A Bone Fragment

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By

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This novella presents three characters, each occupying a different sphere of reality. One is a ‘living dead’ who is forced to return to the land of the living for his continued existence. The other is a young woman who, having lost the will to live, must find a purpose if she is to continue living. The third is a young man who dwells more in the inner than the external world. Their lives intersect through the scripture known as ‘a fragment of a bone.’

Chapter 1

The first time I saw Ikwezi Lokusa Location I thought of a ship approaching Cape Town. The ship would be from the North going East. On the ship would be a young lady wearing a white hat and, in a small bottle dangling from a string around her neck, sand from the Sahara Dessert. But even should she be on deck when it passes the Location, I knew she would not see it.

I had no discernible reason for thinking of ships. Neither the sea, nor the ships sailing past on it could be seen from the township.

Table Mountain, though, was visible from everywhere in the township. It drew all eyes to it, rising as it did in the distance on one side of the township, forming a natural barrier beyond which neither eye nor imagination could go. The sea, and any ship on it, was on the other side of the mountain.

The Location had, in the old native control style, only one entry and exit point. On one end of the road was the R-something to Cape Town, one of those geographical landmarks that could feature as a trick question on a game show hosted by a retired celebrity. Long was the road to and fro Ikhwezi, and dusty. Even chanced upon, there was nothing inviting about it, and with no end to the road in sight, few followed it.

At the other end of the R-something, at the bottom of a shallow basin, were the dwellings that primarily constituted the Location. Technically, the dusty road continued straight through and up a hill on the opposite end of the entry point. On the hill, built entirely of stone and fortress like in appearance, was the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary, it was reverently whispered, is touched by Table Mountain and holy. The stone building, it was true, was shrouded in shadow most of the day. It was also true that, at some points during the day, the mountain and the position of the sun had something to do with this. Perhaps,

then, that is all the whispers meant to convey, for the Mountain was *just* too far to cast a shadow that long.

But from the road, descending into the basin, one got the distinct feeling of passing *from, into*. Perhaps it was no more than concretely experiencing a shift in height above sea level, or maybe it was just that once inside the basin one could not see much further past the exit point. A backward glance immediately after entering the basin is ill advised, the illusion that the basin rim cut off the only link to the outside world was strongest then. But a backward glance just then could convince one that they have entered a different moment in time and space. The Sanctuary, someone would later suggest to me, symbolized that moment, and in it Table Mountain and The Sanctuary occupied the same space. I dismissed this improbable and stretched beyond meaning interpretation of the whispers. But, to be fair to the promulgator, they were never really committed to the position.

In any case the rim of the basin marked the end of one dusty road, and the beginning of another.

At the bottom, the dwellings quickly reveal a resilient character. Some, built of corrugated iron, and a fewer still with bricks, stood on firm foundations and own merit. But the greater number of dwellings, some built with mud and twigs, and others with mud and animals skins, stood by the whim of spirits defiant or benevolent. Through the cracks and patches that marked the walls seeped the feeble wails of babies, and the tired consolations of mothers or older siblings. Besides these dwellings, sometimes under a drunkenly leaning wall, dogs sought relief from the elements. The ticks on the dogs were the only things well fed about them: gorged on blood, they glistened. It was not hard to imagine that the hides of these curs were destined for those walls. Even cured the hides bore the marks of a dog’s life.

The males, fathers to the wailing babies, drank beer and mostly jetted out dark slimy saliva from the gaps between their front teeth. Ordinary spitting was no good. The slime clung to the mouth, and hung from the lips in gossamer thread. The males found having to wipe their mouths as often as they needed to spit tiresome.

The first time I saw the Village I thought “where the @#&! am I?” I was jogging up a hill in the city when I suddenly and irrevocably died. The heart, I am sure. My pastor always feared it would kill me. But not even he could have foreseen how literally mine would do so, for him the hearts of all young people were full of desire and liable to lead to spiritual death. One moment I was surrounded by high-rise buildings, breathing in exhaust fumes, my pounding heart drowning out the noises that were part of the big city landscape, and the next I was standing knee deep in shrubs and bushes. A short distance away was the Village. Next to me was an old man who took pleasure in informing me that I was now dead and a guardian of the land. Am not, I told him in no uncertain terms. Truly, if I that moment should recur, I would change my response to something more in keeping with the situation. Neither the old man nor I were much impressed by the other’s statement. But since I was the object of both observations, I still feel I retained a slight advantage in the unimpressed stakes. The old man, though, continued to be unimpressed for a long time.

But, just like that, I was forced to change roommates: from the young, beautiful people full of life and dreams I used to live with, to sharing a hut with an old man whose only contact with the living is through dreams.

The old man spent a lot of time after that teaching me the ways of a guardian. It involved a lot of incomprehensible riddles and even more obscure methods.

I spent a lot of time not understanding him. It was my will at first. I was in the wrong afterlife and I was not going to easily accept it, nor was I going to give up trying to get to the correct afterlife. Gradually though, not understanding became vexing. When I started to disappear, not understanding became sinister.

My feet disappeared first. I toughed it out, sure that things would straighten themselves out. The worst had happened already, what more did I have to fear? But it got worse; more of me kept right on disappearing.

A believer, the old man advised me, otherwise extinction.

A believer. Would any old believer do? My suspicion, right from the beginning, was that not any old believer would do. I would need the right kind of believer. I begged, sulked, threatened, but the old coot would give me no more than that I needed a believer.

I was uncircumcised when I died. In that winter, I was in my first semester at a big city varsity, running out of money and excuses to go home. My last excuse, that I was busy with exams, was three days past valid. It was time to think up a new one, or go home and face the music. There was really only one song to face: a traditional song about ‘the cutter’, a mythical character quite fond of loose flesh. In some versions of the myth he cut the piece off, dried it in smoke, and enjoyed it as a delicacy.

My biggest worry though, even more than the rite of passage, was the law-speaker. I had met the law-speaker for the first time the summer before, when the elders had communicated their decision that I should be circumcised in winter. I had of course heard of the law-speaker; it was impossible to be of the Preserver clan and not have heard of the speaker. But, until the day I was hauled before the clan elders for refusing to undergo that pagan rite, I had never met him.

“Son,” Umdebedini the herald had said the first time he delivered the decision, “the time has come.”

Umdebedini delivered the elders’ decrees to every clan member. Marriage decisions and the position of a newborn in the clan were delivered after sunrise, except for the position of the first born of a generation: these were announced in the very early mornings just like the dates and place of the burial of any clan member. All sorts of ritual ceremonies, mostly to do with catering to the needs of an ancestor, were delivered in the afternoon. Pregnancies and circumcisions were early evening messages.

He found me standing at the gate, watching the younger boys playing soccer in the street. My age-mates and a few older men were standing closer to the competitors, indicating the boundaries of the makeshift playing field. The boys were on competing sides, but any one of the onlookers acted as coach to any boy of any side.

The setting sun was painting the clouds orange when I told Umdebedini, “I will not go.”

Tall, Umdebedini hunched to hide the fact. Now he drew himself up straight and said, “It is tradition, boy.”

I was ready for this line of attack; I had heard it too many times not to be.

“I am born again,” I said. I meant to make it sound like a command. It was, I was taught, the only way to speak to demons.

“Tradition is law,” he countered. Umdebedini was now the embodiment of the elders’ decrees, instead of just their mouthpiece, a man whose only other distinguishing factor was feet dangling past the end of any bed he slept in.

“I am not going,” I repeated. Any command in my voice was from the lord, but I took credit for all the shakiness in it.

At this, Umdebedini went into his habitual slouch and left. I was left with the task of having to report the conversation to my mother. It was Thursday; she was at a prayer meeting. If I left out the fact that I had received the herald at the gate, and never invited him into the house, I was confident that she was going to side with me.

It would be two weeks before the elders ordered me to appear before them. I went to my father’s brother’s three-roomed house: one room was the master bedroom, the other a kitchen-cum-bedroom for his two teenage boys, and the other was the seating room-cum-bedroom for his one daughter and her two year old baby.

The house only had one door into and out of it. It opened into the kitchen. The kitchen was empty of people. The women must have shut themselves in the bedroom. They were, I later found out, in the back yard.

I found the elders in the sitting room. The sitting room, like the house, was square shaped. The wall opposite the door held a single window, itself a square in the middle of the wall. Of the four walls, only one had a window, and the other a door. Two sides were unbroken slabs of concrete.

“Preserver,” my father’s older brother greeted me. He was seated at the wall nearest the door. No one from the maternal side of my family was present. My mother and her entire family are not clan Preserver.

“Older father,” I said, and then “Elders,” with a general nod in the direction of the assorted elders of the clan. Two sat on either side of the window. Two more sat alongside the other wall. The window was open, the curtains drawn. The room was dark, the sunshine outside banished by the angle of the window. Or so I assumed.

The room was too small for the gravity of their presence. I experienced it as a pull in the pit of my stomach.

There was space to sit next to the elders on the far side of the room. But the seven pairs of eyes fixed on me made the distance too far to travel. I stood indecisively for a moment, and then dropped to a squat just inside and to the right of the sitting room door.

"Is there nothing, son of my brother?"

"There is nothing, Older father; elders. May I hear from you?"

"We are old, boy," an assorted elder answered.

Because respect for an elder demanded that when an elder spoke a youth must answer, and because my mother had reminded me to be respectful even in my refusal, I said, "I hear you elder."

"Harvest is in three moons time. You must go to the mountain then," older father said.

I almost laughed. It was preposterous, the way he spoke. No one spoke about moons anymore. Even if they did, it is doubtful that any said 'moons' quite with so much pomp. But all I did was to wait. Ritual, if never conducted in this archaic language before, proceeded at a stately pace nevertheless. After a comfortable silence older father said,

"Son of my brother."

Permission to speak was granted.

"I am grateful," I started, "that the elders have judged me fit to become a man." It is possible that I sounded as ridiculous as older father. "But the faith does not allow me to practice this rite."

There was more silence, less comfortable.

"Boy, what is this about being born again," an assorted elder inquired gently, "did you go back into your mothers womb?"

I searched for the ridicule I knew was in the question. It was, even to my sensitive ears, hard to detect. Just as older father said, "Son of my brother", I gave up the search.

"No elder," I said, trying hard not to scoff, "I am saying that the faith has made me a new creature. I am neither male nor female."

"What nonsense is this," a different elder asked, with no subtlety at all. "No one cares if you are female, boy. You must become a man in winter."

I was about to respond in exaggeratedly respectful tones when another elder said, "S'godlo."

If older father's speaking of 'moons' was ridiculous, the use of my pagan name was even more so. My Christian name is Seventh-Seal, it is what I am called in all the churches of the saints. Everyone else, even the most conservative of clan members, called me Sandile, my middle name. S'godlo, the summoning-horn of the clans, had long fallen into disuse. I was so shocked by the elder, that I forgot all protocol and looked him straight in the eye. 'Looking an elder in the eye?' was a question usually followed by a painful cuff to the ear. But the deep-set eyes that looked back at me were only mildly enquiring.

"Yes, elder," I said. The white skin of his face was stretched tight against his skull. With a small, pointed nose and thin lips, the elder looked nothing like his fellows.

"Speak law, boy," he commanded. Blending the genealogy and the mythical exploits of the clan forebears in a recital, clan member were taught from an early age to speak law.

"This is not the time, Law-Speaker," older father said.

I took a second look at the albino, and muttered a holy word of binding. It was powerful, the weapon they had brought against me. How had I not immediately noticed him; how had he been hidden from my sight?

"You cannot speak law, boy," the law speaker said wonderingly, as if I was the confirmation of an impossibility. It was true; I could not speak law. I could never go past the earliest forefathers and I frequently assigned a fantastic deed to the wrong forebear

From outside came the high-pitched screams of young children. It was a carefree sound I very much wanted to be part of then. Inside the sitting room older father stood up from his chair.

"Law-Speaker," he said warningly.

Indistinct murmurs, perhaps of support of the sentiment, came from the assorted elders. Older father was the oldest of his generation, and head of clan.

A time was recorded in clan history, indeed an unreliable source of flights and fancy, when people came from everywhere in the tribal lands to consult the Preservers. The clan recorded in memory important deeds and events. The law-speaker, as the then head of the clan, would recall in story form a precedent to suggest a possible solution. That was before the false prophecies of Nongqawuse. After the events of the prophecies, the law-

speaker emerges diminished, confined to storing clan deeds and events, and subject to the censure of the first born of a generation, the new head of clan.

"He is not ready," the Law-Speaker said. He turned his eyes away from me, first to older father, and then a sweeping glance around the room.

I was astonished. In pronouncing my readiness, or lack thereof, the Speaker had spoken as if I were no longer in the room. My heart constricted with fear: what could this mean? Past my fear, a place I reached by contortion, I was aware that a speaker had dared continue past the censure of a clan leader.

The chair creaked beneath older father as he sat down.

"No!" The cry from a young voice came from outside, and was exhilaration and dread all at once. I had felt the same on rollercoaster rides, but right then I could not remember ever sounding that carefree.

My father's uncle, whose discontent with the world was rooted in the fact that he was not firstborn of any generation, stood up. He looked first to the law-speaker, but the speaker's eyes were focused elsewhere.

"Preservers," he addressed himself to the assembled elders, "we did not reach this decision lightly. The boy must go."

The indistinct murmurs from the elders could have meant agreement.

"Son of my brother, you are excused," older father said.

I stood up. I could see the sunlit day through the window. The contrast between the world through the window, and the dusk of the room within was sharp. Eyes averted, I edged sideways to the door. It is disrespectful for a youth to turn his back on his elders and betters.

