a fool, holding something wrapped in his hand. He had done his homework as he knew that being a fine art student, I knew art very well. Most probably even love art.

"Hi Maya", he said to me, "I know that you are as busy as I am between lectures, but I thought I could take advantage of this break to give you your birthday present. And please you do not need to open it now."

"Thabo", she continued, "you should have seen how proud he genuinely looked. But I did open the damn present there and then. Guess what? A 1968 Maggie Loubser painting titled *Women at the River*. I was shocked to the core Thabo. This is the painting that was in the news last month. An anonymous son of an anonymous Johannesburg businessman had outbid everyone else at Strauss & Co.'s latest auction sale and bought the painting for a local record of R3 million for the artist. Anyway, we argued over the damn expensive gift and I threatened that I was going to leave it at the parking lot unless he takes it with."

"And so, what happened?" asked Thabo. He was in anticipation but tried not to show that he was impatient to hear the rest of the details about this gesture of a present between lovers that had obviously gone wrong.

“Of course, with reservation, I took it home partly for fear that someone else was going to pick it up, fearing that the creep was serious about his threats of leaving it there and partly I secretly thought, begrudgingly loved the idea of owning a Maggie Loubser.

My mind was at the same time dealing with the ethics surrounding how the artwork was acquired. In any case, the money he has is from his father’s tenders, and so he does not care. Who knows, even that potholes tender is most

Probably what it is, a shithole tender. Corrupt to the core. Can you believe this: I had to hide the damn art in my bedroom in case my parents saw it and would ask questions that I would not want to answer? But as I thought about it, I concluded well, why not take the artwork and keep it. We resolved our problems, and so I thought. But then around Campus, I heard people I had not told anything about this expensive present and the damned relationship whispering behind my back that I was Miss Maggie Loubser and slay Queen. Especially the girls around campus. That was the last straw. The guy has been going around campus saying that I am his slay Queen with a taste for expensive art, apparently.”

Thabo suppressed laughter.

“And now, where is the expensive painting if I may ask?” “Good question Thabo. But I thought you were smart enough.”

“Oh, my goodness! Do not even try to say it Maya. This is so cruel,” Thabo remarked as eventually the answer sunk in.

“Well, I am sure he is not driving home straight. He is probably thinking which one of his other girlfriends he can go to right now and try to impress by giving her the damned painting. As far as I am concerned, he could as well shove it up his ass. Again, I am sorry to be vulgar Thabo, my nerves are again taking over my discretion. The truth, is this man drove me crazy Thabo. First with his Bentley from Hell, driving around campus, bought by poisoned money from a tender from Hell, while the potholes remain unfixed, threatening to swallow pedestrians and cars alike. This includes my Green Mamba, my beloved Volksie Thabo. Secondly, he drove me crazy with his R50 from Hell. The last straw to this ill-fated so-called relationship was that this creep was going around telling every girl on campus that I am his Slay Queen with a taste for expensive art.

“Tjo Maya!” Thabo and Maya hugged while they were awkwardly looking at each other. “But Maya, on a serious note, do you see the irony in all this?”

“No Thabo. Make me understand.”

“Well, look, I get dumped by girls in the township simply because I cannot afford their own version of Black Tax. But you dump some rich dude simply because he showers you with gifts, the very same things over which I am dumped just because I cannot afford them?”

Maya did not respond. Instead, she responded by looking Thabo in the eye. They hugged again and this time the embrace was tighter and longer than ever before.

When they finally disengaged, Maya spoke in a rather serious tone while breathing heavily, even surprising Thabo who stood there awkwardly.

“I think it is time we pack up so that you can go before it gets dark. And Thabo, can I ask you something again? If you are not available, it is okay as well,” said Maya.

She appeared anxious. That unsettled Thabo a bit, but he was expectant. “No problem, Maya, you may go ahead.”

“What are you doing on Friday, because if you are free there is an exhibition opening at Circa Gallery in Rosebank. The artist is Ayanda Mabulu. Do you know him?”

“No, I don’t, and what is his claim to fame, to attract the attention of soon-to-be one of the top artists in town, Maya Ikwitz, a graduate of Wits School of Arts and”

“Get away Thabo. I did not know that you were such a flirt. Now I am starting to get to know you and I like what I am starting to know about you now. Anyway, on a serious note, really, Ayanda Mabulu is a controversial artist whose last exhibition, preceding this one among other controversial art pieces, featured an artwork, a satirical piece titled *Number One*.

It caused so much controversy in 2012 because he painted the penis of a character named Number One. Many assumed that it was in reference to the President then, Jacob Zuma. This latest work is also said to be controversial. I have already seen heated discussions on social media about his theme in this exhibition, which is patriarchy.

The exhibition is open to the public, but I just feel that going on my own will be somehow awkward. I was supposed to go with Mr R50, but of course you know what the situation is now between me and him.”

Maya looked unsure. She looked at Thabo, waiting for his reply.

“Well, that would be great. I am actually doing nothing in the township, and that would be a great outing for me. But I must warn you though. When it comes to art, I am so stupid, a Mampara. Please do not expect me to contribute anything toward any discussion about the exhibition that may take place there. I do not want to embarrass you in the presence of your art connoisseur friends” Thabo said. He could not hide his excitement.

“Not to worry Thabo. Not everyone you see at an exhibition knows what is going on in the world of art. Forget even the pretense. It is just an appearance. And besides, you are not obliged to say anything there,” Maya assured him as she continued. “After that we can have dinner at Doppio Zero in Rosebank, if you like. I like especially their Greek salad. It is yummy. You must taste it. Maybe you might even fall in love with it too.”

Thabo seemed hesitant, but before he opened his mouth, Maya chipped in. Just in time.

“Do not worry about paying, I will do so. After all, you have already confessed why you cannot score with the clever Soweto girls. You can pay me by taking me to Vilakazi Street in Soweto next Saturday for the Amapiano Festival. I have already bought the tickets as we were also supposed to attend the event with you by now know who and his friend Themba Hlatshwayo and his girlfriend Nicole Richards. This time, you will pay me by pretending to be my bodyguard.”

Both of them laughed at the same time, and Thabo spoke.

“What Maya? You have tickets to the Amapiano Festival? Well, that is so cool. Let’s go. I will certainly be your bodyguard with an AK47 ready for any fool who will be stupid enough to try his luck. In fact, I am a fan of Amapiano and I had heard about the festival.” Thabo was genuinely excited.

“Ok. So, we have a deal. I take you to the exhibition, and you take me to Vilakazi Street”, she added amidst laughter and giving Thabo a high five, “as my bodyguard.” Both of them laughed at the same time again.

The Games

She looks at her Samsung phone and notices that it is already 10am. She is done with scrubbing the floor, cleaning up the kitchen and the ironing of her bosses’ clothes. Dineo’s dresses are neatly folded and

placed where they belong in the couple's bedroom. Siphos shirts and trousers are also ironed and placed where they belong in the wardrobe. She smiles and hears herself whisper as if she did not want anyone else to hear in the house: "He will love them. Dr Siphos Madonsela. As for that bitch, Advocate Nonsense Dineo Moroka, I do not care what she thinks about my ironing. I am just doing it because she is my boss. Otherwise, if she has an issue, she can iron them herself. Or better still go and fuck herself."

Namhla suddenly started remembering the exact moment, and day the fall out between her and Dineo started.

"Maybe if only she did not object to Siphos increasing my salary, on that Monday, 25 March 2019, exactly a year after I got this job, at exactly 8am, it could not have come to this. The R2000 bucks could have made a difference to my life. Maybe, just maybe, I could have rejected Dr. Siphos lustful gazes, always happening when Dineo is not around. I know how painful it is when your man behind your back, hits on and succumbs to other women's charms. But poor Dineo was stupid. "No, there is no need for an increase, we pay her more than other domestics. She is a sleep-in maid anyway, who, does not pay a cent for lodgings. Blah blah! Madam Dineo, now you are paying more in the most painful way you would never have imagined. How nice."

Namhla even surprised herself for her resentment toward Dineo. She flashed a naughty smile and looked at her watch again.

Having satisfied herself with a job well done for the bosses she has been working for the past five years in the northern Johannesburg suburb of Morningside, Namhla Ndara walks to the gate of the huge house. She looks into the street and sees that other domestic helpers are now starting to emerge from the mansions in the tree-lined streets of Morningside. All the houses are huge here with a fairly cosmopolitan population. Whites, Indians, BEE-type blacks, even a small community of Chinese. They are all well-to-do and almost all households have, if not a permanently employed gardener or a maid, people working for them on a part-time basis. Namhla had realised this fact since she started working for the couple in 2018. But at No.42 Rivonia Road where her friend, Chiwoniso Mawarire from Zimbabwe, works for the Wassermans, there is still no activity. By this time, just like the other domestic workers, she should be out and about, standing in the streets, chatting loudly to other domestics. The thing is by this time of the morning, with bosses having gone to work, domestics like Namhla and her friends, become bosses. Not only of the households they, work for, but the streets as well. They own the streets where they congregate and catch up on the latest suburban gossip, such as which boss has been

caught by their wives with their pants down? Which character is the most interesting in *Generations*? Which domestic helper has been fired, after being caught stealing sugar from their bosses? Which domestic helper has been reprimanded by the madam for wearing a mini-skirt while scrubbing the floor?

Namhla had decided that, although it is helpful to have them around as assistants outside working hours, there is a cost to domestic helpers living on the same property as their bosses.

Having waited for a further 10 minutes, Chiwoniso is still nowhere to be seen in the streets. Namhla thinks, well, she was probably still cleaning up the mess left behind by her bosses from the previous night, as usual. She must give her friend more time. At the same time, she wonders why a teacher of mathematics would be fine working as a domestic worker. Well, she does not understand her Zimbabwean friend sometimes.

If I were her, Namhla says to herself, I would be teaching mathematics at a high school. But I have no qualifications close to what Chiwoniso has because I dropped out in Grade 11 to look after my brother, after our parents died one month after each other. Both Namhla's parents were admitted to Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital when they fell seriously ill in 2014. But doctors could not save their lives. Their death forced Namhla, at the age of 17, to drop out of school and look for work so that her little brother, Monde, could continue schooling and that there would be food on the table. With Monde now in his third year of a B.com degree at the University of Johannesburg, it is only a matter of time before he becomes independent and finds a job.

Then she will go back to studying, to complete Matric by correspondence. At 35, she is still young enough to continue with her studies. She will do so while of course slaving for Advocate Dineo Moroka and her husband Dr Siphon Madonsela. Namhla had shared her ambitions with Chiwoniso several times since they met and had become best friends.

"However, my friend, to be honest with you, I do sometimes feel bad about what I am doing with the good doctor behind Dineo's back. I imagine how I would feel if this was done to me. It is just that besides the fact that it is hard to say no to someone who is technically your boss, and still work for them, and see them day in and day out, there is also that small matter of the extra money the doctor gives me on top of my salary. Of course, behind the wife's back. That money comes in handy, especially these days with everything being expensive. I guess it is a small price to pay, Dineo once confided in Chiwoniso.

When Namhla started working for her current employers, they had just gotten married the previous year.

“Still, they do not have kids, and actually do not want to, as they use condoms. These educated people, what is wrong with them? Married and yet still find it okay to use plastics during sex. It is fucked up,” Namhla once told Chiwoniso.

However, she once told her friend that she believed the man is a good person, the type if they had a child would be committed to raising up their children instead of straying into maids’ bedrooms. When Namhla checks her phone, it is 10.30am and her friend is still not out. She decides to go back into the house.

“Oh! I forgot to check the damn Spar plastic in the bedroom.” She goes straight into the bedroom, and there Namhla finds the plastic next to the couple’s bed. She had not noticed it when she put the couple’s ironed clothes into the wardrobe earlier on. She looks inside and gets annoyed. As usual.

“I know it. Just as today is Thursday and yesterday was Wednesday. The whore had it yesterday and, Miss Bitch, must know that tonight is my turn. I know he does not tell you, but I am telling you now.” She curses as she looks into the plastic and frowns after noticing two used condoms. “The bitch was lucky to have two rounds. I will also have my two rounds of fun. Believe me, Mr. Nice Time Dr Siphon Madonsela, you better make sure that that whore did not drain you dry. It is time to play our games tonight. I am horny and waiting for you.”

As usual, she carefully lifts the plastic with her thumb and index finger as if she is worried that the contents would spill. In a meticulous fashion she walks to the black City of Johannesburg plastic bin at the back of the house, next to the cottage where she sleeps, and deposits the plastic with its content and walks back into the house. “Sies.” She curses. She turns and looks at the dustbin. She smiles.

“I am so grateful that this dust bin does not talk. She can keep secrets. I wonder if one day it will betray us. I mean me and my lover and reveal that not only does it carry used condoms from the bedroom, but from the cottage too. My cottage, I love you, Dustie.”

She then goes back to the gate to check if Chiwoniso is now done. Happy to see her friend standing outside the gate of the Wassermans household, she closes the gate with the remote and walks straight to Chiwoniso. She knew that Chiwoniso was waiting for the latest details between her and her secret

lover. Or is she a lover or side chick Namhla sometimes wonders. It really does not matter to her whether she is a nyatsi or a side kick. What matters is that she is getting what she lusts for.

She knows at the bottom of her heart that he feels the same way too. If not why come again and again.

“Maybe if the Advocate gave him children, the good doctor was not going to get lost from his marital bed. This is the price these educated people pay for their indiscretions. Shame. I do not feel sorry for the bitch,” Namhla tells Chiwoniso. They both laugh at the same time and walk towards No.44 where their other friends are huddled, awaiting more gossip-mongering.

Glances and Love in the Time of Apartheid

I looked at her and she looked back at me. We may have looked at each other at the same time in fact. Next thing we were on the dance floor together, embracing each other as we danced to jazz like we knew each other so well. At least those who were watching must have thought so. She was as light skinned and I was as dark skinned as they come. There was something about her face. It looked genuine. As we danced, I looked at her moves. They were fine. Each step was choreographed in a way that pleased my eyes. I found myself smiling.

There was no time to ask her name until we were in the parking lot. “Where are you going?” She asked.

“Yeoville.” “I answered. Not sure what was going to happen next.

She did not ask me whether I had a car. In fact, we did not speak the whole trip. Everything moved very fast.

In the morning, I heard a loud knock. It was not the kind of knock I was used to. It sounded furious. I went to the door and looked at their faces. They were familiar. But anger must have distorted them somehow. Their eyes were screwed up, staring piercingly at me. The kind of look you give someone you want to give a hiding, a person who has wronged you so badly that you feel like doing something bad to their body in revenge. The message was clear. There was no need for me to ask what was wrong. I followed them then down the stairs. This thirty second walk in total silence. With only the steps seeming to disturb this silence of anger with their tap! tap! noise. It felt like the longest I had walked on those steps since I started living at The Monarch, 27 Hunter Street, Yeoville, two years ago. I had of

course walked the steps several times before, especially when the lifts were not working. They often were not due to ageing and lack of regular maintenance. But it did not feel this long before.

Nobody could move out of the complex. Her luxury car was blocking the exit from the garage. She came and stood beside me. I looked at her. Her skin seemed to have turned a bit paler overnight. Mine seemed darker. Or was it the angry crowd that had transformed us? They were nodding as a way of expressing their anger and disappointment. Mumbling, somethings I could not pick up. However, I remember hearing a few swear words coming out of the mouths of some of them. "Son of a bitch and White whore!" The rest just trailed into a distant moan. It was hard to listen to everyone speaking at the same time. Not in harmony but with the discord of a choir without a conductor that did not properly rehearse before going on stage. To hell with them, I apologised in a low voice with my eyes cast down as if that would placate them. What worried me the most was not the blocking of the garage exit, but how they looked at her light skin. The intensity was disturbing. I was the one at fault here, after all. The anger should have been directed at me. Not her, a visitor. I was the one who had not protested when she abandoned the car there as we rushed upstairs. It was my place after all with our allocated parking space that I never used. I was not sure though what she was thinking, but glad that she did not speak, letting me handle the situation the best I could under the circumstances.

I turned and looked at her again, looked at my hands in a white short sleeved shirt. They looked smaller than I thought they were. I looked at my neighbours. They looked like me: dark-skinned and beautiful. I almost kissed them. But then I realized that I was with her. Light skinned and beautiful. I liked her more. That seemed to settle it. I was excited at the prospect of long-lasting love, finally. Ours was love, which would not be disturbed even by an angry mob at a decaying block of flats in a dying suburb in Johannesburg. That was just a temporary intrusion into something special that was developing between two people from two different cultural backgrounds. I suppressed a smile.

"Have you been overseas before?" she asked as we brushed our teeth after taking a shower together that I wished took longer than it did. We were getting ready to go to Time Square, a popular restaurant hub that attracts especially lovers for a slow Sunday breakfast meal as they read their morning newspapers.

"No." I said.

We looked at each other intensely and broke into laughter as we both noticed at the same time that we were reflected in the bathroom mirror. We realized the absurdity of being captured looking at each

other like that, without a word being said. It was at that very moment that I realised that her eyes were round. Iris sky-blue, complementing her dark eyelashes. I loved her more. Felt like I was seeing her for the first time. It was also then that I realised this is the part of her I had missed noticing when we went on that dance floor in the dimmed lights of Kippies Jazz Club in Newtown. Trombonist Jonas Gwangwa was performing as if it was his last show. I looked at my round eyes in the mirror. They reminded me of the look in the eyes of my favourite cat called Cheetah that I loved so much as I grew up. I thought the look of our eyes complemented each other in a contrasting way.

“Would you like us to go there?” she asked, this time wearing a serious face that suggested that she needed an urgent answer right there. I got the message. I did not waste time.

I thought for five seconds: “Why not?” I answered her as if to say, what a weird question. “Of course, who would not want to travel overseas?” But then I thought about the expenses involved and my salary as reporter for a daily paper that is not known for paying journalists that very well. But then I remembered I could at least ask for a one month advance that and luckily, I had been saving for the last six months as if I knew that was coming up. Talk about telepathy. I watched her face light up. I smiled and we hugged. For the first time since we met, we kissed. Her lips were warm and sensuous. We lingered there. It felt good. Like a stolen kiss between teenagers when adults dash out of the house for a short time, such as when they are out buying cigarettes at a neighbourhood grocery shop, inadvertently giving you privacy.

Life and time seemed to move fast from then on. Her place in Fourways was as different as we were.

Her house was a mansion in a gated suburb. My apartment was a one-bedroom flat in an area that was fast losing its shine. I was renting the place from a Jewish woman who was starting to irritate me. She would knock at my door to complain about the noisy neighbours as if I had a solution. And whenever I tried to communicate the landlady’s complaints to the neighbours, they in turn complained about her. She and her daughter were so dedicated to the music of Bach that I came to enjoy it eventually. That is on those nights when I was not with Treasure.

I never got around to asking my Treasure how she got her name. Maybe I should have when she said I must save because we needed to go overseas. Maybe I should have asked when we went to that tiny office in Edenvale to renew our expired passports. That is when the clerk looked at us with lots of questions that he didn’t ask. Looked at me and looked at her. As if our dark and light faces were on the

same passport. He did not smile. But he did his job. Our passports were ready to collect two weeks later. I also though I saw Treasure suppressing a chuckle, the one that says leave us alone you fool.

At Jan Smuts International Airport – at every counter, from check-in to immigration – they looked at me and looked at her, in a way that made both of us uncomfortable. The kind of look that seems to suggest that you are naked but you just do not seem to notice. I ignored the intrusive looks as we headed to the departure lounge. We bought our drinks, settled down to enjoy ourselves, ready for the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Then Treasure smiled. “What’s up?” I asked. “Nothing,” she said.

There was certainly something, I thought, but left it there.

There were very few looks directed at us in the lounge. That made us comfortable again. We did not say a word. Relaxed and enjoyed our drinks. We both felt relieved but did not say a thing about it.

Only then Treasure spoke - “This is different from the check in counter, hey?” Only then did I get what was the smile all about. She seemed to enjoy every moment: the looks, the irritations, and the staring.

The take-off was not much worse than driving in a taxi on a gravel road in a badly maintained part of South Africa’s road network. Soon we were in cruising mode. The way Treasure and I downed drinks felt like we were on the floor at Kippies Jazz club. Except that there was no dancing here in this rocket-like machine. None of the other passengers seemed to notice us. We felt a freedom that we did not experience at the Home Affairs office and certainly not at my apartment block. People here were either drinking to stupor, like us, or were trying their best to sleep under the circumstances.

Next thing we were descending, steadily and surely, half-awake and half-asleep. For the most part of the 11 hours that we had been in air, we had been *lekker dronk*.

Collecting our luggage went smoothly. There was no incident at all at Schiphol Airport. The immigration officer at the counter looked at her passport and sent her to another queue that was longer than the one on our left. The one she joined had both light skinned and dark-skinned people from around the world. The one on the left only had light skinned people who looked like her. I wondered why? But then saw a sign that read “European Passport holders only.”

When it was my turn, the man looked at my passport. He took a bit longer than he had with

Treasure’s before waving me to where he had indicated she must go. I smiled and joined the queue. At least we were not separated, I thought. This immigration officer’s gaze, I had noticed, was not intrusive.

It was subtle. Like the way you would look at lovers kissing in a mall. You always steal a glance, right? You do not make it obvious that you are looking at them. Right too, right?

From the airport we headed to the hotel we had booked for three nights. The journey was short. The underground train was fast. As we emerged from the station platform, we were met by a sea of white skinned people who looked like Treasure. They were busy doing all sorts of errands. Some were hawking stuff, selling newspapers. We walked to our accommodation. On the way we met more light skinned people, all in a hurry, moving in all directions. The streets were crowded. Had it not been for the pale masses, Amsterdam could pass for Johannesburg: bustling and choking with people walking fast in all directions.

Treasure melded nicely with the crowd. She was indistinguishable. In contrast, I stood out. But she also stood out because of me by her side.

Everywhere we went, we felt like superstars. Celebrities from a recent block-buster movie as these-light skinned masses looked our way. But unlike the public attention given to celebrities, these people were not smiling. They looked at us blankly, expressionless even. They did not utter a single word. I thought it was weird. Maybe that is how people here treat the people they admire, I concluded. We moved on, enjoying the attention, expressionless as it was. At face value it appeared harmless curiosity.

Back in the hotel room, tired but exuberant and expectant, we looked at each other. Our eyes locked. The intensity felt like the first time we met on that dance floor back home at Kippies Jazz Club.

“This is it” she said. It was more a suggestion than a rhetorical statement.

“This is the time we have been waiting for my love”, I said, agreeing with her more than making a rhetorical statement.

In the morning, we cuddled in bed. We chose to miss breakfast. The sex, I felt, was good. Even out of this world. “The gazing eyes can all go to hell,” I said.

“Yes, they can all go to hell babe”. She started a chorus, “yes, they can all go to hell babe” and I joined her. We laughed our way into a deep sleep. Peaceful like newly born twins.

Dirty

Robyn looked at him intently as if she wanted to say something, to ask a hard question. He felt a bit uncomfortable at the table, coffee mug in hand, and tried to brush these thoughts aside. It was simple curiosity, the innocence of a child. But deep down a voice inside him kept whispering that something was coming up and he had better be prepared for it. Right then she spoke, but not to him.

“Mama, Siphos hands are dirty. Why are they always dirty?”

Valerie stopped stirring her coffee. She almost knocked her cup down. She turned to face her daughter as if she had just heard someone shout look at this white snake! She looked at her daughter the way she did whenever Robyn said fuck you to her brother Jonathan, which she did when she was angry with him for stepping on her toys by accident, or something. Those expletives erupted from Robyn’s mouth whenever she thought her mother was not close enough to hear her. But mothers for some inexplicable reason always hear their daughters, especially if they are saying things they should rather not say.

At 6 years old, Robyn was two years younger than her brother Jonathan. She did all the talking while he played sports computer games, indifferent to what was going on in his little sister’s mind, and of course with her ever-open mouth. Friends and distant relatives after meeting Robyn, have always expressed the view that she was too intelligent for her age.

Robyn looked at her mother in a manner that suggested that she had told no lies.

“It is true Mama. Bring me your hand.” She put her tiny palm on top of Valerie’s so as to prove her point. “Yours and mine look clean. Siphos can you please bring your hand here. His is dark and dirty. It’s true Mama. I mean they look different. Darker than our hands, even darker than Jonathan’s too and maybe Siphos hands are dirty because sometimes he uses them to eat while we use a fork and knife or maybe because he was born in those places, they show us on TV where people are dirty, where they have dirty hands like Siphos hands Mama. It’s true.”

“Robyn!” Valerie began, but her daughter continued to speak. Louder even.

“Maybe Siphos was also born there like Uncle Sizwe and Auntie Sophie and theirs are dirty because Uncle Sizwe digs the garden and Auntie Sophie cleans the floor without using gloves, and they all come from those dark places where maybe Siphos was born also.

Siphos gave his girlfriend of six weeks an awkward look. “I think it is not going to work Valerie.”

Valerie looked at him too, tears in her eyes. . “Please Siphon, be patient and understanding. It will work in the end. Trust me. She is only six and soon she will understand and accept the situation.

Please give the relationship a chance.”

“You know what, Siphon?” Robyn said. “Don’t worry. I have an idea. Let us go and wash your hands in the basin together. We will use that soap that Mama bought the other day that she said smells good. She said it is strong and can remove stubborn dirt. I will help you to wash your hands and it will work. Mama is right. It will work in the end. Let us do it. Your hands will be as clean as mama’s, mine and Jonathan’s. Come Siphon.” She took his hand and pulled to make him stand. She reached his waist. He hesitated, looked at Valerie, who remained expressionless. He followed her to the bathroom.

“We tried, Mama. His hands look a little bit better now. It is true Siphon?”

“OK. Stop it, Robyn. Let me explain something to you. Listen very carefully to what I am going to say. Siphon’s hands are as clean as our hands, sometimes even cleaner, depending on whether he has just washed them and we have not. People are born different. His hands are dark because they need to protect his skin from the sun. We have less of this protection, which is why we are sunburnt. But we are just fine and so is he. He does not have to change his skin by washing it. Those people you see in shacks are not dirty. They have the same skin as Siphon’s, yes. That is the way they were born, and it is fine.”

“But was Siphon born there, Mama? He should be then because how come that his skin colour is dirty, well dark like theirs?”

“No Robyn. He was born in Morningside Clinic, where you were born, of course many years before you.”

“You were born in the same hospital as me Siphon! But Mama, how come then that his hands do not look like mine then, but not to worry Siphon? Since you stay with us and you sleep in Mama’s bed, you will change one day and become white too.”

“Enough about Siphon’s clean hands and your white rubbish Robyn. Pack up your toys and let’s go and have breakfast at Montecasino in that restaurant you love.”

“Wimpy’s? I do not feel like Wimpy’s today? What about Spur. I want to play with toys there. I enjoyed them the last time we were there. Maybe Siphon, you can join me if you want.” Siphon looked at Robyn. He smiled. Looking at Valerie, he nodded. “Right Madam Robyn.”

She smiled and was the first to head to the car.

Lerato from Soweto

Lerato looks carefully and a bit uncomfortably at the queue at the cigarette counter. She feels depressed as she joins it. But first she hesitates, scanning meticulously those in the queue, paying particular attention to age, race and gender. All races in South Africa are well represented here: White, Black, Indian, and Coloured. Their ages also range from those barely legal to bet to those old enough to be in retirement villages instead of gallivanting in malls in the name of winning that one last chance in their lifetime.

The people seem to be suppressing anxiety, because of the prospect of leaving this queue as millionaires or losing. Whichever way it goes, Lerato observes silently as she looks at what she regards as her hairstyle worthy of an award in her hand-held tiny mirror. In her head, after all, people in a Lotto queue do not want to be disturbed as all they want is to win. Win the whopping R155 million Jackpot at stake here.

Though the queue is long, must be 20 people long, the people queuing, are patient. Anyway, those who want to win have to be patient. Only losers lose patience, Lerato concludes, careful not to make the mistake of saying so loud and causing a scene of discomfort for everyone. What is this concept of winning? Does winning not assume that there is some competition among those who want to win? What competition is here among these people? All they need to do in order to stand a chance of winning and losing is simply play. These thoughts occupy Lerato as she jealously guards her position in the line.

Suddenly Lerato's imagination drifts immersing herself in a dream.

She sees herself in a single engine plane. Flying it herself to distant places she has always wanted to go to but could not do so all these years. How could she have been able to travel when she is married to that loser, Vusi, yet as she grew up in Soweto, she saw herself marrying a winner? Such as their neighbour in Melville, BEE tenderpreneur Monde. Single, eligible, and yet these days he wears a sullen, sad face. Rumour has it that after winning so many tenders over the years, during the State Capture President's administration, now in the Phala

Phala President's administration, he is losing tenders like it is going out of fashion. These include the ones he had won during the previous administration and the new ones he bids for, but his efforts are coming to naught.

"I should have made my moves and pounced on this once rich tenderpreneur back then. But I lost out on an opportunity all those years because of Vusi. My loser husband never gave me an opportunity even to say hi to my neighbour. Get to know him up close and personal, you know. Vusi my loser husband kept me on a leash like a caged animal. It must have been for fear of losing me to winning Monde." These dreamy thoughts, or is it lust, hit Lerato.

She then realises she is next in the queue of the greedy and hallucinating Lotto lot. Her dream vanishes. Just for a short moment though.

After noticing that her ticket is still carefully tucked in her handbag, making sure that indeed it is safe, fearing to lose it, she drifts again into dreamland. This time she sees herself on the beaches of Umhlanga Rocks. That beautiful beachfront in KwaZulu-Natal, having driven there in her new Bentley after winning the Lotto. Alone without Vusi, the loser husband that she had to show the door. That is, after her windfall. Her wish and hope in Umhlanga Rocks were to win the heart of a new man, any man among those wealthy men who hang around such places to win the hearts of lonely young, beautiful women like her. Only then she realises that not even Monde could meet her now new high standards. Her expectations from a man now that she is in the top league of winners after her Lotto windfall are indeed beyond the grasp of a poor soul like Monde. Handsome yes but, being handsome is not enough for her new taste in wealthy men. In any case she herself is a multi-millionaire. The winner: Lerato from Soweto.

Here she is in her attention winning bikini, beautiful Lerato strutting her stuff around the beach with abandon. Yet no man notices her. At least they seem not to see her. In the company of their possessive young partners, they have become blind.

"Wives, girlfriends, friends with benefits, seem to be joined at the hip. Whatever. Sies! These men lack curiosity and any sense of adventure," Lerato curses. The sun sets, yet no man has gone beyond saying hello to her on this damned beach.

"Of course, always in the company of their possessive partners. These men have indeed been bewitched," she complains to herself.

It is then that she remembers how ecstatic she felt after checking her Lotto ticket. Realising that she was the winner of the R155 million jackpot, how quickly she served Vusi the loser with divorce papers. Of course, careful to do so before claiming her winnings, for fear that if she claimed the Lotto before the divorce went through, she would lose part of it to Vusi, the loser, for they were married in Community of Property.

Now no husband, not even a partner for convenience, lonely, alone and failing to win the attention of these wealthy men at Umhlanga Rocks Beach. She too feels like she is a loser. Just like Monde. And Vusi. Monde, the one-time successful tenderpreneur is now a shadow of his former self. Just like her, now losing the attention of these rich men on this beach, Vusi is losing old tenders and failing to get new ones.

The reality is Vusi, her damned husband of 10 wasted years, is losing her to nobody.

“I have won the Lotto and yet feel like a loser,” she exclaims loudly now that she is far away from those losers who queued with her at Pick ‘n Pay Rosebank. Reality has hit home as the dream vanished suddenly in the same way it came to wherever it came from.

Thoughts can really play havoc with people who play Lotto. They suddenly go to dreamland after winning. They dream while wide awake, home sweet home.

Quickly she opens her bag, far away from the prying eyes of her loser husband Vusi, to just make sure that the ‘winning’ Lotto ticket is still there. Then she steals a glance through the window of her bedroom to see the tender-losing Monde, seated outside. He looks defeated, dejected even, as he relentlessly polishes his sharp pointed expensive shoes. It is as if by polishing those expensive shoes government adjudicators this time would rig the tender in his favour. These thoughts flood Lerato as she observes.

This is now his time to eat. After all, the multi-tender winning Guptas are now safely hiding in Dubai or is it somewhere else? This is after winning multiple tenders during the State Capture President’s reign of capture. Only to lose them all in the new administration of the Phala Phala President. Thinks Lerato as she notices her loser husband joining her in the bedroom. “Loser,” she curses. Silently, of course. It is hard to aspire to be a Slay Queen!

Revenge of the Cockroach Matriarch

Mia felt the heaviness of her blanket pressing her in a way that she thought was unusual. She uncovered her face to look outside through a small window of her shack apartment, and saw a flicker of light. The sun was already out and she decided to wake up. It was only then that she realised the reason her blanket felt heavier than normal that morning. She also looked at the corrugated walls of the shack. All four corners were a blanket of black, brown and white patterns. They too neatly matched the patterns of her blanket and those of her two children still asleep. She noted this in silence and shock. She was silent for five minutes, breathing softly as if not to disturb the scene. Gazing at these colourful blankets, she recalled with both surprise and shock that this was the first time she had seen a white cockroach in her 55-year-old life. She also realised that the patterns were made according to the ages of the cockroaches, the small ones forming one pattern, and the bigger ones another but each sticking to their colour as if a curator was in charge of this meticulous arrangement.

It was also then that Mia realised that there was a buzz around the Van der Merwe Factory. It was where she and the other 100 or so residents had their shacks erected by Big Shot. He was the thug who collected exorbitant rent illegally. That is until he was arrested and convicted the week before for various crimes, including hijacking buildings, assault and money laundering. Mia was thereafter appointed by the council to run the building while it was to be developed by the Johannesburg City Council to house the residents in proper apartments, complete with services such as fumigation, cleaning and waste collection.

But just as they were celebrating the turn of fortune, now this: an army of cockroaches that had amassed overnight at the Van der Merwe Factory building in their tens of thousands, making themselves at home in all the 10 shacks and causing pandemonium and confusion among the shack dwellers. As to their origin, how they had deposited themselves in the shacks overnight, nobody had an idea. But they did. Just as they were about to replace chaos with order, now this happened. The cockroaches did not move. It was only when the residents noticed that the meals had gone. The pots containing last night's leftover food were licked so clean that there was no need to wash them, they thought. Some said it was the curse of the thief, Big Shot, avenging his loss of income and power over them. Some attributed the event to witchcraft. Others said it was the work of God. Some suggested a cleansing ceremony to get rid of Big Shot's ghosts. This was a good beginning after all the suffering from Big Shot's cruelty, they reasoned.

But Samson Ndlovu, who worked at Loop Gallery in Rosebank, which focused on edgy contemporary art, and whose duty was to hang artworks in preparation for exhibition openings, had a different perspective on all this. He saw art in all this, and with much excitement he took pictures of these naturally made art works. He reasoned that they were similar to textile tapestry works of visual artist Billie Ziyengwa that he had hung at Loop Gallery the previous month. He was therefore going to show the images to his boss, gallery manager Lesley Cohen, to convince her to put on this artwork as an exhibition. He was sure it was going to attract collectors with a good taste for art of a different kind.

But if the residents did so much as enter the imagination of the ever-creative Mia, they could have gotten a different picture of what had really happened.

“I know what happened,” Mia said to herself. “That fat one, the matriarch cockroach that sauntered on my blanket, when I disturbed it by waking up, must have been the chief organiser of this party. In the stillness of night, she must have called a mass meeting of her clan to orchestrate the plan, of course in their non-verbal language. Or sign language?”

Then Mia stood in front of her followers and spoke loudly: “I called you all here for an emergency meeting because I eavesdropped on the building manager this afternoon, speaking to her management committee. Of course, I was hungry and wanted to eat a bit in her kitchen before retreating to our usual daytime hiding place. These people are soon going to clean up this place, turning it from that which provides us with food into clean apartments that will of course take away our food. As you know, we are their enemy here as we crawl in dark silence into their kitchens to eat their leftovers, even causing disease for them. That is not our problem though. We have to live by exploiting the situation just like they also exploit situations, even each other. That is the nature of life. Have you seen the wages the bosses pay their employees for example? Have you seen how our number one enemy, the domestic workers, especially the cleaners in the wealthy suburbs, get paid small change while the bosses earn big money? After all, someone has to live off someone else in life. Have you seen how a hungry lion will not leave a duiker alone while it is starving to death? Likewise, we live off these people, their miseries of illness, even death due to disease from our feeding habits, is not our problem. It is theirs. What I am getting at is this: our lives will soon be snuffed out by cleanliness and order in this place. And we will soon be gone. That is inevitable as we all know. We witness death every day as whenever they see us, they squash us to nothingness. That is wherever and whenever they catch us crawling toward their unwashed plates for leftovers. Death is always imminent. But we have to die in style. Let us eat tonight and not retreat to our daytime hiding places. Let us lick every plate and every pot for leftovers, and

sweep clean every meal bag till there is nothing left. Let us invite neighbours from the next buildings for this feast. Let us eat till we are unable to move anymore. And in the morning, they will find us like that – a huge, beautiful blanket covering all the walls and floors of their shacks, and that way our memory will be etched in their imagination, long after we are dead. That way we will not die.

While reciting the actions of the matriarch cockroach, Mia was like someone acting on stage, her hands moving back and forth, her voice rising and falling like that of a gifted politician whose speeches move even the most mild-mannered member of the audience at a political rally. It was a comical act, and a performance worthy of a theatre performance.

“Tjoe! Tjoe! Buwa Malema! Speak, Commander-in-Chief Malema,” shouted Morena Ramodike, a well-known fan of Julius Malema, leader of the EFF. His affirmation was greeted with laughter.

It was then that Mia realised everyone was now looking at her strangely. She laughed loudly at the idea that her fellow residents thought she had gone crazy because of this blanket of cockroaches that had suddenly appeared in their lives. “Sorry bantu-we, it was to inject a bit of fun, to relax our nerves a bit under this sticky situation of the cockroaches. I am fine,” Mia said as she laughed. The onlookers relaxed their tense faces as well.

The fumigation team was quick to respond and the fumigation process was swift. It started with removing the blanket in Mia’s shack, before proceeding to each of the shacks. The colourful blanket was soon reduced to a mountain of cockroaches as the toxic material entered their bodies and destroyed them from inside.

They looked beautiful and clean, even in their death, Mia thought loudly. Samson Ndlovu smiled while capturing the clean-up operation on camera.

“The cockroach matriarch’s prophesy of dying in style has been fulfilled,” Mia exclaimed, while witnessing the last blanket of cockroaches on the walls of her shack collapse to the floor in a heap. It added to the mountain that kept on rising. She did not care anymore about the other residents thinking she was getting crazier and crazier by the minute.

“I can do with a bit of humour to calm my nerves after all,” Mia said as she started sweeping the floor of her shack.

Home Coming

Ike Shapiro flew into Johannesburg three days earlier. Already Parkhurst, with its village-like atmosphere, was starting to become unreal, felt like an old English village. Speed humps every 100 metres, Ike felt increasingly unsettled. 4th Street –old ladies walking their dogs on its pavements. Huge shiny cars, everyone struggling to find parking, underfed parking attendants' eyes buzzing with hunger, trying to squeeze cars into tiny available spaces on the pavement. His stomach lurched and he felt a sudden longing for his childhood suburb of Yeoville, the suburb in which he was born in

1972, in which he lived and left in 1993 for London, as a Wits graduate. London: home till now, until 72 hours earlier. Now he was back in South Africa, but it was not the one he had left.

Parkhurst: its well-maintained streets, big houses, even his auntie Christine's. He thought of his two-bedroomed flat back in London, the flat he shares with wife Nadine and their two teenage children John and Sylvia. Compared to what he saw here, not even he, with a decent salary as stockbroker for a firm on the London Stock Exchange, not even he could afford such a house and lifestyle in London. He took it all in. This got him thinking hard.

This was indeed a place for the in-crowd: the crowded restaurants, cannabis wellness shops, coffee shops, art galleries, posh boutiques selling what looked like designer clothes. Fuck it. He needed to get back to Yeoville. Forget his aunt and the paranoia as she said to him, "Please never go there. That place has changed so much, it is unrecognisable, Johannesburg, the murder capital of the world." Blah! Blah! Fuck that, he'd already tasted what freedom and happiness are in Yeoville.

He had caught glimpses of this other reality, driving from the OR Tambo International Airport, seeing beggars, some blind, some not, at traffic lights, grown up men in tattered dirty clothes, pushing trolleys loaded with garbage. All of them black. Something must be wrong in this free South Africa. Freedom is here, and yet not for everyone. A lot must still happen to better the lives of the majority.

And yet what he saw in Yeoville he admired, smiled at what he saw, noticed that the place had indeed changed. Just before crossing Grafton Street, he noticed a man pushing a trolley loaded with bananas, apples, oranges and wondered whether the man could make a living out of this. Then his thoughts were disturbed by another scene on the pavement of Grafton: a man stood next to what looked like a braai stand. Right there on the pavement! He approached the braai master cautiously. "This meat is tasty. Try it boss. You will not regret it. You will not be hungry again for the whole day, especially the gizzards. But

even the chicken feet are just as tasty. I see that you are a tourist. You need some taste of South African cuisine. This is it. Nothing beats street food in South Africa,” the man had said, and Ike gave him a R50 note. The man opened his mouth. He could not speak before Ike proceeded on his journey. He did not take the meal.

On his left Ike saw an area he recognised, however hazily. It teemed noisily with people in bars. Yes indeed, it’s the good old “Time Square”! This was confirmed by the fact that these two words stood, faded and peeling, upon an ancient signboard nearby. It was where he had met his girlfriend back then. Sandra Cohen. Like him at the time she was a student at Wits, studying for a BA degree majoring in politics.

The place was packed and the music was loud, perhaps too loud for a Sunday afternoon, Ike thought. The people drank beer from quarts, appearing happier than those in Parkhurst, he told himself. Maybe it’s true that money cannot buy happiness, he wondered quietly.

Back in Parkhurst, walking down the buzzing 4th Street, Ike’s attention was drawn to a petite woman drinking coffee in a restaurant packed mainly with white people, just a sprinkling of black faces. They wore dark suits and ties. They appeared to be in need of some sessions in a gym. They whispered to each other instead of talking. He thought of the crowd in Yeoville and smiled.

He joined Aunt Christine in the restaurant, and wondered how she would react if he told her the truth. That is the plan up his sleeve the very moment he landed at OR Tambo International Airport 72 hours ago. For Auntie Christine had made her opinion on Yeoville very clear to him, several times.

But what worried him the most was the news that he was to tell her about a decision he and Nadine had just made an hour earlier. Though Ike and Nadine had a long discussion, unsure whether it was the right decision, they both felt they needed to make a difference in their country of birth at the end.

When he called the number which was on the sign board hanging on a pole next to the sprawling Time Square building, two stories up, with the noisy pubs, hair salons, barbershops and God-knows what other businesses took space downstairs, with the words “For Sale” clearly written he got more than just curiosity fulfilled. Yes, the sprawling building, to be specific, what was left of Town Square after the building suffered successive years of neglect that reduced the historic structure to a shadow of its former modern looking self was in bad shape. But still something could be done to it, Ike thought.

“We can turn this building into a thriving cultural place that is sure to attract back the moneyed and wealthy bored by their suburban high walls and security fences. Of course we will have to do some work, hard work on the building, renovating, bringing it back to life once more. But for a mere R900 000, with a space that will accommodate five coffee type businesses downstairs, and at least two bars, this is indeed a diamond Nadine. The rest of the two-story building has capacity for 12 apartments, including the possibility to design a sleek a Penthouse to die for, for us on the roof top. We would also put security guards who will work 24 hours around the clock my love.”

Ike animatedly described to Nadine on the phone, who was quiet all along. Not interrupting her husband even once. He waited and the five seconds of waiting for a response from his wife seemed like were 10 minutes of agony. Unsure what her response would be, worried that perhaps the best way to convince her about his ‘radical idea’ was to get her to visit South Africa sometime and see herself what he was talking about.

“Did I hear you say yes....” He hesitated as he looked around and realized that he was jumping up and down like a child who had just picked up a lost balloon as passers-by in the streets had stopped. Looking at him with their mouths open to see this lone white man in this mood.

“I will then launch the dream coffee shop that I have always wanted to set up in Soho, but could not get to do it because of the crazy rentals here in London. I think Nadine’s Coffee Shop will do well there the way you have just described the place to me. Don’t you think so love?”

They both immediately agreed that it was bye to London with its lifestyle that they believed was at best cold, and at worst indifferent. It was time for a major shift and change in their lives, and for the better. Time to enjoy a vibrant life in South Africa and make the change in society that they felt was missing.

“Nadine and I have decided to buy a house. I mean a property in Yeoville.”

“What? Did I hear you properly?”

“I sent her the pictures of the buzzing street scene and she immediately agreed with me that that is here we would like to retire to. She liked particularly the massive Time Square building that we believe we could take turn into a gem with renovations. We believe we could do with the help of a London architect friend of ours. John Friedman is a highly regarded architect and urban planner, revered for his rare skill in turning old buildings into gems in in especially metropolitan areas. That will be in eight years’ time

though. I mean relocating here permanently, though we will be travelling frequently to South Africa in between.”

There was total silence at the table.

Death Killed It

“So, you killed Udoh.” I looked at M’du, felt my heart pumping harder than a few seconds before I met him. My body temperature rose. I looked through the window to see if diners in Niki’s Oasis Jazz Restaurant could see us. I looked him in his eyes without saying a single word, surveying him from toe to head, something I had not done for the 20 odd years that I had known him. For the first time, I noticed that he was massively built, his muscles protruding from his short-sleeved shirt, and I found myself suppressing a shiver. His muscles appeared puffed up, as if ready for action in a boxing ring.

It was then that I decided it was not a good idea after all, not in full view of everyone inside Niki’s Oasis, the place my friends and I had frequented since it was started in 1995, especially on weekends whenever there was a jazz performance; particularly if we were in the company of women we wanted to impress with our not-so-good dance moves. I did not want to be seen tussling with this huge man who now carried the body of a rugby player.

He became this big when he started going to the gym in recent months, the one nearby at Bree Taxi Rank, the R99 per month one. Yes, that one that always places ladies that show off their nicely packed bodies at the entrance, wooing passers-by to sign up. This explained the mystery of his muscles.

As I reflected on what M’du had just said to me, provoking me, I got angrier by the second, especially because I had not killed him. In fact, I had reached a decision to kill it rather. Not him. That was already a done deal. And now this!

It was at exactly that moment that my mind was taken back to the years of a journey that was meant to be a life-long friendship of mutual respect and love; a sharing of life’s experiences, the good and the bad with Udoh. I remembered the genesis of our friendship. It started 20 years ago at Windybrow Theatre in Hillbrow. He worked there as a publicist for shows and I frequented the theatre a lot, writing reviews for a daily rag. That paid me enough for just buying food, transport to work and rental for my flat in Yeoville.

Whatever else was left from my salary was for booze, clothes and entertaining women of course. That was it. Udoh liked booze too. And just like me, he drank Castle Lager as if SAB was going to close down the next week. You know what you do when you hear that something is going to come to a final end for good. If, anything good came out of that mutual habit, it is that it made us natural drinking partners; making life a little less complicated whenever we were drinking together. This was especially so when one was not in a position to buy for oneself, a limitation that applied especially to me. Udoh did not mind though, so it seemed. In fact, he appeared to enjoy buying his friends drinks, particularly when they were broke.

At the beginning of our friendship, I thought seriously about this kind of behaviour. It struck me as weird, even crazy. After all, who likes buying perpetually broke people drinks in the name of friendship these days? But as the years went by, I understood why he did what he did. It was a rude awakening.

In fact, no sooner did I understand him than I stopped calling him Udoh. I started toying around with names, such as Udoh the Narcissist, Udoh the Liar, Udoh the beer philanthropist, Udoh the impressionist, Udoh the actor, Udoh the manipulator, Udoh the arrogant bastard. God knows what else I labelled him before finally settling on Amplifier after meticulously eliminating the rest of the labels. I thought that all of the labels captured his personality perfectly because the others were a little too harsh. After all, he was a friend. Besides, Amplifier has a musical reference to it which suited his personality perfectly. So, I settled on it.

The only other person who knew this name in our circle of friends was Bobo. Bobo and I made a vow that under no circumstances must Udoh know this.

As if it might make me feel better, I appropriated this renaming strategy from my childhood friend Simon. As we grew up in our neighbourhood village in far-flung Limpopo Simon had the habit of giving all his friends nicknames. And he demanded they must be kept secret from the victims of his wicked childhood machinations, which is the reason to this day that I do not know which nickname Simon gave me. All my friends kept mum about it, some of them even carrying the secret to the grave with them.

“What if he finds out about this name?” Bobo once whispered as we gulped our drinks at De Peak. Amplifier was busy as usual, playing pool with his friends after buying the first round, followed, of course, by more rounds as we continually declared our poverty to him. He always met these declarations with a smile, as if he had just received good news. Good news such as his girlfriend being pregnant. She had a cushy job at the SABC and was indeed pretty, if not beautiful.

“Fulufhelo is a big catch, she drives a big car, has a place of her own, a mansion in Sandton,” Amplifier had told me after their second date. Two months later, they were living together in her two-roomed flat in Morningside, swanky Sandton where the wealthy live in Johannesburg. But on my first visit there I noticed that in her parking space there was no big car. In fact, her white Mini Cooper looked great. I guess to someone like Amplifier who neither had a driver’s license nor a car, a Mini Cooper is a big car. I also guessed that having been plucked off by this relationship from his humble abode – a two roomed flat attached to the same building where Luthuli House, the ANC headquarters in Johannesburg CBD is – to a two bedroomed flat in Sandton was a big deal, a mansion to Amplifier. But I judged it wise not to talk about the big car or the mansion to him from that day onwards. But of course, Fulu, as we called her, in her late 30s with her ready smile and bubbling personality, was a highly desirable woman in Johannesburg’s social and professional circles, especially for those looking for a stable relationship, like Amplifier.

If there was one thing that Amplifier got right, it was that. Had it not been for the fact that Fulu is short, and I am of middle height, I would have hit on her a long time ago. Way before Amplifier did. But the thought of having short children somehow put me off. But of course, I did not tell Amplifier all this, now that they were in a stable relationship. In fact, it was rumoured that he had already paid lobolo for her in the form of seven fat cows. Bobo told me all this when we were in a gossiping mood at Niki’s Oasis the other day after Amplifier had gone to the bathroom.

In answer, I just smiled, distracted by this tall young woman who whizzed past our table at the entrance of De Peak. She headed in the direction of the bar, wearing a white top that revealed her cleavage. Her tight pair of blue jeans elevated her desirability to another level. I could clearly see the contours of her calves. The black high heel shoes exaggerated her height. Had it not been for the fact that she was light in complexion, she could easily have passed for Naomi Campbell. That is, if she had the coffee skin colour of the international model, I thought. Her name was Bella, one of the most desired women at De Peak. Every drunkard there hoped one day she would pick them for a lay. I couldn’t blame them.

“I think some of these horny men actually come to De Peak in the hope that Bella one day will pick them for a lay.” Bobo finally spoke to break the awkward silence since Bella had passed our way. He motioned for more drinks from Amplifier who was definitely destined for a win at the pool table.

“My friends you can order more drinks. The tab is mine. I know that you are as poor as a church mouse,” Amplifier bellowed as he sunk the winning ball. He smiled. We smiled even more. “*Us’ka Bora*

Mureki". After all, do not bore the one who buys drinks, an amapiano artist from Limpopo advised in his hit song. We applauded for even more effect. We thanked the amapiano artist for this crucial advice, especially during crucial times such as this time. When we needed Udogh's generosity.

But suddenly, instead of getting excited I actually got angry. I remembered why this time I could not afford a drink. If I got that money I had worked for, I would not be in this situation of begging for drinks in De Peak from the likes of Amplifier. I thought about this in silence of course.

"Let us drink as fast as we can because the tables may be turned. And if that happened, we are doomed," Bobo said as he indicated that my drink was on the table. He disturbed my thought process. My mind was far away. That memory was unsettling. But I remembered the series of events detail by detail.

On that Sunday afternoon in Xai Xai Restaurant and Bar in Melville, Amplifier had said, as a way of sealing that deal, "For this job, you will get your R30 000, while I get my other half. All we need to do is to place the story of Vusi's theatre group in two or three newspapers. This is of course alongside one radio interview and one TV interview appearance. Then my friend you will join the league of the rich where I am. What must happen is that you work on your contacts in the print media while I work on the TV and radio contacts. With the assistance of course of my well networked wife Fulu who controls the radio and TV sectors in this country as you know, that part of my job, consider it done right away. Do you then know what that means my friend?"

"No, I don't." "Well let me tell you what that means. It means you have to work your ass off to play catch up with smart business guys like me." He laughed loudly, only to be stopped by sudden coughing. I did not laugh. I was annoyed, but chose to be silent about what I had known to be a well-rehearsed public performance by Udogh, who will never let an opportunity like this pass. It indeed achieved its intended effect. I saw him smiling. Satisfied.

Everyone looked our way in the overcrowded restaurant. They had heard every single word Amplifier had uttered about this publicity gig he had roped me into. He was not someone known for modesty. That unsettled me. I guess it touched my ego in the wrong way. However, I ignored the disrespect and went ahead with it because I needed the money badly. After all, the rag I contributed to had forgotten to pay my invoice for that month. You cannot eat ego after all, I concluded, as I swallowed my pride.

Two weeks later we were in the same Xai Xai, having been invited by Amplifier again, ostensibly for a drink. I found him with two chicks. This is what we called women that carried the potential for getting laid for us. We of course called them chicks when they were out of earshot. But when they were close enough to hear us, we always remembered to address them as ladies. Ladies need to be respected, especially by those hoping to get laid. We understood that art of seduction very well.

“Makwavo, meet the two bombshells, Vanessa on my right and Lu on my left. Ladies, please meet my friend of 30 years, Makwavo, a stringer with one of the local rags. He contributes theatre reviews. And of course, being as it is, writing for newspapers does not bring you enough money, as you may know. But with friends who are well positioned in society, especially with connections to the highest office in the African National Congress, he does not have to struggle that much. I give him gigs here and there when I have enough tenders on my plate. And, of course drinks are on me. It is a good life to have well-to-do friends.” Vanessa and Lu looked at each other, without uttering a single word.

Their faces spoke a lot though. I fidgeted. Embarrassed on behalf of my friend.

The two ladies: Vanessa, long blonde hair, blue eyes, a sharp nose. Lu: a broad flat nose, neat black dread locks, plaited, looking healthy. Her hair like that of models one often sees in glamour magazines, advertising natural hair products. She looked at me intently. I thought the gaze of both of them was longer than normal, especially Vanessa’s. That of Lu, well, I was not quite sure what to make of it. She could be feeling pity on me because of my financial struggle credentials that Amplifier had just splashed all over the table, but the look of Vanessa? Definitely, I am old enough to know when a woman is interested in me. The territory had been marked.

“But ladies not to worry about the prospect of washing dishes because I am here and my friend of 30 years can attest to the fact that not even once, have I let him down to wash dishes in a restaurant. For the past 30 years we have been best friends, never. If you will excuse me, let me tell you the story of how one day I extricated him from a sticky situation...”.

“Excuse me, I am dashing to the bathrooms,” Vanessa interrupted him. I almost chuckled but managed to contain myself.

She stood and headed to the bathrooms at the back of the bar. But as she stood up, she looked at me with the same intensity she demonstrated earlier on. I got the message and followed her. But instead of going to the ladies, when we were in the courtyard between the restaurant and the bathrooms, she

turned around, faced me and hugged me. It was a tight and lengthy hug. I struggled to contain myself, relieved somewhat when she slowly detached herself from me. I needed her to hold me again though. She kissed my lips, nothing serious, just a baby kiss before disappearing into the ladies toilet. The short encounter with this blonde felt intense and I waited for her. "Wait for me right here" she had said, "Do not move an inch. Just give me a moment. I will be right back". I was shocked, but not surprised because I had read her mind from that intense look on her face at the table.

That one minute was a very long wait. My body temperature rose, wild thoughts played havoc in my mind and the longing descended to between my legs.

"Here is my number. I expect a call from you as soon as you leave that idiot friend of yours with a big ego but a small...." Her sentence was interrupted by the appearance of Amplifier who had clearly followed us. She ignored his presence and handed me a piece of toilet paper with her number scribbled on it. Quickly, I shoved it into my trousers' pocket without saying a word. I was glad that Amplifier did not respond to what Vanessa had just said.

"Oh! Am I disturbing something? Of course I am not hey Vanessa? Let's go back and drink. Without you at the table things are not the same. Your friend is busy on the phone calling I do not know who. She has been on the phone ever since you guys vanished. She is actually too anti-social for my liking, unlike you Vanessa, right?" I was intrigued by Udoh's choice of word vanish. But I chose to keep quiet.

Vanessa did not respond either. We followed him back to the table. And just as he had said, Lu had left the table and was on her phone on the pavement of the busy 7th Street. But as soon as she saw us, she cut her call and joined us. Vanessa and I looked at each other, but said nothing. I thought I saw Udoh's face tightening.

"Sarah, be busy and give me and my friends here another round. In fact, let us have shooters. Is that not so Vanessa?" asked Amplifier. But before Vanessa could answer he continued, "Not to worry about paying. Like I said right now, I am loaded. Government has just paid me three Metres (R3million) this afternoon. That is why when I saw you guys seated there alone while I was waiting for my friend Makwavo here, I thought well why not celebrate with the two bombshells? I always tell my friend here that if he wants to live a good life, a profitable life, he must join the Movement. After all, it is the ruling party. Besides, when its leaders say the ANC will rule until Jesus returns, it is neither blasphemy nor a lie." He looked at them for 10 seconds as if expecting a reaction. He got nothing. He continued.

“In fact, before I forget, let me pay my miserable friend here 30 grand. Just to thank him for his assistance with print media, and also just to look after him as a caring friend who will not let those close to him suffer while I am enjoying a good life.”

“Beep!” I looked at my phone and R1500 had just been paid from an FNB account into my FNB account. Amplifier looked at me, and then at the ladies. He smiled. I of course did not ask about the R30 000 he had just declared to all and sundry that he was paying me.

“I have just paid him 30 grand, and I will not deduct anything from his fee of R60 000 for his services. In fact, had it not been for the fact that I am worried about reaching my transaction limit today, as I am not sure for how long we will be here celebrating a good life together, I would have paid him his whole fee of R60000 in advance. This is what we call friends with benefits. Hey! Is that not so Vanessa?”

“So do you get to be invited to theatre Makwavo?” Vanessa asked, with her now familiar gaze. I smiled before answering her. I liked the fact that she did not have time for Udoh.

“I am actually going to see John Kani’s *Nothing But the Truth* this Friday. It is opening for another season at the Market Theatre. And if you want, you can...”

“I have four tickets”, Amplifier interrupted, “you are welcome to join me. Makwavo can cancel his tickets or donate them to other people looking for comps. Personally, I do not do comps. Your two tickets are those comps that get you to sit right at the back. Is that not so Makwavo? You can throw those away and we go in with mine as these will give us access to premium seats with a good view of the stage,” said Amplifier. At that exact time Sarah brought the order. He had interrupted me. Again.

Of course, I fumed but did not show it. My tickets were right at the front, three rows from the stage, giving one a clear view of the stage. Again, I chose silence.

After we downed the drinks, Vanessa and Lu looked at each other in a way that women do when they are communicating something that they do not want the male company to know. But then

Vanessa looked at me, once again that look I had come to know. I got the message and stood up.

“Udoh thank you for your drinks. It has been a pleasure to meet you. Unfortunately, Lu has some emergency at home. That is why she was constantly on the phone. It is not something to worry about though. It is not that serious. But we have to leave,” Vanessa said and focused on me again. She continued, “Makwavo, you know what to do. I expect your call tomorrow so that you and I can attend

Nothing but the Truth. I hope that is fine with you. Please WhatsApp me after an hour. It is not a request; it is a command". She giggled before picking up her bag.

"What are you waiting for? Stand up and do the right thing."

The hug was tight. When her small pink lips, locked with my big brown lips, I felt a sensation more powerful than the one I had felt when she gave me that tender kiss earlier on. My left eye landed on Amplifier's face. It was screwed up, seeming to have suddenly turned blue like those of a gunman who was about to pull a trigger on his cheating girlfriend and her lover. I suppressed a smile. Vanessa and I disengaged from each other. Slowly, she picked up her phone and her handbag from the table. They left.

"These are Slay queens. If I were you, I would stay away from Vanessa, especially considering your financial position, which is precarious right now. That R1500 is just an advance on the R30 000 gig. I have used my own savings to pay you so that you can survive until next week when they pay me," Amplifier said. He settled the bill. We went our separate ways. I almost chuckled but preserved it till I was in the Uber.

At that moment I thought it not wise to talk about the R30 000 he had announced as having just paid me. I also did not want to raise the issue of the R1500 as a donation of sorts, and not part of a down payment on the R30 000 fee he had agreed to pay me for my services. After all, the R1500 was going to make a difference in my life. I would have enough to go by till next week when he would pay me the rest of the money, I thought. I got into my e-hailing taxi heading home to Maboneng. That is when I let out the suppressed laugh. The Uber driver must have thought I had gone crazy laughing alone.

A month went by and I remained unpaid. Each time I reached Amplifier, he was in a meeting and would call me as soon as he finished. His meetings would not end. Sometimes his phone would ring and he would not pick up. WhatsApps, text messages, audio messages – they all came to naught. I could feel myself going from frustration to anger. I started remembering the several incidents in our 30-year-old friendship when he cut me short on business deals on several occasions. Each time, I would accept an apology and an explanation that plainly did not make sense at all. Life would go on as if nothing had happened.

And now this! And to make it worse, Bobo would tell me stories about how every night Amplifier would invite him to a drinks party where he splurged on liquor and food and of course without me. He was telling me this because he too had a fall out recently with Amplifier. This is after one day he portrayed

him as a poverty-stricken person, who managed to get by because he, Amplifier, was taking care of him. Amplifier said all these things in front of women. Bobo, just like me, had had enough with Amplifier.

“To tell you the truth I am choosing sobriety over drunkenness. I have had enough hangovers and suffering such constant ridicule in front of people” Bobo complained to me.

It was then that I decided I was going to get what belonged to me from Amplifier. After which, I was going to have nothing to do with him. I was going to kill it, this 30 year long relationship once and for all. It is a doomed relationship that needs to be killed. Right now. But first I needed to get what rightfully belongs to me, and then, tell him. That I am killing the friendship, if at all it is that, once and for all. I am tired of being humiliated in front of strangers by this pompous man. I said all this in silence. To myself.

“Dear Udoh. Good morning and I trust that this finds you well. Can you please pay my invoice for the services rendered? Regards, Makwavo.” It was a short and straightforward inbox message, to which he responded immediately: “Fuck you, my health first. Jou Moer.

I was stunned to silence. It took me a week figuring out how to deal with this message. But, if there was something I was sure about, it was to disassociate myself from him and our friendship after this insult. I was going to kill it as soon as I got my money from him, I repeated the thought to myself. I was fuming. He had gone too far.

Two days later I received a WhatsApp audio message from Fulu: “Udoh is dead. It happened this morning at Bara where he was admitted. They say he was admitted last night and he had pneumonia. I did not even know till this morning as I was looking for him. I was about to call the police station to report him as a missing person when I got this call from the hospital.”

This news meant that death had killed the relationship between me and Amplifier, and that I no longer had the opportunity to kill it myself, I thought, with a hint of regret.

Punishment of Pleasure

“Why didn’t you come to the jazz at Gallery Momo last Saturday?” she demands. She looks at me intently, surveying the movements of my lips and eyes. It is as if these would tell her whether I am lying or not. This is the question I dreaded the most for the whole week. It consumed me as I drove here for our breakfast date with her at our, actually her, favourite place, Xai Xai. After breakfast we have a date

with Dean, the famous Brixton based cartoonist turned equally famous tattooist in the neighbouring suburb. This is where Jackie will get another tattoo on her left arm. At least until the events that unfolded this afternoon that is what I thought was going to happen. "This one is a gift to you, my fucked-up lover," she had said to me that morning. I knew right away that there was going to be trouble in Paradise. But never thought it was going to go the way it did. In hindsight I should have even known better. But I didn't.

Rustic, with an eccentric looking mixed crowd of people: black or white, young bohemian women, who should be behind their desks studying instead of spending their precious time at Xai Xai in Melville. Some come here on their own but mostly with their partners. There are also white middle aged, stylishly dressed women, most of them on their own. Their problems seem to be anything but money. They look like they have reached menopause but this does not stop their eyes darting everywhere, especially when they see a young man walk in unaccompanied. There are old white men wearing funny hats who seem to have a good relationship with money. Like those horse riders, the ones that do it for fun on Sundays at farms around Joburg. Yes, those wealthy ones that are bored with their lives.

These men here could be dining in some of the best places around Joburg. But for one reason or another they choose to spend their money here. These men at Xai Xai look like they cannot score more than one round a week with their wives or partners. But here, Xai Xai seems to get their libidos back, giving them the sexual boost long depleted by either old age or disease. Chatting up every young woman that walks in, black or white, unaccompanied or accompanied, it does not matter to them.

They often do this when their partners dash to the toilet to answer the call of nature. The old vultures quickly sneak to the table, politely offering the young lady and of course their partner, the next round. That is, if she does not mind.

They often don't mind at Xai Xai. How they think the partner will take it when he discovers who the generous benefactor is, I have no idea. They seem not to care though. Rumour has it that some of the old folk actually score in the toilet at the back. In fact, that is where the rumour of them failing to perform where and when it matters most came from.

But my Jackie will not consider any other restaurant in Melville besides Xai Xai, for some reason, though I like her for her craziness. Which man would not like such a woman who gets turned on by simply being in strange places? Doing what she likes the most: toilet, hair salon, tattoo shop, prison and at the back of a bus full of passengers. I have the rumours, though never bothered to find out, that women like her,

do these sorts of things to take control of their sex life, instead of surrendering the power to men to take the lead when it comes to sex matters.

We almost did it the other day in the back of the Red Bus full of tourists, the one that transports tourists around Johannesburg. One day she tried to coerce me to go to Johannesburg Prison, the one they call Sun City, to visit a distant cousin of hers who is serving a sentence there for conviction on charges of date rape. I knew what was on her mind once we were there. But, helpless, there was nothing I could do. I was only saved by the fact that she could not remember her cousin's name and I was relieved as we drove back. As her face frowned, I suppressed a smile. But I knew the game was not over yet. It was no time to celebrate. I admired Jackie's courage sometimes. But at times, she appeared to be too much. Too much in charge when it comes to our relationship and the direction it must take.

For the past two months, I have even forgotten how many times we have had drunken nights at Xai Xai. Not to talk about our thing in the toilet. If the toilet walls were human, they could write a whole book on our sexcapades, not to talk about those of others. Xai Xai could certainly be called a house of sin by some but it also possesses this allure that is hard to pin down. It is certainly not a place to which the upright gentleman would take his first date. But my Jackie, my crazy girlfriend of exactly two months, loves it madly. She likes to be in full control of everything. She is the director of this drama of life for the two months that we have been involved, while I am relegated to the role of a follower. This is the first time I have met such a woman in my life. Jackie is another story. It is sometimes scary.

I had carefully prepared for a question I knew she would ask, having rehearsed the answer with my Nigger Thami the whole week, blaming myself for having listened to Thami. Going to brothels is after all not my thing, let alone the infamous Summit Club in Hillbrow. But anyway, I did nothing, besides watching those girls do pole dancing. As for Thami, well I don't know, especially when he disappeared upstairs with the tall-dark woman who claimed she came from Rwanda, for a "smoke break" in her room. But anyway, here I am, meeting my lovely Jackie for breakfast at her favourite place, Xai Xai.

"When she asks you the question, look her straight in the eye. Turn gently and not abruptly. Answer as quickly as possible. Don't blink. The first word that must come out of your mouth though is sorry.

Then immediately tell her about the problems of your green beetle. The infamous Green Mamba.

How again this 53-year-old age mate of yours let you down...." "But, Thami. Hang on," I replied.

“But what Tims? I know you have told this story of yours of the problems with your Green Mamba many times to her since you guys hooked up. It does not matter. No stress. And by the way, you must consider sending this *skorokoro* of yours to the Johannesburg Transport Museum now. They love collecting them in fact.

But seriously, I do not know how many times I have told you to get rid of it and get a proper car. Just like other Niggers who ride powerful cars. Monsters on the road that can deal with even the biggest pothole in this city. Let alone taming the craziest of chicks in the world. Anyway, let me tell you how to handle crazy white women such as your Jackie, women who like dominating men in a relationship. Tell her the same lie again and again. Trust me Nigger. She will end up believing you. And have you forgotten the story of the German propagandist we discovered during our university years? What was his name again? The one who kept on telling lies during

Hitler’s moments of madness? Gobill something....”

“Paul Joseph Goebbels, you mean?”

“Yes, whatever his name was. His lies worked. A good number of Germans ended up believing him and his lies, even when at the back of their minds they knew that he was lying, the same thing as with women Tims. I mean how many times do we do fuck ups and we make up with them by telling them how much we love them. Women cannot resist the L word. Even as at the back of their mind they know very well that the Nigger is lying through their teeth. They do not care. They just want to hear that magic word. Tell it again and again, and you then become a conqueror. Not the conquered.

That way you will enjoy pussy without hassles my Nigger,” Thami advised me. But at the back of my mind, I doubted if this would work with Jackie. She is simply too smart to buy such crap.

Predictably, my excuse provoked this spirited reply from Jackie – “You are going to pay for this once we reach Dean’s Tattoo shop. And please do not even attempt to tell me the story of your Green Mamba. Try another lie this time. Maybe it will stick. However, whatever lie you tell, it is not going to stop what will happen in Dean’s tattoo shop a few minutes from now. This is not an empty threat Tims. It is going to be a mess today. You better start your Green Nightmare now. Use your magic to cough it into action this time. I want someone to come out of that place drained and weak. Energy sapped and transferred into me. I will have to carry you on my back to the car after that.”

“But Jackie you know that we cannot do it in front of Dean, especially as he does your tattoo. Besides, he will not take it lightly. It is like a violation of his dignity. And ours too.”

She looked serious, and the look scared me. “Dignity, are you crazy now? What dignity? What has this to do with the fucking dignity or lack of it? In fact, I want you to suck me dry in front of him, just as he starts his tattoo sketch of the letter T of your name. I want you to do it slowly. Pull down my pants. Position yourself strategically for action. Start with your fingers, moving from my thighs right up. Touch my clit gently. I want to feel me getting wet. Then I want to feel your tongue right there, exploring the territory. Travelling to where it has not been before, all the way to the crevices and crannies, the contours of my pussy. As I moan the moans of pleasure, I want to hear you take off your pants. I want to hear you whip out your dick. Feel you thrust it in. I want to feel it everywhere, throbbing in every corner of my V. You must come in me, just as I also come. Timing is everything. We will take a rest as Dean puts the final touches of the letter M of your name.”