The tree he stands in has branches, began the Law-Speaker in a falsetto sing-song, the mark of true law-speaking. True law speaking, the sole province of a generation's law speaker, resembled the earlier model by telling a story. But whether the resemblance recalled that precedent, or was indicating a deviation that made it new was no longer clear. I slid down the wall to plant my behind on the floor. Later, in recounting the story to my mother, I will leave out the fact that it was this, the true speaking and nothing else, which compelled me to stay. To my pastor I will confess the fear that so much of me was

still clan that its practices could still compel me. Would I never, I despaired, be free of my pagan heritage?

The branches, the Law-Speaker continued oblivious of my anguish*, are spindly, liable to snap at any moment. I have no awareness of this. I am focused on becoming a leopard. I can tell by the onset of cramps in my legs and arms that I am not become a leopard.*

'But how', the initiates ask each other on the night of the third moon, 'is a person become a leopard?' At the question we reflexively reach for our circumcised members. Faced with a difficulty, small or big, our hands go in search of the lost foreskin. The circumcised member is like a talisman, rubbed it might summon the fabled wisdom of men. But we are all new to the loss. So often we sit with a handful of loss instead.

At the failure of the talisman, they turn to me.

Inside me something *reached* for understanding, but could find no purchase in the speaking. I looked around to see how law speaking affected the elders. Eyes closed, they were either reflecting deeply or sleeping. The Law-Speaker's eyes were on me, but they were empty of seeing.

All around me the veld is silent. I do not hear the raucous cry of the mating bird, though this is the season for it. At the very top of the tree, itself almost a spindly branch, is a satiated snake, its flicking tongue too fast for me to convert the vibrations into sound. Mamzela's shebeen will stand here, right here were the tree I am standing on stands, in a hundred years. I hear, floating on the wings of time a voice singing Iqgira lendlela nguqongqothwane,

I sense, in the breaths the Law-Speaker takes, ill-formed meanings.

Neither he is beginning to realize, does he have the ability to become a leopard. Like the waters of the Gxura river the realization is not something he wants to immerse himself in. A painful spasm in his thigh almost makes him tumble from the tree, but he tightens his grip on the branches above him, briefly swinging from the tree like an ape. Had a high-speed camera caught that moment, future generations would have been more sympathetic to the slur 'ape man' applied to the native. But not even the snake above him really notices, and so the moment goes by undocumented.

"Preserver?"

I looked up.

Now all eyes swing to you.

I flinched in anticipation of the collected weight of eyes on me. But the elders continued in contemplation or sleep. Had I imagined the break in the speaking? Had the question been asked in this, our shared time?

It had not been inevitable, that turn to you but it could be counted on. Protocol dictated that they turn their eyes to the prince first. They had. Tradition dictated they turn to you next. They had. It should have been your father they turned to, or any of the elders of this clan. Indeed He-Who-Speaks-The-Mind-Of-The-Blind-Ancestor, your great-grand uncle, is advisor to the great chief Phato, also called whelp of the beast. He-Who-Speaks-The-Mind-Of-The-Blind-Ancestor resides at the great place of Phato with the other advisors to the chief. It is your great grand uncle who speaks law to the whelp of the beast. It is your father who speaks law to Lord-Of-People, a distant relative to the whelp of the beast. It is Lord-Of-People who is your immediate chief, and father of the prince, your age-mate and first initiate.

It is your destiny, lore-speaker, to one day speak lore to prince He-Who-Looks-Into-The-Sun.

"Age-mate," you respond formally.

Ah, I decided, the earlier question had been part of law speaking.

The prince, with the arrogance of all born to rule, ignores tradition and addresses you by your clan name.

But you, the living totem of the people, observe tradition. It is tradition to address your age mates as such when undergoing the rite of passage.

The prince, as first initiate sits at the furthest end of the makeshift shelter, built expressly for this purpose. You, currently the least favored, sit at the door. Between you and your prince sits eighteen other young men: nine on the left, nine on the right. A fire is meant to be burning in the middle, but only smoldering ash is left now. The smoke from it, escaping through the only opening of the shelter, burns your eyes.

"Speak law," your prince orders you. It is the prerogative of princes to command Preservers.

"We" you start the clan boast and, in a moment of madness, finish with "keep lore."

"We are the memory of the people," you continue the clan boast and, in a moment of greater madness, finish with, "and so have no past."

It is this line that will get me expelled from the shelter, sending me scampering up a tree that will die before two summers are up. The blight at its roots has been eating at it for years.

"He is," the Law-Speaker said, "not ready."

I did not bother to look up; who knew *when* the Speaker's words were anymore? Older father, as it turned out.

"Is it law, Speaker," he asked

"It is law, Head-Of-Clan", the Speaker said, formally.

"We might need more help understanding it, Law-Speaker,"

The murmurs that came from the assorted elders could have meant anything.

I instinctively made myself smaller. At times like these, being uncircumcised and noticed was never good.

"Son of my brother?" I turned my head towards older father. "Go."

Concern, as sudden as it was unwelcome, made me look at the old, strange white man. Unperturbed, he was passively appraising me.

Outside there was no sign of the owners of the young voices. Older father's property, like many in the township, measured a yard. Since the house stood almost in the middle of the yard, I must have walked less than that to the end of the property. Marking its boundary was a line on the ground where a fence used to be. Preoccupied as I was though, I noticed neither crossing that line nor the streets I was walking.

In the autumn before my circumcision, the insidious influence of the law speaking was far advanced in me, and I experienced it as the loss of my father. I missed the bastard like never before. I missed him even more than on the annual father-son prayer day, when the apostle his holiness Melchizedek of Nazareth (Mpumalanga), founder of the church, The

Twelve Tribes of The Saviour in South Africa, sanctified the father-son relationship. On the day, which was always held on the last Sunday before the birthday of our Lord and Savior, even unbelieving fathers were allowed to stand behind the pulpit, the holiest space per square meter in the church building. There, in the sight of God and man, every father stood in tight embrace with his sons. The apostle, after reading Mark 9: 7, always that verse, would turn his back on us: mothers, daughters, and fatherless sons, to lay his blessed hands on the fathers and their sons.

By the next autumn, I spent all my time on the third floor of the Liberal Arts Library building, reading books that had nothing to do with numbers and angles and engineering. I had, in the beginning, naively searched for books on the law speaker, then refined it to books on the myth of the law speaker, then gave up when I could not even find books on the phenomenon of law speaking. I finally settled on books about the myths and religions of the natives of Kaffraria.

But the dry, erudite prose of the myths had an alienating effect on me. I understood individual words and sentences, but nothing more. I had expected, even more naively perhaps, that the books would tell a story as the clan histories did, and that they would offer the reaching instinct within me a stable hook to snag onto. *The Natives of Kaffraria*, one passage intoned, *went about naked all day. On summer days, the men, under the guise of holding court, or inkundla, consumed copious amounts of sorghum beer. The women, meanwhile, were expected to work the land, tilling, planting and generally, so to speak, keeping the home fires burning. On cold days they abandoned all pretense at work, instead warming first the front, then the back of their dark bodies by a communal fire.*

I left the library on the afternoon of three days past a valid excuse more than a little conflicted. I had a niggling suspicion that the individual images generated by such observations hid behind them something dynamic, truths more amenable to the fanciful style employed by clan histories. Yet the definite truth of the observations applied, at least, to my father.

I remembered a tall, soft-spoken, prone-to-asking questions man. Afraid, that's how I remembered him in my most uncharitable moods. I sometimes glimpsed an Afro, a flat, wide nose and broad smile in those memories, and eyes that were always on my mother.

Sometimes his hands were on her too, her shoulders, around her hips, on her swollen belly. Sometimes the fruit of one of those swollen bellies, three years younger than me, pestered me to tell her all I know about her father. But such reconstructions were hard on me, for my sister's fantasies tended towards the romantic, of a man who would, after sweeping her off her feet, protect her from all harm. Still, these faintly incestuous reconstructions were better than my mother's later absolute refusal to talk about him to me. Perhaps she did so to shield me from more harm. But it might also have something to do with shielding herself from probing questions about her second daughter, my baby sister. I did not know what was worse: that she might be his daughter, or that she might not. I could not directly ask my mother this question, but it was always there, animating all my questions. Still, as I took the stairs down to the ground floor, past the checkout counter, and out of the door, I wished he were here with me. My mother tried, but something of the practitioner's insight was missing from her attempts.

The security guard at the gate did not bother to look at my student card, though regulations required that they check everyone's card, coming and going. The students had a method by which, for reasons nefarious and rebellious, they discouraged new security guards from zealously 'just doing my job'. The method was billed as student culture by senior students, and told to new students in orientation week by their guides, though management admonished them to disregard the 'culture' tag. Misconduct, that was the tag management preferred. The result, of course, is that very few students did not know, and was on the lookout for the 'culture' of discouraging surveillance. At peak hours some students, usually senior, would swipe out but immediately turn and swipe in. Once done a few times, other students were bound to notice, and join in the action, causing a jam at the gates. The pushing and shoving in the rapidly growing lines, the impatient "I'm late for class", the petulant, "you are wasting my parent's money", the ironic, "I'l report you to management', and the general mayhem that followed quickly taught any new recruit the value of profiling, and only targeting suspected non-students for card inspections.

Past the gate and guard, my relationship with the city usually asserted itself. The city had more of everything than I was used to: more lights, people, cars, and food. But it gave of all these things sparingly, the lights dazzled but gave no warmth or comfort, more people, and not dogs, sought food in bins, and so many of the cars had only one or two

people in them. Cars were fewer back home, but they always carried more people, often more than there was space for them.

The city cared for no one. It did not rejoice at our successes, nor was it saddened by our failures; it was nothing personal, it was just that past its own existence nothing mattered.

I must have taken the same route past the Braamfontein Civic Theatre, through the Civic Centre, past the Constitutional Hill on my left, a detour onto Pretoria Street, instead of continuing straight down.

I too practiced the art of profiling on my walks through the city. All young, African males were suspects, but not when they were with a female of any age and race. Young males in groups were a potential threat. Whenever I was faced with them, and a chance to either cross the street, or take a short left/right presented itself, I took it, unless they spoke loudly or English, or English loudly. If a group silently made their way to me, consisting of loose-limbed members that walked in a sort of sideways gait; or tried to flank me, even if only one of them peeled off to do so, I made a hundred and eighty degrees turn and started running.

But if, on that occasion of my last walk through the city, I did any of those things, I did them without conscious thought.

My father, I was thinking throughout that walk, should have been here to guide me through this transitional time. He, and not some book written in undecipherable thought patterns, should have been helping me grasp clan histories and law speaking.

Chapter 2

Howling had no place in that walk through the city. I looked around to locate its source, first in memory, and then in my surroundings. Yellow and decayed teeth exposed in a snarl, the dog's eyes were fixed at a point above my head. I appreciated the sentiment, and the last thing I wanted was to impugn its dignity by refusing it, but it had been too long since another living soul noticed me. I took a step towards it with the vague intention of petting it.

"Here boy," I said soothingly, moving slowly and, I hoped, unthreateningly. The move did not impress the dog, ears flat to its head, it retreated stiff legged, tail almost but not quite slipping between its legs. I have never been a dog person, they were too needy, but I

watched the crack into which it had disappeared a little longer. I felt nothing, but it was not the dog's fault. I was just no longer capable of feeling.

"What will become of me," I had asked the old man. We had been sitting on opposite sides of the hut. Though we were not far apart, our outstretched feet almost touched, it was dark inside and I could only see the outlines of body. The roof, that felt like it was just above my head, only served to intensify the claustrophobia.

"If you do not find a believer," he had asked, unnecessarily. Death had changed my perspective on a lot of things, but old habits died hard. I nodded in response to an elder.

"No one really knows, since no one has come back to tell. But some suggest that 'disappearance' is just a figure of speech, that you really become something else."

There was, as usual, something about his telling that aimed for concealment; he believed it helped me arrive at my own answers. But I could also sense reluctance behind this concealment.

"What will I become?" There could have been a trace of apprehension in my question, or the old man did not need it to respond with compassion.

"A tikoloshe," he said, and then added, "possibly." Packed in a word was a world of possibilities. There were, I heard in that word, worse things to become than a tikoloshe. Perhaps that is all the half starved and sickly dog tried to remind me of.

I walked on, trying for the stone building on the top of the hill. Perhaps when I reached the top of the hill I could look back and spot something I have overlooked. It was habit that drove me though, more than the charms of the building. The old man's hut, my home address since I died, was also located apart from and above the other huts. I could see the entire village when I stood at the door of the hut. A path, ending a few feet from the door, ran straight through the center of the village. I had not realized that my plight was this serious. On that afternoon, or what passed as afternoon in the village, I had been going on as usual.

"Boy!"

"Summoning-Horn," I said. Even I could admit that Seventh-Seal was out of place here.

The old man made a show of sitting on his goatskin.

"Will you stop it," I said irritably. The man's old act had long since lost its charm.

He continued to creak and groan his way into a sitting position, ostentatiously ignoring me. There was about the act an air of embarrassment, as if I had farted at the dinner table.

"I have told you how this works," he said as soon as he judged himself comfortable. "There was a time when, if a person dies, they end up here. They remain here as long as their loved ones remember them in ritual ceremonies. When those memories fail, they move on. Ritual failure, that's what is happening to you."

"What do I do?" I had asked this question before. My feet had disappeared; my legs were following. I had asked because I was looking for a way to reverse my disappearance. Until it started to disappear, I was mostly unconscious of my body. I did not have to think about walking or running, or kicking a stone out of my way. Now I was worse than a toddler or a drunk, my invisible limbs failing to obey me with consistency. To avoid falling because I could not adequately judge dimensions, I spent a lot of time sitting in the small and dark cramped hut.

"You need a believer."

The prompt answer took me by surprise, and all I could come up with in response was a stupid, "A believer?"

By this time the old man's performance had already progressed, and he was now pretending sleep. The frequent catnaps had managed to keep at bay my skepticism about the legitimacy of his act the longest. Even now, when I knew better, I had to admit that pretending to go to sleep in the middle of a sentence lent the old man act authenticity.

I went to stand at the door of the hut. There was, of course, no door, but neither the old man nor I were worried about privacy. Only once has someone come to the hut, Njenje of the hut of tales, and that only because I needed a lesson on witches. Outside smoke was lazily drifting from many cook fires, and the sounds of a bush mingled with the sounds of a village going on with life. Time moved differently here in relation to the city and the township. I could easily believe that here time was indefinitely suspended.

It was a simple old village. When first I had come, I had seen the village lacking the order I associate with spaces occupied by a single community. I had been especially bothered by the absence of a clear boundary between inside and outside the village. I was

used to fences, and walls, and clear limits that must not be transgressed. One minute the old man and I had been outside walking in the bush, the next we were in the village. I could discern no visible pattern, and no plan to the layout of the huts: some huts were two steps from each other, while others were a serious walking distance away. They were of all sizes but only one shape, circular.

All the questions I have ever had about the village, the layout and the population, have one basic answer: memory. The Village was a recreation, a memory because its inhabitants had known no other reality as long as they had lived. And so, at death they had easily moved into an afterworld they had been preparing for their entire lives. At least that is what I could piece together from the veiled and disjointed explanations I got from the old man.

But nothing felt like memory to me. Everything felt solid and concretely material. The cramped hut at my back smelled of smoke and other things hard to identify. I had to walk around the old man and other items in it, or I stubbed a toe or bumped my head. A township boy, albeit a small one, I've never been and never had a desire to return to the 'homelands', let alone the places that could still pass for British Kaffraria. If I was ever going to go to a place of my dreams, the village had no way of ever making the list. I did not understand by what logic I existed in a memory not my own? I was, to say the least, an unbeliever in the memory explanation.

I decided to walk down towards it. I can remember being outside the hut only once, when I was attending my own funeral. I took the first shuffling steps towards the road, which was the latest way in which I tried to come to grips with using my invisible lower legs. Dust, reaching only up to my ankles, trailed me. My hands rhythmically touched my thighs as I swung them. When I lifted my left foot from the shuffle, I put it down too hard. The pain was concentrated around my knee. After a few minutes, in which I uttered remembered choice words, I bent it gingerly a few times. It withstood my ministrations without complaint. I shuffled some more, but with my eyes closed. Perhaps, I thought, if I do not see my invisible limbs, I would be less conscious of them. It worked. My body knew what to do better than my mind. I stumbled when I finally reached the path.

The path was smooth, and I had to look, but I forgot to stop walking. I caught myself before I could inflict more pain on my bruised knee: my mind was quick to take on the

burden of uselessly directing my body. I stopped, trying to decide if I wanted to go on. Close up, the illusion of a village carrying on was harder to sustain. There was no one on the street, or outside the huts, and the few goats I could see fed desultorily from stunted trees. The huts were also fewer in number and more spaced out than my view from the top led me to believe. But the silence was most unnerving, not even the indistinct sounds of people hidden from my sight reached me, let alone the laughter of children playing. Was I accessing the failure of my memories, or was I accessing the failed memories of other people?

"Not," I said to the empty stretch, and decided to cut my explorations short. I shuffled back up, opening my eyes only when I judged myself to be close to the opening. The inside of the hut, I was glad to notice, was exactly as I had left it.

The old man came out of his catnap as I sat down. His timing was, for once, convenient for me too.

"S'godlo?" he said. His guttural, pre-colonial accent mangled my name so much, it came out sounding like a gelding device. Even country bumpkins, fresh from the homelands, had less harsh accents than the old man. Indeed, it was not always clear we were speaking the same language.

"Summoning-Horn," I said under my breath. In my mouth the rough edges had been smoothed away by a tongue that spoke more than one language.

"Are there people living in the village now," I asked.

"Yes," he said, but offered no more.

"Where are they now," I tried again.

"In the village," he said, unhelpfully.

I was tempted to start an old argument between us. I thought the old man's teaching methods sucked. He thought not. He thought, in fact, that giving me information defeated the purpose of my ending up in the village.

He laboriously stood up from the goatskin, and went to the door. He stood there, studying something in the village below.

"Have you heard of the Order Of Nxele?"

I hadn't, and I said so.

"Have you heard of prophets in the Order Of Nxele?"

I said nothing.

"This entire place," he said in a vague gesture that encompassed more than the village, "was always meant to be transitional."

From where I sat, the tight kinks of his hair looked like insects come to rest on his head.

"And so, you understand," he continued, "the concerns of the dead were ethereal. Few wanted, or even needed, to be bogged down by the ever multiplying concerns of the living."

"There were so many more dead then," he said, an afterthought I doubted was addressed to me.

He turned, and gave me a look. He saw me, I was sure, but I was equally sure that when he looked out again, he was looking out on a village I would not see.

"Then came the girl. At first she was no more than a fleeting curiosity, a whirlwind that swept through the village, forgotten as soon as expended. After a while she lost even that, the dogs no longer barking at her. Still she came. But something very unpleasant was starting to happen to the villagers: many were disappearing here, only to appear amongst the living and not in their dreams. The more she came by the more people solidified. Soon entire clans were dangerously close to pre-death existence."

"Not many here," he said in what sounded very much like an explanation "had looked forward to death while alive. But once dead, none wanted to go back and live again."

He paused and then added, *sotto voce*, "It's a clumsy phase, life."

"Silly girl," he continued his narration though, judging by the complexity of his tone, 'silly' was not quite the word. "She was telling falsehoods in the manner of Nxele, but about *us*." There was nothing complex about his indignity.

"Because of it, instead of being gradually let go of in ritual, we were being called upon, in supplications and prayer, to actively intervene. As intimately intertwined with the faith rituals of living clan members living death existence was, the dead were now forced to concretely do something about the plight of the living."

The old man took two steps that, from my vantage point, hid him from sight. I stood up and followed as far as the opening. It must have been noon when he started his narration. It was now late afternoon, the sun well into its descent. The old man and I were in the

shadow of sunset. The village, though, was in a pocket of sunlight not justified by the position of the sun. The heavenly bodies frequently acted weirdly in this place.

"In doing so, they came face to face with a threat to themselves. The pale, cross-hanged god had swept through the land, and he had brought with him his father, the warrior god valiant in battle."

I did not think his drooping shoulders were an act. Here was a man saddened by his tale. Only then did the last part of his story register. Here, too, was a man maligning my gods.

"It is, I have come to believe, the combination of the continued threat posed by the cross hanged god and his father, and the inability to do anything for the people in the hour of their greatest need that we have only…" he completed his meaning with a remarkably steady pointing at the village finger.

The path to the stone building from the township was gentler than the one to the hut from the village. This observation did not ease or increase my exertion one bit. I was walking, or, to be more accurate, I simulated walking better now. It was hard to tell, but I preferred continued existence as the object of a superseded faith to the prospect of passing into non-existence. I would have to find a radius described by that faith or, less long winded, a believer. That was one outcome of the tale of the Order of Nxele.

The other was an old bone or as the old man informed me, rather grandly, 'a fragment of a bone.' Now, as when the old thing was handed to me, I did not see what part it could possibly play in my quest, even if it was 'scripture'. I was trained in reading and writing letters; I was not trained in the arcane arts of reading bones and understanding the portents they foretold. No old bone was going to yield its secrets to me, if it had any to begin with. The thing now hung around my neck on a string. I sometimes held it in my hand, inspecting it for any clue, but mostly I forgot that I had it. I almost reached for it as I turned, halfway up to the stone building, and surveyed the road I had travelled.

Halfway down the road to the village I had turned pretty much the same way to look back at the hut. There was, I understood, no guarantee that I would come back to resume my life here. Indeed, whether I found my way back to the village as an ancestor, or resumed

existence as a tikoloshe or worse, the old life as the reluctant student of the old man was over.

As I stopped to look back, I understood something else too: a return as an ancestor would radically change things for the old man too. Neither one of us spoke about it: I was not ready to face that possibility. The old man might have held his tongue for the same reason.

"It looks so small," I said.

"It does," the old man agreed.

I could think of nothing more to say, and so resumed walking. We were going back to the same place I arrived at. It was, perhaps, a portal of some sort but when I had suggestively asked if it were, the old man had responded with a question of his own,

"What", and a look that suggested either there was no answer, or none were forthcoming. I interpreted it as not forthcoming.

As we angled to skirt the village entirely, I pondered some of the answers that did come. I had to find my own way back to the village, the power, if not the need, that had brought me here the first time was gone. I refrained from asking if he had been the source of that power, or if there were some other power.

I was not going to learn by watching him how to get myself either to the land of the living, or back to the village. I asked if that was because he did not know how he did it? I used the word 'instinctively', and not without condescension.

"No," he said. It was more than I had expected.

When we came to the spot I saw nothing that distinguished those bushes from any of the other clumps. And when I was suddenly in the land of the living, I realized that there were going to be no hugs and kisses. Just like that, as if my being had none of the importance his many veiled comments had suggested without confirming, the old man let me go to a fate I might not return from. That, I believe, was the first time I consciously sought and found an emotion memory: I remembered hurt.

I was standing on the other side of the Jokoti River. Many a boy had learnt to swim by almost drowning in that river. The older boys would hold a younger one by the arms and dip him, like a Joko Tea bag, in the water before letting him go to sink or swim. The twelve-year old version of myself had pedaled furiously, all the while sure that he was

not going to make it as he took in water through the mouth, and nose, and ears. I got a thorough beating from my mother for my daring exploits.

In the distance I could see the bridge that spanned the Jokoti. It was 5.5 meters tall, and 10 meters long, and had no name I knew. Coming down on the Eastern side of the bridge, one first encountered the industrial factories and corporate offices before reaching the exciting parts of town, the shops and malls.

On the Western side was Zwelitsha Township, where I was born and bred. It was possible that I could whisk myself to my destination in an instant. But if it were, I did not know how to achieve such a feat. And so, though the river was empty of water except for puddles here and there, I preferred crossing the bridge into the township.

But first I had to jump Ntshebende's fence. The fence, and the boundary it marked, was the subject of a long-standing dispute between generations of traditionalists and the owners of The Meadows or, as it was known to the townshippers, Ntshebende's farm. The Ntshebendes, the traditionalists reckoned, could use the ancestral lands as long as they would turn them over to the traditionalists at any and all times they were told to. The traditionalists, as far as the owners were concerned, were to be shot as trespassers at any and all times they were found on the lands without proper authorization.

I walked along the razor wire fence until I found a hole that looked like a dog had dug it. The deterring razor was all on top. I went down on all fours before crawling through the hole on my stomach. I did not know enough about plants to compare the flora of the different places, but there was definitely more movement in the underbrush here.

I resisted the urge to cross the tarred road to face oncoming traffic. I might not have been able to help myself had many cars come up from behind me. But, though more cars than I remembered on those roads drove past me, they were far less than the cars on the sleepiest Jo'burg streets. Traffic lights had replaced the four way stop signs and a billboard, asking parents who was talking to their children about sex, greeted everyone at the entrance to Zwelitsha. I spared myself the thought of talking to my mother about sex.

I was not the only one that ignored the red robot that bid me stop; a minibus overloaded with kindergarten kids did so too. The kids, unaware of the poor decisions taken by the adults in their lives, were happily playing at the back. Perhaps, I thought, these parents will talk to their children about sex.

Across the road, pointing in the direction the minibus came from, was a South African Police Service signpost. Behind it was Old Jon's Liquor shop. Its open sign, above the wide double doors, was glitteringly inviting patrons in. At night, even when the shop was closed, the lights continued to pinkly read 'open'. Only once was that sign mistaken for an actual after hour invitation. The story of that night was told in extremely few words, pieced together from different and not very impartial sources. It went, essentially, like this: young bucks, drunk, impress girls, pranks of the young. Death and a funeral.

There was, I was sure, more to the story, but it happened so long ago that, by the time we, young bucks ourselves by then, heard it, all we cared for was the caution it contained. It was testimony to the, something at any rate, of the community, or possibly the story, that no young bucks wanted to be, even successful, subjects of the story. I nodded to Old Jon's Liqour, a monument to, eh, something at any rate.

Had I been going to older father's house, and the greatest chance of finding the greatest number of clan members in one place, I would have taken a left at the robots into Inzolo Avenue. Some joker, though, had scraped away the n, and so it seemed as if I would have taken a left into I zolo Avenue. I would have walked past the refurbished post office on the left and, a little further up, to the right, the undertakers. Under the words, Lala Ngoxolo, was a charcoal drawing of a smiling corpse and a Grim Reaper standing besides the coffin. The Reaper was holding a bible in his skeleton hands and smiling too. Coffins, caskets, and tombstones were outside on display.

If I continued straight and past the short right, I would have come to the only football field to the left, and a row of matchbox houses on the right. Each matchbox had a door at each end opening into three rooms, for two separate homes. The football field was mostly used for soccer practice and games, though the poles were rugby poles. On match days, nets were draped from hooks on the horizontal line of the H to cover the lower part. Sometimes, on windy days, or because the ball rattled the poles hard, or just because the ball went past the goalkeeper, the game had to be stopped and the nets hung afresh. Never have I seen the upper part of the poles in use, except when the soccer ball went through it, and no point was awarded for that. But, having reached the football field, I would have had to retrace my steps and take the short left into Zungu Street if I had wanted to get to

older father's house. But I did not. I was, against my better judgment, going to my mother's house.

"She follows the pale, cross-hanged god," I had protested to the old man. He had said nothing. It was very convincing, that nothing, and so, instead of a left, I continued straight into Nzulu Street. No one had meddled with any of those letters.