“But, but Jackie....”

“But what, shut the fuck up. I am still talking Tims. Anyway, as he starts the S sketch, I will start caressing your dick, slowly till it comes alive. Waking up and becoming stronger and stronger by the second again. I want to feel it as it expands in width and extends its length. And then rising just like a cobra ready to strike. Do you hear me Mr. Dignity? It is going to be crazy today in that fucking tattoo shop. It’s true. I swear to God.”

“Mmm. But can I please start the car as we will be late for our appointment with Dean?” “Start the fucking car right now. Drive fast. The punishment of pleasure is waiting for someone today, I swear. Trust me.” Vroom!

“Ok. Stop,” she yelled, as she whipped out the phone from her handbag. She started typing something on the phone. My phone beeped. I looked at the phone. The words were clear. It was like I was in a dream. No, a nightmare. “Go and fuck yourself. Actually no. Fuck your bitches at The Summit. It is over between us. Right now.”

She abruptly opened the door and banked it, and opened it again. Then she spoke with finality. “Next time you must hide location on your phone, so that your next stupid girlfriend, does not know when you are visiting brothels.”

The handbag

The suburb of Yeoville in Johannesburg is colloquially referred to as the United States of Africa. In every street, every pub and every shop you hear many languages of the continent. On famous Rocky Street, there is a bar called Casanova, popular with locals. Here you will find people who work in the only bank left in this suburb, Nedbank. Nearby there is the betting house Supa Bet, Boxer Shop, Shoprite and other small businesses, such as saloons selling fake, but expensive human hair, mostly shaved off the heads of poor blonde women God-knows from where, and neatly packaged and shaped to the African continent. This is for the benefit for those who want to look blonde.

Of course there are those that work the streets: tsotsis, prostitutes, conmen and robbers. It is here where they quench their thirst after a hard day at work, enjoying sundowners as they also enjoy a game of pool, always overcrowded, rowdy and argumentative. In fact, there is more betting than just playing for fun on the bar's only two pool tables.

Here the whole of Africa is to be found – Congolese, Zimbabweans, Malawians, Zambians, Nigerians, and so forth and so on, mainly men. This crowd would definitely not please members of the vigilante group Operation Dudula if ever they happen to pass by. Dudula accuses these Africans of a myriad of crimes: trafficking in women, trafficking in children, drug dealing, stealing women from South African men, money laundering, zama zamas. Soon the crime of State capture may be added.

I personally discovered this place when I moved into the neighbourhood six months ago, looking for a place where I could have a drink in total anonymity.

It was a big mistake. Because soon after setting foot in you get friends as this crowd will not leave you alone. They will talk to you, engage you, and push you until you acknowledge and befriend them. Such is the life of Casanova people.

But there is something that eventually touched me about the Casanova crowd. They exude a relaxed attitude. These are people who have banished the memory of the painful scars of life into a receding distant memory. To them the present is more important than the past and the uncertainties of the future. They are saying fuck the past. Enjoy the present. Do not worry about the future. The future will take care of itself.

This is how I ended up becoming friends with Morris. But we call him The Toothless Bulldog. How he lost his two upper front teeth is a story of legend at Casanova. Those who are generous with their

explanations say it is because of the burgers that he likes eating from the nearby McDonald's. Those not generous give a more sinister explanation for it.

"He lost his teeth because of his affinity for sucking pussy. In fact, The Toothless Bulldog prefers sucking to penetration," Omeh the Nigerian, the one known for embellishing everything, once volunteered one Sunday afternoon. He appeared drunk, making it hard for anyone sober to believe his theory.

In recent days the bar has been abuzz. Gossip flying left, right and centre. Talk about gossip being the preserve of women only! Some say the sudden bulge in our favourite bar lady Vicky's handbag is due to condoms that she always carries, just in case.

Marko claims to have been a child soldier in the Democratic Republic of Congo and eventually escaped the burden of war by running away, travelling by foot all the way to South Africa 10 years ago. None of us of course believe his story, but we let him be, choosing peace over drunken arguments over which there will be no victor. Anyway, Marko claims that what is in Vicky's bulging bag is definitely a pistol. Suddenly there is curiosity, but then doubts set in among the group.

Tony, whom we nickname Dwarf because he is so short that he can only reach the waist of his fellow pool layers when standing upright, also claims to know what is in Vicky's bag. He says she has stuffed up papers and stones to scare off her estranged fellow Congolese boyfriend that she has just dumped. The man does not want to let go and therefore the bulging bag must be seen to carry a dangerous weapon. We laugh, and not because we believe his story, but because of the juicy part of the jealousy boyfriend.

Personally, I have no clue about what is in Vicky's bag, though I do notice the bulge. I have also seen that in recent days she has withdrawn from the rest of us. Not engaging us even as we try to flirt. This of course has left a lot of us who claim to have perfected the art of fluttery disappointed of course.

But The Toothless Bulldog came to me last week out of the blue, claiming to have solved the puzzle of the bulge in Vicky's bag. I naturally became curious, though suspicious.

"Had it not been for the young men who work the streets, and some of whom from time to time come to drink at Casanova, we would be talking a different language as far as Vicky's life is concerned.

One guy's pants were already down to his knees. He was almost done removing Vicky's underwear while two of his colleagues had pinned her hands down, preparing to rape her while waiting for their turn. This is when suddenly pandemonium broke out. The young street tsotsis would have none of it.

They descended on the misfits like a hurricane. Knives were pulled out between the two gangs. There was blood on the floor. Though nobody died in the skirmish, certainly some of the gang members will have some explanation to do to their loved ones for the scars they sustained in what is now known in the streets as the Yeoville Battle to Save Vicky. Anyway, Vicky's gang made sure that, she reached her flat safely, a mere two streets way from Casanova eventually. It was after midnight, during closing time, when this happened," Toothless Bulldog offered me his own version of what happened to our beloved Vicky. I was shell-shocked at first, but calmed down before Toothless Bulldog noticed my doubting face.

"For sure that is how Vicky ended up with that pepper spray in her bag," insisted The Toothless Bulldog. He must have after all discerned my doubt because he added, "Case closed and the riddle is solved, ladies and gentlemen who is next to buy drinks as we celebrate." He spoke with finality.

Marko responded to Toothless Bulldog by asserting, "I know what is troubling our beloved Vicky."

But Dwarf contested, "Not only do I know what is troubling Vicky, but also what is in her bag."

"Nkosi, Please God," I protested. "Please save us from these drunkards. And if you guys have nothing else to talk about today, just do the usual. Play pool. Bet against each other. Argue with each other. Go to the toilet and masturbate. Anything but talk about things you know nothing about. Anyway, let us give her space, and maybe one of these days she will tell us what is troubling her. Most importantly, what weapon of destruction she is carrying in her handbag, and which fool is it meant for among the drunkards." We all laughed except Toothless Bulldog.

The Toothless Bulldog replied, "Themba hold on. The guys have a point, and they are not far off the mark. Do not shut them down. Isn't this country of yours respected for freedom of speech? After all you say you do not know why Vanessa has suddenly withdrawn from all of us."

"Guys stop it. I have heard everything. "There was silence as everyone looked in the direction of the bar.

And then Vicky continued. "I mean everything. I am not deaf. None of you is correct so far. But guess what, here is a challenge to you. Whoever solves this puzzle first, will have a date with me. Ther two of us to a restaurant of your choice, with the only condition being that I must not be in Yeoville, but anywhere such as Rosebank, Sandton and even Bedfordview I don't mind. I give all of you a week to come with the answer."

There was pandemonium in the pub, as people excitedly greeted the news of our beloved bar lady's challenge with enthusiasm. It was hard to hear what everyone was saying as they were all speaking at the same time. But I thought I heard The Toothless Bulldog mention something about the money he still owes his inyanga back home in DRC, and how difficult it then was to approach him to solve the problem of Vicky's bulging handbag.

These streets

It is a place whose streets drip with blood. When it rains, the blood finds its way into the Jukskei River. The blood of victims is washed away with other trash from the city. The Jukskei River does not only carry thrown away garbage from the city right into the ocean. It is also burdened with carrying the blood of both the city street victims and that of the victimisers.

Vimba! Catch him! They shout. The next thing, he is down. This is not his day as old men and old women, even teenagers join the party of the aggrieved. They give him poetic justice. He uses knives to rob and kill so he too must die by knife. There is shouting, whistling, singing, sjamboks, axes, rocks, guns and other weapons wielded by the angry crowd raining down on their victim. Soon he is down and someone with a hammer is restrained from using it on the fallen man. But no! He must feel the pain. He must die slowly. As the weapons rain down on his body, he first lets out a loud cry of pain, which soon fades slowly into a whisper of agony and death and his cry for forgiveness is drowned out by the frenzy of whistling, singing and shouting. Then there is silence. Nobody knows what happened. The conspiracy and complicity of the wounded and the aggrieved take over.

Soon there are police sirens and the place declared a crime scene, barricaded by the usual plastic tape. The ambulance picks up the body that is now barely dressed. The case is closed, becoming just another statistic as the victim's life is not saved by the arrival of the police. It is too late and this one gone forever, joining his ancestors.

If lucky, the police will arrive just in time to rescue him and save whatever is left of his battered life. He is a criminal, they charge, always at the top of their voices as they bay for blood. The blood of those they accuse of causing mayhem in Berea and the neighbourhoods of Yeoville and Hillbrow.

These tsotsis terrorise the community, they rob the innocent, people live in fear here, they claim. Everyone in this community has been a victim: losing wallets, handbags and cellphones, they point out.

The unlucky ones even their lives, they add. The victimisers draw blood using their sharp knives, plunging them deep into their victim's flesh, they describe in graphic terms. They slice parts of their bodies like a hungry crocodile would do to a victim. They are brutal, they are not human. They are predators of the worst kind. They show no mercy to the black bodies in the streets, we too must not show mercy to them, they deserve mob justice. They sing the usual chorus of the angry.

The streets are defined by frequent spasms of violence. The victims, in the name of defence for the community, they too become victims of their own actions. They and the criminals become one, losing part of their soul in this violence as their conscience becomes numbed, brains becoming distorted. Both adults and children become one in this action of the angry in the streets as they lose their Ubuntu. The blood of both the victims and the victimisers meets at the mouth of Jukskei River, carried by raging water, straight into the ocean.

The blood of both the victimisers and the victims ends up in a permanent home in the ocean, feeding hungry crocodiles and fish which cannot distinguish the blood of the victimisers from that of the victims. God save Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville as one day the whole community will drown in its own blood, choking to a death of its own making as the streets eat their own children.

The White Man's Dog

Suddenly someone was behind me and of that I was certain, what with those quick steps behind me. I could hear him gaining space between us as his steps became louder and more rhythmic with each passing second. He appeared to be walking with a spring that drove me into a sudden state of anxiety. I did not want to look back, yet I badly wanted to at the same time. What do I do? Do I bolt and run towards Jan Smuts Avenue, 200 metres away, ahead of me? But then run away from what? But how fast could I really run carrying this bag, with my whole life in it.

The idea of losing the bag, my life, suddenly hit me. I did not like the idea, the feeling of which was just too much, even ghastly to contemplate. But this could be my reality, right there and then. Any minute I needed to think fast to avoid a pending tragedy, a huge loss and I could not hold myself anymore. The compulsion to look behind me overwhelmed me as steps were clearly louder now, seeming to be more confident and anxious to catch up with me.

"Oh! My God, here he is next to me now, on my right-hand side," I softly spoke to myself.

“Heita,” he said. He was breathing heavily, like someone who had completed a marathon, I thought. There was no way now to run away from him. It was a man of around 40: dark skinned like me. He had white eyes, wearing a grey tracksuit. He was about two metres tall or thereabout, but I could not make that out within those 10 seconds I managed to look at him. Intermittently of course but it was not intentional, but through instinct or fear, or both. He appeared hungry, clearly not for food but for something to satisfy whatever other craving he appeared to have, right there, next to me. He then reduced his steps.

It was as if he wanted his steps to walk in harmony with mine. But suddenly I no longer heard his steps as they appeared to have melded nicely into mine, sounding as if we were one person walking, such as in a well-choreographed dance sequence of a couple dancing. Rather our steps were akin to those of a disciplined battalion of soldiers in parade, readying themselves mentally for a huge battle ahead of them.

By now he and I, our steps were one, but I am sure our minds were not. Certainly, mine was not with him, that I know for sure. My heart was beating heavily as if it wanted to jump out of my body, leaving me to face the man alone. But then my mind was with me still. Not wanting to run away like my beating heart. On the one hand, it was on my bag which was my life and, on the other hand, it was wandering all over the place, my mind that is, disorienting me as within that short period I wondered how and where to disappear to, to extricate myself from that situation, right there and then. At the same time, I was praying. Why me out of the 62 million in South Africa? Why was that happening to me right then and there in Parkwood noyal instead of all the other shabby places I knew of in Johannesburg, such as Hillbrow, Yeoville, even Johannesburg CBD? I would have understood if it were to happen to me in those places. Oh! God Help me! It was a silent prayer of desperation.

“Hola.” I responded, feigning confidence, but fearing that he probably had picked it up. I smiled a bit, looking at him. He cut straight to the point. He spoke slowly but intentionally. There was subtle menace in the tone of his voice, yet calm.

“I am not fine. Where I come from, it is bad, my situation.” He spoke slowly while looking at my bag as if to size it up. Its weight that is. I could not mistake the intention of my unwelcome company.

He did not even attempt to hide his intentions. I got it.

“And so, what is wrong where you come from?” I struggled to steady my voice, not wanting him to notice that I was in fear.

However, the little ability to feign confidence just a few seconds before had vanished, making me feel exposed. Vulnerable even.

“The lawyers.”

“What is wrong with the lawyers? I asked and this time there was not even pretense of confidence.

“There.” He barked pointing indifferently in a direction he seemed to have chosen in a random sort of way. I immediately got what trick he was up to.

“I have been run over by a train. Road accident Fund must pay me.” I could tell that he did not even believe in his own statement.

He pointed in the direction of where he was coming from, using his right-hand index finger. But his eyes were fixed on my bag. Just like a starving eagle eyeing a dead rat. It dawned on me what was about to happen to me. I mean to my bag, with my whole life in it. Any second.

I mean after failing in a number of businesses in my 50 years of life. Trucking business; clearing rubble at Johannesburg’s construction sites or the houses of the wealthy in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg after renovations; running a security company guarding the houses of the rich, also in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg; owning a cleaning company that specialised in scrubbing the dirty floors of the wealthy, also in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg; owning a company of bouncers, guarding the wealthy, also in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg as they enjoyed expensive drinks and snorted cocaine in their nightclubs; managing a transport company that transported the children of the wealthy to and from school, also in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Name it all, I had done it. Now with these spectacular failures in business, what is the measure of a man?

This manuscript in my bag was, at least to me, worth protecting. That is if I could still protect it. I mean whose life is worth recording, or reading about? Rather, who has the right to restore his dignity? Mine at that moment was about to be taken away. Just like that.

Then I saw him. Two hundred metres in front of us. He must have been 80 or so. Walking slowly with his dog on a leash. There and then was my escape route. My interest was on the dog, not the man. Not him without his dog anyway. I briefly looked at my walking companion. Sizing him up my chances of success with this plan.

He was still talking. Breathing even more heavily. I did not hear what he was saying. I did not care though. Not anymore since I had found my escape plan. All I remembered then was that he was mumbling something like being run over by a train. Repeating the same messages several times over like a boring poem by read on stage by a poet who has run short of ideas.

But these words seemed to ring continuously in my head as I walked fast: documents, the lawyers, and any other rubbish said by my unwelcome companion. To be precise, I no longer cared to hear the rest of what he was saying. Reality of the precarious situation I was in had long dawned.

At that moment I remembered what my friend once told me that actually drove us into a huge argument. So huge that we did not talk to each other for two days. His name is Mandla Sithole.

“As a black man, you must never trust a white man’s dog,” Mandla said to me. It was while, as usual, he was taking a swig from his Castle Lager bottle. He looked around the bar full of white middle-aged men. Also drinking beer, speaking loudly. They were discussing rugby or something, while watching a game on the big screen in Jolly Rodger Pub in Parkhurst, a pub that attracts what one would call the white working class – plumbers, mechanics, wiremen, off duty barmen, bar ladies, barbers, cops, teachers, hair stylists. That sort of crowd, if you get my drift.

“Why Mandla?” I asked.

“You see my friend,” he said while wiping his mouth with his hand. “Have you noticed that when you visit a white man at his home, his dog will bark furiously at you?”

“Ja! And so! Dogs will always bark furiously at strangers that appear on their doorsteps?”

“You do not understand my friend.”

“Well, you do not make sense to me because dogs will always bark at strangers, like I said. Make me understand.”

“Ok, let me educate you about a white man’s dog’s behaviour. All dogs are trained to bark at strangers, right? But the white man’s dog barks furiously at black visitors. More furiously even, compared to when they bark at a white stranger. Haven’t you noticed that yet?”

The argument had gone on and on, and there was no resolution to it, except to say that we did not speak to each other for two days, while waiting for the situation to cool off.

But one thing that had just struck me right then in the situation I was in was the fact that blacks generally are scared of dogs, for whatever reason, especially a white man's dog. Of this I was quite sure, as I had witnessed it a couple of times.

I then moved faster. My unwelcome companion did the same, catching up with my steps. I did not mind him that time as I was actually taking him to where I wanted him to be. You could say he was playing into my hands. Falling nicely into my game plan. But he obviously had no clue about what was going to take place next right under his nose.

"Hi John, it has been a long time. Is Casper as vicious as he used to be? Am I safe this time to walk alongside him without risking being mauled like last year?"

Obviously surprised, the white man opened his mouth to speak, but he could not.

"Oh Shit!" exclaimed my walking companion of five minutes and thirty seconds. He raced into a side street. He vanished.

"Dogs are more trustworthy than a human being. Even more patriotic," the white man said. We both laughed at the same time as the dog. Just in that moment his dog emitted a soft growl, while wagging its tail as it looked at me suspiciously but with a friendly disposition.

"I wish this dog was an aggressive one, not a lame duck that befriends strangers," the white man finally confessed.

"As long as it did not show this soft side of his a minute ago, it is Okay with me, and both of you have a good afternoon."

We both laughed as I went my way while the white man and his dog went around the corner disappearing into the leafy suburb.

Mama Zodwa

Blue eyes, blonde hair and tall, Laura Nicholson was at the top of the corporate game. As group financial director at state owned armament manufacturer, Denel, it was a matter of time before she clinched the-

all-powerful finance job of Group Chief Financial Officer, she told herself. It was possible to achieve this, especially because her boss, Dave Anderson, was going to be retiring in two years' time and he was planning to go back to England to retire "in peace in a country where there is no corruption and democracy and the rule of law are part of our everyday life," he had confided in her. He had also assured Laura that he was going to recommend her for the position of Group Chief

Financial Officer. He was certain she was the best person for the position; and that she was bound to give fierce competition to anyone, given her track record in cleaning up the governance issues in state-owned companies.

"The thing that could stop you from getting this job is one."

"What? What's that Dave?" "You are white."

Laura dismissed the suggestion by way of looking blankly at him and headed to her own office. "However, keep your fingers crossed. Even in a country-crazy with Black Economic Empowerment, meritocracy could still prevail over mediocrity. Trust me." He was almost shouting. Laura did not respond. Instead, she opened the door, closed it behind her and left.

Indeed, Laura Nicholson was respected within the corridors of power at Denel. She was largely regarded as a financial whizz kid. Some even flattered her openly by referring to her as a finance genius. In boardroom meetings, she was always the tallest one in the room. And of course, the small matter of her looks made her a dominant presence at the table.

She truly knew her figures well. She could pull out big data from her head about the company's performance to the curiosity, perhaps surprise, and even envy of fellow executives at Denel. So, although she envisioned a bright future for herself within the company, Laura had decided that she was going to be there for two years only, after which she was going to resign to go into her own business. After all, she came from a wealthy business family.

Her father, until 10 years ago, ran a company he founded, High Pressure Tyres PTY LTD, which with a 10 percent market share of the lucrative tyre market in the country, was a significant player in the sector. This made huge profits for Douglas Nicholson. He sold the company when he turned 75 and retired in comfort. With only one daughter, Laura, who was independent, he did not foresee any financial difficulties for the rest of his and his wife Julie's lives. Laura therefore had long decided that she was also going to follow in her father's footsteps when she turned 40. She did not intend to continue in boardrooms with men, who first noticed her looks before her brains.

After all, she had an impressive track record of fixing the mess of governance at state owned enterprises, such as South African Ports Authority, Eskom and Transnet, where she was head hunted for the job after her time in the country's leading private sector boardrooms. Laura's B.Com Finance degree from Wits

indeed worked for her. Denel was the last time that she was going “to clean up the shit created by financial zombies in these public enterprises,” she said.

But Laura was wrong about a few things at Denel. Within a period of seven months, major changes took place. Dave Anderson resigned, taking early retirement. He was frustrated by the new Chief Executive Officer, Andrew Molewa. Parachuted to Denel, rumours had it, by Luthuli’s Cadre Deployment Committee, the man mistook corporate governance for corporate looting. Rumour swelled within the Denel corridors. Soon after he set foot there, for example, the supply chain and procurement procedures were suddenly changed, without any regard for possible exposure of the company to risks. Dodgy consultants were brought in to advise executives on which service providers to hire and which ones to avoid. This frustrated several top executives of the company, including Laura. More was to come.

“Ladies and gentlemen”, said Andrew Molewa, “as you know we have a new board, with that comes new changes about how we are going to run this business going forward. And as some of you may know, I was head-hunted to bring order to chaos that existed unfortunately under my predecessor’s watch. To cut a long story short, we are going to streamline the business within the next six months, even shorter.”

Molewa, a short bespectacled man, was a man of even shorter words. His temper was also short, as those who were to remain at Denel soon found out. He dismissed executives without giving them an opportunity to ask questions about a matter that was going to have a profound impact on their lives, and of those working under them.

“In the next few weeks, you will hear from me,” he coughed before adding, as if for effect, “individually, that is.”

When the meeting ended, the room was gloomy, as if it was after the burial of a colleague. Laura wondered why was it that when companies in South Africa wanted to retrench people, they sugarcoated the process with words such as streamlining and downsizing.

“Damn it. This is bullshit. They should call a spade a spade,” she said to herself as she picked up her handbag and headed to her office on the third floor of Denel House.

What happened to Laura and the other executives seven weeks later did not surprise her at all.

*

“You should try to find time to be with your daughter. I know you are busy, but you cannot be busy all the time,” Julie complained to Laura. She had lost count how many times she had cautioned her daughter for what she called surrendering the responsibility of raising her child to “poor Zodwa,” the domestic helper. Laura again ignored the plea from her mom that she had visited at Graceland Village. She brushed the complaint aside. In any case this was not the first time she had been made to feel guilty by her concerned mother over what she claimed was abdicating her responsibility of raising Nancy, her five-year-old daughter. Her father, Richard, died in a car accident when Nancy was two months old. Julie had been in Graceland Village, a retirement home in Midrand, for three years in 2016 when her husband Douglas Nicholson passed on.

He was 87 years old when he died, the same age as Julie when Laura visited her in 2019. Julie was in good health for her age, but she missed her husband a lot, which she told Laura each time she saw her. Therefore, to lessen the burden of the loss, Laura visited her mom whenever she found some free time, which was not that often. She was an extremely busy businesswoman, running Chicken Star, a fried chicken franchise with 30 outlets throughout the country. More outlets were on their way as the chicken franchise was highly popular, especially with people in the townships. Investors had noticed this demand, and therefore saw the opportunity to make a quick buck by investing in Chicken Star. This was not bad for a single mom who was retrenched as financial director in 2011 from the state-owned arms manufacturer Denel.

The reason officially given for the retrenchment was that the institution was downsizing in order to be profitable. But gossip in the corridors of Denel was that the executives who faced the axe, all ten of them, including the group heads of supply chain management, corporate affairs and risk management, was that they resisted state capture schemes hatched within Denel, particularly after the arrival of Andrew Molewa. Laura, with her savings and the retrenchment package she received, started the fried chicken business straight away. She opened the first shop in Maonya Mall,

Soweto, in 2012. Another one followed in Mamelodi Mall, and soon thereafter, in quick succession, Soshanguve, Mabopane, East Rand Mall and Bedfordview Mall. All these Laura owned, but then decided to go the franchise way. That formula became magic. Would-be investors flocked into her plush office in Rosebank, inquiring about opportunities to buy the franchise to operate individual outlets in other areas. Even when Laura gave birth to Nancy in 2014, being single, she did not worry much as she was in a position to raise her first born child in pretty much comfort. When Richard, her boyfriend of one year,

passed on in 2014, she of course suffered a personal loss. But that loss did not extend to financial matters.

In fact, Laura was the talk of town. She was seen as a model entrepreneur who did not waste time embarking on a phenomenal journey of business success. In those days, hardly a week passed without her reaching business publications' headlines as a keynote speaker at this business summit or that business conference. Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, New York – she featured regularly at major business summits. If the truth were told, and on the face of it, she had no worries, especially from the perspective of fellow businesspeople and the public at large.

“Powerhouse entrepreneur speaks sense to executives in New York.” “Laura Nicholson the chicken queen takes her business to new heights as she opens yet another branch” and “A single mother with a singular determination to create a super chicken chain in South Africa.” These headlines made her friends proud of her. They made her smile to herself, especially when she was alone and feeling satisfied with her business success. But there was one thing, the most important to her, where she felt she had failed. It brought much pain to her.

In her heart of hearts, Laura knew that she had a huge problem. She even wondered if this damage could be mitigated, or if it was too late. Her big worry everyday while on planes, in luxury hotel suites, at business conferences, during expensive dinners with suitors and business associates, was one thing: Nancy, her only daughter.

“What makes it worse is not the eating of chicken feet. That I can deal with. After all, I am in the business of selling chicken. In any case, as she grows up, so will she acquire new taste for other food types. That is not a problem for me,” Laura told her best friend Sylvaine over dinner at a top restaurant in Fourways Mall. Luxury Cuisine was her favourite place to chill with friends whenever she was around town and not globe-trotting. After all, it was convenient. Not far from her luxury mansion in nearby Steyn City, where she moved after her sixth shop opened. She did not mind the price of R8 million for the sprawling property upon which stood five bedrooms, a Jacuzzi, a garage to accommodate four cars and a three roomed cottage at the back, which Zodwa occupied as a live-in domestic helper, and in which she prepared her chicken feet.

“When I saw her eating the chicken feet for the first time in Zodwa’s room, I was shocked. For sure, but then thought, it was just the curiosity of a child. To be honest with you, I was so angry with Zodwa that I contemplated firing her on the spot. But then I thought about Nancy. Without Zodwa, she would be

miserable. But you know, I know that I make money out of selling chicken, but not the fucking chicken feet that could choke my daughter each time she eats them!" "And how did she explain herself. I mean Zodwa of course? Sylvaine asked.

"I am sorry this and that madam. She cries this and that if I deny her the fucking chicken feet, nonsense like that."

"But Laura is it true though that Nancy cries if she is denied the..."

"The fucking chicken feet Sylvaine, name it. Well at that stage I doubt that she cried for the fucking chicken feet."

"Friend, are you saying that Nancy has developed a compulsive taste for the..."

"Obsessive taste for fucking chicken feet, yes, not only that. Nancy now demands that Zodwa makes them for her every fucking day as if that is the only food we have in the house. Can you believe it?"

"Ok. Laura, please listen to me carefully. There is nothing wrong with Nancy eating chicken feet if she likes them. It is food after all. The chicken feet certainly do not kill anyone. Otherwise, half of South Africans would be dead. Anyway, but you said you are not worried about her developing a taste for chicken feet. What are you then worried about?"

Sylvaine brushed a strand of hair from her face as Laura composed herself. They did not speak for a minute or two.

"She calls her Mama Zodwa. What the fuck is that? Who am I then to her: Her sister, her domestic helper? Her who? Tell me Sylvaine."

"I'm sorry my friend. But hold on. Isn't the word mama just a prefix used in Zulu when one is referring to an older person as a form of respect? I think I recall that from our Zulu class at university. Remember."

"But anyway, this nightmare is over now. At least soon it will be over," said Laura as she lifted her wine glass that was by now half empty.

"I do not understand. Do you mean you have now found a solution, and you better had because this issue is not good for your health. I mean your worries about Nancy."

"I have sold. It is now time to open a new chapter in my life."

“Please do not do this to me Laura. What are you on about now? Are you sure you are alright? Perhaps it is time you consider getting professional help? I know a friend who has been assisted by a real good shrink and I am sure she would not mind....”

“No! No! Come on Sylvaine. I have not gone crazy. I am sound and proper. I mean I have just sold a good chunk of Chicken Star. Though I cannot tell you the details, safe to say it is enough for me to retire. In fact, even for Nancy to retire before she even starts working, if you know what I mean,” said Laura while at the same time noticing the surprise and confusion on the face of her friend. She then proceeded.

“The Public investment Corporation gave me an offer I could not resist. They bought 70 percent of Chicken Star, and it did not come cheap believe me and” “But hold on,” interjected Sylvaine, “That means then you have lost control of the company you have worked so hard at building from the ground up.”

“Do not worry. They made the mistake of ceding 40 percent of that to an empowerment consortium.

And guess who constitute that consortium?”

Sylvaine smiled, with her face showing unmistakable relief.

“Ok. I see why they called you a financial whizz kid. Do not tell me that the consortium is led by that talkative shop steward who sometimes used to give you a hard time trying to unionise employees at Chicken Star. What’s his name again? Ee! Luzuko Pemba.”

“But do you know what that means Sylvaine?” Laura sipped her last drop of wine before continuing to explain the repercussion of this boardroom coup.

“The public Investment Corporation made the mistake of insisting on the appointment of Luzuko Pemba as the board chairman, which I readily agreed to,” she said but noticed a sudden shock on the face of Sylvaine, whose mouth was open, but words failing to come out of her red lips.

“You mean your employee is now your boss? That is insane really.”

“Not exactly, it is called boardroom scheming and, if you like and if you’re a cynic, you can even call it a board room coup.”

Sylvaine noticed more confusion on her friend’s face, even a look of shock and incredulity.

“It was very simple, especially knowing Luzuko’s weakness. I took him out to that expensive place in Sandton known for selling expensive drinks. Club Mo Afrika, they call it. The one frequented by the BEE-type highfliers that he has always wanted to go to as a shop steward, but obviously with his salary it was impossible. Anyway, after only two glasses of expensive whisky we were on the same page.”

But Laura noticed that her friend was by now completely lost in this boardroom theatre of the brave and scheming. She went on to explain.

“In the corporate sector, though the board chairman is important insofar as giving overall direction to the company and reporting to the board is concerned, the real power lies with the Chief Executive Officer.

“Oh! Goodness me. Do not tell me that you got your favourite guy in your company to occupy that position?”

“Lazarus Phiri whom as you know I head-hunted soon after graduating from UCT Business School hardly 12 months ago to be our accountant. You now get the picture?” Sylvaine nodded while smiling.

“Just a second waiter, can you please give us our favourite shooters? Laura this deserves a toast and I will do the honours.”

“But do you know what it really means?” Laura asked rhetorically before answering her own question.

“Not only does it mean that I have sold the company for millions...”

“I know, you do not have to explain to me. I may not be a sharp boardroom schemer like you. It means you still retain control of the company through the appointment of your proxy, Lazarus Phiri. So even though you now only hold 30 percent of the company, and are technically a minority shareholder, you are in reality in charge of the running of the company, of course without occupying the position of Chief Executive Officer or board chairman. You are in reality having your cake and eating it.” And Sylvaine added, “Literally.”

“But most importantly, it also means that I am in full control of motherhood. I no longer need to go to the office every day or worry about the spread sheet.”

“Here we are, enjoy your shooters.” Their conversation was interrupted by the waiter with their order.

“It was not easy to come to this Sylvaine, believe you me. The plan almost went horribly wrong. We almost had the Andrew Molewa Round Two. The Public Investment Corporation had an eye on a Comrade Corporate Executive. Rumour had it that their blue-eyed boy is in fact a cousin of none other than the minister of Labour, which was confirmed when he was one of the two people invited to the interview, competing for the top Chicken Star job with of course my Lazarus Phiri. But guess what, I was ahead of them. When it came to the boardroom vote it boiled down to two to one. I now love that detestable place called Club Mo Afrika. You may proceed with the toast my dear friend,” Laura declared with a warm smile.

The blonde and the student thief

She walked with quick steps while constantly looking behind her and that made me feel uncomfortable. I slowed my steps, hesitating a bit before I picked them up again, pacing fast but not fast enough. My bladder appeared to want to burst, anytime. This was because she appeared sure and was now walking steadily again. This gave me space to increase my speed behind her, but the blonde lady was still looking over her shoulders till she unlocked the gate. This gate took one through a narrow corridor that could not accommodate two people walking side by side. I naturally waited for her to go first into the toilet marked “Ladies”, while I walked in the direction of the one further down the corridor, marked “Gentleman”. But after unlocking the gate, she did not move. She stood aside, as if to give way to me. I should have read the signs. But I did not.

“Hi. Do not worry. I will close the gate behind me,” I said. I wanted to be a gentleman.

“The point is, I do not like people walking behind me.”

I was surprised, but decided to ignore her and walked straight into the gentleman’s toilet. But before I entered the toilet, I briefly looked behind me and saw the blonde woman brushing her hair back. She appeared anxious. I almost screamed: “What the fuck you are anxious about?” But I restrained myself and continued walking. Almost running as my bladder was playing havoc with me again.

But I could see the shadow of the lady on the white wall of the toilet in front of me. The lady eventually slowly walked towards the Ladies toilet. But she still kept an eye in my direction. By now I was sure she was keeping an eye on my every movement. I started to have feelings of guilt. But guilty of what! Guilty of going to the toilet perhaps! Maybe I should have understood her action when she stood aside in a

way that suggested that she preferred that I walk past her. But then, whose fault is it that I have a dark skin and she has a light skin? I brushed these thoughts aside and faced the urinal in front of me. I felt relieved. My bladder was empty. Hallelujah!

But it was on my way towards the exit, after finishing my business in the toilet, that I understood the absurdity of it all. A middle-aged man, casually familiar to me, was standing outside the gate with her, hair obviously struggling to remain blonde. Its grey colour was starting to dominate his pate. He was standing stoically outside the door. He was surely with her. I had seen this man several times before. He runs a tattoo shop next door to the Spar. He appeared as surprised as I was about the scene that was unfolding, an unnecessary scene obviously. That is, according to me, but surely not according to the blonde lady.

I glanced at the parking lot of the shopping centre. It was business as usual: cars driving in and being ushered to available parking spaces by car guards wearing green reflectors. The ones that speak

French with a heavy central African accent, all from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Or the other Congo that people seem not to talk much about. Some cars were leaving. All these people – the car guards and the motorists – seemed to be oblivious to the drama unfolding in front of their eyes at the gate to the toilets that they also use whenever they come to shop at Spar. I wondered what the blonde lady had told the man who was now standing next to her waiting. Waiting for me.

“Why are you walking around carrying a steel pipe?” I looked at her. I was offended but restrained myself. I must be honest it was not easy.

She was breathing heavily. The tone was clearly accusatory. The man next to her just stood there, motionless. Suddenly he appeared embarrassed. He shifted uncomfortably. His face appeared confused. He understood what was going on. Finally.

For a few seconds, I thought an apology was in order for the blonde lady was really frightened. It showed all over her face. It seemed to be turning from pale to red. Her hair too, seemed to be moving in all directions. Her ears were raised, as if to hear what my explanation for carrying a ‘dangerous weapon’ around a shopping centre was going to be. Clearly, in her eyes, the key holder in my hands had a specific purpose – to attack blonde women walking into toilets to do their business.

I was struck by the absurdity of it. I mean, for this shopping centre in Melville not to keep the toilet open to anyone. Why lock the toilet, and then require those pressed to relieve themselves to carry this damn thing hooked on a two-metre-long steel pipe?

But I needed to respond to her. If not to explain myself, at least to show to her the absurdity of her paranoia.

“But this is the key to the toilet.”

She looked surprised. She walked away. Her eyes cast down. Her voice was trailing as she vanished into one of the shops but not before I overheard the words: “We live in a dangerous country. A violent society.”

I was not sure whether those words were directed at me or at society. I ignored her and headed to the Spar to return their damn key, hooked to a ‘dangerous weapon. “

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“And that’s what happened to me in the Melville shopping centre yesterday.” I said to the half-drunk black woman of around 22 who I found drinking at nearby Laduma Pub in Brixton.

“That woman is crazy” she replied. “Instead, it is us who should be afraid of them because of the history.”

She told me she was a student at the University of Johannesburg in the final year of journalism studies, after I had just explained to her why I was drinking at 10am on a weekday.

I did not ask her what she meant by “we” and “they”. I also did not ask her what she meant by “the history”. This is because the young lady soon disappeared with my R800 in R200 notes. The money fell out of my trousers’ pocket as I took out R100 to buy the next round. First, it was the blonde lady in the shopping centre, and second, it was the student thief. The situation called for another glass of wine on a damn Monday morning.

The Melville Singer

When John Mavuso arrived at their home, he found his wife Pretty, seated on the blue couch in the corner of the sitting room. Her favourite headgear, the blue headgear, was as usual wrapped around her round small head. She just looked at him casually, nodding slightly as a way of acknowledging his presence and arrival, but said nothing. He knew straight away that there was trouble. She was not even watching *Generations* on the giant TV screen facing her. Normally her eyes would be glued to that screen, following the twists and turns of the story and the lousy acting. Not even the warmth of the room could shield the businessman from the air of anger that permeated the room.

This was how John Mavuso was welcomed home that evening after a hard day's work at the office. He was tired but knew that his work was not yet over. At his palatial home there was more work to do. Homework, as he normally called it, or fires, he needed to extinguish. Often these fires were petty arguments over even pettier issues involving his daughter and her mother. But he could not sit aside while his family members were threatening to tear each other apart. But whenever he intervened in these arguments, he always made sure that he did not take a side. At least he pretended not to take a side. But in most cases, he knew that he was often on the side of his daughter, Thandi. He was fond of her more than he was of her older brother, Njabulo, while his wife seemed to get along well with Njabulo. This did not bother him as he considered this to be normal in families where there are boys and girls.

John Mavuso once complained bitterly to his wife. "These people from the township have small brains. They do not understand that an announcement of a tender award today does not mean that the millions are in your bank account tomorrow. For all I know, the tender could still go wrong, especially with the stupid media scrutinising and sniffing around any tender, no matter how small it is, that Mavuso & Dekker is involved in. But to these township fools, John Mavuso is rich. They even think that if the tender is worth R150 million, all of it gets into your bank account. In fact, if we were not smart enough to use creative accounting for a tender of R150 million we would be lucky to be left with R15 million as profit after paying for material and these unionised workers."

"I agree with you there darling", replied Pretty "You must never lend them money. I blame it on you because why do you still get in touch with those good-for-nothing people, who drink day in and day out. You should tell them that we are now in Bryanston in Sandton. This is not Jabulani in Soweto. If they call you again, hand over the damn phone to me. I will share with them a piece of my mind, and I can assure you they will never call you again. They would rather WhatsApp you or send you, Please Call Me. They must never drag us down with them into a past that is now behind us."

Pretty was especially furious one day when Ricky asked for a loan; a loan that both of them knew very well was never going to be paid back. In fact, Ricky was not the only one who frequently asked for loans that they knew would not be repaid.

Ricky always complained whenever John Mavuso reminded him of the loan repayment arrangement. “My man, how can a billionaire be asking for repayment of a mere R15 000 from his best friend suffering in the township? After all, you own more than half of Mavuso & Dekker. And you live in the burbs, eating and dining with the Motsepes and Oppenheimers of this world.”

He was not the only debtor to remind John of how wealthy he was, and therefore that he “should not be worried about small amounts of loan money due to him from poor township souls.”

John Mavuso always shrugged off such attitudes from his friends but knew that sooner rather than later they would come back to him, asking for more money, “as long as the tenders Mavuso & Dekker scored with government are published in the damn newspapers”, he complained constantly to his business associate, Pieter Dekker.

John Mavuso once asked Pieter: “How do we stop the damn newspapers from writing about every single tender we lay our hands on?”

“The reality sadly is that we cannot”, replied Pieter, “because, the damn government has this stupid concept of transparency when it comes to government tenders. They say that the public must know as these are public funds. I wonder if they would be happy if we also went to the very same newspapers and tell them who got what brown envelope.”

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Though John Mavuso knew what had happened, he tried and failed to convince himself that this time was not the case. But he could not help wondering what had happened between his daughter and his wife.

“Have they gone for each other’s throats again? Of course, not in a physical way”, he said to himself, and continued, “not yet, it is unimaginable it could get violent like that because Thandi loves us”.

The point is since Thandi went to Slovo Informal Settlement on a trip arranged by the university, for students to volunteer their services to those less privileged, mainly organizing reading sessions for the settlement’s children who even in Grade six struggled to read, another side of South Africa showed up.

Bucket toilets are used by every family as if it is normal, streets unpaved, families of five living in a one room shack, white bread and atchar served for breakfast, sometimes lunch. Some sleep on an empty stomach. That was enough to change Thandi's attitude towards the accumulation of wealth with no purpose.

This, after reflecting on how she and her family lived, transformed her as she decided wealth in the middle of poverty is meaningless. In fact, crude.

These thoughts flooded Mavuso's mind as he dropped the key to his Jaguar on the dining table. The Jaguar was one of the toys parked in his massive garage, along with the 3 series BMW, the Navara, the Mercedes Benz, the Porsche, and the obviously odd 1969 VW Beetle. These were the cars that any of the family members could pick and drive on any day without first asking for permission. As long as the keys were there, you could pick one up, insert it in the ignition and drive. However, Thandi's preferred car was the VW Beetle, which in fact was bought on her insistence against of course the protestation of her parents, especially her mother, who felt that having such an "old grandparent among young blood" was lowering the status of the family and "reminding us of our struggle days in Soweto."

Her father did not give much resistance, and so the old Volksie became a sore sight in Mavuso's garage. But the children, especially Thandi, hardly remembered those struggle days her parents often spoke about. And Njabulo just shrugged it off as if to say, well, that was then but now they lived in a different world that did not need to be confused with the past.

Though John thought his daughter was sometimes naïve, especially in her insistence on living minimally while she was in fact living in luxury and extreme comfort, he always had excuses for her attitude towards material things. In fact, at times he felt that his beloved daughter was more mature than his wife. This was especially the times when he and his wife of 25 years had just had their fights that were of course not serious, but the usual arguments about him talking on the phone while at home, often long after having knocked off at work. Apparently, he would be talking to his business associates. But, Pretty, had her own suspicions, that she never voiced, even though what was obvious was the fact that she hated the phone calls, even though Mavuso at all times said he was talking to his BEE partner at Mavuso & Dekker, Pieter. Mavuso insisted that he had to take the calls, at all times, because that was the BEE company that had taken his family from their poverty-stricken lives in Soweto, from a match box house into a mansion.

“The business has taken us from Soweto right into the heart of Bryanston where we are now the talk of town,” he would often say, always adding, especially on days he was happy after winning yet another government tender, “dining and wining with the big boys, playing golf, attending exclusive dinners, driving the latest luxury models, holidays in Dubai and Thailand twice a year, with Rolex watches on our wrists.”

Indeed, when it came to splurging on his family, such claims had merit. His family, with the exception of Thandi, had expensive tastes, including the habit of wearing Rolex watches. But Thandi, never! She either preferred her hands to be light, or simply hated gadgets on her wrist. However, she never told her parents why she preferred not to put on her Rolex, which meant that to date it was still wrapped in its pack. It had been opened once and closed forever the day it was presented to her, which in fact was ten full years ago.

According to her parents, particularly her mother, all the luxury goods they collected, including the cars, Gucci brands and Rolex watches, was not to display their wealth to the public, but “simply to appreciate the good things in life,” that their fortune had changed for the better.

“Thandi, if you do not appreciate what God blesses you with, he will take it away and give it to those who would.” Pretty once admonished her daughter when she refused to drive the Porsche, preferring her Volksie instead, to attend her Matric Dance. She rarely drove any of the other cars, except on the occasion when the family was visiting some of their wealthy friends in the suburbs for dinners. Even then, she would do so reluctantly, and only to please her parents, especially her mother, who would remark, “what will your father’s business associates think if the daughter of a successful suburban businessman rocks up at a family dinner party driving a ramshackle car, when the rest of the family is driving in comfort?”

Thandi understood it was about them, not her, and to please them, she relented, even though she felt it was unusual behaviour for four family members to go to such dinners driving separate cars, when in fact they lived under one roof and would all fit into one car. On those rare occasions when some of their hosts would casually remark about the fact that they came in a convoy, her mother would say, “we were not at home all of us at the same time, and we would have been late if we waited for all of us to be at home before it was time to depart. Thandi would raise her eyebrows. But say nothing at the dinner table. Each time, she waited till they were at home. She would then confront her mother about her lies during dinner.

“But Mom, you are the one who always insists that I must at all times tell the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it could be, even the boyfriend that I could be dating. And so, what has changed at the dinner table?”

But each time she raised the issue of her mother’s contradictory moral positioning, Pretty, just shrugged it off. She would change the topic, such as asking her daughter how her studies were progressing at UJ. All the small diversion tactics of her mother’s irritated Thandi. But she understood the futility of continuing to argue with her mother.

However, in as much as Thandi hated what she described to her close friends as her “family’s ostentatious display of wealth especially in the sea of black poverty,” she did in fact appreciate the comfort she was living in. She did not deny her privilege per se. She just hated what she thought was her family’s propensity to display their wealth in public. This was the explanation she gave to her friends, especially the ones who thought she was in fact a hypocrite to deny her inherent privilege by simple being a Mavuso.

She knew that this wealth arose from the BEE government contracts that were then coming her father’s way since being invited to join Pieter Dekker to form Mavuso & Dekker (PTY) LTD. This was after he had been invited to form a BEE company subsequent to working for so many years as a nonskilled labourer in the construction industry. For ten of those years, he had worked for Pieter Dekker (PTY) LTD, and there at another company that he claimed exploited him. That was before the BEE deal. To John Mavuso, it did not matter that the deal was a sham in that it made him, on paper at least, a 51 percent shareholder.

But the reality was that he was an employee, paid slightly more than a site supervisor. His real status in the company only changed when mega deals started rolling in. Some of them were actually initiated by Mavuso himself once he understood the game. These were deals struck with comrades in government who sometimes preferred to deal with him, instead of with Pieter Dekker. They often complained in these secret meetings that Pieter Dekker, whom they liked to refer to as “*Mlungu Wakho*, your white man, is sometimes difficult when it comes to our commission arrangement.” One such government official, Thom Ngwenya, from the Gauteng Department of Infrastructure complained to John Mavuso during a meeting held in their favourite coffee shop in central Johannesburg. “Dekker is sometimes difficult when it comes to the cut. I mean who takes a 10 percent cut in this day and age? Besides, he

sometimes insists on paying the money into my bank account. That is committing suicide in this day and age. I prefer to deal with you as a brother, because you understand the discreet nature of the deals”.

The coffee shop was positioned at the corner of Mooi and Bree Streets; an extremely discreet venue indeed because you would never suspect that major multi-billion Rand deals were clinched there. It went by the name Bree Coffee Shop. In reality it should have been called Bree Magwinya Shop. It sold fat cookies to mainly hawkers selling counterfeit clothes and shoes from China outside. This was where John Mavuso and what he then preferred to call “Government business associates” met to discuss tenders. This was before the tenders were published for apparently competitive bidding.

But it was not always like this for John Mavuso, especially at the beginning of his business career as a tenderpreneur. That is, before Pieter Dekker ceded him an actual 30 percent stake in Mavuso & Dekker, instead of the initial sham 51 percent ownership that only existed on paper, with most of the profit going into the pocket of Pieter Dekker.

Parachuted to endless meetings on short notice with senior government officials for “presentations” at those meetings, he was introduced by Pieter Dekker as Executive Chairman of Mavuso & Dekker. Sometimes, without explanation, he was introduced as the CEO of Mavuso & Dekker. However, it actually did not matter to John Mavuso, or Bra John as his adoring friends called him after he became wealthy. He liked the titles, especially the word executive in CEO and not so much the chairman or even the CEO. The word executive made him feel good, especially during his Soweto days before he relocated his family to No. 42 Bryanston Drive, occupying the 8000 square metre stand that used to be the home of Pieter Dekker and his family. That is, before the Bekkers moved to an even bigger house on an even bigger plot, just next door in Sandhurst.

The Dekkers’ former house included six bedrooms, a Jacuzzi and a swimming pool that only Thandi and Njabulo used. His wife Pretty and he were always teased by their children about the swimming pool. And Thandi teased her parents in other ways on other occasions.

“Mama and Papa, you are lucky that I am now a grown-up girl, no longer as naughty as I used to be growing up in Soweto. Had it not been for that fact, I was going to give you a hard time here in Bryanston.”

“What do you mean give us a hard time?”, replied John, “you mean you would be running around with these young white boys of Bryanston I normally see you hoot to at the gate? Never try because I do not

want a white son in-law. They do not pay ilobola,” her father said. Thandi chuckled at the image of hooting and went straight to the point she wanted to make, just to embarrass both her mother and father:

“OK Pa. Listen to this one. Suppose I make trouble and dive into the swimming pool right now, what are you and mom going to do?”

They both got the point, laughing at the same time. Deep down though, they were cursing the fact that they grew up in homes in Soweto with no such an ordinary family facility as a swimming pool, let alone a Jacuzzi. This was the point they kept labouring on when Thandi and Njabulo upset them, that they took for granted what they had, that “life was hard and is still hard for those left behind, living in the township’s match-box houses, dirty and crime-ridden streets, uncollected garbage, noisy taxi drivers, schools with no electricity, crime and grime competing against each other.”

*

“Is it Thandi again Love? I think we need to sit her down properly. Maybe call her aunties to come over to drum some sense into her thick head.” John Mavuso sat on the couch next to his wife. He put his hand on her shoulders, rubbing her, comforting her. He continued. “Do not worry my love.

She is still growing up. She will come over it once she starts to ma...”

“She better mature fast,” Pretty interrupted her husband, and continued, “because I will throw her out of this house into the streets to live with those people. Spending a week in the streets, sharing the dirty blankets and nightmares with the urchins will make her wake up from her stupidity and being naive. Can you imagine?”

“She wants to spend the family money we have worked so hard for on those homeless friends of hers in Melville. Giving them food every day is not enough to satisfy your Good Samaritan daughter’s appetite to please urchins. Maybe sending her to St. Mary’s School for her to get a good education was not a good idea after all. Instead of the top education they offer, the nuns also taught her to clean the family’s savings and the fridge in the name of charity, supporting street urchins who ran away from home because of their stupidity, only to torment our children in the streets, turning Thandi into one of the biggest donors in Melville, more than even the wealthy who live in those big houses there.

“Can you believe it John? Thandi now wants me to give her money so that she can rent a house for them. And I have told her that she must forget it. She can only get that money to waste on hopeless people living in the streets by choice, over my dead body. In any case, those women in the streets are not really who they claim to be – people of morals who ran away from home due to poverty and abuse. For all I care, they ran away because they want to sell their...”

“Hold on. What.....”

“John do not dare interrupt me before I pour my heart out. Maybe throwing her into the streets to live with them for a week will make her understand that life is not a game of cards her so called friends like to play, of course gambling away the money my daughter gives them every day.” Pretty, then looked at her husband. His eyes showed sympathy, but he was thinking new thoughts, which he shared with Pretty. “Maybe we should relent to her demands. After all, what difference will it make to spend a few thousands of Rand on this shelter? It is actually good for business because it would demonstrate to all-and-sundry, especially the government tender committees that Mavuso & Dekker is a good corporate citizen that we care about our people. We not only build houses for them to live in but we reconstruct their destroyed lives. The money made from tenders can be given back to the community. And that will undermine forever the popular idea or stereotype that when black people become rich, as compared to whites, they do not care about the poor. Pieter, I am certain, will love this idea of mine ... well, Thandi’s idea. So, we can say, well, Mr. Government and you damn white liberals, we rich black businessmen in fact do care too.”

“I will show you with this project. I John Mavuso will show you that we deserve all the housing tenders that are coming our way. The media who are always on our back, breathing on our necks for every tender we get from government, scrutinizing every insignificant detail like dogs sniffing around for non-existent drugs in a tourist’s bag at OR Tambo, calling us names like tenderpreneurs, corrupt and God-Knows what else they call us. Now here we come, Mavuso & Dekker care about South Africans. We can say, write the story, we demand a front-page story, just like the last time you did one on the Ekurhuleni low cost housing tender we got from the Gauteng Provincial Government – questioning our integrity about the tender papers being filed late, the tax certificate of Mavuso & Dekker expired, that there must be an inquiry about how a company of questionable standing could get a R150 million tender, that the black BEE partner in Mavuso & Dekker is just a front, the real owner of the company being Pieter Dekker, even the house Mavuso lives in in Bryanston is not his house, he is renting it from Pieter Dekker

and Blah! Blah! like my daughter likes to say. Now we have a good story to tell. Advertise it with posters all over town written in bold letters: 'Mavuso & Dekker shelters homeless women of Melville!'"

"Thandi is a good girl. We can even buy the damn Melville house outright from whoever the white man owner is, instead of renting for the damn prostitutes, or women. Thank you Thandi for a good corporate social responsibility idea."

He smiled as he decided he was going to take the idea to Pieter Dekker first thing in the morning but thought this was not the right time to speak about it to his still seething-with-anger wife.

"Why are you smiling? What your daughter wants me to do with our family savings is not funny."

Instead, John Mavuso smiled before responding. "Thandi, what a clever girl of mine!"

Thandi saw her for the first time at the robots of Main Street at Campus Square with her hand stretched out. She was holding a coffee cup, obviously from McDonald's across the street. Thandi was driving up the road to UJ Campus. She was touched by this tiny person wearing tattered clothes on a particularly cold February day. What made Thandi take a particular liking to her was the fact that as she approached motorists, she did so without expressing aggressive behavior. She always smiled, even when she got nothing from the motorist. This was unlike other beggars Thandi had encountered on the road. When the motorists did not give them money, they suddenly became aggressive, even abusive, toward the driver. Often as the driver moved on, it was not unusual to hear a beggar sulking with no subtlety, on occasions spewing expletives.

"You fucking stingy bitch, son of a bitch. Motherfucking rich pig."

In fact, she had lost count how many times she bore witness to motorists being insulted by beggars on the road for not parting with cash. But not this one. Whether she was given the money or not, she always smiled.

"Have a good day. See you next time. Thank you. God Bless you."

Her manners were impeccable, even in that vulnerable and demeaning situation of having to stand at the robot begging every single day. Not once had Thandi heard her deliver expletives, even in response to motorists who enjoyed shouting insults at the beggars as they drove past in their expensive cars. This woman always kept her cool and continued to greet the next motorist, treating him or her with respect.

If this was rehearsed behaviour, then she would be a highly skilled actor who would do well on stage at the Market Theatre.

The plight of Shorckie, as Thandi came to know her, was not like that of other street people she had encountered anywhere else in Johannesburg. She could not have been more than one and half metres in height, so Thandi thought instead that she should actually be called Shortie. Her desperation to put keep body and soul together was obvious to any motorist who stopped at the robot. Despite her smiles, her sunken eyes revealed her pain. Her face was that of an old woman trapped in a young girl's body.

Before the robot went green, Thandi hurriedly searched for her purse in her handbag. She handed a R200 note to Shorckie. It was not the last R200 to change hands. That was when Thandi was in her first year at university, and it marked the beginning of a relationship that drew in other people, particularly her parents and her close friend Tebogo who was in the same class as her and a suburban girl like her, hailing from Midrand. For Tebogo, Thandi's generosity toward Shorckie was linked to their shared dream of the Melville House. But for her parents, it was linked to the spending of money in a way that made them feel uncomfortable.

However, and despite their discomfort, it was obvious to them that their daughter was committed to a project that expressed the core of her being – something of profound importance to her. That was how the ritual of handing over R200 notes to Shorckie began. She performed this ritual from Mondays to Fridays every week, for more than a year, for as long as she drove through the intersection. Even when university was on break, Thandi drove to Campus Square, where she knew Shorckie would be standing at the robot, begging from motorists, but certain that even if none of them gave her a single cent, Thandi Mavuso would be there for her. Thandi liked the fact that there was someone who relied on her for her survival. She drove there to honour an established ritual, as if they had signed a contract that could not be broken without severe emotional consequences. However, thirteen months after meeting Shorckie, this ritual escalated to something else, something more fulfilling for both of them. At least, that is what Thandi felt after the decision she made one night, while she and her best friend Tebogo were gallivanting in the teeming bars of Melville, committed to getting silly drunk and better, getting laid even better. But on that Saturday night Thandi and Tebogo did not get laid. Instead, Thandi got something else.

Half drunk and speaking loudly, they hopped from one packed bar to the next until Thandi stopped dead still and demanded Tebogo's attention.

“What’s wrong Chommie? Do you feel like throwing up? Let’s rush to the toilet at Sips. I will go in with you into the toilet”.

“No. Wait,” Thandi interrupted her friend. “Listen. Can you hear this voice?”

“What voice now Chommie? Believe me you are not hearing any voices. It is those shooters we have just had at Six Cocktail Bar, believe me. Those are killer shooters.”

“No Tebogo. I mean this piercing voice. Listen carefully.”

“Oh yes. I can hear it. It is beautiful, coming from that pub on 4th Avenue, the one where the white girls hunt like bitches on heat. Let’s hurry up.” Tebogo pulled her friend. They almost ran to XX Pub.

“I was damn right. Oh! My God! I cannot believe this” Thandi said, almost shouting as she cupped her mouth with her palms. She was in shock as she saw who was on stage and whose voice had pulled them there instead of to Liquid Blue Bar on 7th street, where they thought they had a good chance of getting laid.

She wore a blue dress that fitted her perfectly, wrapped around her petite body, and high heeled shoes that made her look taller than she actually was. The black wig made her look like an international superstar that had just landed in Melville. Her singing was out of this world. Thandi felt extremely proud of her but at the same time she felt confused and sad for Shorckie. She decided to call her The Melville Singer. For her first set Shorckie belted out mostly popular cover versions which got the overcrowded pub’s young patrons to sway in harmony with the melody of the music of Mariah Carey, Witney Houston and Beyonce. It was as if they were watching the stars themselves in performance in real life, not the Melville Singer.

But it was when Shorckie suddenly sang her own songs that the crowd really woke up. Thandi also noticed that Shorckie appeared to be puffed up, making her tiny body frame appear like it had suddenly ballooned. Her cheeks too appeared to be expanding. The first song that she introduced as “Mama” was a blues song. It sounded as if it was coming from a space of sadness and pain; a spirit from the past singing as it struggled but failing to free itself, trapped in the abandoned house of long-gone ancestors, making it difficult to leave the past so that it could be in the present.

Shorckie sang the song with so much emotion that the whole pub was transformed; the lyrics appeared to have touched a collective brain nerve in the audience, connected to the memory of their own

miseries, past and present, real or imagined. They could not resist emotions that made some of them cry. The crowd of mainly students, white and black, from the nearby UJ Campus, were transported into their own past that they too were struggling to leave behind so that they could enjoy the present. When Shorckie sang her next song, titled "Wound", it affected the crowd even more deeply than "Mama" had. There was no more dancing, only devotion to the words and rhythm and melody of the music; each listener buried in their own thoughts. Tears and sweat mingled as the music unearthed pain and longing.

It was at that moment that Thandi made her decision. The reality of her privileged existence hit her hard: her comfortable home in the suburbs, pocket money of R1000 every morning, the option to choose any of the four cars she wished to drive any day.

"This is fucked up," she shouted above the music, startling Tebogo. "Please, let's go Tebogo. I will explain to you outside. There is nothing wrong. But please let's call it an evening." They exited the XX Pub and entered the darkness of night.

The Spilt Milk Social Café on First Avenue and the corner of 7th Street in Melville was busy, as usual, on that Sunday. It was a day after the performance of Shorckie, the Melville Singer, at XX Pub. On

Sundays the café was abuzz with local residents who, instead of making coffee at home, decided to enjoy the Café's popular brands, most of which were from East Africa - Rwanda, Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya.

Because of what had happened the night before, Thandi that morning dragged herself out of her warm bed in Bryanston to meet Shorckie who, as usual, she found standing at her spot at Campus Square. As usual, she was begging. This time, she was clad in her normal clothes: the tattered dress whose colour was unclear as it begged for a washing machine. It was as if Shorckie was not the same person as the one who, barely twelve hours before, was being applauded in the pub.

"Good morning Sisi. You do not have to pick me up as I can walk ..."

"No Shorckie. I did not mean it that way. Come in. We need to talk."

Shorckie hesitated as Thandi pointed at the passenger seat, removing books that were lying there to make way for The Melville Singer. It only took five minutes for them to arrive at Spilt Milk Social Cafe.

On the way there, there was total silence in the car. Shorckie was not sure what it was that she had done that may have upset her benefactor.

However, in the middle of her fired-up performance the previous night, Shorckie had not noticed her benefactor and her friend in the crowd. Anxiously, Shorckie wondered whether Thandi was taking her back to Thembisa, a home that was an excuse for Hell that she had escaped from because of constant abuse from a father who stopped being a father after her mom died. She had become his punch bag, and when he was drunk, he entered her bed. If Sisi Thandi thought taking her back there was a solution, she couldn't be more wrong. It could not happen.

Having traveled the short distance to 7th Street, Thandi squeezed her Beetle into a small space in front of Spilt Milk Social Café and said to Shorckie, "now we are here. Come."

All the tables inside the coffee shop were occupied, which disappointed Thandi because she thought Spilt Milk Social Café was the perfect space for their conversation. The large spaces between the tables assured that there would not be unwelcome intrusion of their conversation.

A waitress approached them. "Hi. I am Rose and I will be taking your orders this morning. Inside it is full, but our courtyard, which is as cosy as the inside of the restaurant, still has one table for two." The waitress directed them to an empty table at the far corner of the courtyard. There could not have been a better spot, Thandi thought.

"I will have cappuccino by the big cup, and the English breakfast," Thandi ordered before looking at The Melville Singer seated across from her, who appeared unsure as she scanned the menu. "Shorckie, you can order whatever you want for breakfast. You can also order lunch, which you can come and collect if you want."

"Ok. Thank you Sisi. I will have the same order as you for breakfast. For lunch, Rose, can I please have ribs and mashed potato - the one that comes with a burger, and don't forget cappuccino also for me please, also in a big cup."

"Tjo! Sisi," said Shorckie, "my story is a long one that will need the whole day to tell, but I'll try to summarise it, how I ended up on the streets ten years ago, how I met my sisters and brothers in the streets. I'll also explain my performance last night. You say you were there, so how was it? I was worried that the pub was full of students who want to have fun and not listen to my own songs that make people feel sad ..."

"NO!" Thandi interrupted. "Your performance was so stunning that it's why we are meeting this morning. I no longer call you Shorckie. I'm sorry, but from last night I will call you The Melville Singer."

"No, Sisi, not to worry. The name is so cool. I love it. From today I am The Melville Singer?" They laughed together. Shorckie continued with the story of her life for the next 45 minutes as they drank their coffee, waiting for their breakfast orders.

The Melville Singer told Thandi that she was 38 years old, news that shocked Thandi because she could have passed for a teenage girl. It was only when one looked closely at her, especially the sunken eyes and the face that seemed to hide a lot of pain, that one could realise that she was older. After leaving her home in Thembisa where she had been abused by her father after the death of her mother, she first slept rough in the streets of Hillbrow where more abuse took place by strangers and drug dealers. Luckily, she met somebody called Kate who became her friend and told her that she lived in Melville which was safe and where people were more generous.

The English breakfasts arrived and Thandi and Shorckie ate with zest. While they sipped their cappuccinos, Shorckie resumed her story.

"We are now five women sharing the streets of Melville with other homeless people, mostly men. Some are run-always from Soweto and Alexandra, even as far as Wadeville, and others are orphans. I used to earn good money doing something decent, not standing in the streets begging motorists like I do now. We had our own place called Paul's Tavern that featured me regularly, especially on weekends. The money was not that great but it was money that fed me and my four sisters that I live with in the bush on Melville Koppies where we erected a plastic shelter. At the beginning white hikers used to threaten us. They said that they were going to report us and get the City Council to evict us. They said we were trespassing but then nothing happened. I think they all saw that we are harmless and we kept the area around our home clean. At the start, drunk boys menaced us but we taught one of them a lesson and news spread around among the boys that they must never mess with the five mad women of Melville, which is what they called us. But now we have become friends, even with the street boys. We even share cigarettes, food, even drinks. And this sharing all happened at Paul's Tavern on the poorer side of Melville which is very different from the pubs on 7th Street where you saw me perform last night. It was my second gig there and the new manager pays me R150 per night. Not good money I know because they closed down our pub soon after Covid-19, where every weekend I was paid R600, now I'm so grateful for anything that comes my way. The new manager said that if I fill up the place constantly,

they will increase my fee, and they are the ones who bought me the blue outfit and the heels and the wig you saw me wearing.

“Sisi, Paul’s Tavern was God-given for us who live in the streets. Just like the rich people on the other side of Melville we had our own place where we could drink your *Ngudu* in peace instead of being forced to drink in the streets like now. Life was not that bad for us sisi. Not everybody in Paul’s Tavern was a *tsotsi* like the owners of clubs on 7th Street said we were and forced the authorities to close down our place. And some of us worked in Melville for the same people who run the businesses on 7th and own the houses in the area, working as car guards, security guards, cleaners, maids, plumbers, even wiremen. Sometimes we even saw people from the other side come to Paul’s Tavern before month-end to have one or two *ngudus* before going back to drink expensive *dumpies* on their side.

“And they forced our place to be closed down because they said criminals drink there like it’s a crime to be poor and to refuse to buy a *dumpie* for R35 when you can buy the whole *Ngudu* for R21. We lost our tavern where we bothered nobody and now, we’re on the streets, and sometimes I wonder where they think their workers who live in their backrooms have their own fun after payday. When they brand everyone, they see walking in the streets a criminal, are they saying they employ criminals in their houses? Or we are criminals when we are in the streets but decent when we carry their babies on our backs or scrub their dirty floors or clean their shit off their toilet seats? Yes, sometimes they give us food or even money to buy food and some help boys on drugs to go clean. But mostly they treat us like shit.

And because they treat us like this, they are the ones who create criminals who steal from their mansions to survive! This did not happen when we had our own place where we all knew each other. They call us all criminals simply because we are poor and homeless. Right now, we do not know where Mr. Paul is who owned our Tavern. Some say he has gone back to Ghana; others say he opened another place in Maboneng. He was a good man for us and we don’t know where he is.”

When Thandi drove home, it was already afternoon. She knew exactly what she was going to call the home for the homeless mad women of Melville. She knew the obstacle would be her mother. And she knew that her father would not resist sponsoring rent and meals to make The Melville House a reality. Even from her daily allowance of R1000 that she received as ‘pocket money’ before she left for university every morning, could be saved to pay for the rent and food for these women.

“That would be enough. But she also knew sooner that the secret was not going to be a secret for long, so she needed to be open with her parents. In any case, she was assisting fellow human beings, women

for that matter, to stand on their feet, born in different circumstances, by different parents. She could have been them. In any case, they are all black, and just like her, they came from the township. Well, although she left the township when she was five, she too was born there. And her parents, according to them, used to struggle in the township too. Of that, she was sure.

“Let me start with my mother”, she said to herself as she drove home, “and once I have climbed

Table Mountain, it will be easier to climb Melville Koppies and The Melville House will be born and

The Melville Singer and her fellow Mad Women of Melville will have their own home.”

When she arrived home, she was surprised to see her father standing at the door of their house waiting for her. He normally did not do this.

“You have won? “Won what dad?” Mavuso smiled and hugged his daughter.

“The House is on 4th Avenue Corner 3rd Street. It is a five-room house.”

Number 46

This door has stories contained in its dry wood. This door keeps these stories in the spaces between the screws that keep its handles together. This door has secrets that will one day unhinge from the screws that hold them in bondage. This door will one day be free to express itself and reveal the secrets it has kept confidential for years: the quarrels inside the flat, the complex personalities that have called Number 46 Mitchell Street, Unit 205, Berea, home; the rudeness and arrogance of the occupants when they feel they are alone and drunk.

And yet this door is there, observing and hearing everything: the careless banging of this door as they open and close it to get in and out. This door has endured it all, but this door does not complain, not yet. This door does not have feelings. At least it does not express them. Not yet.

This door is not rude and does not speak back when provoked. Not yet. This door keeps information confidential for now.

This door is more loyal than one’s lover for now.

This door, unlike a dog that sometimes answers back by barking when provoked, does not answer back for now.

But this door will one day free itself from the burden of confidentiality, for sure.

This door will one day talk nothing but the truth. That is guaranteed. This door will say I need my freedom from you: Freedom from the humans that have lived here, including you, freedom to express myself without fear or favour, freedom to say the truth, nothing but the truth. The truth shall set me free, they say. And the truth I will say one day. That day is the day when the screws will unhinge and scatter the secrets of this flat, Number 46 Mitchell Street, Unit 205, Berea. That day is the day when true freedom for this door shall dawn in this place. Surely one day the truth shall come out. It always does.

PART B: The Portfolio

The journey begins

When I arrived in Makhanda for the O Week in January 2022 I and the other students on the MA

Creative Writing Programme were introduced to some of our teachers who were present by Paul Wessels the coordinator. I was at the same time both excited and anxious about the new journey that I was about to embark on.

Anxious because even though I have written work that has been published extensively in various newspapers, I simply had not tried producing what is called creative work, worthy of publishing, such as poetry, a short story or a novel. Excited because I felt I was ready to learn something new, something I had not done before. In fact, I had always wanted to know how the writers of novels, short stories and poems that I have always loved to read, managed to produce such good work that I enjoyed so much.

My anxiety was not allayed when Paul told us that during this journey there was going to be “a lot of reading, writing and thinking.” And indeed, those words turned out to be true throughout this journey. However, when the teachers gave us the course outline, I immediately knew that I was at the right place, ready to learn a new set of writing skills in new genres that I never thought I would grasp as a writer. I immediately knew that I would love to pursue the short story form. But at that stage, I did not know how that was going to unfold, and whether I would really be transformed into a fiction writer.

Instead, I learned more than how to write a short story as it turned out in the following months and weeks of attending seminars led by the various teachers. However, I should not have worried that much after all. That is because thereafter, I began a journey of learning, making mistakes and correcting them. I had to learn how to write prose and even poetry, something I never thought was in me, not even remotely.