Newcomers to Zwelitsha took some time to realize that the police station was not on Nzulu Street, but that both Zwelitsha High and Zanemipilo Clinic were. That was because, while every other street in the township ran straight from one end to the other, Nzulu did not. It curved to the right about 50 meters from the robots so that, from one corner, the other corner could not be seen. Past the curve, to the police station, was Nzuzo Avenue.

I was walking past the curve when I saw a figure I recognized. I curved right to follow it.

"Mntwana," I said on reaching her. She responded by neither word nor deed to my greeting. I was prepared for this, not even my mother had sensed my presence the last time I visited.

We were just past the point where the curve straightened. The houses that lined both sides of the street had a door on one end only, for one home. It was generally accepted that the proper Zwelitsha started at the curve. Indeed, the one-door houses part of the township was called 'the curve'. The oldest part, the two-door houses part, where older father's house was situated, was called emaBaceni, the place of refugees.

"Are you alive," I asked in vernacular, while eyeing the 5litre bucket balanced on her head. It looked heavy. Vetkoek, I guessed, though it could have been fishbread or fishcakes. If any of those, and judging by the hour, she was heading to Zwelitsha High. From the curve, one passed Zanemipilo first. The high school was diagonally opposite the clinic.

A dispute about who sold where arose, and was settled, when I was in standard 8. I can remember very little about the dispute. I vaguely remember that the dispute and solution had something to do with early birds and fat worms: those who must sell at the clinic were deemed the early birds, and the learners, because their lunch break was at noon, were deemed fat worms. I did not understand then and now how that solved what, but the

Learner Representative Council, which was mostly made up of history and geography learners, assured us it made perfect sense. It must have to the vendors too, for the dispute ceased and did not arise again.

"Help," I offered when we reached the locked school gates. Zanovuyo, Zano to her friends, bent her knees slightly and heaved the bucket off her head as she straightened. The lid fell of and a few vetkoeke looked like they would follow. But she steadied the bucket with a tight embrace, and the contents stayed in. Only the lid was lost but it was quickly returned to her. I took that as a polite no.

"Tyhini Zukiswa," exclaimed the lady who put the lid back on the bucket, "kuthen' ungathethi? Uph' umamakho?"

Only then did I, moving to stand in front and to the side, take a good look at the girl.

The bone was in my hand; I could feel it pressed hard against my thumb and crooked forefinger. Would a bruise have been visible? I almost went after the triviality, adding size and color to flesh it out. But it was not worth the effort, since I doubted that anything could divert me for long from the moment I realized how long ago I must have 'passed on'. There, right in front of me, was a clue, and it was no less than 18 years old, though it could have been older.

It was possible, of course, that the girl, Zukiswa, was not Zano's daughter. She might have been a much younger sister, or a cousin, or even niece. But Zano, who had been out of my league, had visited my dreams often enough that I could claim intimate knowledge of her: high cheekbones, a yellow bone that turned red with intense emotion, thin eyebrows above soft brown eyes; the short, muscular body we, always in admiration, called 'fit', the tight and protruding behind. This, a younger version, was close, but not the original. I did not, of course, allow myself an even closer look to see which of the versions was the better, it would have been obscene.

I looked around at all the faces that lined the school fence, and most resembled people I once knew. Three people to the right sat a woman who looked like Nozuko Duze. Three school grades behind me, she was living with her boyfriend, in his shack at his parent's backyard, by the time she reached high school. His mother used to kick her out at least

once a week, and he kicked her out almost as regularly. She was lucky she managed to get that far beyond the gates of the high school. Looking at her now, I did not think that she had escaped the shacks though. Next to Nozuko, leaning over to say something to her, was someone who could have been Nombasa Mjoli. She used to be famous for one of two exclusively girl activities, netball or home economics, I don't think I ever knew which. But not even the prospect of seeing girls was enough to attract a male audience to those activities, let alone male participants. Down the line I went, placing narratives to faces, coming so close to some that our foreheads touched. Some, a very few, were total strangers, which was new. I grew up in a Zwelitsha where everyone knew everyone else. But, whether stranger or lapsed acquaintance, they all looked right through me.

When the alarm went off, signaling the lunch break, I went to stand next to Zukiswa.

"You could have told me sooner that you were not your mother, young lady" I said reproachfully. "What if you had heard all that I had dreamt of doing to, well, your mother? Such permissiveness cannot be tolerated. I cannot stress that enough," I said, wagging a finger at her. She just sat there, not at all fooled by my poor attempt at levity. Like everyone else, she was not shouting out good deals and the superiority of her product, she was silently waiting for the teenagers to come to her out of their own will.

There was, to be sure, a lot of noise and activity, but most of it happened between the learners beyond the fence. The vendors spoke to the learners only to make sure they got an order right. I would have remembered our lunch break differently had I not been witnessing this one. In particular, I would have remembered acknowledging the food sellers as elders, and not looked at them as I would have at a vending machine. But, watching it happening, I could not deny that it was pretty much how we, as teenaged learners, had done it.

"Is anyone of these related to me," I asked, peering at some of the faces pressed hard against the fence.

"Oh, get your mind out of the gutter," I said in response to her silence. "Of course I do not mean my own. I know I have left behind no issue."

If I did not have a half brother stashed away somewhere else, my father's line had come to an end with me. To die without a son was a curse and, if the teachings of The Twelve Tribes of The Saviour in South Africa were to be believed, I had brought it on my father.

I have dropped the ball and brought to a screeching halt a strand of self-extension that stretches back to the beginning of life. It was a sobering reminder, and for the rest of the break I too, stood silently next to the girl.

"Greet your mother for me, will you," I said to her at the end of the break, by way of farewell. She closed the lid on the empty bucket and, bucket swinging from one hand, walked away like I was not there.

As I have been doing since the girl, Zukiswa, left me standing at the gate, I tried seeing things as they really are. I was doing so now, looking at Ikhwezi, but there was no inexplicable blurriness to it, nothing looked like I was missing something, everything looked solid enough. I briefly considered bringing the bone into it, but not knowing how, and feeling a little silly for considering it, I put it back around my neck.

Instead I kicked a stone; it rolled away into the bushes. I felt the impact travelling no further than my foot. Some of it must have travelled all the way to my brain though, otherwise how could I have known it had happened. No, I decided, my senses are as reliable as ever, no misleading information about Ikhwezi Lokusa Location from that source.

It was Zano, or, to be precise, *not* Zano. Surely, I told myself for the trillionth time, I would have eventually noticed that the girl was not Zano. Besides, considering that I was unaware of the time lapse, anyone would have made the same mistake. Yet I had gone no further than those school gates. Home, and the few people left who possibly still missed me, was somewhere behind the school. All I needed to do was walk past the school, a few streets down, a right into Zuza Avenue, past a few houses, a sharp right into an old iron gate, home.

Instead, I am here, watching the shadows chasing the light out of the basin. There was light near the rim still but, as I blinked, it was gone. And so, I finally admitted, were the chances that I was going home. I had not been, as I had been telling myself on the N1 past De Doorns and Sandhills, out on a straight-thinking walk. Neither could I turn back anytime I wished, as I told myself the closer I got to the Huguenot tunnel. For a long time, months, I have been walking away from whatever new shape my family's life had taken. I was not going to look at their lives without me.

It was now so dark in Ikhwezi Lokusa Location that I could see no further than my nose. I was going to have a devil of a time finding the entrance into the stone building, but I could not get myself to worry about it.

Not for the first time on my way to what I now decided was the stone building, I thought about the old man. It has always been clear that, if I was an answer to any of his prayers, I was the wrong answer. I knew nothing, was interested in nothing I should have been, asked all the wrong questions. Still, he had hope in me, and even he could not disguise that fact. I was going to bring back the old days. That, to him, meant the days when ancestors walked the land, and the land knew them. I had walked the land all right. Walked it so long, and so far, I ended up in this dark place. If the dog was any indication, this land cared not one bit to know me.

Maybe, I thought as I walked up the hill, there was a believer out there. As the land plateaued around the immediate vicinity of the church I calculated the probability that such a person would be living in Ikhwezi Lokusa Location. The roughly hewn stone was cold to the touch, and seemed to confirm my conclusion that it was well and truly over for me, and that the land has to go on as it always has: without me.

Chapter 3

In Bloemfontein The Man boarded the wrong bus.

From Jo'burg, he had been on the right bus. The right bus had been slow, as if the destination, Cape Town, was enough to induce a kind of lassitude on anything. Or, sensing his mission, the gods of travel and busses had thought to delay him. The first citizen of the metropolitan, The Mayor to her fervently believing followers, the Bronze Lady to her detractors, was spearheading a campaign that called upon all citizens born in the city over 20 (but younger than 35) to take a grain of sand to Table Mountain. An act, she said, that would symbolize their belonging to the city, and their pledge to turn it into a beacon higher than the one that attracted the first settlers.

The campaign slogan, 'one settler, one grain of sand', was vigorously opposed by the Minority Political Party. The campaign logo, a Table Mountain with a top layer of reflective sand, bore the brunt of their attack.

"But what does the slogan mean," the Mayor had asked through her spokesperson, a man granted the freedom of participating though he was born in Thohoyandou. The question was, presumably, rhetorical, for he responded without waiting for an answer,

"We are all," one televised image of him responds on her behalf, "adaptive sons to the Mother City." Most people have him say 'adoptive'. His native accent, something of a drawback to his political ambitions, was the cause of this confusion. But the word, his handlers believed, was easy enough that, should he be called out on it, he could say it with no trouble.

The spokesperson, though, blamed the confusion on the jacket worn by that particular image. There were many other televised images of him that, he felt, were enunciating the word clearly enough that no confusion ensued. A three-piece suit jacket, that image had

worn it with jeans and a turtleneck shirt. The combination of formal and casual gear, he believed, made him appear less refined and so less articulate.

Secretly, the tweeter rumor mill had it, the very *person* of the spokesperson symbolized the Head of an Elephant, a faded mythical symbol signifying unrecognizable glories. No wonder, opined #Zimpopo, his televised image resembled a performing monkey.

But that conspiracy theory was not what the Minority Political Party latched onto. The meaning of one settler, the spokesperson of the Party explained, is inextricably linked to the meaning of one bullet. If, he reportedly continued, you understand the meaning of one bullet, you understood the meaning of a settler.

It was the The Daily that carried the report of the explanation. No other paper did. In fact, it is fair to say that the explanation, or the report of it, was met with deafening silence from public and armchair intellectuals alike. The Minority Political Party offered no more explanations after that. They also, by all appearances, dropped their opposition to the campaign.

The Man, although almost born in Cape Town, was born on the banks of the Gxura, a river full of portents and inedible fish. It is at the Gxura, the story went, that his prophet-father met, and convinced his then teenage mother that, should she subject herself to a painful experience, she would carry and bear joyous fruit. The story becomes very hazy after that. The long of it is that he, the man, turned out to be the joyous fruit though, his mother assures him, he, like all babies, came out crying. The short of it is that his father disappeared immediately after the painful experience. To Cape Town, all the most reliable reports agree. His mother, perhaps looking for more painful experiences, perhaps looking only to express her faith in the prophet-father's predictions, followed him to Cape Town. She would come back to disgruntled abuse from the community, and to give birth next to the Gxura.

The prophecy was quite specific, and insistent, on where the baby was to be born and she, though feeling a little abandoned at that stage, decided not to tempt fate.

With only the caprice of prophecy separating him from any Capetonian born and bred, The Man thought that the criteria for the sand carriers could have done with a little more flexibility. And so, as an objection to simplicity, he was going to Cape Town to catch and

eat a single fish from the area around Table Mountain. An act, he thought, that would symbolize nothing, even should millions enact it. As it was it would be enacted by no one but himself. But he was determined, so he booked, paid for, and took a bus to Cape Town.

But he did take the right taxi from Yeoville to Park Station, Jo'burg. Officially, some girl had said in lieu of rejecting his offer of love, is Bellevue East. That he spoke of himself as residing in Yeoville, he well understood, was what did him in.

He left his cottage on St. George's Street quite early. It was not his style, leaving early; but he had needed to escape the cottage. On the morning of his departure a weight on him made it almost impossible to get out of bed. Unable to push the weight off him, he pissed himself. But the rapidly cooling wet patch gave him the impetus he needed, and he managed to roll out of bed. After which he still went to the toilet to piss. Only a trickle came out, but it relieved him. He took heart from it, showered, ate a little, and left.

Louis Botha Avenue was closer, and he could have caught a taxi from Alexandra to town there. But the Alexandrians also used the taxis on Louis Botha. Alexandra was, in his opinion, too close to Sandton: it was Sandton's shadow. Proximity to the Alexandrians made him uneasy, he could always feel the shadow on them. And so he caught a taxi behind the Shoprite on Hunter Street. That one went through the heart of Hillbrow before briefly making contact with the outskirts of downtown Jo'burg. The brief contact seamlessly turned into downtown Jo'burg. He could alight next to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, close to Park Station.

The first two rows of the taxi were empty, the last two occupied. There was, in theory, space for two more people next to the ladies on the back seat. But though the ladies sat close to each other, their straining-against-low-cut-tops bosoms and the width of their bums made the back seat attractive for reasons he felt uncomfortable with. A brother, studiously unaware of both the ladies behind him and The Man as he came in, sat in the seat before the backseat. The Man, deciding that he knew a pimp when he saw one, decided to go nowhere near the ladies. He took a seat just behind the taxi driver.

The taxi driver, instead of following the official route, a left into Fortesque past Rocky Street, took an immediate right into Bedford, down all the way to Louis Botha. They

stopped for a man with a lot of bags. Since the seat behind the driver was reserved for women with small kids, and people with many bags, and since he had neither, The Man moved to the second row. He considered telling the driver that he was going far, and that his bag and rucksack should therefore be considered more numerous and weighty. But he was not sure that the driver and the passengers were in a position to appreciate the truth of that. It was a tricky thing knowing which truths people would accept. Besides a different problem presented itself more forcefully. It was clear that men with small kids must also occasionally use taxis. But it was not so clear whether they were also entitled to the seat. Finding an answer to the problem should be easy, but he could not imagine how he would go about doing so.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder and said, “two”.

“Two,” he said, tapping Bag-guy on the shoulder and giving him the money to pass on to the driver.

Bag-guy did not immediately take the money. Instead he looked at the money, and then beyond the man’s shoulder to the back seats.

“Omunye?” Bag-guy asked.

Without thinking, as if he was doing no more than blink, the man extended the zone of proximity over Bag-guy. As fast he pulled back the zone, keeping it tight to himself. Trouble was never far away whenever he was in the zone. He kept his hand extended, with the money within easy reach of Bag-guy.

The ladies, though, responded with sharply exhaled sounds of derision to the question. “Unguno taxi, buti,” one asked loudly, “Okany’ uqesh’we njenge-conductor?”

“Is this your money, sisi?” Bag-guy retorted in English.

“My friend,” the other chipped in, “just give the money to the driver’.” He was not, from her tone, her friend.

The Man continued in the proffering stance, eyes firmly kept on the taxi driver.

The passenger behind him kept silent.

Bag-guy took the money and gave it to the driver.

The driver took it without comment, and just as silently gave back the change.

Someone took the money when he gave it back, he did not look back to see who.

“After robot,” the man behind him said.

The taxi stopped next to Nandos. The man and the two ladies got off. Bag-guy looked straight ahead, but stole a quick glance at the last lady to get off.

He thought about the trio long after they got off. He could not imagine that participation in their forms would inspire worship in him. He could also not imagine that, should union with them bring him to a state of worship, he would express that transcendental experience in isiXhosa.

Nor, truth be told, had he needed the zone to know that those forms did not hide the souls of priestesses.

“Please driver”, Bag-guy said at the Noord taxi rank. The taxi driver stopped. Bag-guy got off.

Please, the man thought, is not too hard a code to crack. Still, the many ways in which it could have been interpreted left him momentary dizzy.

Bag-guy was straightening after putting one heavy bag on the pavement when the man noticed pooled shadows beneath him.

As the taxi eased into the heavy traffic around the Noord taxi rank, he had to admit that he did not know enough about shadows and angles and travelling sunrays to know how they were meant to behave when mixed. Also, with so many people around the taxi, others climbing in (one girl even had a miniskirt on!), he had a devil of a time concentrating. The shadows beneath Bag-guy, then, might as well have been ordinary behaving as shadows do universally. But as Bag-guy moved, the shadows had also moved and *was that supposed to happen*?

He thought not.

But perhaps, momentarily dizzy as he had been, the world had behaved in unaccustomed ways?

“Stop Suffering”, said one of the new passenger from the Noord taxi rank. But so engrossed was he in trying to decide whether the pooled shadows had been the Sandton shadow clinging to Bag-guy, that he almost did not realize that the words also applied to him. Indeed, the taxi was already pulling into traffic when he reached, and opened the door.

“Uyehla,” the tax driver asked. He could not decide the tone of the man, but decided it must be morose. Otherwise, he thought, what does it mean to be a taxi driver? “Askies”, he apologized, and hurriedly got off.

Outside, downtown Jo’burg buffeted his senses in a susurrus sound. He started to rock to it, backwards and forwards in uneven motions as it pushed, and he pushed back. It was overwhelming, though, and he could feel it enveloping him; individual objects were starting to lose individuality, blurring into the susurration. His own blurring he experienced as an unraveling of his being. Suddenly he was not able to vouch for his own reality.

In the past, when something like this had happened, his salvation had been the zone of proximity.

But the zone only kept him in proximity with the world. What he wanted was to stay in downtown Jo’burg as it always was.

So, modeling his response on his immediate experience of the susurrant world, he resisted. At the point where the susurration reached him, meaning had already petered out. It was possible, he thought, that the sound was preservative, and that should he go deeper into it he would discover downtown Jo’burg as it always is. But each time the sound pushed him back, he could only glimpse, further back, fading meaning.

Rocking, he pushed back with fear. All he could remember of ever being downtown was fear. He had learnt to walk downtown hurriedly; eyes downcast, always poised to quickly get out of anyone’s way. Every other detail had been a blur, washing over him indistinctly. Only fear: of mugging, of death, of violence had stood out clearly. Pushing back enough of his remembered fear, he hoped, would make it possible for him to rediscover it behind the faded meaning.

The city re-emerged slowly. First, as if to show good-natured defeat, the susurration turned into the general noise of a busy city. But gradually he registered the higher but individual sounds of car horns and screeching tires. He could feel, but not yet see noon light warming his skin. He rocked a little longer, not daring to let go too soon of the fear, lest the world only partially emerge.

When someone jostled him from behind he opened his eyes to downtown Jo’burg as, he imagined, it should be experienced. Things had hardly changed from the time he started

fighting the unraveling. The taxi had not yet managed to pull out into traffic, and people were still crossing the street. He surmised that they had been crossing throughout his rocking. The entire process had lasted less than sixty seconds. It was, he thought glumly, enough to make him believe that it had all been only his imagination.

He crossed the street at the same time that the taxi eased into the left hand lane and sped off deeper downtown.

He tried to focus on individual objects and people so that the city could make an impression on him as individual and distinct parts of a whole. But he soon gave up; there simply was too much to focus on.

The city, as far as his general and indistinct impression of it went, could have been anything.

It might as well, he thought, be nothing but a figment of my imagination.

He moved out of his inner world, and into Park Station as soon as the roof was over his head. He did not notice. Had he noticed, he might also have experienced objects and people in Park Station as individuals. That would have led to being overwhelmed again. Passing close to him, almost bumping into him in his haste, was a man running to catch a train, the 07 to Springs. On platform 17-18, down the stairs away from the inner city, a man was shouting, “Springs, kwaThema!” The shouting man was one of three vendors on that platform. He was the only one who announced the destinations of the trains on that platform. It was, the other two vendors understood, his trademark.

The running man, doomed to miss the train, would get to platform 17-18 just in time to see the last carriage leave the platform. He would take two, three running steps towards it, slow to a walk, lift his hands up in the air and cry “eisani”. He would then stand there for a moment before the hope that it might not have been the 07 would make him root in his pockets for small change. He will find nothing smaller than R5. The shouting man, now just one of three vendors on the platform, will say to him, “Springs, kwaThema”, while handing him four sweets, two Chappies bubblegum, and R3,70c change. The running man will ask the shouting man,

“Elandelayo?”

The shouting man, putting the change away, will say

"15."

The running man, now the waiting man, will not even consider that he could have gotten the information from the electronic boards visible everywhere. Human contact was indispensable to his true calling: defending and preaching the one true faith.

But the running man, unaware of his determined future, ran towards it with determination to catch the 07.

The 07 had seven carriages, six of them economy class, only one plus carriage. Most all of the passengers knew them by their old names, third and first class. All the third class carriages were packed to overflowing. With hardly any space to stand, and that space dwindling all the time until the train reached the townships, people stood with bodies pressed hard against each other. Those bodies were pressed even harder together with calculable frequency as one or another roamer had to be made space for to pass. There were three kinds of roamers: the vendors, the preachers, and the gamblers. The veteran passengers spoke of the latter as thugs. When they passed bodies pressed harder against each other.

William "Ndiyeza" Jungqu was ambivalent about the passing of the thugs. When they passed he could close his eyes and grimace without raising suspicion. Or so he believed. Faith, Ndiyeza has come to accept with newly acquired conviction, is the *evidence of things hoped for*. His most fervent hope was that some day the 07 would never come to a stop. When that glorious day dawned, he would be ready to go on forever.

However, the passing of the thugs also meant hot and sticky wetness flowing down the inside of his thigh, and an anticlimactic ride the rest of the way. His hope, some days, was to go on forever holding off coming in his pants, however many thugs passed by; on other days his hope was to come in his pants forever, with or without any thug passing by.

The peak hour 07 featured in both those hopes.

The 07, it could be said, was the evidence that his hopes would come true. It carried his greatest joy and test: young women from shitty, dead end jobs, with far more weighty matters on their minds than a crotch touching their asses on a packed train; asses of many

and varied shapes and sizes. All the shapes and sizes had the potential to make him come in his pants as he rubbed against them with the regular side to side, backwards and forwards movement of the train. Sometimes he could hold off for long, but never when the thugs passed. It did not matter that he had rubbed against the asses once, twice, or thrice, when the thugs came, he came too.

One day, when the 07 never came to a stop, he hoped to have the asses and the thugs beat.

Back in Park Station, one floor above the man was a security guard on patrol. She, thighs straining against pants and love handles barely held from overflowing by a tucked in shirt, was gearing up to do her job on a group of people. They were leaning against the railing, looking straight down on the heads of other people below them. Their looks, if not kept in order, could lead to all sorts of mayhem and pain to those below.

Her job, she and her fellow security guards well knew, was to keep order. The best way to do this, they all agreed, was to keep Park Station free of people: people, and only people, were a real threat to order. It was an occupational misfortune that their bosses disagreed with them.

And so she found herself having to deal with people like those leaning on the railing now everyday, all day long.

"How," was the FAQ.

"So and so," would have been her answer in the early days. A wide-eyed rookie, in those days she had had dreams of being the exception to the rule of security guard-ship. How many times had she, as a civilian, not decried how mindless security guards were?

"Baboons!" she had chorused, accompanying the remark with the appropriate sounds.

Now, striding purposefully to do her job, she was glad such fatuous humanism was well and truly left behind.

I really should, she thought as she closed with the latest threat to order, apologize to baboons.

The man walked past hundreds of individuals. He did not see that all three of his bank's ATM's, all of them on the ground floor, were out of order. It was 'temporary', for

‘service report’, and all were ‘sorry for any inconvenience caused’. He would have had to go upstairs, to a different bank, had he wanted money. But the man wanted no money. He wanted chicken. He had already walked past the Peri-Peri Flame Grilled Chicken, and would soon have passed it such that he would have had to walk into the Chicken Lickin’. But the extra peri-peri sauce that came with the chicken weighed heavily in favor of the flame grilled chicken. He walked in and stood in line.

Thulisile Madonsela, Madea to her friends, asked the man what flavor chicken he wanted.

“What choices do I have?” he asked.

The flavor question had only *one* of three responses: mild, or hot, or very hot. Choice, in Madea’s opinion, nowhere came into it.

“Mild, hot, or very hot, buti.” Her voice was Reserved Acerbic.

It washed over the man.

“Very hot, please,” he said, politely oblivious.

She punched his order in, gave him his change, and immediately forgot everything about him.

“Next customer,” she said to no one in particular. Had she thought about it, she might have come to the conclusion that she forgot everything about everyone *before* she served them. But such thoughts were quite beyond her, radically flavored as they were.

Bloemfontein, the co-bus driver doubling as an attendant had stressed, is not a refreshment stop. But the bus had been slow in reaching Bloemfontein, he explained,

“So,” said in such a way that the sub-modifier sounded Southern Sotho, “we are behind schedule.”

He stood up from the seat to the left of, and behind the driver to stand in the aisle, facing the passengers. The first two rows immediately behind the driver (but only one row to the left) was reserved for the drivers.

“So, the next refreshment stop will be in the Western Cape.” He did not say where exactly in the Western Cape, and no one asked.

“ So please,” he said in a commanding tone, “if you want to pee, do it now.”

The bus rapidly emptied, and the man, though he felt no urgent need to, decided to take a leak. He stood up intending to take money from his rucksack. But, blocking the isle and causing a bottle-neck to form behind him, he decided to take it with him.

Theirs was not the only bus that decided on Bloemfontein as an unscheduled chama station. The result was a lot of buses going to a lot of places, and a lot of people going to the same restroom.

The man stepped out of the bus, and into the milling crowd. An amorphous fog of unfocused being assailed him. Thinking back on it later, he will think ‘ambush’. The earlier sense of unraveling assailed him forcefully. There was nothing gradual about his blurring into the amorphous fog now: he was on the bus; then he was no more.

The co-driver, showing no signs of distress at the late but important announcement, decided on this moment to shout after the passengers,

“The bus number is 011!”

Asiphe, a psychologist from the Northern suburbs, and an agony aunt for a major tabloid, would have described the sudden rise of the zone of proximity in the man as unbidden. She would have recognized it as an illusory yet pretty effective survival mechanism. But to make the diagnosis, the man would have had to visit her private practice, which was quite beyond the man. She would not, even then, have cared to elaborate on what survived.

The tabloid’s editor, a wily veteran who understood that the bottom line was the only truth that mattered, would have had a ‘consultation’ with her had she submitted her findings for publication. He would have been very careful; she *is* a black woman. No other group was as oppressed and he — old, white and male with no struggle credentials whatsoever — was second only to their own fathers as oppressor.

But he would have let her know that the people who read the tabloid cared nothing for ‘high opinion’. It confused them.

“Could you tone it down?” he would have asked with perplexed sincerity. She found it most difficult to say no to his perplexed sincerity.

But Asiphe would have found the man a trying client. The chances that he would have agreed with any of her educated conjectures, arrived at through hard study, continued practice, and keeping abreast with the latest developments in her field of expertise were slim. And so, in the revised, toned down, agony aunt version, she would have been less reluctant about describing him as “plain delusional”.

The man, who never would interact with Asiphe in any way, could not care. It was, perhaps, because the supposed article never saw the light of day; it could be that, even had it, the man would not care.

He straightened in the zone. He breathed in and out twice, thrice. He continued on his way to the bathroom.

“It is always,” he said to the night air, “better to err on the side of caution.” His voice pleased him; in the zone it always did.