As one of the two MA Part-Time students, that is Patrick and I (initially we were three but the other student left after a few weeks), our lessons were going to be mainly online with a few contact lessons in between. I liked the idea of using the Zoom technology, especially during this journey, as it was possible to see your teachers and they also could see us and we interacted in real time, from anywhere in the world. This was important in that you could ask questions or get clarification or feedback on your work right there on the screen. My journey as a writer had begun in earnest.

Seminar 1

I had of course heard about the word motif before, especially in visual art, whereby an artist uses certain mark-makings or ideas, embedding them into their work to the extent that they become a signature of their art practice. However, I had no idea that motif could be used in a story. I was very curious when Henali Kuit who led our first seminar, introduced us to motif in a short piece titled “Eagle Swallowing Girl” by writer Kate Bernheimer. We analysed the motif in this short story. I was fascinated by the idea that motif could be used to sustain a narrative by creating a mystery around the characters, including their strange behaviour and the suspense that runs centrally in this text. I also got a better idea of how in a literary context, motif is defined as a literary device that a writer employs to bring cohesion to a piece of writing, achieving this function through performing a number of functions. These include fulfilling an aesthetic function by existing as a pleasing pattern, a structural function by creating a connecting thread between moments and a narrative function by propelling a narrative arrangement in a dynamic way.

I learned that there are various ways in which motifs can be used to perform a number of functions that make a story interesting to read. For example, in “Eagle Swallowing Girl”, there are a number of characters in the story, such as the big truck, the snake that does not swallow the rabbit, the mouse that is confused by the unusual behaviour of the snake that is disinterested in attacking and swallowing it for food, the repairman who does not talk much but poses a threat, danger to the narrator, the home

owner who is the narrator in this story and who is afraid of being hunted too, just like the hawk and the girl by both the eagle and the repairman who behaves strangely, the floating bird-like girl, the owl, the nest, the elusive hawk, and the hunting eagle, which is the main character in this story. The motif of the eagle is what brings the thread of the story together as all the characters exist and their activities make sense because of the existence of the Swallowing Eagle. The eagle therefore brings a link to moments to drive the narrative in this story.

The motif in this story is therefore a bird, which, appears both as the hunter and the hunted, and whose appears in the story multiple times. The bird is what makes this story cohesive, joining moments, helping the narrative thread as well as performing the function of pleasing, including the humour and metaphors in it. All the characters are weaved around the eagle and its tendencies to hunt and swallow. Even the metaphor of the repair man represents the swallowing eagle.

The motif of the bird, in its different forms in this story fulfils a narrative, structural, aesthetic (floating girl, the eagle took off in a beautiful angle of flight, the pine tree where the eagle is perched held three nests of a hummingbird, mourning dove, goldfinch). The bird motif is used to create a flawless, comprehensible narrative.

Seminar 2

I was really pleased with what I learned about the function of the concept of motif in writing. But that excitement was somehow dampened when I realised that our next seminar was going to be poetry. Poetry, just like the short story form has always been a strange thing to me. I simply did not understand how writers are able to create a powerful story using sentences that are short, words that are so perfect in creating an image of what the poet is talking about. It was time to face my demons of the fear of failure in writing poetry in our second seminar titled Meeting Poetry, facilitated by Mxolisi Nyezwa. As it turned out, I should not have allowed those worries in my head. This is because Mxolisi, just like any human being may not know everything there is to know to let the message sink into the head of every learner he teaches. But teaching poetry, even to a poetry ignoramus like me, is not one of his weaknesses. His approach was so simple and yet powerful, making me at ease as I listened to him dishing out essential tips on how one should approach the writing of poetry.

Mxolisi's seminar emphasised that poetry writing must be approached with a questioning mind. This happens especially when a writer occupies specific positions to allow the writing process to take place, and these specific positions are marginality, vulnerability, innocence, simplicity and not claiming to know everything. This is to allow you to approach the function of writing from a position of being ignorant. Mxolisi emphasised that as writers we either write poetry because we are disgusted, or we chant because we are enchanted by it. As writers we have to set ourselves up carefully, in order to write meaningfully. Certain stances allow for poetry to come and look for us, instead of us looking for poetry.

This is expressed in Pablo Neruda's story titled "Poetry", written in the form of poem to a young writer as advice. The basic principle in terms of this advice is that, as already stated, instead of a writer looking for poetry, it should take place the other way round. In this way, the possibility to write beautifully exists. I found the proposition of poetry looking for you especially useful because I am not sure how to trigger poetry within me. Seeing the world from a disgusted or admiring position, I found helpful in activating my own capacity to write poetry within myself.

There were also structural techniques that I had to learn that allowed me to move easily in the maze of poetry writing. The seminar emphasised that there is a way of writing poetry that is mechanical, that is, identifying certain tools, and those tools include the presence of certain energies such as rhythm, rhyme and paying attention to the actual meaning of the words a writer chooses to use in his verse. This seminar was so useful to me that I came out of it thinking that in fact I have always been a poet. It is just that I did not know how to trigger poetry to come out of me.

When Mxolisi went further to give his perspective on what he said are essential features of poetry, I realised that I have seen these in some of the poetry that I had read before and why these poems had impressed me. Mxolisi identified five features as necessary in poetry and these are as follows:

A. Musicality – poetry which is arranged in a way that it sings. Musicality in words is an important feature, the idea of our stories, our words singing and chatting in a particular way with rhythm, allowing space where we engage our writing in a mechanical way, editing, listening to how the words have been arranged. This way, it is possible to achieve a choir, a

song in a poem and the song does not have to be beautiful. It can be erratic, but it must be true to its source, its own movement

B. Marginality – Presence of the vulnerable storyteller in the world is important and the writer must bear this in mind in order to write a meaningful poem. A marginal storyteller is a unique character that tells stories from that point of view and experience in life. Marginality is a special condition in that it allows the vulnerable writer to bring out how the world interacts with them. Taking this position enhances the quality of their writing. A position of vulnerability adds something to our writing. This incorporates the idea of being an alien in the world, and sometimes being invaded by the things of the world and ancestors. That in short is the positionality of being on the margin of societal influences. Observing the world from such a position allows for a writer to become unique in their writing.

C. Simplicity – This speaks to the idea of the power of telling stories by choosing and adopting simplicity in composition. Indeed, using simple words in story telling in general is something I also prefer in favour of using words that are unfamiliar and therefore tend to drive me to putting down a book. I read books to immerse myself in the story and the use of complicated and unfamiliar words is a habit that I consider to be a distraction from the essence of the story being told.

D. Being a beginner – Poetry is a close relative to confusion and disaster. One who writes is always a lost woman or man. It is better to be confused than to know all the answers.

E. Writers need an attitude that comes out as stupid questions. Writing from the point of view of an innocent child, looking at the world from a vulnerable state is important. I understood this to mean that when you ask questions when you are in doubt, you will get confirmation of what you may not be sure about, and it does not cost you anything other than a challenge to your confidence. Approaching poetry this way, without the interference of the ego, is helpful to a writer.

F. It is important to distinguish clearly what the writer knows and does not know in reference to what they are writing. What I understood this to mean is that it is fine to isolate what you know and what you do not know. Taking the position of knowing everything has traps. Maybe it is better to segment what you know and what you do not know, and particularly stand firm on what you do not know as the idea of knowing is a contestable arena. The right question to knowing excites our imagination, opens up our imagination. And often a writer who approaches writing from a point of not knowing, writes beautifully. We become

sensitive to what we incorporate and what we declare in our writing. This indeed is a useful tip that I thought I would follow through in my journey if ever I wanted to write poetry that touches people like those I have read and left me in awe.

The poetry seminar fired up my imagination so well that when subsequently I attended the group reading session led by Paul Wessels, I paid particular attention to the meaning of words in a story. I read a story titled THE WRITER, by Janice Lee. In this story there are a number of unique features, and these include the way the writer begins the story by writing a list of verbs, which at first do not seem to make sense as they strive to connect to the rest of the body of text through concepts and names at face value not connected, such as a tree, love, waves and mystery. These are themes that run through this prose. Another unique feature of this story is that it is told in four long sentences, punctuated by commas, without losing the reader in the process.

Though I must admit that this story is not one of the easiest to follow, I was however prepared to go all out and unpack its complexity. For example, I discerned that by clever use of prose, the writer is able to transport the reader into her imaginary world, full of mystery. This story is an example of text speaking to itself, and not trying to endear itself to a particular reader. It is obviously written with no reader in mind and yet the prose is catchy, and makes you want to read more, not necessarily trying to follow the story and the several ideas that the reader already knows. The prose sings and is almost poetic, and in the process sparks the imagination of the reader.

When my fellow-student Patrick selected and read five stories titled Invaluable, Invasion,

Explosions.... Explosions, Scenes from the 99th World and Freedom of Expression by Osama Alomar (Syria) –translated from the Arabic by Osamar Alomar and C.J. Collins, I was able to follow them too, even though they were not easy to follow if you do not pay enough attention. I managed to glean that although these complex stories narrate a particular scene, they seem to be talking about one country whose people's lives are wretched and under tremendous strife. I found the five stories to be impactful because they are written from an empathetic perspective by the writer.

The writer is disgusted by the miserable lives of the people he is writing about, who seem to be under constant oppression with limited freedom of expression, are under attack and portrayed as helpless. There is a sarcastic tone in the writing directed at the powers that be. There is a lot of humour in the stories. There is irony. There is metaphor. The stories are short but written in a way that makes the

reader get the message completely. I realised that I was able to unpack these stories by paying particular attention to words the writer chose to use.

Following the poetry seminar, we were required to write three poems for our assignment. Poetry based on three situations, and I wrote the three poems titled: "Floating Leaf and Gentle Waves", "The knock of my ancestors" and "Strange things do happen". The feedback from Mxolisi was that he found "Strange Things do happen" to be promising, and "The Knock of my ancestors" good, but "Floating Leaf and Gentle Waves", disappointing. I was disappointed because this happened to be my favourite. The lesson learned is that the reader has a final verdict on the written word, and not the writer. The writer writes and the reader decides if a piece of writing touches them or not. And so, I found Mxolisi's point to be valid.

Seminar 3

By now I was starting to enjoy poetry so much that I looked forward to our next seminar because it had something to do with poetry and a new element of prose writing, which I also happen to enjoy by way of reading books whose prose sings when you are reading them, making you not want to drop the book. I happen to like prose because I find good prose by a writer gifted with the facility of choosing good words to stand on their own, without necessarily depending on a narrative to carry a through.

The seminar titled Fierce Writing, facilitated by Kerry Hammerton, was by way of reading poetry and prose pieces that she selected for us and posted on RU Connected. We were required to read the accompanying notes carefully. The seminar also comprised questions to guide us through the readings. In some cases, the poems were accompanied by videos of authors reading their own poetry, which made my experience of these poems especially interesting. I liked the fact that the seminar required us to not only focus on how we write but what we are writing about, or what we choose to write about and why. I found this to suggest that we must be critical about what we choose to write about, and that is taking responsibility for our writing.

I found some of the prose and poetry pieces to be dealing with difficult subjects, and also using unusual forms of writing, such as the use of lower-case letters throughout. For example, Danez

Smith's "dear white America" poem (Smith, Danez (2017), and Vangile Gantsho's "red cotton" poem

(2018). These two poems deal with the subject of white racism in America, and Gender Based Violence in South Africa, respectively. The use of lower-case letters intrigued me, and I learned that this can be a useful literary device if used within a certain context. For example, for the two writers using small letters in their respective poems, while dealing with a huge problem, I found that contrast noticeable. The authors are probably trying to draw the attention of the reader to the weight of the subject matter they are dealing with and how emotional the subject is. Both poems made me reflect on both issues and where we are at in South Africa as far as the issue of Gender Based Violence is concerned. Both poems are pregnant with intense emotions and have an extremely angry mood in them. I learned that this kind of writing is useful, especially when it comes to lobbying around a contemporary issue in society that is problematic. I found the deliberate choice of words effectively evoked emotions in the reader. It was clear that the subject matter of these poems reflected the deep concerns of both poets.

I was moved to the extent that in response to the prompt of Section One of the assignment – which, via focus on Vangile Gantsho's poem *red cotton*, required students to describe a scene that hints at something horrible that has happened without explicitly stating what happened – I wrote a prose piece titled *A Neighbour from Hell*. Echoing the tone of the writing in the two poems mentioned above, I wrote a prose piece in which I took the risk of putting myself in the position of an angry person whose feelings have been violated through violence perpetrated on them. I found this act of being an angry narrator quite challenging because often I feel comfortable writing from a positive point of view, a safe space for me.

In this instance, I found myself fighting the emotions of personally being engaged in the story and its issues, as I found it to be draining to write. However, at the end I felt somewhat liberated from a certain burden of not speaking out in the face of violence, as is the case in the piece. I will most probably pursue writing in this direction in future, exploring to see how far I can go in that direction. From these two writers' pieces and my response to their pieces, I concluded that sometimes as writers we need to adopt an angry tone, especially if we want to lobby against an issue of social injustice prevailing in the society we live in. We have a responsibility in society to do so.

I attributed the use of lower-case letters to the original poem by Vangile Gantsho; to the fact that she used that form to be heard and to draw attention to the issues. But that would not work for me in a prose piece. I concluded that the use of the lower case in poetry, such as in Vangile Gantsho's piece, works well, especially when you want to raise awareness about a violent event such as rape. However, I

think this form could be limiting in prose, as it would distract readers from following the story, particularly if it is a long piece.

But this way of writing is important practice because not only does it make you feel liberated as a writer from a burden of silence in the face of injustice, but also raises consciousness about a social issue. It fulfils the satisfaction of writing with a purpose, for a good cause. I find this to be an admirable way of critically choosing 'what' one writes about, which is likely to influence the 'how' of one's writing.

I found the collection of poems in Section Two dealing with the issues of identity, especially when one is a minority in a diverse country, such as the USA. For example, Danez Smith's poem "dear white America" is a poem that speaks on behalf of Black Americans, and the perceived hatred they get from their White counterparts. Natalie Diaz's 'American Arithmetic' in "Postcolonial Love

Poems" (2020), deals with the issues of minority Indians in the USA. Olivarez Jose's poem titled "Mexican American Disambiguation" deals with the issues of a Mexican American identity crisis and prejudice against them by fellow Americans. "Invasion" by Charles Reznikof deals with the horror of the Holocaust and how badly the Jews were treated by the S.S. (Reznikoff, Charles. Holocaust.

Nottingham: Five Leaves Publication, 2010).

All these poems are emotive as they deal with a community that is not receiving justice, that suffers at the hands of the majority and simply because they belong to a minority. I found framing the narrative from a community point of view to work. Segmenting a population, focusing on a specific group is a literary technique which I found to be working for the writers of these pieces.

These pieces in response to the prompt in Section Two: Focusing on a specific moment in time or a single event, write a poem or prose piece from a community's point of view in the first-person plural "we", inspired me to write the poem titled *Forgotten in times of a pandemic*. This is in reference to the current plight of South African artists who feel that government is not doing enough for them as they cannot earn a living like before, due to the several lockdowns that have been declared since 2020, when Covid-19 broke out globally.

Through this exercise, I therefore learned that creating a voice that represents a community that is under-represented in a diverse country is, therefore, an effective literary technique one can use to raise awareness through writing poetry or prose.

This seminar, therefore, fitted well into what was required of us to do in the subsequent group reading. We held our regular Group reading session led by Paul Wessels. In the group reading session, we selected poetry and prose that we analysed in terms of form, looking specifically at what works and what does not work. The poems and prose pieces were emotional in terms of mood, varying in length to those that were two lines to those running to several paragraphs. Some sentences were also short, but still impactful. I found the varying of sentences, to those short and those long, quite effective in getting the point through in a narrative, as it makes it easy to read and follow the narrative. This is something I will consider using going forward to see how, and if, it would work in my own writing.

For example, in the piece *From Deaf Republic:3* by Ilya Kaminsky, I found this extract to be short but to the point. One gets the whole narrative about the two brothers who are in love with the same girl, and yet they seem not to be bothered by what by all accounts, appears to be a disaster waiting to happen in their relation over this one lover. But interestingly nothing happens. This left many questions in my mind that could not be answered by the extract. For example, there is no confrontation between the brothers at the end over this girl. Perhaps it is indeed true that blood is thicker than water. Perhaps reading the whole story would assist to answer that question.

But if you think that this behaviour of the two brothers in *From Deaf Republic:3* is intriguing, wait till you read *2 Shorts* by Lily Hoang. For example, in *Women & Desire*, one gets a sense that the majority of the tenants and the two women who regularly engage in noisy sex sessions in their room are wrong. In the first instance, fellow tenants do terrible things to these two women, including invading their privacy, to stop them from their noisy sex escapades. In the second instance, the women themselves seem to be inconsiderate of others by making noise day in and day out, as they make love. However, the more drastic action the sick -and -tired fellow tenants take, the lovers take a similar action to amplify their noisy sex acts, countering the action taken by the rest, to the annoyance of the rest of the tenants. Here the author has used the technique of tension to drive the narrative. The writer has also used the technique of different value systems among the warring tenants that ultimately are in conflict with each other to drive the narrative. There is also a sense of humour in the story. This story demonstrates that using humour, diverse value systems, tension and ultimately conflict can drive a narrative. These work perfectly well, and therefore a writer can exploit these devices to tell a beautiful story.

Seminar 4

After getting intrigued by the strange happenings in Seminar 3, I looked forward to this seminar, which promised light moments after the heavy stuff above. In this seminar titled Epistolary Writing, facilitated by Stacy Hardy, we were introduced to a writing form that felt like something familiar to me, but till then I had no vocabulary for it. This is a form of writing that is constituted by written documents mainly but not exclusively letters, between usually two people. Sometimes there is response to these letters by people to whom they are addressed. But at other times there is none, for example, a letter written to a dead person, family member or a friend of the letter writer.

To make us grasp this form of writing, we were given readings that contained examples of epistolary writing in the form of prose and poems. After reading these pieces and listening to the audio, I soon found that these writings are mainly personal and put the writer in a deeply vulnerable position, exposing their emotions, vulnerability, including such intimate issues as love, break ups and other familial issues. I soon also grasped the fact that these letters and poems also go beyond the personal, as they can give the reader the broader picture and context in which the writer is living, with regards to place, time, and political environment, by simply perusing these pieces of writing between friends, family members or lovers.

These letters also constitute historical accounts and can be turned into novels or other genres. I soon also discovered that the language in the poems and prose is very specific and intentional as it has the ability to bring a reader close to the person to whom it is addressed, the narrator or the writer. Reading such letters makes you feel like you are being privileged to get into a personal space of two people that you do not have a personal relationship with. This form of writing makes the reader feel like they have been given a rare opportunity to get into a special space shared by two people who know each well. However, while this form of writing gives a reader permission in a way to enter deeply personal spaces, such as the two people's love affairs, their family issues, their deep thoughts and fears, but Epistolary writing also gives a reader the broader context of the society in which the writers locate themselves, such as the politics, social issues and cultural issues. So even though the writers write with the purpose of communicating with each other, broader issues of their society inadvertently come out of such communication. I learned that reading such letters in a particular period of a society gives you a glimpse into the broader issues of that society.

This, I gathered is a literary technique a writer could use. For example, to address current issues of importance to society by simply ostensibly writing to a fellow writer about a teething issue in society, such as the current power supply cuts South Africa is experiencing and the failure by government to

address the crisis. In fact, one can write a whole book through a series of letters addressed to a fellow writer, who also responds on the same issue giving their own perspective. It is something worth pursuing in writing, I think.

Just as I was exploring and reflecting on enjoying Epistolary Writing in this seminar, I was jostled back to the reality of mysteries in writing as the subsequent group reading session dealt with that phenomenon.

During our group reading, led by Paul Wessels, and attended by me, fellow students Esona and Patrick, we read three stories, each, with Esona reading a piece of prose titled “No Matter Which Way We Turned”, by Brian Evenson.

I found this story intriguing as the issues that it deals with are beyond my rational way of looking at things, such as the mysterious loss of bodily limbs by a girl, simply because someone called to the skies for some mysterious power. However, what I found to be working in this story is the picture of horror and fear that affects the witnesses to the girl’s predicament. The horror and fear have been woven into the story so much that the reader understands why there is so much fear among the characters portrayed in the story, without the reader necessarily making sense of why certain things in this story happened the way they did. You did not need to believe in the mystery for you to be touched by Brian Evenson’s story - the mystery, the strange things happening and the fear that has struck the party at the lodge. However, if you are still pondering over the strange issues happening in the above piece, wait till you get to this one.

I selected a piece titled “The Heart’s Secret Moves” by Yuri Herrera. I picked this piece to read because the writer has positioned the main character in an awkward position. This leaves the reader not knowing whether the character Pedro, who goes on a killing spree of the bad guys, is someone one should empathise with, or that he is as bad as the people he goes out to kill, ostensibly for committing injustice in society. The critical question is: Is it OK for someone, such as Pedro, to go around and kill the bad guys, simply because they are bad. But what the author has succeeded in doing correctly by way of rationality, is casting Pedro as a well-meaning guy, who unfortunately after killing the first bad guy, a rapist policeman, gets increasingly crazy. Mad even.

His brutality and quest to kill no longer look justifiable or condonable, as he continues to claim more bodies in this murderous spree. This is in sharp contrast to the rationale when he committed the first murder of the police, for the narrator makes it feel like, Pedro was justifiable, as he is portrayed as understanding what he was doing as representative of what his friends would have loved to see in the

name of justice. So, the writer has succeeded in telling the story of a well-meaning guy, who went overboard in his craziness. And so, a reader first empathises with Pedro, but then later is forced to backtrack and judge Pedro harshly. This is because Pedro crosses the line of rationality through his excesses.

The writer has managed to make you shift your mind and attitude towards Pedro and his original cause. I found that to be a powerful literary technique, to manipulate the reader's mind to follow the writer through the twists and turns in the story. In "My Last Story", by Janet Frame, I found the technique of the writer getting the unnamed narrator writing in the first person, to say that he was not going to say certain things but going on to say them anyway, quite capturing. This technique forces you to read on and get to know what the narrator was going to tell you anyway. In fact, he goes on to say what he claims he was not going to say. Using this technique, the writer got the narrator not only to tell one story, but several stories this way. It is a technique I will try to employ in my own writing in some cases, to see how far it can match these beautifully told stories by Janet Frame, using the first-person narration of an unnamed narrator.

Seminar 5

As I pondered about these techniques of telling a story using various techniques to capture the attention and the interest of the reader, I found myself soon learning another quite interesting way of telling a painful story in a non-direct way, but still effective as something worth pursuing, especially when one is telling a story of trauma.

During this seminar facilitated by Jo-Ann Bekker, focusing on writing obliquely, I got to understand that sometimes writing about a painful experience or an intense experience of excitement can be difficult. However, there is a literary device one can adopt to make it easy, and that is to write about the event off centre, looking at things that are on the periphery of the main event itself, though without completely erasing the event from the narrative. This can be achieved through a number of ways. For example, describing other events or scenes associated with the main event, while at the same time mentioning the main event obliquely, in an indirect sort of way. This writing can be in the form of poetry or prose, both long form and short form. In the readings that we were given there were several examples of all this form of writing that gave me an idea of how to tell a story obliquely. The stories exemplify best the concept of writing obliquely. Some of the stories are quite painful and not easy to

read without somehow being touched personally by an event that may have happened in your personal life and space in the past. Or events that happened in the past to people close to you.

In the readings, two stories particularly stood out for me, one of which is titled “If I Stay Right Here” by Chwayita Ngamlana. In these three short pieces of writing in a form of prose, the writer uses descriptions to define concepts such as desire, obsession and dyke. This way, the writer has made it easy for a reader to understand what they may have undergone in the past or undergoing currently. Such as love for someone or the pain of a long-distance relationship. For example, the concept of obsession that the writer describes here may make it easy for a reader to let go of a problematic relationship that one maybe trying to salvage and save.

In a way, this kind of writing is likely to connect with people’s own experiences and therefore becomes compelling reading. An example is the following line: “Obsession is trying to fix a broken chair without realising that the chair is just bent at the knees and that’s how it was born” (Excerpts from the prologue of the book titled *If I Stay Right Here*: a novel, (Chwayita Ngamlana Blackbird Books, 2017).

Another story that caught my attention is a very short story titled “Pee Sisters” by Stacy Hardy (from the story collection “Because the Night” by Stacy Hardy (Pocko Editions, 2015). I like this short story because it is about two women who dislike each other so much, the reason being that the other one thinks that the one pee sister wants to steal her boyfriend, an allegation she denies. But the way the narrator goes about it is such that she does not seem to want to face the elephant in the house – the hot issue at hand. That is their hatred for each other because of a man.

The writer does not go straight to say that they are fighting over a boyfriend, but rather chooses a round-about way, such as describing the pee, the environment where they pee, and the fact that they pee at the same time, and they go far enough so that the boys will not hear them. This is a powerful way of writing obliquely about an issue dividing two supposed friends. But through focusing on all the peripheral issues to their relationship, we get to know that they now want to mend fences. We get to know that it took a pee in the bush to unite two friends whose friendship is threatened by the existence of a love interest by one of the pee sisters, a man. I thought this is an effective way of telling a story about a complex relationship between these two pee sisters, simply because of jealousy. The writer did not go straight to say that two friends are fighting each other because of jealousy over a man. Stacy Hardy’s story prompted me to write a piece titled “Glances and Love in Time of Apartheid”.

This story is motivated by Stacy Hardy's "Pee Sisters" in that both stories deal with a complicated love story though the circumstances in which the love plays itself out are different. Like the narrator's "Pee Sisters", the narrator in "Glances and Love in Time of Apartheid", finds himself facing animosity from society, threatening the couple's relationship.

The narrator here is a black man who falls in love with a white woman. They are two people from different backgrounds in a country that is largely divided when it comes to interracial relationships. However, in this story, unlike in Stacy Hardy's "Pee Sisters", I explore the issue of racism that often faces interracial couples in society. Society simply does not accept people that look different to fall in love in peace. In short, although the two stories deal with different circumstances, jealousy in the case of "Pee Sisters", and racism in the case of "Glances and Love in Time of Apartheid", both demonstrate the complexity around the theme of love, and that a threat to a relationship sometimes comes from outside the relationship itself, such as a disapproving society, or friends. In these two stories both issues threaten love between two people.

In my story, I deliberately avoid describing the two lovers as black and white. Instead, I choose to describe them as dark skin and light skin. I also avoid directly dwelling on what the two lovers are facing, a pushback by society to their relationship by way of racism. Even though that is the elephant in the room, and one gets it at the end. This way I wanted to write obliquely about an issue that sometimes divides society on race grounds. That is love across the race divide. In this piece I indirectly address the issue of racism, often a black and white couple faces from society without directly naming it. This way, it allowed me to develop the narrative as far as I could, rather than directly address the issue at hand, which is racism. However, at the end, it takes a pee to unite two warring sisters, and a plane to distant Amsterdam to bring the couple even close. In this seminar I learned how effectively one can use the idea of writing obliquely to deal with an elephant in the room, without naming it, and still capture the attention of the reader, without traumatising them or triggering them about their own past experience of a painful event that may have happened to them or those close to them that is similar to the story you are telling.

I never till now realised that I probably love mysteries in stories. I probably do because in our subsequent regular group reading session facilitated by Paul Wessels after this seminar, out of all the other stories I could have chosen from the Reading List, I chose this story, full of mystery. I read "Invitation" by Claudia Hernandez. I chose this story simply because of its complex framing, a narrator who gets invited to go outside her home by mysterious people. She then starts seeing two versions of

herself. That confuses her. And besides she mysteriously gets locked out of her home, forced to look for a new home.

In my mind I chose this story because I found it hard to understand. Paul however suggested that the best way to look at this complex story is to look at the woman, who sees a younger version of herself, besides her current self as someone who sees a vision. That angle made me understand that as a writer you can create a vision for a character. In a work of fiction that does not need to be logical. That is to say the behaviour of the characters a writer creates.

A writer can make a character move a mountain without a logical explanation. A writer should therefore not be afraid to take a risk with his or her characters. For example, making characters do certain things that are ordinarily out of the ordinary of society's norms and expectations. This is a risk a writer takes. It is however important to be aware that sometimes it will work, and at other times, it will not work. By share coincidence, Patrick also chose to read a story that is also wrapped in mystery. This indeed, was a day of reading mystery. "LUCIA OR, THE PIGEON" by Evelio Rosero too has a complex framing just like the one titled "Invitation" by Claudia Hernández.

It deals with the mysterious disappearance of things both living and not living, first the pigeons, and finally the narrator's partner, Lucia. What I notice in this story is that there is a great sense of sadness and lament in the voice of the narrator about life in the past compared to now. There is also the fear of loneliness in the event that his partner Lucia, disappears as well. And just like in Claudia Hernández's short story the best way to make sense of this story is to suggest that the narrator was seeing visions of extra-ordinary happenings in his environment. Again, this can only make sense in fiction as a writer can create extra-ordinary circumstances, such as the mysterious disappearances of things in this case. Only in fiction does this make sense. In other words, the writer has a rare license to create anything in fiction that does not necessarily make sense in real life situations as we know them through our lived experiences. I am starting to love the license that writers have.

In South Africa, we currently have issues of Gender Based Violence and patriarchal attitudes that do not assist in advancing society. It is for this reason I keenly looked forward to a story chosen by Esona, which deals precisely with this burning issue. "Neomachismo" by Natalie Scenters-Zapico has the tone of an angry narrator, who is not happy with how men sometimes treat women. The narrator seems to be suggesting that the young woman being addressed here must be submissive to a man, irrespective of

the abuse. But in reality, this piece is meant to make a reader outraged by the treatment women get from men.

I think raising issues of feminism this way is effective as the piece manages to make one feel outraged and automatically be on the side of women suffering abuse from men. In fact, “Neomachismo” as a piece of writing dealing with issues of women abuse is more effective than shouting feminist views from raised platforms, especially when feminists are aiming at getting the support of more people, including men in their fight for fair treatment of women by mostly the men they love. This is the conclusion I reached after reading this story.

If the writer’s aim here is to gain more support for the feminism cause, I am game here as I felt outraged by how this young woman is seemingly told to be submissive to men irrespective of the abuse and without questioning some of the absurdities. As a literary device to observe, and which a writer can employ to tell a story more effectively, I think one can write with strong emotions, saying something extremely ridiculous, whose effect in the reader’s mind is to achieve the opposite of what at face value is what the writer is advocating for through a stupid character of course, such as the narrator in Natalie Scenters-Zapico’s piece.

Seminar 6

As a reader of fiction, till now, I had always wondered how come novels, especially the great ones, all seem to follow a certain way of telling a story. The answer I have been looking for all along, I eventually found in the next seminar titled Narrative Convention, facilitated by Paul Mason.

In this seminar, we learned about the concept of narrative convention as identified and championed by literary scholar Joseph Campbell. In his seminal text, “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” (1949) Campbell discussed myths, fairy tales and legends, in a wide range of cultures and from antiquity to the present-day. His study revealed a common narrative pattern or structure. This structure consisted of a series of changes in the journey or adventure of the hero or protagonist. The reader is introduced to the hero or heroine inside his or her so-called ordinary world.

This hero is then encouraged to deal with a situation of unfairness, often encouraged by a mentor. Firstly, the heroine becomes reluctant, but eventually relents. Once they cross that threshold there is no turning back. They face danger and a crisis that they need to overcome in the form of identity crisis or

confidence. The hero/protagonist has to deal with a powerful enemy or enemies. In the process the heroine ropes in allies who assist her in the fight for justice and fairness. The fight is fierce, and the hero faces a realistic risk of losing everything if he does not succeed. Eventually the heroine becomes victorious, and she returns home, with a reward waiting for her as she returns to her normal life.

Does the above sound like all the great novels you have read?

This basically is the structure of all stories, be it in theatre, movies or novels, even in oral tradition.

The structure is, however, clearer in screen plays.

However, in this seminar, we were also taught that in as much as it is important to tell stories this way, as this has been proven to work well for centuries, we need to challenge the narrative conventions in our story telling, especially if we are going to write a story that has elements of surprise. We need to stretch our imaginations and go where we have not been before in our writing, a place that is challenging and often makes one uncomfortable as a writer.

Three stories in the seminar were cited as challenging this narrative convention: “The Sanatorium under the Hourglass” by Bruno Schulz, “The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born” by Ayi Kwei Armah and “House of Hunger” by Dambudzo Marechera.

I found the short story written by Bruno Schulz to be unusual as inanimate objects through text were made to look like living things. A dead person was made to look like still living by the technique of pushing time backwards in the narrative. Though some of the scenarios created in this story would not work in the normal world we live in, but psychologically, or through the logic of events and scenarios painted, I found myself agreeing with the possibility of the gist of the story.

Likewise, in an extract from “The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born,” the wooden banister of a staircase is depicted as a living organism that endures endless revarnishing and repainting as well as the pressure of human hands. This piece of writing struck me as a mode of narration that brought the story to life in an unexpected and unconventional manner.

In the extract from House of Hunger, Dambudzo Marechera presents a narrator who talks about issues affecting his country, from corrupt politicians, homelessness, shady missionaries and their shenanigans, to the hungry masses. By using these seemingly disconnected fragments, the author manages to paint a vivid picture of the political turbulence of the country inhabited by the narrator. At face value, the

ramblings of the writer seem unconnected. However, once they are considered collectively, they emerge as a narrative that expresses a country in crisis. This is a useful way of making sense of this unconventional piece of writing. It is something I will attempt to do in future as I found it to be a complex form of writing about issues facing society without writing seemingly a single narrative piece of prose in a conventional sense.

Therefore, after reading these pieces of great writing by the three writers, you can imagine the excitement I built within myself, looking forward to the assignment we were given. I was ready to experiment in my writing journey. For the assignment following this seminar, we were required to write two stories, a conventional short story and one that challenges the conventions. I wrote a short story titled "Mia takes a shot at Big Shot". I used the conventional structure that was identified by Joseph Campbell as the basis for mythological narratives. Following that structure made it easy for me to create a hero, and that hero became the protagonist Mia who fought injustice perpetrated by the villain in the story, a character called Big Shot who exploited her and other poor city people by charging them big sums of money as rental for inner city Johannesburg substandard shack accommodation in an abandoned building. The dilapidated building is a former clothing factory. I found the hero's Journey structure as a literary technique useful in creating this short story.

In the second phase of this assignment, we were required to use the first phase narrative as the basis for a new story that does not follow, and even undermines, narrative conventions. The purpose was to create a piece of writing that could make claims to strangeness and originality.

I therefore wrote a story titled "Revenge of the Cockroach Matriarch" based on the original story titled "Mia takes a shot at Big Shot". Instead of using Mia as the protagonist and Big Shot as the antagonist, the principal characters in the first story, I presented the cockroaches – which inhabited the same building as Mia and the other residents – as the story's protagonists. In the original story the fight for control over the building takes place between Mia and fellow residents on one hand, and the exploitative Big Shot on the other. The cockroaches that share the same building are voiceless. In the second or reworked story these creatures, led by their matriarch, not only have a voice, but they make life in the building come to a standstill as soon as the housing committee decides to transform the building into a clean and hygienic space. Naturally, this threatened transformation poses a threat to their existence.

Although the cockroaches know they will not be able to stop their imminent deaths, they decide to go out in style, by eating everything they find in the shacks to the extent that they would not be able to move, and the people would rather kill them en masse in the morning when they wake up while their stomachs were full. This was an attempt on my part to make the often 'invisible', non-human beings visible and human. I was also attempting to show that someone's misery is not necessarily shared by every other being on earth. In fact, beings depend upon other beings, literally for their sustenance. I found this way of writing a story not only interesting and intriguing, but highly unconventional; carrying the potential to be more interesting to the reader than a story that follows the conventional mode of narration.