Zukiswa Nomjobo was also on her way to Cape Town on bus #011. She was pressed, and had already made up her mind to piss come the next stop. She had neither known nor cared that it would be Bloemfontein, but she was glad it was. The place (but really a girl from the place) had once made her shed a lot of tears, it might as well get more reject juices from her body. When she got off the bus she could have sworn the man, who sat in front of her but to the right, had been smaller. Indeed, after he stumbled, and she had really thought that he would fall flat on his face, he somehow came up taller, straighter. Bigger. At this point she felt something warm trickle down her left leg. She crossed her legs hard at that, squatting so as not to be jostled over by the crowd.

“Nothing,” the man said conversationally to the wall in front of him. There were three urinals, and he was in the middle.

“Grunt,” the man on the right said, looking at him, and then quickly back to his own steady flow.

“Grunt,” said the man on the left.

“Grunt,” responded the man: it seemed most appropriate considering the turn of conversation.

When nothing further came, either from his penis or his co-pisser's, he shook off and went to wash his hands.

"Grunt," he said to the deep-set eyes looking back at him. People could drown in those eyes. He met the eyes of the guy next to him, but the guy was already looking away.

"Could you look me in the eye, please," he asked the guy, even though he knew the man could drown. But the guy walked away to blow-dry his hands without first shaking the excess water off. The man followed.

He walked out at the same time that he tapped the guy on his shoulder. The guy turned his entire body, facing him squarely.

"You should shake off excess water," he said, shaking his own vigorously in demonstration, "otherwise you'll blow your hands in vain."

The guy turned away, and again walked away as if the man had not spoken at all.

The man looked at the guy until he climbed into a bus. No one walked in front of him to obscure the guy; there were far fewer people walking around now. As the guy disappeared into the bus the man looked around. He wanted to be seen. He performed a sort of dance step and then walked into the shop. The security guard looked at his backpack, and then looked outside.

"*Now we are known only partially*," he misquoted the Bible to the air. He walked up one aisle, and then down another before grabbing the first packet of something on the shelves.

Thinking to give an improved repeat performance he asked the cashier,

"What choices do I have?"

"I do not have," she said, but looked to the right as she spoke. Her colleague, standing at the bulletproof window, shrugged her shoulders and repeated her words to the petrol jockey outside.

I am cloaked, he thought, in nothing.

Chapter 4

Ikhwezi, she thought, as she stood in the shadow of the yet to rise sun: the morning star. She stood on a hill waiting, waiting for the first rays of the sun to dispel the shadows that clung to her soul.

Behind her, like the hulking corpse of a pre-historic monster, stood the stone church, silent and brooding.

The church, the only one in the township, was built on an ascending slope, lending weight to the mass illusion that gripped the minds of the township dwellers that Table Mountain was only a short ascent further. Behind the church, looming large in her imagination, towering over the brooding corpse that was the stone church, was Table Mountain. It was beautiful, the mountain, a giant protector of the human race. At least, she amended the thought, the protector of the race that lived in Ikhwezi Lokusa Location. The township itself, she saw, was enveloped in darkness all of its own: darkness deep and inky.

"It is like my soul," she said, her voice disappearing into the darkness.

From where she was standing, she could see only vague outlines of the shacks that made up the township. In the inky darkness they took on a sinister appearance. She imagined that the eggs of huge prehistoric monsters might have looked like that to a human observer. It was from the township that she hoped her salvation would come.

The Hummer.

She would have laughed at the sheer madness of hoping for a person that might not even exist, had there been any laughter left in her. But there was no humor left in her, no joy. There was only a huge empty space that had defied all prescriptions, all remedies, and all prayers. The empty space had not responded well to the prescriptions of the doctors and psychiatrists she had consulted. It had not responded at all to the remedies of the fortune-tellers and spiritualists that she had consulted. At least, she thought, she knew now what the hole was not: it was neither depression nor stress; it was neither an ancestral curse nor an ancestor's curse. It was just a huge empty space in her soul, or in her spirit, or whatever was inside her.

She sighed.

Into that space had disappeared many friends and lovers. Inside it had disappeared many beautiful things in life. Gone was the laughter in her life, gone too was misery. Gone were the colors of the rainbow, the song of birds; for her, there was no pleasure in touch or being touched; no pain in rejection, no disappointment. There was only the space inside her, a huge empty thing that threatened to take her life. At this thought a sound passed her lips, a bitter thing she recognized as the sound of her laughter.

It too disappeared into the darkness without any ripple effect. No, she amended the thought. It was the presence of the empty space that kept her alive; *it* that kept her alive. If she had any sense, she would reject its gift and die. She should seek death, and fuck the empty space. Hard.

"Is this what you did, Sello, my friend?"

As soon as the question was out of her mouth she knew that there would be no answer forthcoming. Like my laughter, she thought, the question had disappeared into the darkness without a ripple. Wherever he was, she knew, Sello had not heard the question.

Suddenly, as if an ambush of an enemy, the light of dawn descended upon the darkness she was standing in. It is no longer, she thought with detached interest in the graying morning, the darkest hour before dawn. She had no extensive experience of the coming of light in the mornings, but the one that came to Ikhwezi seemed strange. The morning moved from the darkest hour to light without any amicable give over between the forces of light and dark.

Quick, she thought, *like a vengeful husband come upon an unfaithful wife.*

Her indecision to repeat the question to Sello or not dissolved quicker than the darkness around her.

"The hummer," she whispered in the fading darkness, "is not come."

Quickly, before the light could expose her to the world, and perhaps to herself also, she turned and entered the stone building.

The next darkness before sunrise found her standing in front of the church again. Behind her the building was hidden in rain that blanketed the world like mist. It fell steadily, as it had done throughout the night.

She hardly felt it, though it would chill her to the bone later.

The Hummer, she thought, whether to ward herself from the rain, or to call that person forth, she knew not, and cared not. She stood in the rain that was like mist and regarded the shrouded township below. Absurdly, with a quick glance at the hulking corpse behind her, she thought of the Shroud of Turin.

Perhaps, she thought, the misty rain is the spiritual version of that cloth that had wrapped the body of Jesus.

"Did it bring as much misery to you as it will the township below?" she asked the image of the cross-hanged man forming in her head.

As if in answer the image, indistinct to begin with, faded.

Ikhwezi lay at the bottom of a shallow basin. All around it the land sloped up and out, with the unfortunate result that rainwater pooled at the bottom of the basin, causing havoc for the shack dwellers.

I will, she decided, *look upon this rain as the Shroud of Misery.* Having expended enough energy on the misery of others, she turned her attention to her own.

Will the Hummer come today, she wondered?

It might happen, she thought, rain heavy on her eyelashes, *that the Hummer might miss the stone building in the misty rain.*

"No," she said, turning her head up to catch raindrops on her tongue, "he will not." Blinking, she felt raindrops running over her eyelids and down her cheeks like tears.

There were no tears in her life. Tears were for those who cared, or hurt, or loved, or any of the thousand emotions that people took for granted. Tears were for those who could see beauty in odd and not so odd places. She saw no beauty at all. In her life there was only the empty space, and she could not bring herself to look for anything in it, for any reason.

Her heart lurched painfully as she spied movement in the mist. But it was no one, only a mist devil: an illusion created by some natural phenomenon she could neither name nor imagine.

It disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

"My heart," she muttered shakily, "do not flutter so."

As if in response to her voice, the mist devil appeared again, taking no recognizable shape in the swirling rain.

Perhaps, she thought, *I am the natural phenomenon.*

"I have come," she whispered to the mist devil, "in search of a legend."

Since the time she had decided to come in search of the Hummer, a whole month before arriving at the stone church, she had not allowed herself to consider the wisdom of her action.

But since coming to Ikhwezi, exactly two days ago, she had been thinking of the Hummer a lot, the thought materializing in her mind at odd moments.

"Can you tell me anything about the Hummer?" she asked the mist devil conversationally. "Is it true that this bowl," she continued, with a gesture that encompassed the shallow basin Ikhwezi lay in, "was made by the Hummer?"

The mist devil responded with a movement, a sort of flowing of its immaterial body.

"Of course," she said apologetically, interpreting its swirl as part of its former disappearing act, "you would not know or care about human affairs. I meant only to converse."

She laughed, a short cynical sound, and said, "I am a lot of things, but crazy is not one of them. Talking to oneself is a sign of madness."

In the darkness that heralded sunrise, misty rain falling unceasingly, the mist devil stabilized briefly, then resumed its flowing form.

"Haha," she barked, parodying the sound of genuine laughter, "So you approve?"

Pausing just long enough to tuck back a stray dreadlock, she said, "Legend has it that the Hummer hummed the morning star out of the sky, it landed here, briefly, before his strength failed and his hum fell silent. The star, it is said, returned to the sky." Before her, as if in response to her tale, the mist devil drew itself up straight and tall.

"Ah," she sighed, wishing that she could have emitted the cynical sound again. But she could not force it past the suddenly yawning void inside her.

"You know," she said, " I read that story in a toilet."

She hesitated, weighing the wisdom of telling the mist devil that, in fact, the story had only been a few words, three lines crookedly scrawled on a public toilet door:

The Hummer,
sing morning star,
Ikhwezi Ntshona.

Underneath the words, as if in anticipation of her credulity, was drawn a goofy toothy smile.

On the hill, misty rain falling incessantly, the darkness was imperceptibly giving way to the first sunrays.

She decided to skip that part, and rather relate how she came to put the pieces together that led her to Ikhwezi Lokusa Location. But with the light now rapidly gaining mastery over the world, she thought of the first rays of the sun testing the strength of the shadows that clung to her soul.

"I wish for him to sing the morning star into my soul, into the empty spaces in my spirit," she said instead.

In the receding darkness the illusion of wind and rain danced first a crazy dance, then disappeared. Impulsively, just before the illusion gave way completely to light, she waved to it.

Then she fled into the deeper and perpetual darkness of the stone building.

When, the next morning, she saw a figure on the rise that overlooked Ikhwezi, she knew it to be the Hummer. It was a memory of knowing what it is to have emotions that made her sure that it was the Hummer, the stirrings of something deep and forgotten in the depths of the empty space.

And the darkness. The darkness immediately around the figure was deeper than the morning darkness she had stood in the previous mornings, deeper than the darkness she was standing in now. In the middle of it, the darkness was the solid figure of the Hummer. She had an eerie impression of movement around the figure, as if the air around it was in motion, as if the darkness was riding on that in motion air. The figure though was not moving at all.

It is, she decided about the motion she was observing, *the movement of a garment; a cloak perhaps, he has on to ward off the morning chill.*

Morning darkness, she decided, *can ride nothing*.

She felt a thrumming inside her. Before she could make sense of it, it was gone.

On the rise that overlooked Ikhwezi, its back to her, the figure of the Hummer stood still.

A thought dropped into her head, *the morning star*, briefly, unexpectedly, and then it too was gone.

She took two steps forward and stopped, suddenly hesitant in the morning darkness. She thought of calling the figure, to pierce the morning darkness with his name, started to, and then stopped again, the word unuttered.

She laughed a little. What if the figure answered to the name Simphiwe, or Mpho, or Linda, or something equally mundane?

It felt strange, unnatural even, to think of the figure as anything else but the Hummer.

It would, she thought, *be wrong for him to answer to any other name*.

"Hummer," she breathed, barely a whisper, seeking, she realized, not to attract the attention of the darkness in motion.

It is, she thought forcefully, *nothing but a cloak he has on, to ward off the morning chill.*

She felt the thrumming again. She felt it traveling over her body like the fingers of a blind man, seeking searching, knowing. She took a step back, alarmed. The thrumming stopped.

Still, the Hummer, intent on something hidden from her, did not move from the rise overlooking the township. As if a breeze had started up, the cloak he had on moved a little faster. Except that, from where she was standing, it looked like it was the darkness around the figure that was in motion. She could not see beyond the darkness, as if the darkness defined the figure, as if the darkness was inextricably linked to the presence of the figure.

At the thought of darkness defining the Hummer, she remembered what it was to be disturbed. It was not pleasant, the memory of being disturbed.

The darkness, she decided, *was hiding the Hummer*.

She took a step forward, then another, then more until she was sure that the memory of emotions was not going to stop her from getting to the Hummer.

These memories, she thought, *are unrecognizable as anything I ever felt.*

The darkness around the Hummer seemed to shy away from her with every step she took, until it was absorbed into the solid figure that was the Hummer.

It is, she thought about the shrinking darkness, *nothing but the cloak he is tightening around himself.*

And it has a hood, she added as an afterthought.

On the rise the figure stood unmoving, intent on something in the township below.

She stopped next to the Hummer, and looked at the township too, seeking the thing that held his attention so. She saw nothing but a township indistinct in the morning darkness.

"Hummer," she said softly, " I have waited for you."

The figure neither moved, nor spoke.

She decided to wait too, to say nothing until she was acknowledged. In the dark, the township before her suddenly took on familiar dimensions, like an old friend described by a stranger.

"I have, " she said, " always seen the township in darkness."

The figure neither moved nor spoke.

What would it be like, she wondered, remembering her earlier decision to say nothing until she was acknowledged, to live in perpetual darkness?

Perhaps, she thought, it is darkness that defines the township.

"Like my soul," she said, " Ikhwezi is defined by absence."

She glanced sideways at the figure, a solid darkness in the time before dawn. She tried to imagine how he would look in the morning light.

Does he, she wondered, *know that the light here employs an ambush tactic to annihilate the dark?*

"There is no dignified retreat, no orderly fall back. Only annihilation, quick and sudden,"

Immediately she felt like a fool. Her words, unconsciously given as advice, were ill placed.

Do I imagine that the Hummer does not know about the coming of light and the defeat of darkness, he who hummed the morning star out of the sky? Surely he would know that hiding oneself in darkness is a futile exercise in the long run.

"Absences…" she started, then stopped, giving the figure a longer sideways glance.

The figure neither moved nor spoke.

She looked at the township below, seeing how it never emerged from the cloak of darkness, seeing how the darkness, in fact, cloaked Ikhwezi.

"I have," she said again, slowly, " always seen the township in darkness."

Why, she thought, hum the morning star down, when the light of dawn was coming, when the sanctioned authority of daytime, the sun, was coming?

The answer emerged slowly. She would not be able to decide, later, how much of it had been insight, and how much bad logic brought on by the food she was eating in the church.

Unlike the sun that brought hard, death dealing light, the morning star shone only in the dark, illumining the dark, painting it in soft colors. Painting the location in soft colors.

She turned her head to the figure. It neither moved, nor spoke, but from where she was standing, she saw darkness as a presence.

The morning star, she thought, *the light of darkness.*

She felt a thrumming inside her traveling inside her like the fingers of a blind person, searching, touching, knowing. Knowing perhaps, an absence that is a presence.

She imagined thinking of the empty space inside her as a presence, imagined seeking the thing inside her out, embracing it, allowing it to purposefully color her reality.

"Is this what you did Sello my friend?"

She thought of him: young, talented, illumined by the bright light of the day all the time. Not softly, not showing his darkness in the best possible light, but punishing, bringing destruction in its wake, ambushing his inner existence with its harsh glare. Painting and lighting his inner world with its perspective, its standards; painting his inner presence as absence. She thought of him dying under the sanctioned light all the time.

She looked at the Hummer, a darkness in the morning; thought of him humming the morning star out of the sky, seeking always the light of it to stay and illumine Ikhwezi

Lokusa. She looked at the Hummer and thought of her friend, and thought too of the empty space inside her, a void that she had seen as an absence.

Is this what I came here for, she thought?

Further thought was interrupted by the sudden appearance of light. The ambush of the light came as it had the first day, neither concealed by the misty rain, nor softened by her realization. It bore down on her with inexorable intent.

"To paint my inner world with its reality," she said, with a glance at the figure next to her.

The Hummer, like the township below, was disappearing. Like the township below, he was emerging as something new under the sanctioned authority of daylight.

She thought of the memory of emotions that had seized her earlier, and how they almost stopped her from moving forward. There was nothing but the void inside her, an empty space that told of a presence. This time, when the thrumming came inside her, she knew it for what it was: a hum, possibly of the same tune that had called the morning star from the sky.

She fled to the perpetual darkness of the stone building.

Chapter 5

The man knocked on the door. Stepping back, he held out his left hand, palm raised, a small bone at the center of it.

Since taking the wrong bus in Bloemfontein he had stayed out of the zone. But now, preparing to see her after a long time, he raised and held the walls tight. He had been in the zone when they met, keeping himself apart from the world. Coming around a corner, late for class, he had bumped into her.

“Look where you going,” she had said, and then. “Look what you’ve done.”

He had looked. Her books were on the floor, where she had dropped them because of him. It was in him to simply walk away, since she could not see him.

“Are you going to pick them up,” she had asked imperiously.

“Do you see me,” he had almost asked, but was too amazed that she did to ask. So he had dropped the zone, kneeling to pick her books up. “Hey,” she said, concern in her snooty voice, “are you alright?” Outside the zone he was alone and scared, and that she had picked it up when he came out of it, told him that he had been invisible to her in the zone.

He held still when the door opened. He was not visible to outsiders just because he moved inside the zone. Still, she was no ordinary outsider. She was, and always will be, the girl who made him step out of the zone.

Standing in the door, she looked straight at him, and he experienced a moment of anxiety.

Do you see me, he asked from within the zone, not knowing if he wanted her to or not.

Her eyes, after a slight hesitation, travelled past him to a point just above his head, and held there. At this, he closed his hands on the bone, held it for a second, and opened it again.

She sighed, perhaps in response to him, perhaps in response to something else, and closed her eyes. When she opened them she fastened first on the hand (the bone in the hand!) and then vaguely past it. *I am*, he thought, *in the zone of proximity*.

Still she stood in the doorway. Through the prism that was the zone, her nose was flat, her skin dark, the mouth made large by prominent lips. She was, he had always told her, what a rain goddess should look like.

"You are," she had always responded, "cheesy."

She looked past him, through him, around him, whenever she lifted her eyes from the bone. Though he could hear her through the walls of the zone, she could not hear him. They had tried, at a time when their love would never fade. He would erect the zone, and say something to her. Safe in the zone, he expressed his wonder at her.

"Do it again," she would laugh delightedly, clearly amazed that she could hear nothing.

But still she stood in the door. Her stance in the doorway told him she was waiting for something from him. He jiggled the bone in his palm and said,

Someone gave it to me when I got off the bus. It was true, someone had, but he was not sure where, and why. Since he was not sure of all that preceded the moment he was given the bone, it was, perhaps, not necessary to explain the bone further.

She was not looking at the bone anymore, and she did not move from the door. Afraid that his continued invisibility might unnerve her, he dropped the wall around his rucksack and, bouncing it up and down, said, *I had only this when I got off the bus.*

The girl in the door wanted to ask him why he found her. But it was pointless asking him now, sometimes he got lost in his own thoughts. She decided to go back to sleep. She left the door open, and was not surprised when he did not immediately come in. She guessed that he had not yet noticed she was no longer standing at the door. When the door slowly closed she, lying on her side, kept her back turned to him.

"I hold no truck with arcane knowing," he was saying. "I was reminded that you are here in Grahamstown. I got off the bus."

How flattering the girl lying on her side thought.

"And now a bone."

The connection is unmistakable, she thought.

"There must have…"

The girl lying on her side stopped listening, he did not need her to listen, even though he was, for now, talking to her. Later, when he slid his arm underneath her to pull her towards

him, she helped him mold and fit his body to hers. When she turned to her other side, he turned and helped her mold her body to his.

When the man woke she was gone. He frantically touched his crotch and the bed for wetness. All was dry. He stood up, put on trousers, and then looked around the room. The note on the nightstand caught his attention. He walked around the bed to read it. Gone to a lecture, he read. The words were a smudge on the white paper, her cramped handwriting occupying only a small section of the white paper. The second sheet of paper was blank, words from the first scratched inkless on the second. The blank page meant nothing to him, so he tossed it aside.

The third, and as it turns out last, sheet of paper asked him to join her for lunch, "If you want." He did not know what to make of that, but he did want, and so it mattered little.

The note did not say where he should meet her. The omission was the clue. In that love past of theirs she had had to endure the zone and long monologues on the falsehoods of the Left-handed One. He was to meet her at the site of the greatest almost-victory in history.

With thoughts of falsehoods and food uppermost in his head, he made ready to honor the invitation.

At the corner of High Street and Beaufort a beggar laughed at him. To his right, and past the left shoulder of the beggar, High Street ran straight up and down.

"*Jonga le,*" the beggar said loudly. Some people turned to look. The man tried his best to pass the beggar without attracting more attention. But the beggar was having none of it.

Min' igama lami ndinguHobo,
Ndizohlala ndingu Hobo,
Nob'ungandizonda ndokunika uHobo,

he sang, extending his right hand.

The man, still trying to pass unobtrusively, took the hand. He quickly let go; the hand was smooth and soft. The beggar, walking with him, started talking about Moses' burning bush. It was, he kept repeating, burning.

"*Hehe, uHobo ngu Professor*!" some women standing in a long queue to an ATM laughed. Some of these women had red ochre on their cheeks and foreheads, others white ochre. One of them had a baby on her back. The baby's mouth was hanging open in sleep, its pacifier stuck to its lower lip. Its chubby neck folds hid red and white beads. Past the long line a car suddenly appeared from a passage. It startled the man into immobility. But Hobo bumped hard into the driver's door and was knocked back hard. He kept his balance by first holding on to the man, then staggering back to hit the wall with his back. Sliding down the wall he cried, "sorry matha, I tried," in a voice pitched low so that only people close to him heard. It was a scene from The Lion King, and Hobo neatly caught both the comedy and the tragedy of it.

But neither the driver, nor the man took note of Hobo's performance. While the driver stopped, and was coming out of his car, the man went into the zone. He extended it to the emerging driver.

For a moment High Street was like many small town main streets: there were only so many cars and no more; people crossing the streets did so at leisure, sometimes taking time to shake hands as they passed a neighbor last seen that morning. One language dominated the airwaves: peasants and workers alike loudly conversed in it. The car attendants, jobs made difficult by the easy availability of parking spaces, and the beggars, jobs made difficult by the repetitive nature of their occupation, spoke the language of the upwardly mobile. The latter spoke the language they were educated in. They could be heard all over town softly and in carefully modulated tones encouraging their progeny to do the same. Peasants and workers spoke the dominant language too, but it came out mangled by their thick, ethnic accents, and so, in their mouths, appeared diminished. And so, in the language stakes, the beggars came out on top of the workers. They used the language of their betters like a prop: placed just so it enhanced without intruding. They got better discards for it.

The man, had he failed to notice High Street because it was so unremarkable, noticed it even less now. There was a moment when High Street was as it has always been, when a booted foot emerged from the car that Hobo bumped into. But the rest of the person emerged not onto High Street, but into the zone only to disappear. Having seen many disappear in the zone, it had never occurred to the man that he, too, might disappear in the zone. He disappeared *into* the zone, but not *in* the zone.

Hobo, pressed, and with a lot of Old Brown Sherry in his bloodstream, would have happily informed the man about *a* disappearance at the exact time the driver disappeared into the zone: Hobo's own. The moment just after Hobo had bumped into the car had unexpectedly framed him. True, the world was ever his stage, but quite suddenly he was caught in the spotlight. Ever the improviser, he *had* kept his cool, thought of and used appropriate lines for the occasion. But no one seemed to appreciate his performance. Everyone (except himself of course) had concentrated on the boring sideshow provided by bumped cars and disgruntled owners like the philistines they were. Hobo was, in a word, disappointed. The level of culture in a town so popularly associated with the arts was, quite frankly, deplorable.

And so it was that he could not with any certainty recall who did what and when, or even that they actually did what and when. He thought it a fair response, a tit for tat kind of thing. Everyone forgot him, and so he was going to forget everyone.

By the time he recovered from the non-reception of his work, the man was already opposite the high court, having left him in the dust. Hobo almost ran after the man. *There*, he thought, *goes a man framed*. But, like the true artist Hobo is, he realized that the moment, having come from nowhere, was now gone.

He had drawn up his knees, lowered his head onto them, and holding cupped hands out, took up his earlier song:

Baxolele baba…hmhmhm!

The man walked onto the Rhodes campus under the arch, quite unaware of the curse. Even had he known, it is doubtful that he would have been so aware that it would have influenced his actions. His consciousness was wholly taken up by the absence of access control gates. Instead of being manned by menacing security guards, these gates were open to the community. Tom, Dick, and then Mary passed the man, going in and out of the gates as they pleased.

Barbarians, he thought, *at the gates*.

He walked straight from town onto campus without any impediments. The porous boundary emphasized absences. It disturbed him that it affected him so. He liked the

porosity. It was, he hoped, symbolic of the relationship between the community and its intellectuals.

The porosity should emphasize presences, he thought. Yet here he was, struggling against feeling insecure.

"I am," he said to the trees shedding on him, "institutionalized." If the soft and yielding leaves he was trampling on gave him any response, he had no way of understanding it. The clock on one of the towers displayed the time of day. A girl was coming towards him. Breasts firm, hair long and flowing, she was in skinny jeans and a sleeveless t-shirt.

The clock could be wrong though, he said as she passed. "*Or right twice a day*," he added as an afterthought.

The shape, but not the size, of the security booth looked like a doghouse. The boom gate was lifted high, like a guillotine waiting to fall. Inside the doghouse the security guard watched him pass incuriously. Past the doghouse, and under the guillotine, the man took a sharp right and started the climb up the hill. The monument, visible in parts when he looked up, not at all when he looked down or around, was waiting. The gardens pulled at his attention when he walked past them. They, he noticed with something akin to relief, were gated, though the gates were open. He stopped, trying to imagine the gates as a gaping maw. There was a time, he thought fleetingly, when he would have been strong enough to imagine it so. The gates, though, continued to appear as just open gates. There was a dirt road that continued a distance into the gardens. Somewhere in the gardens he could see a dog chasing something thrown by its master.

"A tail wags the dog," he said.

He passed the gates. It occurred to him that he could quote no false sayings. A religion, even if false, needed random sayings that could be interpreted as wise.

The false prophets, he decided, *had not much to say*.

Past the stone building on the left, the climb started in earnest. He looked around and up. He saw nothing. Astonished, for he had expected to see more of the monument come into view, more of the monument came into view. He stopped, and looked back. Over the campus grounds, beyond the finite cars and people in town, the man could see the township. It was an indistinct collection of some *things* that could be houses, or huts.

The man stepped off the sidewalk and onto the footpath to the monument. He sat down, first on his haunches and then, as he got tired, on a patch of grass.

"I have crept up on myself," he said to the footpath running past him. *The split second of nothing,* he decided, *had gone beyond itself, infecting my hind-sight.* It was telling that, after that second of seeing nothing, possibly the township could have been a village.

He looked up to the monument again, open to the possibility of anything. But everything, including the monument, conformed to reason. He wondered how much falsehood leaked into, and infected his reality.

The girl was deep in conversation with a companion. They moved as if choreographed. The angle between their seats tapered forward until their seats almost touched, but the backrests flared outwards, forming a $\wedge$. Following the angle of their seats their bodies would, should they stand up straight from their seats, touch at the elbow forming a v shape. The companion was talking animatedly, sketching incomprehensible diagrams in the air, and punctuating these with emphatic nods. In the short time he had been observing them, the companion had stopped twice, going dead still while vacantly staring at a point just past the girl's knees, and to the right of his seat. Each time he did so, he leaned forward, clasping his hands in front of him while resting his elbows on his knees. At the same time he leaned forward, the girl sat back. From this position, she looked at the back of his head. There must have been a signal regulating these moves, for both times the companion started talking after the girl reached for, picked up, drank from, and carefully put back her cup.