Fire up by the experimentation of the two stories I have described above, you can surely excuse me for the excitement I felt going to our regular group reading session that week.

In the reading group session facilitated by Hleze Kunju, each student read two stories from either Reader 1 or Reader 2. Hleze emphasized that in stories, it is always crucial to look at what makes the story to work or not work by interrogating the literary techniques that are employed in the narrative. It is not important to say I like a story without identifying that which makes it to work.

For example, in a story titled "The Fifth Story" by Clarice Lispector (Brazil) Translated by Giovanni Pontiero, which is from *Reader 1* page 5, the writer used the technique of repetition of ideas effectively. Even though the story itself could be one story, he told a slightly different version going forward, with one additional element not found in the preceding version, to make it look like there are five stories. I found that technique useful in adding value to the story as it keeps the reader waiting for what will come next. We were also made aware that in a story there are certain things that will work and others we need to discard if we find them not working to enhance the narrative of a story. For example, in a short story titled "Tsafendas's Diary" by Ivan Vladislavid, the use of a granny's knitting cap as the backdrop to the story and how knitting appears as motif throughout the story is useful in enhancing the narrative.

The knitted cap also finds a new function in the narrative - that is a cap that helps the grandson to think. The use of a dream that appears through this child, taking the young child to places that he would not be able to go to in a wake state, is also a technique I found useful in making the story look authentic. He for example, could think like an adult in a dream, something that he obviously cannot do as a child in a narrative that seeks to look authentic.

What I find not working in this story though is the constant digging of the hole into which food is repeatedly thrown in. I think that part has no role to play in strengthening the narrative. The whole digging part, I would not miss it if it were not part of the narrative. In fact, it confuses the reader and interferes with the narrative of the story. It does not seem to belong there, but elsewhere that is not part of this otherwise beautifully constructed story.

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Seminar 7

For this seminar, having enjoyed learning about how to write poetry that sings from Mxolisi' seminar, I looked forward to deepening my knowledge about the mystery of writing poetry, and this time looking closely into the language of poetry. Facilitated by Marike Beyers this seminar titled Poems from Poems, to me came up as building blocks on the earlier seminar, getting into the nit gritty of the art of constructing good poetry, the word technicalities. We were introduced to the writing of Kenneth Koch: "How to make your own days: The pleasures of reading and writing poetry", which focused on the Introduction and chapter on *The language of poetry*.

We got to learn the following: poetry as a special kind of language; a language within a language, inspiration: works from a phrase or sentence in poetic language: be inspired by language, music of words (sound, rhythm) of it as important to the meaning as the content (grammar, syntax and meaning), creates tone; an emotional response, rhetorical devices such as comparisons, repetition, personification and so forth and so on, as devices that make poetry writing a special type of writing with its own language. We also go to learn that poetry has a unique quality of creating some kind of reality of its own, growing its own existence and these possibilities exist because as one writes and reads, that results in a new evolving language of poetry.

In this seminar I also got to know that there is a close relationship between poetry and prose, each having the potential to benefit from borrowing from the other certain aspects of writing. Marike in her seminar notes, pointed out that in poetry, there is intensity of language, compared to prose writing as she alluded to this for example, to the writing of Joseph Brodsky: "A poet and prose". A prose writer can for example, improve his or her sensitivity to language by writing poetry, even if they do not intend to publish poetry. Poets can also borrow a lot from prose as well, especially in their daily communication.

The following elements are what prose writers can learn from poetry: brevity, harmony, presenting thought and experience in a synthesized way (instead of analytical focus), making the reader more complicit in the creative process (having to read for structural meanings more pertinently, held together by voice and intonation, linguistic expressiveness, particularity in using punctuation. Basically, what I learned is how poetry plays an important role in the construction good and short sentences in prose. Poetry therefore, I learned is the basis of any other good writing.

If you master the demanding economy and discipline of words in poetry, it therefore should become easier to write prose. It therefore follows that mastering the structure of poetry composition is an important skill that one can harness and use effectively in prose writing. Having said this, it is important also to know that there are certain things that will work in poetry well, but will not achieve the same effect and impact when employed in prose. For example, the following are the things that work better in prose as opposed to poetry: narratives that involve more than three characters, reflections on historical themes and childhood remembrances.

From the writing of Robert Creeley, we learned about how he narrowed poetry in which he points out the following about the complexity of poetry as having the following elements: music, sound and rhythms, which can be listened to either loudly or in silence. We also learned that poetry can create images through words, and just like music, poetry can touch you before you even get its meaning. Poetry can also induce emotions in the audience or the reader. I related to this very well, based on my experience of listening for example to spoken word poetry. In spoken word poetry, because of other issues related to a performance, often in an overcrowded, smokey bar, it becomes from my own experience difficult to hear every word uttered by the performer, but if the poetry is really in the other elements, such as rhythm, one can still enjoy it, notwithstanding the difficulty of hearing and taking in the words coming from the mouth of the performance poet. This complication can at times be related to unusual pronunciation of words by the performing poet. However when it is good poetry which is sabotaged by the factors that I have mentioned above, this seminar made me to understand that if the same poetry is on paper and one gets to read it at their own time and pace, with the benefit of analyzing the words, one can still enjoy the poetry better because we learned the fact that poetry is that which exists through itself, that is words as things and that is a language; a making that is in words.

This proposition, I found it fitting well in for example, Edward Hirsch's piece titled "How to read a poem". We learned that in reading poetry one must find the points one finds most meaningful, such as simple language in which a reader participates in analysing the structure of the poem. However, we also

took caution from Robert Berold about the issue of how readers receive and consume poetry and their potential influence on how as writers we create poetry.

Robert Berold advises that one should not worry too much about readers or audience in poetry as poetry will find its own readers once written. This I understood to mean that eventually any kind of poetry has some audience somewhere no matter how it is structured. Some people will like it, while others will not. This suggestion by Robert Berold, fits into the piece by Enrique Villa-Matas titled "From Dublinesque". Through this piece, we learned that a talented reader "allows a conscience radically different from their own to appear in their mind," "difficult terrains that demand a capacity for intelligent emotion, a desire to understand the other and to approach a language distinct from the one of our daily tyrannies." This basically suggest that a reader interested enough in poetry, will make an effort to understand unfamiliar terrain in poetry instead of dismissing it off hand, without making even the slightest effort to understand it and learn something from it.

Basically, it boils down to the proposition that skills for writing are as important as skills for reading, and that is that the skills needed to read poetry are as important as the skills needed to write. A reader has as much responsibility in reading and understanding poetry as the writer has the responsibility to write and create the poem. It therefore means that impactful poetry is a shared responsibility between an interested reader and the writer. This suggests that in fact the interested reader and the writer are co-creating poetry that opens possibility for expanding the meaning of such poetry. I really enjoyed this seminar as it indeed expanded my knowledge and therefore was in an inspired posture when I tackled the assignment emanating from this seminar.

For this assignment, we were required to do the following: Write two poems using some aspect that spoke to you. The poem doesn't have to 'answer to' the poem you chose, but if you liked elements of repetition, write a poem using something that repeats/recurs, that kind of thing. Or you can freewrite from a particular phrase that struck you and create something from that. Alternatively use the broad themes of the selection of poems as a guideline: write a poem using memory or in memory of someone; write a poem directed to something or someone; write a poem 'making use' of what is around you and in your head; scenes that imply a story; a poem on the process of making something or putting something in the world(or combine the methods – but 2 poems at the end of it)

I chose to write two poems speaking to the aspects of the poetry in the reading that spoke to me. And the poems I wrote were inspired by certain aspects of the poetry I read.

Johannesburg, My Jozi, I titled one of the two poems.

The poem speaks to the character of the city built on the back of the discovery of gold in 1886 in which both the wealthy –called Randlords who invested in gold mining on the reef and the poor, mainly migrant workers from southern Africa, participated in its mining. But today, the wealth has moved on to other investment opportunities but the poor remain. Called zama zamas, they go underground in mining shafts looking for the elusive gold dust that they believe will make them rich. The results are often disappointing. That is one aspect of Johannesburg, but the other is that people and visitors love the city and hate it at the same time. To write this poem, I was inspired by the poem “City that does not sleep” (*Nightsong of Brooklyn Bridge*) by Federico Garcia Lorca (Spain 1898-1936). Though stylistically, the poems are different, with Federico Garcia Lorca, focusing on the idea of the city that does not sleep, and “Johannesburg, My Jozi”, focusing on the hate/love relationship residents have about Johannesburg, the idea of looking at the city as a personality in poetry appealed to me.

The second poem I titled *Number 46*.

This poem which is about the history of a flat as recorded by its door in the suburb of Johannesburg called Berea, was inspired by Robert Berold’s poem titled “To my room”, which looks at the history of a room and its relationship with its occupants and what it has witnessed there. In Robert’s poem, the room is so close to its occupant to the extent that he instructs the room to bury him in a simple plank when he dies. In this poem, I liked how Berold made the room to be more than a place to sleep. The room was a friend of his, and together they had so many experiences that made them even closer. What this does to a reader, is that it makes you to look at a room, not just as an inanimate object, but a place that has so much history as it has witnessed so much in relation to what has been going on in that room since the owner took occupation. In “Number 46”, I wanted to subvert that close relationship between the room and the narrator in Berold’s “To My Room”.

Instead of a close relationship between the room and its occupants, is pregnant with anger and bitterness. It is a relationship filled with tension.

The feedback that I got after submitting the drafts of my two poems was that I had gotten the structure fine. It was however pointed out that I must eliminate repetition in my writing and that I must always be mindful of consistency in text, for example, whether I go with ‘I’ or ‘we’ and not to introduce these inconsistencies in the text of my poetry. On the final draft I incorporated what came out of the feedback session with Marike and Patrick, and that is eliminating the repetition and correcting the inconsistencies

in the text as regards to the use of pronouns 'we or I.' I was finally happy with what came out of the seminar, and therefore I was in good spirits when I went to our group reading session for the week.

At our reading group facilitated by Hleze, Patrick and I read from two stories one from Reader 1 and the other from Reader 2. In the group reading we focused on the form rather than the meaning of the stories and how the use of certain techniques enhanced the impact of the chosen stories on the reader. In analysing stories with the aim of making your own writing better, it is more helpful to focus on the aspects of prose that tighten the story and grip the attention of the reader rather than focusing only on the meaning of the story, we learned. I therefore went into the next seminar prepared well after this seminar and the group reading session. After all the seminar became a building block onto the previous seminar as we then moved into an area that forms the identity and style of a writer different from the other writers populating the literary space

Seminar 8

Titled Voice, the seminar was facilitated By Masande Ntshanga. I enjoyed it because although I had before heard about this concept of voice, and quite honestly, did not understand clearly what is meant by this concept of voice, this seminar offered me an opportunity to deal with the issue once and for all. I had to reflect deeply on the meaning of what I understood what an authorial voice is, especially because there seems to be no unanimity among writers when it comes to the definition. After considering a number of definitions by various writers, I however settled on the version that defines authorial voice as the personality of the author that must come out in the stories they tell through their writing style, such as the tone.

This definition aligns with that offered by writer Victor LaValle. In this regard it was important for me to pay particular attention to how one can learn to identify and develop their voice in writing as there are tools that one can use to acquire this knowledge as Ntshanga suggests in the notes. According to Victor LaValle, the fact of the matter is, every human being has a voice. I happen to agree with that view. However, many, especially emerging writers are still to identify and develop their voices in writing. Often writers at the beginning of their writing career struggle and often go astray as they search for their authorial voice. I understood through this seminar that authorial voice is an elusive thing that

requires a lot of searching through writing continuously. Of course, sometimes one gets it wrong as in the case of Masande Ntshanga at the beginning of his writing career. He mentions this in his seminar notes.

Personally, after reading the notes, paying particular attention to Ntshanga's narrative of how he struggled to find his voice and Victor LaValle's communication with Ntshanga about how he also found his voice, I was left not quite sure about whether, I have found my authorial voice myself. And I seem not to be alone on this struggle of find that elusive authorial voice as for example in the case of Ntshanga. However, the discovery of authorial voice sometimes comes from unexpected quarters. For example, it took the boredom of Victor LaValle's girlfriend while reading his manuscript for the writer to self-reflect and finally find his authorial voice. Ntshanga himself found his authorial voice through his admiration of the cover and title of Hip Hop artist Yassin Bey (previously known as Mos Def)'s fourth album, "The Ecstatic" and through the reading of the artist's book of the same title, as well as other literature by the same author.

Personally, to go around this predicament, I had to tap into what other writers say about finding an authorial voice. To try and identify my own authorial voice, whether it exists or is non-existent at this stage I am not sure, and so the search continues. The best way of finding one's voice is ultimately to write and write I did, writing a story titled "Amplifier". However, to write this story, I had to find a way in which I was not only comfortable with the language, but also the settings of the story by drawing from characters that resemble the behaviour of real people that I may have known and may have observed in different situations around Johannesburg's coffee bars, restaurants and drinking holes over the years. These characters, some of whom maybe my friends, and some may not, are just a random selection of people in bars, restaurants and coffee shops that my fragmented memory still imagines it recalls.

Some I invented to fit into the narrative framework, using my authorial license. To assist me in conceptualizing the setting, particularly the beginning, (which I often find to be the most difficult in a fiction writing process, but once you get it right, it becomes the anchor of the story as everything that happens later revolves around those few words at the beginning), I therefore found it useful to use a short but what I considered to be a powerful beginning. This is, a beginning that I believe, leaves the reader, with many questions about what is being talked about and therefore, hopefully creates the necessary curiosity for the reader to keep on reading the story. I therefore drew a lot from the setting of Ntshanga's short story titled "Space" (2013). "I guess you won't believe him, either, but this is what CK

tells us, this morning. He says there's a grey man living in the shed behind Ma Thano's spaza shop on Miya Street, a man who isn't a man, but one sent down to us from outer space." (Ntshanga 2013).

"So, you killed Udoh." I looked at him surprised. I felt my heart pumping hard and my body temperature also rose at the same time. I peeked through the window to see if diners in Niki's Oasis Restaurant could see us. I looked him in his eyes without saying a word. I surveyed him from toe to head."

This is how "Amplifier" begins. Both these paragraphs invoke a sense of curiosity about what this is all about and I felt this to be a powerful way of provoking a reader to be interested enough to want to read more. Though this story is the work of fiction, the characters in it and the settings are people in real life and places I have frequented myself. For example, Niki's Oasis in Newtown, Windybrow Theatre in Hillbrow, De Peak in Newtown and Xai Xai Bar and Restaurant in Melville. These are places I have been to over the years with friends.

The main characters' behaviour is drawn from recent experiences. This way I found that this aided me in writing in a manner that assisted in the flow of the story as well as making me feel that this story is a story that those who have been to these places that I used as a setting for this story, would connect with and associate the behaviour of the characters with those they may have observed at these places. The difficulty that I experienced though with a story like this, which draws a lot from real events is the fact that I sometimes felt that I am revealing things about friends that I should not be revealing, and that in a way, I am also putting myself in a vulnerable position.

To overcome this predicament, I had to constantly remind myself that this is fiction, and after all I am not using real names of the people for example. And besides, although some of the events in the story happened in real life, some are either my own creation or hugely exaggerated real events I could still recall. Another difficulty I experienced was putting what is essentially fragments of events involving different characters of real people I may have observed in different settings at different times together to form a cohesive narrative. I dealt with this difficulty by imagining these events I may have witnessed in these different places as having happened in a sequential fashion. For example, the following sentence is plucked from someone's inbox conversation over money issues. This is a real conversation between two friends one of whom owed the other money. The names are however fictionalized:

"Fuck you, my health first, Jou moer." Such real conversations like this assisted me in creating certain sentences that appear real and genuine though they are a work of fiction. This experimental exercise was useful to me to look at different ways of expressing myself in the tone that resembles who I am. I

have also learned where I must tighten my craft of story-telling. For example, I felt that I took long before introducing a dialogue as the protagonist kept on talking by himself through his imagination.

That is why I had to introduce the other characters in the scene of De Peak Bar, and that I felt rescued the story from being a monologue that carries on unnecessarily too long. Fellow student Patrick Ngcobo picked this up as he suggested the following: "The story begins with a powerful shocking line with strong emotions. The opening line grabs the reader's attention then it becomes nostalgic. The connection you (narrator) had with your friend is important but it looks like you exhausted time on it. The reader expects confrontation or action that compliments the opening line. I would have preferred that you created suspense or have a line that invites sympathy or rebuke. I think that you went too far with the information on friendship. When Fulufhelo is introduced, the story comes to life," Patrick commented during the feedback session linked to this seminar.

Seminar 9

I guess after this raging debate about the issue of voice within myself, still doubting whether I eventually had completely understood what authorial voice is, and even more importantly whether through writing the short story "Amplifier", I had managed to demonstrate the discovery of my own voice, I was relieved to move on into the next seminar. After all, it dealt with a different matter altogether the issue of overwriting both in prose and poetry. This seminar appealed to me because I struggle when it comes to the issue of overwriting. I often write long sentence, and in the process, I think lose the reader.

The seminar titled Poetry and Prose: Overwriting, facilitated by Henali Kuit, I hoped was going to go a long way in assisting me to deal with my literary demons of overwriting once and for all. In the seminar I found the process of reading and finding out missing parts of the story to be a revealing experience. This is because even though the pieces given are readable and one can grasp the narratives, the pieces could read better with those missing elements added. In a particular given story, for example, the story, misses commas that would make the story flow better and would also work as a sentence and paragraph breaker. However, the structure of the story is there and in fact a reader, if they wanted, would fill up those missing elements effortlessly. These missing elements were noticeable in the story titled "Next of Kin by Jo Gatford" (2001) in which the narrator is writing to a friend about what must happen to them when they die. Though the story is short, and thank goodness for that, it does not have a single comma till to the very end.

Personally, I reworked on my “Amplifier” story, cutting it by 50%. I must be honest, at the beginning of the process of cutting, I was nervous, fearful of losing too much of my original story through this cutting process. In this piece that I had previously written and submitted to RuConnected as part of my assignment submission for the Seminar 8 titled Voice, which basically required us to explore writing that would demonstrate our authorial voice, I focused on the dialogue.

When I went through the dialogue, I found that my original dialogue paragraphs had several sentences that were not needed for the sake of the clarity of the article. I could see that I could cut the dialogue by half-without necessarily losing the essence and the meaning of the article. Those sentences, I cut in fact were a repetition of what I had already said in the paragraph.

However, although I chose to focus on the dialogue part of the story in my initial draft that I submitted to RUConnected for feedback, Henali Kuit Kuit who facilitated the seminar and the feedback session, pointed out that in fact the whole story needed revisiting with a view to cutting the story as much as I could, especially some paragraphs and sentences that in fact were unnecessary repetitions. Initially I had some apprehension about whether I was going to be able to cut the story shorter and still be able to have a story with all its elements that make a proper short story complete. However, after going through the story sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, and idea by idea, I could see to my amazement that in fact I could cut so much in the story without losing the story actually.

It was an instructive process. In fact, I did that and I agree with Kuit after all that those sentences, she pointed out do not need to be in the story after all. And therefore, in my final submission, I extended the process of cutting the story to the rest of “Amplifier” and submitted a story that was not only cut shorter in the dialogue section, but also in the rest of its body. When the process was complete, I was however happy, even happier with this version than the original story. In fact, the process of cutting the dialogue made the story read better, becoming clearer than the original. However initially, as I went through the process of cutting the dialogue by half, I had a fear that I was going to lose something important. But when I compared the edited piece with the previous one, nothing of the original story was lost. It is essentially the same story that flows much better.

On reflection, I also saw that in my original dialogue paragraphs, I tended to over explain an idea in the hope that a reader would understand it better. But on reflection, I noticed that in the edited version, there is no need for explaining anything as reading the paragraphs of dialogue afresh confirms the fact the fact that the ideas I wanted to put across in the first place remain intact in their clarity.

This exercise has assisted me to understand that after writing a story, it is important to go back to the story after sometime and look at what aspects of the story could be cut short, without losing the meaning. If one could say something in as few words and shorter paragraphs as possible, the better because the story becomes clearer and flows better and in fact, the shorter the better with regards to paragraphs and sentences.

In the process of cutting the story's dialogue by 50%, I also found out other aspects of the story that I could focus on, and that is other sentences outside the dialogue that would also be cut shorter. What I also saw in the process of cutting the dialogue shorter, is that it assists in making the reader to be part of the story by sucking them into thinking about what is for example meant by a certain action in the story that is not fully explained. The reader sort of thinks through it and makes own conclusion based on what is given and not suggested. The reader therefore becomes without knowing it, part of the creation of the story.

Seminar 10

This process of cutting a fairly long short story by half, difficult as it was, was in a way, as I it turned out, prepared me for tackling the next seminar, which as Paul Wessels had said at the beginning of the O Week, in many aspects represented the essence of what the MA in Creative Writing required: "a lot of reading, writing and thinking." At the beginning I found the literature about writing hard to follow. However, after several trials and failing, I eventually grasped what the various writers were saying and the following is my essay on poetics:

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Poetics Essay

Facilitated By Paul Wessels the seminar titled *THE POETICS OF THE WOR(L)DS WE LIVE* challenged me so much at the beginning, to the extent that for the first time in the course, I found myself in a position whereby I doubted as to whether I even understood what the various writers were saying about the subject of writing. It appeared to me, writing about writing is in fact more difficult than the process of writing itself. But when I read and read again what the various authors were saying, it eventually sunk in me what they were saying. I indeed had to do "a lot of reading, writing and thinking" before I reached a stage where I felt I was confident about my understanding the poetics of the wor(l)ds we live in. Only then did I start the process of writing.

I learned through this seminar how crucial it is for a writer to know what other writers say about writing. I make this argument because after reading these writers I found myself asking the question why as writers we write what we write. Is it for the reader or is it for selves? Perhaps answering this question may assist in how one approaches writing. I still do not have the answer to that question, but thinking about the answer even though I am yet to find an absolute answer to the question, asking the question has somehow helped me going forward, to think carefully about why I write, and that way the process will determine the approach I take when writing. The attempt at answering that question will however become clear at the end of this essay as I beg for patience. For now, let us dig a bit more deeply, into what these writers are saying.

The subject of reading and writing has been discussed by writers in the past, dead and alive, for years, running into centuries in some cases in fact, and ideas and approaches around it are as varied as the writers themselves. It is however, a subject current and future writers will continue to have conversation about for years to come. However, while the thinking about writing will continue to have a multiplicity of positions and voices, some even may contradict each other, what is not in dispute is the need for writers to read widely in order to enrich their own writing the basic idea being that you cannot be a writer if you do not read, as the two go hand in hand. This thinking in me was triggered by this seminar on the poetics of the world we live in, that not only introduced me to a number of writers dead and alive dealing with the same subject, but also got me thinking about why I write and how do I get to write.

These writers we were introduced to through this seminar present their works in different styles and voices. Yet in some cases, there is convergence of ideas and thinking among some writers. Therefore, this journey of reading about these writers and what they say about their various approaches to writing, difficult as it is to follow in some instances, takes you into the interesting, weird and crazy world inhabited by writers across generations, geographies and cultural backgrounds. This experience at the end gives one a deep insight and fascinating array of views, ideas and opinions about writing and reading, leaving one with a burning desire to explore some of the ideas presented here. Others I must admit are hard to follow, let alone even imagine attempting to explore in my own writing journey. Their insights are however valuable to formulate the basis of one's own thinking about writing.

The writing however left me with my own opinions about what they say and what I also think about my own writing. And therefore, what do I think?

Therefore, inspired by these writers and what they say about writing, I would like to make an argument that as a writer, there are various ways in which you can approach writing. To do it with confidence, it is however important to read as much as one can, about what other writers say. This way, this process should help one to refine their thinking about writing, develop their own way of presenting their writing out of the various arguments and presentations other writers make about this subject. This is however, not to suggest that one discard what the other writers say, but to say that based on what they say, one way or the other, as a writer, you will find a way that suits you, such as discovering a new literary device others writers share, or simply discovering new thinking about what works and what does not work in fiction writing. In other words, by reading about what other writers say, and how they present their work, as a writer, one must be able to develop their own voice, influenced and inspired by some of the writers one reads, for example paying particular attention to the certain writers' specific approaches to the subject of creating art in general and literature in particular.

After reading what these write say, I therefore reached a conclusion that there is no single approach to the subject of writing, and also there is no single form of creating art, as art can be created through various forms, such as poetry, prose or even drawing or painting. And therefore, through this essay, I am first focusing on the various discussions by a selection of writers about the subject of writing, reading and thinking contained in this anthology. In this reflection I also include my personal views about some of the issues raised here by these writers over the centuries. The fact is, through reading these writers, I found some ideas attractive, even suitable to my kind of thinking about writing, while others I found hard to follow, even not suitable to me. This is not to suggest that what does not work for me, will not work for another writer.

As I am showing here, the views and approaches relating to how to approach fiction writing in the form of poetry or through prose are varied. In some cases, however indeed there are both convergences and divergences of views among the various writers. I however found in some cases there are themes that are similar that run through the thread of ideas presented by these various writers. Where such themes emerge, I point them out. Here I am focusing as much as possible on these different perspectives and views as well as the ideas that seem to follow a particular theme, especially the ones I found attractive and suitable to me to emulate as a writer. But also, few others I found curious to explore though not suited to my way of thinking about writing. I paid particular attention also to what these writers say, because even though I may not follow their styles in future, preferring those attractive to me, I found the ideas nevertheless curious, and therefore worthy thinking about them. After all, I believe a writer in

order to grow must never lock themselves in a cocoon in which only their ideas matter for that would be limiting.

However as far as these writers are concerned, I found some ideas to converge with mine, while others so different to mine to the point in some cases, where I thought they are so impractical. However, an example of thinking about poetry that I also find useful in my own writing is the position of Phillip Zhuwao and Barbra Guest.

For example, what Phillip Zhuwao (2002:1) says about his style of poetry and how he creates it, and that is that he looks inwards, the self, to create poetry could be said to be reflecting what Barbra Guest (2015:78) says about creating poetry as well: "Never 'negotiate' with the reader by projecting the reader's aims into the poem, such as a 'desirable subject.'"

And Velimir Khlebnikov in "On Poetry" says the following about poetry: "People say a poem must be understandable. Like a sign on the street which carries the clear and simple words, "For Sale." But a street sign is not exactly a poem, though it is understandable."(1985.152).

Williams Carlos Williams the late medical doctor and a celebrated poet however seems to hold a different view to those above. In his essay "The Practice" (1979:197) he says that his writing is informed by his everyday interaction with his patients, as through observations he makes from close and intimate encounters with his patients he is able to get ideas for his fiction writing. In other words, he gleans the unsaid from his patients by digging deeper into their souls and brings that out in his poetry. How more beautiful could it be for a writer.

He makes this conclusion (1979: 197): "That is why as a writer I have never felt that medicine interfered with me but rather that it was my very food and drink, the very thing which made it possible for me to write. Was I not interested in man?"

Well maybe I am a little biased here and a confession is needed. I happen to share this view as a writer whose daily job is to write articles about artists as a journalist. There are certain things the artists do not always say, but one can still discern them, and such material could easily be suitable for fictional content.

This is what Williams means when he argues that practising medicine in fact assists him in his fiction writing as he does not have to look elsewhere beyond his daily encounter with human beings with their stories in a different context of medical practice. In my fiction writing, I get inspired by everyday encounters with different people in different situations and I take these encounters and reimagine them.

I see people I encounter struggle to say what they need to say, and yet these things they struggle to take out are the very essence of whom they are. I therefore formulate my fiction characters based on the everyday encounters with mainly artists, seeing them as any other human being, with fears, anxieties about the daily vagaries of life. For example, they fall in and out of love, get broke, lose homes and get mugged and robbed. Just like anyone. In my writer's mind, writing mainly in the short story form, I then reimagine these humans, recreate their new lives, put certain thoughts in their minds, recreate new setting for them and make complex new circumstances for them in which they see themselves. It can therefore be argued that my everyday encounter with real people assists me in my fiction writing activities in the same way Williams' daily encounters with his patients helped him to write beautiful poetry.

I find the idea of the limitation of the impact of fiction on society with one individual creating as opposed to co-creating with the reader, as proposed by Raymond Federman in his essay on "Surfiction" (1993), spot on and plausible. He also argues that for the future of fiction to be guaranteed, not only must there be co-creation between the reader and the writer, but the way books are printed must also be rethought through, including even page numbering, further also proposing "the very concept of Syntax must be transformed" (40) as he argues that the order it forms "prevents words from wandering." (41). He, calls this kind of rethinking how to package and present fiction to the reader, Surfiction.

This radical suggestion by Federman, if implemented, got me wondering whether it would achieve its intended purpose, or rather even complicate further the reading experience.

Federman however makes the following conclusion about his proposition: "If we are to make of the novel an art form, we must raise the printed word as the medium, and therefore where and how it is placed on the page makes a difference in what the fiction will be for the reader." (41).

I like the idea of co-creation that he argues for as I believe it widens the possibilities of interpretation and meaning to a piece of writing. But I simply cannot see how changing page numbers will change how I read a book though, and that whether it can indeed result in a more pleasurable experience. I have my doubts, but Federman believes it does. (42) ..."if we agree that life is never linear, that in fact life is discontinuous and chaotic because it is never experienced in a straight line or orderly fashion, then similarly linear, chronological and sequential narration is no longer possible." I must admit though that I have never tried the new methods of reading a book that he argues for, but it appears as if, due to the

long-held habits I have developed over the years, If I tried the ways he argues for, it would be a struggle for me to enjoy reading books the same way I have always done.

Amina Cain from an extract of "Slowness" in "The Force of What's Possible: Writers on Accessibility & the Avant-Garde" (2015) emphasises the need to read and think slowly in order to immerse oneself in a novel to become a better writer. Cain makes the following point about the benefit of reading slowly in order to write better: (2015: 30) "I am drawn to the novels of Marguerite Duras for the same reason I am drawn to a film like Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman*. Something happens in a space that is quiet and immersive. Your body and mind slow down too."

And Cain is not alone in this as Linh Dinh in "What I usually say to my students" (2010) has the following to say about the benefit of reading and writing slowly: (2010: 252) "Identify the writers or works you admire the most, and read them very slowly as many times as necessary."

This suggestion is something that I believe is practical and possible, as reading and writing go hand in hand, and therefore someone who reads to understand and reading slowly supposes that someone is immersed in the work and that can also influence thinking critically about the words one chooses in their own writing. This is certainly advice that every writer must try to emulate and see what happens to their critical thinking skills, such as building up the profile of the characters, the twists and turns of the plot. This is certainly a suggestion that has a natural home in my own writing as I tend to read slowly and immerse myself in the story.

Njabulo Ndebele in "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New South African Writing" (2006:31) makes an argument that the history of black South African literature is littered with "history of the representation of spectacle." And representation of spectacle in writing is also noted by another writer here, Adrienne Rich (1993: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69530/someone-iswriting-a-poem>) who makes the following argument:" In a political culture of managed spectacles and passive spectators, poetry appears as a rift, a peculiar lapse, in the prevailing mode," and yet, she adds, "The reading of a poem, poetry reading is not a spectacle, nor can it be passively received."

Ndebele makes the following observation: "The visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African social formation appear to have prompted over the years the development of a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation" (31) Here Ndebele references Roland Barthes.

What is interesting here is that Ndebele is talking about the spectacle in Black literary representation in South Africa inspired by the social formation that is, the actual mechanics of apartheid as a weapon of oppression and specific understandings of resistance. In other words, a certain kind of writing by black writers in response to the political environment emerged, creating a situation where stories that had everyday nuances of people somehow took a knock in favour of the spectacle.

Rich speaks about the same thing, the spectacle in poetry performance motivated by something totally different, and yet both of them are 'spectacles' nevertheless. Different contexts inspiring the same, and that is the spectacle in literary representation. In other words, the similarity in the identification of this phenomenon of literary representation by both Ndebele and Rich in two different contexts I find to be fascinating as if they are writing about the same condition that gave rise to the spectacle they are talking about, and yet they are not.

But I find Bell Hooks' essay on critical writing much closer to Ndebele's position as far as the political context from which the motivation of their reflective essays emanate.

(1991: 53) "Paralyzed by the fear that I will not be able to name or speak words that fully articulate my experience, or the collective reality of struggling black people, I am tempted to be silent," Hooks writes.

Here it is interesting to note that the context that gave rise to both Hooks' and Ndebele's essays are the same, and that is white oppressive systems.

What I can draw from both writers are their concerns about an emerging literary tradition, specifically among black writers in these two contexts, who in responding to the overriding issue of oppression that the black people find themselves in, produce literature that is steeped in the spectacle. This literary output results in a situation whereby the value of the literature produced is diminished. This is because as the authors argue, this tendency to produce spectacular literature in fact results in the conflagration of the oppressor and the oppressed in such a way as to render it (the spectacle) comprehensible through very basic, stereotypical, hysterical, emotional exploitative mechanisms of representation. The problem with a spectacle, both authors argue, is that it does not incorporate individual complexities of the characters, or specifics of place, details that would enhance the fiction's literary value. This kind of writing, as Hooks argues, can result in the obvious conclusion that the oppressed are nothing more than their oppression. So, spectacle therefore reduces the humanity of victims in much the same way that oppression does even though it is deployed as a tool of resistance.

However not every writer gets inspired to write because of an oppressive social and political condition. Fairy tales for example have inspired many a writer to write beautiful stories for years.

It is interesting to take note of what all the below writers are saying about the subject of realism and fairy tales. And so here we can see the convergence of ideas between these three writers about the argument of falsity of reality, and I agree with them that there is no such thing as reality. In other words, reality is made up. Put differently, you create your own reality. What is real in a different context, may not be real in another context. This however does not suggest that fairy tales cannot be used by realists and constructing their stories. Both realism writers and fabulists can tap into the literary tradition of fairy tales to tell stories

Kate Bernheimer in "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale" writes about fairy tales as the basis upon which stories are told, the anchor for constructing a story developed over many years by different societies.

"Fairy Tale. This term brings to mind a unique form we still recognize and use even after many centuries of manipulation to its discrete techniques. The term survives mutation." (1994: 62).

Yet Kathy Acker in "The Killers" in "Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative". has something to say. "A story, you see, a story has something to do with realism, and what I have just told you, though each little bit was real or had happened, has nothing to do with realism." (2004:16)

Acker goes further and references another writer Julio Cortazar: "Almost all the stories I have written belong to the genre called fantastic, for lack of a better word, and are opposed to that false realism that consists of believing that everything can be described and explained, as was assumed by the optimism of nineteenth-century philosophy and science. That is, as part of a world governed more or less harmoniously by a system of laws, principles, cause and effect relations, well-defined psychologies, etc. That lovely world order –that governing harmoniously by all these principles – we all know is now over."(2004:16).

Anna Kavan also has something to say about what is real as she has the following to say on the subject: "To explore it, unconventional techniques are required. For instance, the repetition of certain incidents in the same or slightly differing forms is meant to create three- dimensional effect – an effect in depth – and to show that there is no "absolute" reality, but that every happening will appear different at different times to different people" (<http://criticalflame.org/the-radical-revisioning-of-anna-kavan/>)

Dambudzo Marechera has the following to say on the subject of reality and fantasy from an extract a paper titled "Beneath reality there is always fantasy" presented at Zimbabwe German Society Alliance Francais British Council: "Beneath reality, there is always fantasy: the writer's task is to reveal it, to open it out, to feel it, to experience it. Laguma's walk into the night becomes a jump into the unknown." (1988)

Another subject which is generally a popular issue in film and certainly novels is the phenomenon of aliens, another form of life that human beings imagine exists in a parallel universe. Though no one in history has come up with proof of an encounter with aliens, in a form of a photograph, for example, this never deters writers imagining their encounter with these mysterious creatures.

Jackie Wang writes the following in "Aliens As Form –Of-Life: Imagining the Avant-Garde": "I write to you because you are co-editing this book on the avant-garde, because you are my "alien sister" and aliens have a lot to do with the avant-garde...The t-shirt made you think of me because you know I like space and I like space because I like aliens. I like aliens not only because I am one but also because I enjoy imagining other forms-of-life." (2015:322)

And Wang is not the only one with these imaginations of aliens and how writers often use the concepts of aliens in literature, as another writer Chris Kraus even has even what I consider to be an effective way melding lives of outer space with earthly being in literature.

The following is what Kraus says about his unnamed narrator's strange encounter with an alien: "if I am not touched it becomes impossible to eat. It's only after sex, sometimes, that I can eat a little.

When I am not touched my skin feels like the flip side of a magnet."

As If this strange encounter with an alien is not enough Kraus goes further to describe the experience of the sex act the unnamed narrator had with the supposed outer space being. "The

Alien penetrated me very slowly as we sat together on the bed."

The use of alien characters and their interaction with human beings is a long-standing tradition in literature, and even though personally I am yet to have an encounter with an alien, due to my own fantasy of encountering an alien, I find this piece quite fascinating as a literary device, a metaphor for situations we earthly being often find ourselves in here on earth.

The two writers here are using the concept of aliens as a creative stance against discrimination, Wang a matter of racism and for Kraus a matter of feminism. Both writers use different strategies demonstrated in their pieces here. Wang adopts alienness and uses it as a humorous strategy to elucidate her feeling about the avant-garde. She is broadly comparing the situation of being Asian with the situation of being seen as an avant-garde writer from her context nationally, geographically and literary. Kraus uses a fictional method of characterising an encounter between two people in a relationship in order to highlight in this specific instance, the misogynistic behaviour the man has towards the woman. Here she is calling the man an alien because his behaviour is strange and estranging. Of course, his behaviour locates all the problems on her side. Kraus further quotes and discusses material and individuals who do believe in real aliens from outer space –Wang does this as another strategy to critique or to add to the critique of discrimination against people based on their difference or otherness. Now Kraus is not bringing in the concept of aliens in order to discuss extraterrestrial encounters or interests. She is doing it in order, firstly, to talk about the French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these pieces of writing by writers over centuries and in different geographies of the world, give a reader and a writer an insight into a rich archive of thinking about writing and writing from different perspectives and contexts ranging from poetry to prose, performance and even painting. I found so much to learn from these, most of whom are ancestors, while others are still alive today.

And so, what is my conclusion about these amazing ideas by these amazing writers? I liked some, even fell in love with, while others I feel quite honestly, I am not ready for them. But at this stage I would like to backtrack to the big question triggered by especially the idea of co-creation with readers that Federman makes an argument for because that is what triggered the big question I asked earlier on in this essay about why we writers write and whose answer I struggle with. At least I do not have an absolute answer. The same question I guess could also be asked of other creators, such as painters, composers, dancers and those who draw. Certainly, earning money out of writing fiction is great, but I am yet to meet a writer who would say that his primary motivation for writing is money. And so the answer must lie elsewhere.

But here I will attempt one at the risk of failure. My vague answer to the question why I write is the need to fulfil the urge to say something. Say something in a form that imbues certain aesthetic qualities, and that something when read by either me or someone else, has these qualities revealing themselves,

sometimes effortlessly, but at other times, requiring an effort, active participation by the reader. If and when that happens, a process of co-creation that Federman talks about here, takes place, and therefore widening the possibilities of meaning and interpretation of the end product. That end product can be a word, a sentence, paragraph, poem, short story, an anthology of short stories, a novel, even a painting. This in fact forms the basis of the core why I write fiction, essentially telling stories in a way that engages me and hopefully even other humans because of our shared experiences, I guess for the lack of a more modest way of saying it, I write to touch me and other people I share the world with, to influence them by affecting their emotions and imaginations.

Seminar 11

After this seminar, which at the beginning I found to be complex, and needing a lot of thinking, reading and writing, I felt relief to thereafter get to do the actual work of writing in the seminar titled Effective Dialogue, facilitated by Chwayita Ngamlana. We learned about how dialogue can be used effectively to tell a story and how not to use dialogue. For example, dialogue cannot be used to just fill space, as this, results in a story being flat. We also learned how dialogue can be used to enhance the liveliness of a story. Dialogue can also be used to create the dynamics of the relationships between characters. For example, through creating effective dialogue, the main character emerges. This worked well in my both prose and dialogue pieces that I wrote as part of the assignment.

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Seminar 12

It made a lot of sense that after learning about how to use dialogue effectively, where different characters are in conversation with each other, carrying the story through in the process, the next seminar was about one person and his rant, a monologue, in a way. It felt like a breath of fresh air to have to learn that actually a story does not necessarily need more than one person to make sense, and even appeal to a reader.

This seminar titled Soliloquies/monologues/disquisitions/diatribes/raves/raps/rants/insults, facilitated by Paul Mason, focused on a form and style of writing that can be called monological. We were presented with examples of writing that best represent this type of prose writing, drama, and poetry.

At first not only was I rattled by the rants and raving by a selection of these writers as their writing is an attack on popular perceptions about political systems, ideologies, public figures such as the late famous writer Goethe and classical music composer Beethoven for example, but also the anger expressed by the tone of the pieces. But I was also surprised that there exists in formal writing such kind of writing and it is actually acceptable and legitimate.

But when seminar facilitator Paul Mason explained that that type of writing is aimed at creating a certain feeling by the writer and one does not need to agree with the opinions expressed but the tone must be authentic to the main objective of this kind of writing, I understood this kind of writing's place in writing.

I gained great insights into this kind of writing from the satirical pieces of columnist Tom Eaton whose target of his satire expressed in strong words is the ruling ANC. Incidentally, I also chose to write about the ANC in a style that is close to that of Tom Eaton. His tone in his rant inspired me to write in the same way after I was made aware of his style of writing by Mason, and the strong language he uses to attack his target motivated me to change my style, which compared to him was mild.

I submitted my first draft and Paul Mason gave the feedback that the piece was in the spirit of the assignment, my target was identified and the satire was spot on especially towards the end of the piece. However, he felt that I needed to change the style and the tone needed to be angrier in my expression.

For my second draft I worked on the tone and tried to express myself in an angrier tone towards the subject of my satire, which is the ANC that I likened to a wolf in a sheep's skin in my piece. I played on the idea of a political party that has a crisis of governance, a political party that threatens to implode and consume itself due to factionalism and the fight for positions in order to loot public funds under its control. The senior people the ANC deploys into government, are failing to transform society for the better as they are instead seized with corrupt activities and practices to enrich themselves and those close to them, I charge in a stronger tone and an angrier voice.

To do this I was assisted by reading the writings and ranting of several authors as well as watching film extracts that assisted me to formulate the tone of the target of my insults The Movement which I refer to as The Wolfment instead. The Wolfment is a word I invented to try and show the disdain I have toward the ANC in its current character and version in government. I did this to try and represent what probably many people feel about The Movement's track record in government, compared to the high standards and ideals it once championed during the struggle for freedom.

The following written texts and videos assisted me immensely as I was able to pick up the tone to use in my piece: Hamlet's soliloquy from the film "Withnail and I" (1987); and Samuel Beckett's novel "Malone Dies".

These texts assisted me in understanding the purpose of this kind of writing, and mainly that anyone who is a public figure, such as a politician, popular author and ideology can be a target of such type of writing. The strong language these pieces contain also assisted me in framing my own language much stronger than I had done in my first draft, especially as I went back to those pieces.

However, through this seminar I also understood that there are certain things that one should not do, and one of which is to target for insults private individuals that one may know. I also learned that this type of writing works well when you write against popular public perception about something or a public figure. In other words, one needs to go against the grain for this type of writing to be effective. I also learned that the insults can be in a form of poetry, both performance and written and that it can also be in the form of prose. The language one uses can also be in the form of satire and humour. However, whatever form one uses to express the insults, they must evoke some reaction from the reader or the audience. This can only be achieved by adopting an angry voice by the writer. I also learned that the only way this kind of writing can work is if the target of your insults has some form of authority, such as government, a politician or a popular author or cultural figure that the people ordinarily revere. For example, it would not work if the target of your insults is the weak in society, such as the poor for this would be in bad taste.

Seminar 13

Moving on from anger and insults of an individual angry writer aimed at some authority to a seminar titled Place, facilitated by Carol Leff, felt like a God-given opportunity for me. This is because I have always loved reading books and writers who have the ability to write about a place that one has never even been but still making you feel that you have been before. These are writers who make even the most obscure and remote place on planet feel like the biggest and most prominent place that every human being alive must feel that they need to be there. It must therefore take a special skill for a writer to achieve such a literary feat. I have always been curious how such writers manage to weave such compelling imagery using simple everyday words.

Through this seminar I was introduced to a number of writers whose works are based on writing about a place. The idea was to make us understand that writing about a place is an art form, and a place is more than just a place as it can also be presented as a character in writing.

And indeed, the extracts by these writers demonstrated well the idea of turning a place into a character. In these readings we were required to pay attention to certain things in the way that writers write about a place. For example, how a writer imagines and writes about place.

We were required to pay particular attention to certain socio-economic factors of a place. Such as how do people move around – on foot, by taxi, by bus or train? When we consider place as a setting, there are socioeconomic factors that should also be considered – is it an impoverished or wealthy area? What about employment opportunities for those who live there? Are there hospitals, schools, libraries, shops? Other considerations regarding place have to do with language, culture and race. A place where a specific group congregates often will allow for a certain way of life with unique customs and traditions. As I went through these readings, I felt that my curiosity of how writers manage to write about a place beautifully has eventually been answered. With this new knowledge, I plunged deep into my assignment well equipped with these tools, ready to experiment with them and see if I could achieve something other writers have done and continue to do in their writing about place.

In my writing I was inspired particularly by Phaswane Mpe's extract from his short novel "Welcome to Our Hillbrow". The writer is particularly meticulous when it comes to certain details, such as street names. In my article titled "Yeoville", I tried to emulate him with regards to paying particular attention to street names. In fact, I also realised that I actually needed to visit the Johannesburg suburb of Yeoville to get the street names right. I had to carry out, a mini-research of the place and therefore realised that researching a place before one write about it, adds value to a piece of writing, especially when it comes to getting certain well-known facts right.

I also needed to make sure that my characters are believable and also to make the place alive, to have a character such that a reader who has not been to the place before can actually feel and see the place through these characters. Though I was inspired by the extract, when it came to writing, at first, I struggled to make the place alive. However, in my third draft, I managed to tweak the story by describing the scenes, the people in the streets and in bars and that way, I could feel that indeed the story had become alive and in fact takes a reader right into the life of Yeoville. Another technique I used

was to imagine the smells of food, how the people spoke to each other and whether they were jovial in their interaction or indifferent toward each other.

This seminar and the assignment emanating from it also gave me an opportunity to do something that I have always felt I should try, and that is writing outside my own culture. When it came to the main character in my piece *Ike*, I imagined a Jewish man in his 50s who had left South Africa in 1993 and had come back in 2022 to a different country from the one he left. Yeoville was the place where he was born, and it has changed so much from the time he left. Instead of counting mainly middleclass whites as its residents, now the place is mainly a home to black people from the rest of the

African continent. To create this character, I had to place myself in the position of a white person and imagined how they talk and interact with other people from totally different cultural backgrounds. This was in fact my first attempt at writing outside my own culture and I found the exercise challenging but at the end quite fulfilling.

Seminar 14

But writing effectively needs more than just a good story line, or a place that has all the elements at the writer's disposal to make the piece alive and sing. Certain marks that a writer can use also play an important role. I learned about the role of marks in sentences that make a piece enjoyable to read in a seminar titled *Politics and Poetics of Punctuation*, facilitated by Stacy Hardy.

We learned about the importance of paying particular attention to sentences. Sentences are not just thrown in without a relationship to each other. In fact, it is the relationship between sentences that actually forms a narrative of a written piece. And what helps sentences to be tight, to tell a story in a comprehensible way, a way that allows for the musicality to emerge, especially when read aloud, are punctuation marks. The punctuation marks must be used for a purpose, such as delaying, hesitation, or simply to allow breathing. Punctuation marks used meticulously can achieve musicality and rhythm in a piece as well as joining one idea to the next. In fact, there are several punctuation marks that one can use as a literary device. For example, a dash, a comma, semi-colon, question mark or exclamation mark. These marks have a purpose in a sentence and that is to achieve a number of functions. It is therefore important to think carefully around a sentence, not only the word one chooses to use instead of the

other word, but also what one is trying to achieve in a story. For example, is it for achieving musicality, or allowing breathing space, even joining one idea to another?

I experimented with the use of punctuation marks in two articles.

The first story I worked on is a prose piece titled “Yeoville,” I had written earlier on about a place, the suburb of Yeoville in Johannesburg. The place is known for its crime and grime, but also for its cosmopolitan atmosphere. It is a home to many immigrants from the rest of the African continent in South Africa. I looked at the place from the perspective of someone, outside, a Jewish character who was born in the area, but left the place shortly before South Africa achieved its freedom in 1994. As compared to the upmarket suburb of Parkhurst, where he was staying with his aunt on his recent visit, where he found the place to be rich, but boring. Yet he found Yeoville, besides its reputation for crime and poverty, the people to be happier, more jovial and friendly, than those he saw in Parkhurst.

I was required to select some paragraphs from this original piece and to use punctuation marks to tell the story better. I selected the first few paragraphs of the story and some from toward the end of the story to work on. In this piece in the form of prose form, I experimented with using shorter sentences to tell this story than the original piece consists of. The punctuation marks actually assisted me in telling this story better than I normally do as I have this fondness for using long sentences. I found the exercise quite challenging but fulfilling at the end. My reworked sentences were more carefully thought through than when I was using longer sentences. This is because punctuation marks on their own are unable to carry a story through without a carefully thought-out sentence and words. I therefore paid particular attention to words I chose to use the punctuation marks I chose to use and the length of the sentences.

When I presented the first draft, Stacy pointed out that I could rework this piece. As I reworked it, I found myself having to change the story, re-writing some of the paragraphs. Still, I was not satisfied with the short sentences and the new words that I introduced as well as the punctuation marks.

I figured out that in fact this story would read better if I changed it. Instead of focusing on Yeoville as the narrative anchor of the story, I needed to focus on Parkhurst, the source of my character’s discomfort with its opulence as compared to Yeoville. And the story this time begins with Yeoville as a backdrop and ends up with Parkhurst as the place that is the source of the character’s irritation.

This way I found out that when using short sentences in my story, I needed, the punctuation marks that suited this story, and the story to me read well with certain punctuation marks. The lesson, I learned

here is that the use of punctuation marks can actually change the meaning, rhythm and the perspective of a story.

For the new second piece that I was required to write from scratch, titled “These Streets”, I found it easier to write than the reworking of the already completed story, as already reworking on the existing piece had assisted me to easily find the form I needed to write this piece, including the words, the punctuation marks I chose to use and the length of the sentences. My approach seemed to have worked well in bringing the story I wanted to tell alive. When I presented the piece at the feedback session with Stacy and fellow student, Patrick, it became clear that this was the way for me going forward, that is using short sentences, choosing words and punctuation marks carefully, to achieve musicality and rhythm. In fact, Stacy even suggested that I needed to go further with the piece, using even shorter sentences and experimenting with other punctuation marks. In short, the feedback was that perhaps this is a way for me to look at even beyond the scope of the seminar. It is a suggestion I am seriously considering in future.

We were also required to pay attention to Punctuation Marks in books we were reading at the time and that happened for me to be a book with the title: “Black Beach: 491 Days in One of Africa’s Most Brutal Prisons” by Daniel Janse van Rensburg and Tracey Pharoah, (2022).

I reread this book, paying particular attention, to how punctuation marks are used. The book is about van Rensburg’s experiences in an Equatorial Guinea prison for close to two years, following a business deal that went sour with the political elites in that country.

In it I noticed that the authors use mainly two types of punctuation marks, a comma and semi-colon interchangeably. That is, of course, beside several other punctuation marks also used in the book. I was intrigued. At face value, I immediately noticed the inconsistency in this way of using these marks as they appeared to be used randomly. I was not sure whether I understood the logic of when to use one instead of the other to achieve some sort of hesitation, breathing space or rhythm in the text. It is only when I read the paragraphs aloud that I discovered that, where the authors use a semi-colon instead of a comma, it gives one who is reading aloud, a longer breathing space than when they use a comma. I found this discovery through reading aloud quite interesting. When reading silently, this is not possible to pick easily.

However, when it came to the length of sentences, the text contains both long and short sentences, a variation that is working well when the right punctuation marks are used for each instance. This depends on whether it is a short or long sentence that is used in the text.

Seminar 15

One subject that has fascinated me for a long time in my reading habits is the subject of books written about adults about children, and these books if you read them have the power to make you feel like you are that child, remembering what you were up to at that age. How adult writers manage to do this has always made me wonder and admire the remarkable skill of such writers to capture so well the world of young people.

I therefore had a kin interest in the seminar titled reWriting Children facilitated By Jo-Ann Bekker. For this seminar we were introduced to a number of writers whose works in the form of poetry and prose are written from the perspective of children. The pieces look at the world through the eyes of children. At face value to an adult, some of the children's opinions, thinking and views captured by these pieces of writings indeed appear ridiculous. But when you put yourself in that age bracket, which I had to do to assist me in making sense of what the thinking and the utterances of these children are, you start to make sense of it all. Putting myself, rather imagining myself, when I was a child, and the kinds of things and thinking that I can remember seized me, did assist me in writing my own piece titled "Dirty".

This piece looks at the world through a four-year-old white girl's race lens. Her mother is involved in a relationship with a black man. I had to think hard about how such a child could make sense of such a multi-racial relationship at that age. It was not an easy task at many levels. First of all, I had to become a child in my thinking and my view of the world. Secondly, I had to put myself in the position of a white child and how she saw the world and attempts to make sense of her family's situation. I am black and certain cultural nuances are not universal to both cultures, not shared by both, while others are.

For example, the case in point is the issue of the use of a fork and knife that the main character in "Dirty", Robyn, mentions. It is common practice in black culture to use your hands, besides a fork and knife if you want. This is uncommon in white culture, not that it does not happen. It is just rare. I also had to think carefully about the language of a four-year-old, paying particular attention to words. For example, during our feedback session, Jo-Ann Bekker, who facilitated the seminar, doubted that a word

such as “Unbelievable!” which in my story I attributed to Robyn could conceivably be used by a child – “even a precocious child.” I replaced that word in my final editing process.

However, what inspired me to create this story are the readings that we were given, as I paid particular attention to sentence construction and words that are attributed to children of a certain age, and therefore I modelled my story on the stories in this seminar. Though the story itself is original in its conception, however I borrowed a lot from reading the poem of Mxolisi Dolla Sapeta titled “Master” and Mariana Enriquez’s short story titled “Adela’s House”. Sapeta’s story assisted me in framing my article as it deals with power relations between black and white people. Enriquez’s short story was helpful especially when it comes to the language that children use when they speak. They use a language that is simple and their thinking comes out as irrational to an adult. But that is their world, and in their eyes, it makes pretty much sense. I have learned that when you are writing about children, you need to see the world as you would imagine they would see it. Reimagining how you spoke, thought and did things when you were the age of the characters in your story is especially helpful.

When I wrote this short story that looks at life through a child’s perspective, I first had to frame the story in a way that has a clear narrative, and of course has conflict in it to carry the narrative. When the way was clear about how the narrative would pan out in my imagination, the process of writing, putting words together that I felt would tell this story with several elements, a child’s innocence and ignorance, race, and tension in a new multi-racial relationship commenced, I had to choose the words carefully, especially when it came to the dialogue and rationality. This of course depended on whether it is a child speaking or an adult. After writing the first draft, in sort of free style writing, I went through every word, every sentence and every paragraph, replacing certain words, sentences and even shortening sentences and paragraphs, as well as paying particular attention to punctuation marks. As far as the use of punctuation marks is concerned, I focused on how best to use punctuation marks to make the story, more alive, and punchy.

During the revision process, I asked myself a few critical questions relating to this story, such as whether the story is comprehensible, whether it is long enough to tell the story fully, whether there is some light moment in it, as this story deals with a weighty subject and to balance it, it needed some humour in it. I found myself writing a bit more, pushing the length from 800 words to just over 1000 words. I injected a bit of humour to it.

This process from the writing to the editing took three days as I would leave the piece for a while and come back to it. This way, it enabled me to look at the piece with fresh eyes, in a number of cases noting things elements that I left out that I should include. In other cases, noticing mistakes in the story, such as mixing tenses and therefore not being consistent when it comes to tenses. I even forgot to write the title of the piece.

What I have learned in this seminar is that when it comes to editing you have to embark on two processes, called macro and micro editing. Macro editing is when you look at the story holistically while micro editing is when you look at small but essential details that make the story to have rhythm and musicality, a process that involves replacing some words, correcting grammar and tenses among other things.

Seminar 16

Writing and reading stories about the lives lived by children was indeed fun and challenging at the same time. But in real life, there is also another world, the adult world that a writer must also consider. It is this world that I plunged into with much excitement. In fact, in main respects this world demands that the writer does the opposite of the representation of the children's world in their writing. And that is exactly what I found myself learning in the rather challenging seminar titled Experimenting Through Sex (sex scene), facilitated by Chwayita Ngamlana.

The seminar discussed, and sought to demonstrate different ways in which one can introduce a sex scene without it being jarring (unless intended) or veering from their style of writing. We were told in the seminar that as writers, we often avoid sex scenes because they make us uncomfortable and vulnerable to public shame.

However, we were further advised against avoiding a sex scene in our writing, particularly where there is some romantic situation between characters.

Avoiding a sex scene, however, especially when a piece of writing is couple-centred, often hinders relatability and may sometimes dim the idea of the couple representing a realistic relationship. Sex needs to become as normal in literature as it is in real life, we learned.

To assist a writer to navigate the difficulties of writing about a sex scene, there are different ways that one needs to consider enabling a sex scene to be written properly and be easily discernible to a reader.

These ways include approaching writing a sex scene from metaphorical, blunt, reflective, violent and unexpected perspectives.

To make the process of creating a sex scene easy to navigate, we were required to read a selection of chapters/pieces from the novel – “If I Stay Right Here”, by Chwayita Ngamlana. These pieces titled, “Touch, Rats don’t need a reason to run”, “Kitchen Heat” and “Head”, I found them helpful in framing and formulating my own story titled “Punishment of Pleasure”, and the setting up of a sex scene embedded in it was also assisted this way. For example, I modelled my short story on the piece “Head” from the selected readings as this suited my sex scene well.

We were also required to choose one of or more of the 10 sex fetishes/sex acts from the following:

Quirofilia, Somnophilia, Katoptronphilia,Electrostimulation, Consensual Voyeurism, Objectophilia, Spectrophilia, Kleptolagnia, Claustrophilia and Orisophilia.

I then researched these fetishes to see which one of them suited my plot and the sex scene that I created. This was so because first of all, I wrote the story and the sex scene and went back to these fetishes to see which one of them fits nicely into the sex scene that I created the most. This way, I found out that because my subject has a fetish of the use of fingers by the sex partners as a tool of sexual stimulation, the fetish that fitted my sex scene well is Quirofilia.

This is because this refers to the use of fingers as a sex tool such as the situation with the sex scene of my two characters, Vanessa and Tim in “Punishment of Pleasure” The seminar also required us to set the sex scene in one or more of the following locations: Prison, Tattoo Shop Petrol Station, Sauna, Gym, Campus, Army Base, Car, Circus and Food Truck.

These places as places where sex could take place are unusual. But that does not mean that sex does not take place in such places, as indeed it often does. I found these places to be honest, interesting places for a sex scene and therefore it was relatively easy for me to spot my own location from the list provided, where I wanted to place the couple, the main characters’ sex scene. In fact I chose three places.

The sex scene in my story is set in three places: The car of the male character Tim (one of the two main characters with the other main character being Vanessa), prison, and Dean’s Tattoo shop (a minor character).

I was also able to use certain ways of approaching this sex scene and locations where it took place either real or imaginary, and that is metaphorical, blunt, and reflective approaches as I found these to be working well in my short story.

What I have learned in this story overall is the fact that to create a realistic sex scene, it is important to consider the type of sex fetish, the location as well as the way in which to approach a sex scene. These factors assist a writer to create a sex scene that in the eyes of the reader, seems to fit in naturally into the narrative. I have also learned that when one is writing about sex in general and a sex scene in particular, one must resist the urge to be self-aware about their own vulnerability in the process and the stigma attached to one writing about a sex scene. In my case I found myself resisting the urge to tone down the sex scene because of a recurring worry in my subconscious mind about what if my 15-year-old son got to read this. Getting rid of such thoughts during the process of writing assists one to focus on the sex scene and write it as one would imagine it unfolding in real life.

I will therefore, going forward, especially when I am writing about an area of social life that has stigma attached to it, such as a sex scene, adopt this attitude that says, I need to tell it in a way that it becomes relatable to people's daily experiences of sex in their own lives and not worry about what people will say and think about me as a result.

Having delved into experimenting about writing about a sex scene, it was time to move on and read about what other writers have written and review their books. I enjoyed going through these four books that I chose.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review 1 Title: WITH THE SAFETY OFF

ISBN978-0-9869982-6-3

Author: Graeme Feltham

Publisher: DYE HARD PRESS and altoviolet

This novel starts with a setting in fact that tells you a lot about the lifestyle of the protagonist and the company he keeps away from his prestigious job as a talented copywriter and conceptualiser at a leading advertising agency in the swanky suburb of Sandton. However, the company he keeps and what he does in shabby toilets of even shabbier bars of Yeoville is in sharp contrast to his position as a respected creative at work and a fine connoisseur of the fine art of classical music. Anyway, Fig finds himself inextricably entangled in the sticky issue of drugs, the complexity of a society undergoing its own changes and a drug related tragedy. These incidents include death and violence neatly woven into the protagonist daily's existence and struggle to live. The story is told through an unnamed narrator as well as the dynamics of dialogue between Fig and the other characters that share a life with the protagonist.

This way, the author manages in the very first encounter with a new character in the book, to let the reader form their opinion about the main character, such as whether you like the character or not, you sympathise with them or not.

The setting of this novel, the poor and socially struggling Johannesburg suburb of Yeoville, and the offices of the advertising agency situated in the wealthy Johannesburg commercial and residential area of Sandton could not have been a better setting for a novel that in many ways. This is a tale of immense contradictions in post-apartheid -South Africa in which personal relationships are renegotiated and the sociology of the society in which the story is set is undergoing tremendous transformation. The gap between the poor and the rich is wide enough to cause tension between the two worlds. However, the character of Fig traverses both worlds with remarkable ease, Sandton where he works and gets to rub shoulders with the rich and powerful clients, his greed-for-profit

Greek boss, advertising agency owner Orieste and colleagues. On the other hand, away from work,

Fig lives in a different world in a suburb that is going downhill in the 90s post-apartheid South Africa. He lives among an assortment of people, such as drug dealers, small time tsotsis, gangsters and his life also revolve around several sexual partners, including his casual romantic encounters. Life is tough in that

neighbourhood, with danger lurking everywhere: in the overcrowded Yeoville flats, its mean streets and it's not always-safe bars.

The author manages to take the reader there with him, and you feel, visualise and imagine the lives lived there by the likes of Fig and his community, where drug dealing, drug taking, boozing, violence and the struggle to live are part of one's daily experience of life. What the author manages to do here is to introduce you to the lives of the struggling, cunning and the dangerous in the streets, in the bars, and in Yeoville's overcrowded flats. You may not always agree with their ways of earning a living, but you understand why these characters do what they do in order to live.

For example, Fig's excessive use of drugs and later dealing after losing his advertising job, is a mechanism for survival, and so are the other characters such as the Nigerian drug dealers and the Yugoslavian mobsters and dealers who find themselves in a foreign country that does not give much to talk about with regards to job opportunities to the likes of them, driving them into selling drugs and committing other crimes simply to survive. But then you understand that people like Fig are human, and to be human is to be imperfect. It comes with making wrong choices and decisions, whose consequences are often times, tragic. You encounter such events in "WITH THE SAFETY OFF." Reading this book however, one is constantly faced with the moral question of whether the likes of Fig and his friends are glamorising the abuse of alcohol and drug taking and dealing, or they do what they do because they have little else by way of option to live. The book does not give judgment, leaving it to you the reader to make your own judgment call. That perhaps is an intelligent way of writing, and that is leaving it up to the reader to decide which side they fall in terms of the dynamics that define these characters' relationships with one another on one hand, and the law on the other and the circumstances they find themselves in.

In this story of survival, you meet several characters with names that one could describe as dodgy and tell a lot more about the person's personality. Such as Yugoslavian mobster and drug gang leader Yuri; and women whose wretched lives do not include fidelity, but instead their stories of survival in the seedy part of the city. In this place going downhill socially and economically, very much features the central character of Fig. a man who redefines, rather takes the concept of minimalism, or living minimally in a society whose gods include worshiping extreme kinds of consumerism and accumulation, to new levels. As presented here, it is hard not to like the character of Fig, even though the choices he makes, partly to survive, and partly to take care of his addiction for both sex and drugs are not honourable. For example, he does not come out as someone who is materialistic, preferring rather to

have what he needs to live instead of excessive accumulation for things he does not need to meet his daily living essentials.

For example, in his flat in Yeoville, it is barely furnished, and he seems to be fine with that.

But all these factors – the several women in his life, [dialogue laced with expletives and vulgar street language]– are a hook instead of something repulsive that diminishes the book’s literary value. Once you have been introduced to the environment these characters inhabit, you then understand why they speak in rough street language. This is a reflection of their situation and environment and daily encounters in the rough streets of Yeoville.

Curiously however, Fig, just like the author, hails from Uitenhage, and just like the author, Fig was educated at Rhodes University, and just like the author, Fig was a punk who lived in Yeoville in post 1994 South Africa. He was caught in the middle of the chaos and the opportunities that came with the dawn of democracy. A dawn whose promise for a better future does not include the likes of Fig and his fellow Yeoville folk on the margins of society, such as the drug dealers and women with very little to boast about regarding their morals as defined by society. The characters in “WITH THE SAFETY OFF” portray lives of people who live non-conventional and non-conformist lifestyles.

By now I am sure you are getting intrigued by the closeness between the character of Fig and the author Graeme Feltham. You should because this book is a classic example of art meeting actual life, and the results are not always as pleasing as one would expect when the two phenomena intersect and collide, and so it is for the author and his central character in “WITH THE SAFETY OFF.”

Drugs, multiple sexual encounters, murder, excessive boozing, violence, micro-racist aggression in crowded Yeoville bars, street language laced English dialogue, excessively repetitive use of swear words by the characters, colloquial street language in conversations, Nigerian and Yugoslavian drug syndicates, doping doctors and corrupt police officials. It cannot get better than this for a novel that dissects South African society in transition from a thirty something white man’s perspective, trying to fit in and survive living in Yeoville of the 1990s.

It is these entanglements of these factors with Fig’s life that drive the narrative in this story of the quirk, but in different ways hugely talented Fig. He is hard working too, and that is if working outside social norms and the law, also fits into what society often refers to as hard working –that is in a social normative definition sense. But it is these elements of non-conformity with the norms that make you

want to know more about the lives of the characters that inhabit the pages of this book and the imagination of the writer. There is a feeling that something big is going to happen in this story-actually many things do happen at the end.

The very first sentence of the novel is telling about what one should expect in the rest of the story involving our main character Fig. But before going to that part, it might be interesting to go back to the intriguing part of the clearly suspicious closeness between the author and the main character in this novel, Fig. Clarifying this part, will perhaps assist us in understanding the twists and turns in this book, that make it a compelling reading, particularly for those looking to understanding Yeoville of that time and why this intriguing blurring of boundaries, of a distinction between the life of the author and that of the central character Fig - in other words between Graeme Feltham and Fig.

“Of all the unlikely jobs that Graeme could have had, being a clerical administrator for a small insurance company next door to me really took the cake,” writes a friend of the author James de Villiers in one of the two introductions in the book, and he continues, “He was bored and frustrated to distraction, ranting on about his boss Fat Andy. He needed the bucks. He loathed the job. We got chatting and found common interest in experimental music, and avant-garde everything.”

If this does not assist in shedding light to this mystery of the closeness between what happens to the character’s complicated life in the story, well, perhaps this one will do. “Although my father never did explain to me his affinity with the name Fig, I suspect it had something to do with his love for brevity. One clean syllable. Delivered from the lips without a trace of pretentiousness,” writes his son Luke Feltham, in the other part of the introduction to his father.

Still confused? Here is another hint from Luke. “Nonetheless, it would be obvious to anyone who had heard his innumerable stories, that Fig, the protagonist of this book and his novella *One Hundred Naked beers*, was, for better, and worse, a reflection of Graeme and his machinations. I believe Fig is a vessel through which Graeme could share his own experiences while simultaneously trying to make sense of his environment,” writes Luke.

That environment Luke is referring to is in many respects summarised by the next sentence, the very beginning of this beautifully written novel brimming with moments of tension, uncertainties, language of the streets of Yeoville, combined with doses of urban sophistication expressed through the character’s superior copying writing and strategising genius, as well as advanced knowledge of classical music, complete with names of composers coming out of Fig’s tongue effortlessly. That is when and if

the situation required him to do so. It did on several occasions actually—during presentations of ideas to clients while he was still employed at the Launch Factory in Sandton. Particularly when he felt like being bombastic to fellow creatives and impress his Greek boss, and also during his drug influenced philosophical musings with his fellow drug dealer and supplier, Nigerian, Mike.

“I hate you because you are white.” (p.3). These are words delivered by a black character in the novel directed at Fig who was embroiled in a passionate kiss with Matlakala, clearly one of his several romantic conquests. This happens while he is in an overcrowded Yeoville Kenyan owned bar, whose barman is a Muslim. Talk of ironies and paradoxes of the environment in which Fig found himself. This is actually the very first sentence in this novel that sets the tone of what will happen throughout the book, with regards to the environment in which Fig lives and the people he interacts with constantly.

If there is some doubt about the intentions of the angry character that Fig gives the name Cyclops, what Figure says next in response to the aggrieved and angry fellow drunk, clearly a provocation from a one-eyed unimpressed man should clear the air.

“I am sorry about your problem of the colour white; I love the colour blue.” (p.5). At the same time, Fig takes out a R100 note from his pocket to bet on the pool table in which the angry man and another Kenyan patron participate. Fig wins and heads to the bar for several whiskey rounds, making the drunk, angry and jealous man even more agitated.

This skirmish at the very beginning of this novel is actually a carbon copy of several challenges, not always of a racial nature that Fig has to traverse in his drugged, boozed, and over-sexed life while living in this neighbourhood that has become black, a home to mainly African foreigners. These include some of his friends, such as Mike from Nigeria who is not only a friend but also a supplier and fellow philosopher of Fig's. There is also drug dealer and supplier, head of the drug syndicate Kariem and a gang of drug dealers -Yugoslavians led by a scheming and horrible Yuri.

There are more startling happenings that take place involving Fig in the book.

Something must be said though about “WITH THE SAFETY OFF” It is not a book for the faint hearted or those given to easy judgment and moralising. It is also not a book that one would find easy to read to their teenage son who is at the stage of experimenting in their life with a lot of things.

This is however not to say it is not a well written book. Fact is, it is: What with the street language melded nicely with formal English, giving the book the authenticity and authority of its edgy

environment, the hypocrisy of society, the sensibility to place that the writer is imbued with, in the style of Chris Abani. The writer believably situates his characters nicely in an environment that takes the style and pace of the locals' manner of speaking, walking and scheming, making the events that happen there not to be out of place.

The suspense and the feeling that something terrible is going to happen, and it is just a question of what and how that is going to happen, makes "WITH THE SAFETY OFF", hard to abandon reading halfway through. The book is pregnant with all these qualities that make for compelling reading. This is despite the fact that the excessive drug taking, and the misogynistic sexcapades may make you cringe several times throughout the book. I argue however, that it is not about agreeing with what the characters get up to. But how you would want to see how and what will happen under these circumstances the characters find themselves in. And many things do happen to Yuri and his friends indeed.

However, it would have been nice if the author lived to read his book. That is only if he did not die in 2017, missing the publishing date by just two years.

Book Review 2

Title: THE HEINEMANN BOOK OF South African Short Stories: From 1945 to the present

ISBN: 0 435 90672 0

UNESCO: ISBN 92-3-102944-4

Publisher: Heinemann/UNESCO Publishing

Author: Edited by Denis Hirson with Martin Trump

After reading this book, it becomes clear that the book does not claim to be a representation of what constitutes an ultimate book on South African literature, covering the years 1945 to 1992. That in fact would be impossible to achieve on a book of 240 pages in a country that has a significant number of writers, who in their respective areas of writing, have done their fair amount of work in contributing to the country's cultural production through the literary tradition. The editors also make another important point to take note of.

This book when looked at and analysed from a demographical representational approach, is found lacking, clearly not representing South Africa's diversity of literatures that the country is gifted with.

What becomes glaring as one goes through this collection of 21 short stories by various South African writers, is the fact that there is a disproportionate under representation of stories written by black South African writers. But this is not the fault of the editors.” THE HEINEMANN BOOK OF South

African Short Stories: From 1945 to the present”, indeed under-represents the voices of writers from the black community whose perspectives would be valuable. This is particularly because they are a racial majority, constituting the biggest singular demography of what South African has always been and still is today.

However, it can also be argued that because of the scope of its subject matter, covering a wide range of what constituted a daily experience of South Africans of different races in the period covered, this is the closest we have of a book that attempts and in fact achieves to a big extent, what probably no other book published so far has done –a collection of stories that is at the heart of South Africa’s literary tradition and evolution covering so many decades. This is despite the under representation of black writers in the collection, somehow rendering the effort a missed opportunity. However, there are reasons for that beyond the capacity of the editors.

Having made that argument, it is pertinent to note what one of the editors, Denis Hirson, in fact notes this superbly, when he writes in the introduction of this anthology regarding the obvious under representation of stories written by black writers:

“It is impossible for a writer who lives in oppression to organise his whole personality into creating a novel. The short story is used as a short cut to prose meaning and one gets some things off one’s chest in quick time.” (p.2).

Although here Denis Hirson’s comment refers to the issue of form, and that is of writing in the short story form instead of a novel, as represented by these short stories here, it can be argued that it is a correct observation when it comes to arguably most black writers. But it can also be argued that the reference to the impossibility of writing a novel by a people under oppression extends to any form of organised writing, especially the type that demands an elevated level of imagination and creativity, such as in writing a novel, or a short story for that matter.

The question then to ask is whether an oppressed and therefore inherently disorganised individual is in a position to create work of an acceptable standard to claim its place in a an anthology, such as THE HEINMANN BOOK OF South African Short Stories: From 1945 to *the present*, which features a mosaic of

well written text and beautifully told stories whose approaches by the various writers in their creation, range from those told in a fairy tale format to those that are unconventional. To achieve this literary fineness, one therefore needed to organise “his whole personality”, a luxury most black writers did not have during those years because of the political and social conditions they found themselves grappling with on a daily basis.

Perhaps it is helpful to also note what Denis Hirson further says in that regard: “Stories committed to paper under such conditions-usually in a South African context, by black writers –give an impression of a train hurtling a half-lit landscape with scenes and visions flashing by too fast, characters glimpsed but not filled out, emotion pounding but not really transcended.” (p. 2).

An example of such type of a story is written by Mango Tshabangu titled *Thoughts in a Train*, (p.162-164). This is a story that well captures the nuances of the complications that comes with white privilege – living in gated suburbs, big houses and commuting in spacious segregated trains where blacks are not allowed, whose lives are in sharp contrast to the poor living conditions in which blacks live and travel. The observations of the narrator, told in the first-person narrative style, are quite emotion inducing, placing a reader to place.

“On this day it was Msongi and Gezani who were most interested in the shut windows. You see, ever since they’d discovered Houghton golf course to be offering better tips in the candy business, Msongi and Gezani found themselves through the rich suburbs of Johannesburg.....” (p. 163).

Then suddenly a reader is told the story through another narrator in the second person narrative format. This somehow, spoils the reading rhythm and pleasure established by the first narrator, and in the process, diminishing the value of an otherwise interesting story that tells the tension that arises when one part of a country is extremely rich, and the other part extremely poor.

The stories in this anthology as a whole, despite the lack of adequate black voices, compared to the white writers who predominantly populate the 240 pages, give however, a wide range of stories – from those that are overtly political, such as *I Take Back My Country* by Bartho Smith (p. 133-142), capturing the race –induced anger and hatred of a character called Siwane Nxumalo. His hatred and anger emanating from what he believes white people have stolen - his land, his country, to the point of being indifferent to those who are white and want to assist him out of his situation of poverty and misery, Bessie Head’s *The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses* (p.202-207), Christopher Hope’s *Learning to Fly* (p. 208-215), to those that are politically subtle. Examples of these stories include Nadine

Gordimer's short story titled *Six Feet of the Country* (p.178-188), Ahmed Essop's *The Hajji* (p.187-201), Alan Paton's *Life for a Life* (p. 216-226). These stories told in two different tones are nevertheless equally powerful in capturing the race tension that existed in the period reviewed by this literature of South Africa.

It is clear that stories related to the issue of apartheid, which was at its height in most of the period covered by these stories, runs through the thread of most of the narratives. You get good doses of this through the interaction of black and white characters. Such as when white characters refer to blacks in general with the derogatory term Kaffir or insisting on being addressed as Baas. Such as when a hard-hearted white prison warder called Jacobus Stephanus Hannetjie in Bessie Head's *The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses* had a confrontation with a political prisoner character called Brille.

"I don't take orders from a kaffir. I don't know what kind of a kaffir you think you are. Why don't you say Baas..."(p.203).

However, it would be a misrepresentation to claim that stories in this anthology are all informed by the apartheid condition of the time, because they are not. Some stories deal with issues of religion and superstition and their role in the South African psyche. Such as Njabulo Ndebele's *The Prophetess* (p.1-26) and Elise Muller's "Night at the Ford" (p. 64-71, translated by Catherine Knox), for example, alluding to the cultural and religious diversity of the country of the time and perhaps even going into the now.

Yet other stories deal with the mundane everyday lives of ordinary people, such as family relationships, farm workers and their white bosses for example, giving a reader a glimpse of life ordinary everyday life during a period in the history of South Africa before the country evolved to the present.

Through this rich literary heritage, the book does not sanitise the human conditions, making it a perfect resource for those who are looking for a clear understanding of the country's evolution from its past to its present, from the tumultuous apartheid years to the free, democratic and yet uncertain South Africa of the present. The writers have captured the history well through the stories as told by the diverse characters, white or black, that they created, who find themselves in certain situations and settings as they fight, at times, even struggle, to affirm and exert their existence in an ever-evolving South Africa.

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Book Review 3

Title: A Question of Power

ISBN 0-435-90720-4

Author: Bessie Head

Publisher: Heinmann African Writers Series

Right from the beginning, something must be said about this book, and that is that there is striking resemblance of the circumstances surrounding the tumultuous lives of the author Bessie Head and the main character in the book Elizabeth. For example, Elizabeth leaves South Africa during the segregated apartheid years for a village life in Botswana, and it also happens that Bessie Head did the same in real life. Both, that is to say, Elizabeth the character and Bessie Head, end up being teachers in Botswana and more events that changed their lives followed. This therefore raises the question of whether Elizabeth could actually be Bessie Head. For one Elizabeth is of mixed race, and so was Bessie Head. Both also hailed from Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, raised by foster parents and went to missionary schools by way of education.

And so, on the basis of this observation, it could therefore be argued that *A Question of Power*, could be an autobiography, and if not, at least a memoir of the late South African writer, teacher and former journalist who died in Botswana in 1986, aged 49.

However, whether one concludes whether this book is a memoir or autobiography, or fiction does not diminish the literary value of this book, and in this case, I regard it as a book of fiction that delves deep into the complex life of the metaphysical and the physical world through the character of Elizabeth. It is a psychologically challenging book to read as it forces one to get into the mind of someone who keeps on shifting between sanity and insanity. Perhaps in a way, drawing attention, to the fact that there is a thin line between sanity and insanity.

After losing her job as a teacher at a village school in Motabeng after a mental meltdown related to complications of her life living among village people whose disposition was not that of displaying warmth to this foreigner among them, Elizabeth experiences more heartaches.

Bessie Head here manages to make a reader to imagine what happens when a person is thrust into the midst of strangers who are not in a hurry to make friends. Loneliness sets in and one's mental state is also altered by the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the hosting community to embrace a foreigner in

their midst. This feeling of loneliness and rejection is well captured by Elizabeth when she tells another character, Eugene, also a fellow South African exile in Botswana: "People don't care here whether foreigners get along with them or not. They are deeply absorbed in each other...." (P.56). In fact, this sentence prepares a reader for what later happens in Elizabeth's life in this rural village of Motabeng.

What happens here is that Elizabeth who is in and out of hospitals due to her shifting mental state, one instant being sane, and the next instant, degenerating into a deep mental wreck, has a tumultuous life, to an extent that she at times is not aware of the existence of her young son who is referred to simply as Small Boy, the one who seems not to grow. You see, Elizabeth who in her normal everyday life, just like her partner in a successful gardening project that she is involved in after losing her teaching post, Kenosi, is not lucky when it comes to the vexatious issue of love. But then something happens in her life that torments her in this community. She falls in love. But not with a man in the flesh, but two extremely jealous spirits -souls with whose lives her own soul may have intersected with in the past. Already by now you get to have empathy with Elizabeth and her plight, even as she seems to be neglecting Small Boy as she deals with her own psychological issues with these two rival spirits with their army of spiritual soldiers by their side.

A Question of Power is in two parts, and the story of the complex life of Elizabeth when she is in a stable mental state, and when she is in a mental space that could be described as insanity and emotional instability, is what drives the narrative in this book. You will sometimes get angry with Elizabeth, especially with her choices. For example, you would want her to at least if not find love among the Batswana men, in real life, and not in her illusionary spiritual life, as she does with Sello and Dan, why not the overseas volunteers. Such as her close friend, a young American man called Tom who is a volunteer on a development project in the village. Sadly, she does not, even as they seem close enough to eventually fall in love and find eventual happiness, especially for Elizabeth.

Instead of that happening, as it looks at times like it would happen, Elizabeth instead, further drifts into a state of hallucination, seeing visions that only she can see of course, while the rest of society see nothing. In fact, it is seeing these visions that make doctors to send her eventually to a psychiatric hospital, leaving behind Small Boy with friends in Motabeng Village. This leads further to her torment, and as a reader you are forced to suffer with her in her predicament. Her suffering becomes yours too because already you are sympathetic to her situation. This is how the writer, pulls you into the story and get you embroiled in the goings on in Elizabeth's entangled life with the mysteries of the intersection of the human and the metaphysical worlds. Her life becomes real to you as a reader.

But after reading about her mental entanglement with a soul called Sello in the Part 1 of the book, you would expect that in Part Two, the character would find relief. But it does not as another soul, called Dan, emerges. Elizabeth is in love with this cruel soul, who in reality is jealous of the previous spiritual lover of hers, Sello. This lover called Dan, mocks and torments Elizabeth so much that she even contemplates killing herself and Small Boy. That is when she is in a state of sanity. In fact, this new lover is no different from Sello in her vision. Dan dangles several seemingly beautiful women in front of Elizabeth, just to make her jealous. It does not help when these women in the eyes of Elizabeth, seem to be more beautiful than her. She becomes an emotional wreck, and in the process dragging you the reader down in that path, for you are by now her sympathiser. You are empathising with her in her long-suffering journey, first with the helpless soul Sello and now with the cruel soul Dan. Problem is, these soul lovers of Elizabeth keep on shifting in their attitude and behaviour towards Elizabeth, creating emotional and psychological havoc in her life.

For example, Sello, the first spirit lover in Part One, when he appears to her as a monk, in that state he is loving. But then at times, he transforms into a terrible person when he assumes the figure of a man in a brown suit being directed and controlled by a rival female spirit called Medusa.

“All Elizabeth could see was Medusa and Sello in the brown suit. Apart from the first time when he had snarled that he was God himself, he left the management of everything to Medusa.” (p.46).

The writer here manages to get you hooked into the complex worlds inhabited by the spirits as seen through the visions of Elizabeth. This way Elizabeth’s struggle in this mysterious metaphysical world she faces also becomes your mental struggle to try and make sense of this world and, yearning that she wriggles herself out of it.

This struggle between sanity and insanity, or metaphysical and the physical as explored through the character of Elizabeth is what draws in the reader to *A Question of Power*. The fact that the living, are entangled in a love triangle with the spirits in an intriguing maze of love, jealousy and emotions, further makes this book a compelling read.

Book Review 4

Title: Willemsdorp

ISBN 0 7981390 13

Author: Herman Charles Bosman

Publisher: Human & Rousseau

“Willemsdorp” is a book that is typically written in Herman Charles Bosman’s literary style of turning mundane dorp –rural town life into a colourful mosaic of vibrant life, which is engaging and gives a great insight into the goings on among the rural folk, mainly white Afrikaner farming families. One such book of his that best illustrates this style is “Mafeking Road” (1947). There is certainly a lot of that in this book.

However, unlike his other books, “Willemsdorp” an anniversary edition edited by Stephen Gray with Craig McKenzie, is a work of art in its raw original state as the writer wrote it and indented it to be published as such. The book written clearly in American style with such typically American words such as queer and nigger, used liberally in the book, reflects his time when he lived in America.

Essentially “Willemsdorp” is a book about a northern Transvaal small rural town in which an editor of a white English liberal leaning publication called Northern Transvaal News, shortly before the National Party’s election victory, finds himself entangled in the web of local politics and social scandals involving two adversaries from two political camps, Robert E. Constable of the Union Party representing the political interests of the English speaking whites, and the The Volksparty’s Dap Van Zyl, a handsome and colourful character representing the interest of the Boers. The two small town politicians are fighting a brutal battle for a single Council seat.

Charlie Hendricks is not only involved in the politics of the two dominant white parties fighting for power, but also the dorp’s darker side. Infidelity, hypocrisy, petty gossip, a local sergeant’s overzealous investigations and enforcement of a law that aims to govern what lovers choose to do behind closed doors, allegations of dagga smoking by the elites, and ultimately murder, exposing the dorp’s darker side and social faulty lines.

The editor Charlie Hendricks that literary scholars generally argue, is a character representing Herman Charles Bosman himself, is not an innocent, objective by Stander to the shenanigans taking place in this rural outpost. He is intrinsically part of it. In fact, he occupies a prominent space in its centre. For example, he is one of the social elites who in the cover of darkness, just like the triumphant candidate of the Volksparty in the council election, Dap Van Zyl, is involved in a scandalous romantic relationship with Marjorie. And when she is found mysteriously dead, having been dumped into a deep hole, Dap Van Zyl’s secret romantic links with her is exposed, and he is arrested for murder. He agrees to the romantic link but denies having killed her. Charlie Hendricks on the other hand is driven to almost insanity over the young woman’s murder as he fears arrest from the ever-meticulous Sergeant Detective Brits.

In this book you get to meet interesting characters such as the self-righteous and moralistic,

Reverend Thorwell Macey of the Church of England, the rural outpost's hard working but quirk Detective Sergeant Brits who overzealously is determined to police sectional transgression across the colour line, undecided and rather timid mining commissioner Jack Brummer, conservative school principal Johannes Erasmus whose wife cheats with his brother, Cyril Stein, the eccentric and nonconventional dagga smoking school board secretary, the town's prostitute Majorie, a beautiful young Coloured woman who could easily be mistaken for a white person had it not been for a her frizzy hair that gives her away, her secret father, Jones, who is in charge of the Northern Transvaal

News's page layout, a disappointed Lena Cordier who has been dumped by the undecided Jack Brummer among other characters.

These characters, their behaviour, as well as their interaction with the marginalised black people that they regard as not worthy much as human beings, is make this book a powerful narrative of a life during a period in the history of this country. That is when it was normal for white people to call blacks with derogatory names such as niggers and kaffirs, without anyone raising not so much as an eyebrow.

This in a way tells us about the politics of the time, when any white man was baas to every black person, and blacks were treated as an underclass. This however is not a weakness of the book. Rather it is its strength and an authentic portrayal of that period in history in the country. This is in line with a claim by the publisher that the book is in fact un-sanitised -in other words, a proper representation of the white society of "Willemsdorp" and its attitudes towards black residents at the time.

"This text of Willemsdorp is the first to appear in full, uncut, as Bosman intended," the publisher writes in a pre-introduction text to the book. This is clearly in reference to another sanitised version first published in 1977, in which certain texts from the original script were excluded. Nevertheless, that book even with certain parts of the script removed due to the censorship laws of the time, "it soon established itself as a classic of South African literature." The publisher makes the claim.

The shock murder, the scandalous affair between Krisjan Erasmus and his brother's wife Malie, exposed by the dagga smoking Cyril Stein, the secret romantic triangle involving the politician Dap Van Zyl, newspaperman Charlie Hendricks and the Coloured prostitute Marjorie, the shame of the death of school principal Erasmus senior through his own hand and the hypocrisy –all these well woven elements into the narrative of the social life and politics of this small town, is what makes this book an interesting

read. Add the racism, you then have a book that tells the authentic politics and sociology reflecting not only the politics of the small northern Transvaal town, but broadly, of South Africa of the time.

Herman Charles Bosman though did not live to witness the public reception of this book, published as he would have loved to see, because he died in 1951 of a heart attack at the age of 46

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Writing in Community: Creative Writing Workshop with Grades 6, 7 and 8 learners at Windybrow Centre of the Arts

Date: 6 November, 2023

The venue of the workshop, adorned with an expansive mural by famous Ndebele painter

Esther Mahlangu, exuded warmth and was welcoming. The initial plan was to give 15 grades 8 and 11 learners this creative writing workshop. However, on the day of the workshop, I was told by management that the Grade 11 learners were busy preparing for their end of year examinations. Instead, management suggested that I hold the creative writing workshop with the Grade 7 and Grade 8 learners, 15 in number.

But as soon the other learners in Grade 6 heard that there was a creative writing workshop about to be held on the premises, they asked that they be allowed to attend too, a request I agreed to. The number

of participants suddenly rose to 25 learners. Fortunately, Windybrow Centre of the Arts had enough sheets of blank papers and pencils to cater for the enlarged number of participants. Initially I was worried that it might pose a challenge to control such a big class of learners in different grades. At the beginning, indeed it became a challenge to get all the learners, especially the Grades 6 and Grades 7 to grasp the prompts that I had initially planned. I had to prepare new prompts that were much easier to follow by all learners.

To ease the process I first introduced myself, after which I asked each learner to introduce themselves, saying their name, the grades they were in and where they lived. Some were clearly shy, and spoke softly, almost in a whisper. I then encouraged them to speak up as the workshop was a safe space for everyone, pointing out that everyone's voice mattered as writers and we are allowed to speak our minds without any inhibition. That helped. Soon after the introductions the participants became more articulate and confident.

The reasons why some of the participants were shy, I concluded, was because the learners came from mainly marginalised communities that include Hillbrow and the surrounding flatlands of Berea, Yeoville and Johannesburg Central Business District, and are not used to speaking in front a large number of people. This was later confirmed by the Head of the centre Gerard Bester. The Windybrow Centre of the Arts, located in Hillbrow, is a division of the Market Theatre Foundation, and offers playwriting skills to learners from the community as part of its after school extra- curricular programme.

Some of the learners at the time were writing text for a play they were going present in May, 2023 during the Africa Month programme of Windybrow. This festival is an annual event that seeks to bring understanding between South Africans and the immigrant communities in South Africa.

I started off by telling the participants that the workshop comprising of freewriting exercises was going to be fun, and there was not going to be grading of the written pieces. That seemed to loosen up the environment in the room. I then proceeded to tell the participants about the rules of the workshop, and that is that I was going to give them prompts and they were free to write anything that came to their mind, and that the pen needed to be moving all the time till the call to stop writing was issued. I further explained that when the time was up, they needed to stop even mid- word or sentence. That suggestion appeared to attract curiosity from the participants who expressed their curiosity loudly. The participants appeared to have understood the instructions, or so I thought.

As the workshop leader I read out the first prompt and set the time to 2 minutes, and told the participants to start writing immediately after I gave them the first prompt and that the pen must never stop moving, and that elicited some excitement expressed in a spontaneous outburst of laughter by the group: The first prompt I gave them was “My friend”. Just as I thought the instructions were clear, indeed the majority grasped the rules. However, a few souls were lost. I had to stop everyone, asking them to restart from a new page while I explained to those lost the rules of the game again.

After the two minutes I asked that everyone must stop writing. They indeed did stop, but found the game somehow funny as they all laughed at the same time. The workshop from there was on indeed. When I asked any volunteers to read what they had written, three hands hesitantly shot up. They read their pieces and received applause from the audience.

I then gave them the following prompts: “I wish I could” ..., “On my way to School,” and “Why I love my Place”, one after the other and asked volunteers to read out their stories loud. Each time there were more hands of volunteers that were willing to read their stories. There were applause and laughter in the room. It looked like more and more people increasingly wanted to read their stories, encouraged by the positive reception they got from fellow participants. At this stage, I also noticed a trend among the volunteer readers, and that is that the same hands and a few new others shot up each time. I then encouraged the new volunteers to read first.

When I checked the time, it was 4pm. Time was up, just as the participants appeared to be enjoying the exercise. When I indicated that the workshop was over, I could see some disappointment registered on the faces of some of the participants. I then suggested that they needed to read books for pleasure as writing and reading are interlinked. I also suggested that out of the stories they had written, once home, they needed to choose the one they liked the most and continue to develop the story further. The participants thanked me. The head of Windybrow Gerard Bester who intermittently attended the workshop also shared with the participants his personal story of a selection of pieces of writing, demonstrating his vulnerability and feelings after the death of his mother, struck by Covid19, in 2020. Those pieces of reflective writing after the loss were a subject of an academic symposium performance he held with a group of academics that very same day at Windybrow Centre of the Arts. He then suggested that the participants in my creative writing workshop, needed to archive what they had written, both on paper and on their phones, and that some of what they had written could be adapted into songs. Bester thereafter asked me if I could be available at another time to hold another creative writing workshop with the Grade 11 group that could not attend the workshop on that day.

Writing in Community: Public Reading

The reading of my work comprised reading three short stories from My Creative Thesis. The group which among them had members of the community of Melville that included a father and his two daughters, one in Grade 9 and the other in Matric, a dramatic arts graduate from Wits, a BA Honours Drama student from Wits and a security guard working in the area, were a group of 10 people. I was nervous at first as these people came from diverse backgrounds and most of them seemed not to have much in common. I was also aware that the purpose of the exercise was less for me to host discussion among attendees than it was to have the opportunity to read my work to a group of interested people who may or may not want to offer any commentary. The fact that through a word of mouth and through an arts network of Newtown that I invited, they came, gave me some level of confidence. The first short story I read is titled "The Melville Singer".

After reading the rather longest short story in that collection, I took a break, had a glass of water, and surveyed the reaction of the audience as I did so. I saw some faces smiling. The father of the two daughters spoke. "I actually saw someone pass outside who is the Melville Singer," he said. I was surprised by this conclusion, intrigued even, but restrained myself from saying anything. Others suddenly looked outside in the direction of a group of men who were drinking beer from quarts outside a nearby bottle store.

I understood the gesture as some of the characters in the story are Melville beer drinkers who like the crowd outside drink beer in the streets, and went on to read the next short story titled "The Games". A rather short, short story, it took me 10 minutes to finish reading. I saw the two girls suppressing laughter. However, there was no comment forthcoming from anyone. Could it be that it was because it is a story that involves extra marital cheating, I wondered silently, before proceeding to read the last short story titled "Dirty". As soon as I finished reading this one, two hands shot up, one from the drama graduate who expressed the view that he had witnessed several incidents about children sometimes expressing racist views and such views were a mirror of their parents' attitudes towards other races. A few faces in the room nodded in agreement with him.

The BA Honours student commented that she liked the story and suggested that I should consider adapting the story into a theatrical production as she felt it could work even better as a theatrical piece on stage. I thanked everyone for attending. But as I reflected on the experience, I realised that people relate to fiction differently. For example, the father of the two daughters concluded that a person he saw passing outside fitted the demeanour of the character of The Melville Singer, suggesting that to him this short story was realistic fiction, and the drama graduate also thought that Dirty somehow related to his own personal experience. The BA drama student felt that “Dirty” would even work better as a stage play.

All the people who attended did not say anything about “The Games”.

I also learned that the turnout at a reading session is quite unpredictable as you will never know who will turn up or not. For example, I had expected mainly people from the arts sector to turn up as I had invited a specific group, part of Newtown’s arts eco system comprising people from different professions including photographers, curators, visual artists, musicians, writers and arts marketing professionals. The event which took place at

Melville Shisanyama on Saturday, November 4, 2023, however attracted a different crowd, 10 people. But instead of the between 10 and 15 people from the arts sector that I expected the majority came from the suburb of Meville.

The lesson learned here is that you can never know who can never guess who will be interested reading your work.

Reflections on Reader Report

One of the most anxious moments in a writer’s journey is the waiting for feedback from readers and critics once your book is out. You simply do not know what the feedback would look like. As writers we all wish and yearn for the embracing of our labour of love from those who buy and read what we have written. But the response by readers to our work is simply unpredictable. Until you receive one, there is no way of knowing how a reader is going to react to what you have written.

Fortunately, on this programme, as students, we have the privilege of having an anonymous reader who reads your work, after which they give you crucial feedback. Fortunately, the reader does not say they

do not like this or that, and end there, or they like this or that and say no more. They tell you as the writer what they like and why and what they do not like and why, and point you in the right direction to improve where you need to improve.

This is important feedback in that throughout the course of this programme, certainly one gets feedback from the various teachers on the programme and fellow students about one's work. Such as what works and what does not work. In almost all cases, the feedback is spot on, and if one considers them as you review what you have written, the feedback points you in the right direction regarding where to improve your work, irrespective of the instinct to want to defend what you have written. Listening to what other writers and teachers said about my work during this process of learning, assisted me a lot in improving my writing, and I remain indebted to them.

However, getting feedback from someone who is encountering your work for the first time is something special, though scary. But this is something to look forward to as here is someone who is seeing your work for the first time, without the baggage that comes with prior familiarity with one's work. This is certainly a welcome development in one's writerly journey.

However, even with all of this the anxiety still rages on in one's mind, I was in this state as I waited for the much dreaded and yet much expected and necessary readers report on my Creative Thesis, "The Melville Singer", a collection of short stories. Every day in December

2023, the first thing I checked every morning was an email from my supervisor Dr Paul Mason. Indeed, it popped in one day. The waiting was suddenly over. It felt surreal. I hesitated to open the Reader's Report at first. Took a glass of water, after which I breathed in, before opening it.

"Thank you for the opportunity to read your draft thesis. I hope my comments will be useful and constructive. I have made some suggestions which are for you to consider or ignore. While reading I cannot help but proofread so I have made highlights and suggested minor revisions in comments on the document itself," the reader says. The reader was to the point in regard to what I needed to fix and that is regarding language and grammar. I went straight to the point the reader pin-pointed and corrected what needed to be corrected. In doing so, I learned something about writing, and that is that no matter how confident one is about language and grammar in your writing, you need to go back after some time and read afresh. There is always a need to do micro-editing in some cases, even macro editing. I needed to do both on the short story "Dirty" for example. The language of the main character was simply not appropriate for a five-year-old. The reader therefore has a point that

Robyn even though she is only five speaks like an adult, and therefore this did not make sense. Even makes the story unbelievable. So, I responded to this by elevating the age of Robyn from five to six years, and tweaked the language a bit so that what Robyn says suits her age.

“One of the stories that I didn’t enjoy that much was ‘Dirty’. I see what you were trying to do there but I had trouble believing in Robyn the child character. I think it is her dialogue that doesn’t really come across as that of a five-year-old. Phrases like ‘Is it not so Siphos?’, ‘with the other children’ and using the word ‘since’ mark her voice as more adult than that of a five-year-old.

What I learned here is that writing about children needs special care simply because as adults, we sometimes impose our thoughts, language and behaviour on child characters without much thought put into how children speak and behave in real life. This is what is happening with my short story “Dirty” here. I therefore agree with the reader here. To respond to the Reader’s observation, I did two things to the story: elevating Robyn’s age from five to a six-year-old girl and reframed Robyn’s dialogue to be appropriate for her as follows: “Wimpy’s? I do not feel like Wimpy’s today? What about Spur. I want to play with toys there. I enjoyed them the last time we were there. Maybe Siphos, you can join me if you want.” This I believe should solve the problem in this story picked by the Reader.

What the reader says next however, gave me the confidence that I am on the right track.

“I really enjoyed reading these stories. They are new and different and bring fresh perspectives of young South Africans not often seen in print. I also think you handled their range of classes well and your handling of race was subtle but also pointed where it needed to be. Your characters are the real strength of your stories. Even in some of the shorter ones, I got a good sense of their personalities.

Namhla, in particular was a stand out.”

However, as I celebrated this generous feedback from the reader, I was again taken back to the fact that macro editing is an essential exercise that one must not take for granted in writing as one seeming harmless fact, such as naming a character can affect a story and even diminish its value.

“One character though, that I didn’t quite believe in was Karen from the first story, her eagerness just seemed a bit too much and I didn’t really understand her rage about the ex-boyfriend, maybe he needs to do something worse! Also, I think her name calls to mind the Karen trope of a middle-aged white lady who always wants to speak to the manager. I don’t think that is what you were going for, so I’d suggest a change in name to avoid that.”

I responded to this feedback by doing two things: Changing the name of Karen to Maya. This name I felt suits a hippy young university student. I also made the character, the Pony tail man with a moustache that represents that of Hitler to do something outrageous, and that is that in addition to try to gift Maya with an expensive Maggie Loubser's painting for her birthday, he started telling everyone on campus that she loved expensive art and she was his slay queen, a word reserved for those women who live off men to fund their expensive lifestyles, further alienating her and straining their relationship, especially when some girls on campus started calling her behind her back Miss Maggie Loubser and Slay Queen. This I believe was enough to make her angry enough with her boyfriend leading her to dumping him.

The reader generally liked the build-up in a number of the stories, but pointed out a few instances where the stories could be improved, for example the below observation:

"The build-up of suspense in your stories is particularly successful, for example in the first story 'Take me to Vilakazi Street', I was with Thabo as he flipped back and forth between thinking he was in trouble or not and I felt a similar build-up of suspense in 'The handbag' though it was a bit frustrating to not learn what actually was inside Vicky's handbag! 'The white man's dog' too built the suspense successfully, though I was a little bit confused by the comments about the lawyers. I guess that it was just meant to be a distraction, but why lawyers? That was a little bit odd, but nonetheless this didn't detract from the building intensity.

The two stories I most enjoyed were 'The Melville Singer' and 'Glances and Love in the Time of Apartheid' for different reasons.

In 'The Melville Singer' I think what was a real strength was the shift in perspective. At first, we see Thandi through her father's and mother's eyes and this sets up all kinds of expectations about her. But then, when you shift the perspective to Thandi, those expectations are undermined to reveal something unexpected. This is mirrored too, in the way you set up Shorckie through Thandi's eyes but then when Thandi sees Shorckie singing, she transforms into something completely different. These shifts in perspective bring nuance and complexity to the story and, it might be worth experimenting with this in some of the others. One that comes to mind, is the other story I most enjoyed, 'Glances and Love in the Time of Apartheid'. It could be an idea to shift the perspective there to the man's 'Treasure'. Does she have the same apprehensions? Does she feel people's gazes in the same way? Does it bother her or does she revel in the attention perhaps? I wondered about her. "

I responded to the reader's report on the short story: 'Glances and Love in the Time of Apartheid' by reframing the story that sees Treasure in a tongue-in cheek sort of way, enjoying the attention she and her boyfriend were getting, especially when people showed annoyance when they realised that they are a couple. Here the reader is right because as originally written, the story does not show Treasure's reaction. Surely a character in such a situation should react to what is happening with other people around them and because of them.

When it came to the reader report's remark on the ambiguity of the mentioning of lawyers by the main character, in the short story 'White Man's Dog', I added two sentences that I argue remove the ambiguity of the character's reference to lawyers: "He barked pointing indifferently in a direction he seemed to have chosen in a random sort of way. I immediately got what trick he was up to." This is to give a hint about what the robber was up to with regards to distracting his victim. I also added a sentence that gives a hint as to why lawyers are thrown in the conversation, in hope that that clears the ambiguity.

As writers, we like it when readers embrace our writing, particularly when they think that we have been successful in our mission of telling stories, and therefore I felt uplifted when I read the following from the Reader:

"As a whole, I found the arrangement and order of the stories to be successful. There was a fine pace to it and a good balance between longer and shorter, heavier and lighter stories. The collection seemed to be building up to a climax with the story 'The Melville Singer' where issues of race and class are most vividly realised. The final story, which follows it, 'Number 46' at first seemed a bit strange, as it was the first time that I noticed that the perspective was from a non-living thing. However, I thought having the voice of the door as a kind of allegory was a creative and interesting way to conclude the collection. The door's voice too had the right measure of firmness and finality to it. It could be an idea to experiment with another part of the house speaking in this way, and have that somewhere in the beginning section, so that the door speaking doesn't come as such a surprise at the end.

Well done on a fine collection of stories that were a pleasure to read. Good luck with the final revision stages and I hope to see these stories in print one day."

In conclusion, what I learned from the Reader's report is that one needs to take seriously the comments the reader makes as if and when these stories are published, that is also likely to be the reaction of some readers, while some will not of course react in the same way. Because of this it is important to

revisit the stories where the reader suggests that they could be improved. It is important to improve those stories where you feel as the writer the reader is right, such as I have done here, but also be in a position to not make changes where you feel that the reader may have misunderstood the point of certain stories for a number of reasons. At the end, it is one's judgment call as the author of the stories as to where you need to make changes and where you need not to where you believe doing so will for example diminish the value of the story.

In this case I did not make changes to the short story 'No 46', where the Reader said the following: "I thought having the voice of the door as a kind of allegory was a creative and interesting way to conclude the collection," but (my emphasis), "It could be an idea to experiment with another part of the house speaking in this way, and have that somewhere in the beginning section, so that the door speaking doesn't come as such a surprise." I left the beginning of "No 46" as is because it creates a suspense perhaps leaving the reader possibly wondering what is going on and they hopefully continue reading to try and figure out, and therefore like the Reader points out "at first seemed a bit strange, as it was the first time that I noticed that the perspective was from a non-living thing." The point is exactly that-creating curiosity in the mind of the reader.