The man stood on the top stair, not sure if he should see them first, or if he should be seen first. The problem was solved by the third break in the companion's performance. As the girl leaned back she glanced up and away from the companion. She stood up, looking at him.

The companion continued staring at a point in front of her knees.

The man walked towards them. She put a hand on the companions bowed back.

The man could not read the gesture. Either it was part of the choreography, signaling a halt perhaps; or it was an unscheduled disruption of the choreography.

If the latter, emotions held tight, *they are intimate.*

The companion continued to look down, lost in the contemplation of the patch of floor in front of him.

The man looked away from the hand, looking out of the big window glasses behind her. Later in the conversation, and in response to a gesture by the companion, the man would realize that the scene outside the window was the town and, further, the township. But he did not realize it then.

They did not greet each other, the girl only waiting for him to sit before doing the same. She had, in the course of a week, read Bessie Head's *Maru* to him. Maru had not greeted his sister and best friend because their blood was one. He had approved, hoping for the same tight bond between them. The girl had been upset with his idolization of Maru, calling Maru a twilight idol.

She took her hand off the companion's back. He sprung up like a jack in the box, launching straight into his performance.

"And so," hands sketching an air diagram, "the disappearance of the great Head-Of-An-Elephant can be understood as a physical and historical occurrence."

Up close the sudden dead stop followed by a vacant stare was unsettling. It was like there were two companions, one replacing the other so fast that they appeared as a single person.

"As a physical and historical occurrence, the conditions of the great king's disappearance can be discovered, and so subjected to truth and falsity. We can no longer…"

The intense glare of the performance was suddenly and, at least to the man, inexplicably turned towards him. The girl, as if she had anticipated the break, said, "This is he."

"Is this he," the companion asked.

"Is this who," the man asked.

"Are you doing it," the companion asked the man.

"No," the girl said.

"Am I doing what," the man asked, floundering. The table separating them suddenly signified more than just a physical barrier.

The companion looked to the girl, and then turned towards the man. The turn put the companion directly opposite the man. To the side of this direct line of communication, the girl could now only see the back of the companion. She could see all of the man.

"My name is mbongisidyantyi," the companion said expectantly.

“It’s a combination of bell hooks and the-pimp-named-slickback: no capital letters and Boondocks,” the girl said by way of explanation.

The man, having never heard of the pimp slickback, did not understand all of the explanation. He told the companion his name.

“We,” mbongisidyantyi said slowly, “need you to go to Cape Town.”

The man looked at the girl. She did not think the request a joke.

“But first you must take the mantle of false prophet in the Order of Nxele,” mbongisidyantyi continued.

The companion must have seen something in the man’s face for he added apologetically, “We know it’s not much, but no one living has the authority to name you false prophet *forever* like Nongqawuse is.”

The girl put her hand on the companion’s back. From the man’s vantage point, it looked like her arm now ended in a stump. If the companion registered the touch, the man could not tell.

“Will you accept my apology,” mbongisidyantyi asked.

Almost the man said *you have forgotten the face of your father, maggot*. But he doubted that the companion knew Roland of Gilead, Stephen King’s last gunslinger. He looked more like someone who would respond to, or even issue the call ‘Workers of the world, unite!’ So instead, really not understanding what the hell was happening, the man nodded.

“I,” mbongisidyantyi said, “belong to a now defunct…” groping for a word, the companion’s look veered towards vacant. *The hand on his back*, the man thought, *has a lot to do with him not quite losing touch with reality;* “collective,” mbongisidyantyi finished. “In the collective we all have positions, vantage points from which we look at the same thing. My vantage point is myth and metaphysics. The thing we are all looking at is black.”

“You,” mbongisidyantyi said, “possess a metaphysical alternative in which to instantiate a myth.”

“The zone of proximity,” the girl said helpfully.

“You told him about the zone,” the man asked the girl. He hoped his tone was conversational but curious.

The girl nodded, but said no more.

"I," mbongisidyantyi said, "need to instantiate the Left-Handed-One, *the author and finisher of the false prophecies*."

The companion and the girl's hand on his back moved: the companion to triumphantly lean on the backrest, the hand to rest demurely on the girl's lap.

Who, the man wondered, *moved first*.

Behind them early afternoon was deepening into late afternoon. *It is*, the man thought, *a pity the angle of the sun is all wrong. It could, perhaps, have formed a halo around the companion's head*.

"What," the man started carefully, "makes you think that I can understand your gibberish? Even if I actually understood your words, what makes you think I would be able to 'instantiate' anything?"

The companion went vacant, though he had to turn his head a lot more to locate the space in front of the girl's knees.

Okay, the man thought.

"The key to something like the zone," mbongisidyantyi exploded back into the conversation, "is consciousness."

I am, the man thought, *conscious of the relationship between you and my girl*.

"Now, for many people consciousness is *about* something. The thing is external, objective and discoverable. For fewer people consciousness is about the self. The thing is reflexive."

The girl was looking at the man. But she held herself poised, ready to intervene at any moment.

She fears for him, the man thought.

The companion, mbongisidyantyi, was saying, "But for fewer still, consciousness is a process. Now for these select few, consciousness is not even reflexive; *consciousness is.*" The eyes of the companion darted hither and thither as he spoke, settling on nothing and everything all at once.

The man imagined he could see spittle at the corners of the companion's mouth. He looked away in mild disgust.

The girl, eyes on the man, put her hand back on the companion's back. She moved it up and down the bowed back soothingly. The man sensed it too, the vertigo that comes from

following someone walking the delicate line between reasonable explanation and incomprehensible ravings.

He imagined her body molded to his again, as it had been in the morning.

Abruptly the companion stood up, “It is time for you to show us the consciousness that is the zone.”

The concern on the girl’s face was unmistakable. Her hands fastened on the companion’s hand and arm. The man looked away. The thing in his heart was green.

“Son-of-Autumn,” she said apprehensively. The subtle cues were clearly no longer sufficient to keep the companion’s façade of sanity intact. Words, that embodiment of clarity, were drafted in.

“Yho,” the companion exclaimed in mock seriousness, “the clan name *baba*! Was she like this with you?”

The man, caught unawares by the question, smiled uncertainly.

The companion, perhaps considering the question rhetorical, leaned over to kiss the girl.

She leaned away from him.

The companion, perhaps having anticipated the move, perhaps just over balancing, followed.

The girl held, bracing (pushing?) the companion with palm and spread fingers flat to his chest. She closed her eyes when their lips met.

The memory, *legs wrapped around his waist, left hand nails biting into his back, right hand bracing (pushing) against him, eyes closing as he entered her,* rose unbidden to the man’s mind.

When the kiss ended the companion, in perfect imitation of the remembered man, gently planted a kiss on each of the closed eyelids, and on the bridge of her nose.

“Thing,” he said when he kissed the left eye. “Of,” he said on the bridge of the nose. “Water,” he said on the right eye.

A pet name, the man thought. *Ridiculous.*

“What…” the man started, and broke off. The thing in his heart was violence, and it was lodged in his throat. He cleared it, and started again.

“What does the zone have to do with consciousness?”

It could, he reflected, *have been any question, and it still would have been brilliant in that steady voice.*

The companion's look was intensity itself.

Does he, the man wondered, *go vacant when they kiss?*

"Come, let me show you." When the companion stood up, the girl followed suit. The man could no longer bear it, and scathingly said,

"When did you become such a girl?"

The companion brayed laughter, all the while walking towards the door, the girl in tow.

The canons that blazed a thousand men into oblivion were silent, the wall encircling them short. So close, the size of the enclosure did not live up to its historical reputation. The three canons looked like props set up according to a badly researched script. In the failed light of the day, it was easy to be oblivious to the might of the empire whose instruments these were.

"These," the companion said, "are articles of faith. They swept the prophecies of the Left-Handed-One aside like the falsehoods they are."

Gently disengaging himself from the clasp of the girl, he proceeded to lay both hands on the middle canon. Bowing his head he reverently whispered, "my idols," in what might have been a prayer.

"I cannot," the man thought, *"believe that these are the objects that derailed a people's history."*

"Come," the companion beckoned the man.

The man looked at the girl. At her nod, his rooted to the spot feet carried him forward. *Did I*, he raged inwardly, *just look to her for permission?*

"Will you stand here?" the companion asked in the same hushed tone. His pointing finger indicated a spot on the wall, directly in front of an idol. The man tensed his legs to leap onto the wall when the weight of the occasion descended upon him like a caution. It was, he knew, nothing more than the companion's posturing. Still, he laid both hands on the wall to steady himself, distributing his body weight to his knees and the balls of his feet. Pushing off the earth with his feet and transferring his weight to his arms, he propelled himself up. He grazed his left shin on the wall and, his landing fouled, he almost tumbled

from the wall. He caught himself, but not the word “unyoko,” from tumbling out of his mouth.

In lieu of my body off this wall, he thought, though quite at who or what he could not decide. He could see lights as far as the township. But in his immediate vicinity there was only darkness. The light drew his eyes relentlessly. He was aware of a whispered conversation behind him.

“No…” rose towards him, but the rest of the sentence sunk below his hearing.

“Surely it is I…” emerged, but the rest quickly went the way of the first. Still, the man caught the emergence of more than just the words; he caught the emergence of identity. In the distance, the lights were merging, blurring into overlapping rings. The darkness, immediate not so long ago, could be seen through and around the rings. The dark both reduced and highlighted the circumference of the outermost ring.

The girl screamed his name. The overlapping rings broke into a thousand individual lights. He peered into the darkness behind him, alarm arriving just before another scream. The girl was in front of him.

“Where are you,” he asked, the words travelling the dark faster than sight.

“No, I am not your ‘Thing-Of-Water’. Here, let me help you up,” she said angrily, to the companion he supposed.

The man could not decipher the sounds accompanying the words. He climbed down the wall and carefully walked to where he thought they should be.

The girl was chiding the companion still.

The man, when he reached them, asked his one overriding question.

“After you climbed the wall,” the girl answered vaguely. She had her arm around the companion’s waist; he had one arm draped around her shoulders.

Something eluded her. The monument, when they got near it, was closed. Experienced from the town side, the building seemed to emanate an air of brooding watchfulness. That, she surmised, is what had bothered the clans about the fort. On the entrance side it just felt empty. She settled the companion within the ambit of the light cast by a street lamp.

The companion sagged, ended up lying sideways on the grass.

“What did you do?” Somewhere inside herself, she knew, her real question lurked. But it resisted her attempts to capture so as to speak it.

"Nothing," the man replied, perplexed by her question and to whom she addressed it.

The girl could feel her emotions taking shape. She had to wait a little to see what shape they settled on. When it came to the man, there were fewer and fewer shapes her emotions could take.

"He," she said, pointing to the figure in the patch of light behind her, "was standing there; then he staggered; and then he fell. You must have done *something!"* The last word came out high-pitched.

"And that is all you saw?" The voice was rugged and low, it could have been the grass asking.

The girl ignored the question. She could feel her emotions settling on anger. Standing as tall and straight as she could, head slightly tilted to look the man in the eye.

Asiphe, consummately professional as always, would never have disagreed with a patient to her face. But there was a jagged edge to the girl that would have made Asiphe skeptical of her self-diagnosis. Asiphe's heavily qualified diagnosis would have been that the girl was, not angry, but frustrated.

"Thing-Of-Water," the companion called again in a more recognizable voice.

The man, having weathered her anger many times before, was certain that she would ignore the companion.

She turned and went to the companion. The companion had struggled to all fours like a dog. The girl sat in front of him in a Buddhist monk posture, hiding his face. She lifted one hand to his face. The companion vomited; the man could only hear the sound of it. The girl moved to the companion's side, and started wiping his mouth with her hand, and wiping her hand on her clothes.

The companion looked miserable; the man took grim pleasure in that. When the companion brought nothing but slimy saliva up, the girl wiped her hand on his back. The man took less pleasure in this. The companion wiped his own mouth once, and started rooting in the mess between his hands. He selected something thin and small with his thumb and forefinger. He stood up.

"Here," the companion extended his nasty find.

The man made no move whatsoever to take it.

The girl took it from the companion, wiped it on her clothes, and extended it to the man.

The man took it.

"A bone," he asked uncertainly.

"I have swallowed it everyday for a month. This," the companion said with a significant look at the man, "is the first time it has come out the upper end."

The thought of swallowing something kak'd, even by himself, was hard to understand and the man asked, aghast, "why?"

"A divination piece of the false prophecy, and a surviving chapter of the original bone document."

It neither looked, nor felt like any document the man had ever seen.

"Think of me," the companion added, "as having willingly swallowed falsehoods." This struck him as funny, making him laugh and cough.

"Do not laugh," the girl commanded.

"There is a bus to Cape Town tomorrow," the man said.

"Did you, the girl asked, "determine what kind of consciousness the zone is?"

The two men said nothing.

After another moment of nothing said, the girl and the companion walked down and away from the monument.

The vomiting ritual, the man thought, *must have strengthened the invisible cues.*

The man fished out the old bone. It was bigger than the new one. He threw it away.

Chapter 6

The morning found her standing on the hill, in front of the Sanctuary, looking below, at the spot where the Location was. It was dark, the Location hidden in the hour before dawn. I knew it was there, where else would it be, but I could not see it. I stole a quick glance at the scribe. Whatever her name was before, she was now Scribe, everyone in

Ikhwezi Lokusa called her that. I was not willing to use ‘scribe’ as her name, but I did use it as her title: ‘the scribe’, like ‘the president’.

Even though she was looking fixedly at it, I was sure that she too could not see the Location. But she did not need to. Indeed, the Location was rather incidental to her gaze. All her attention was on the hummer. I doubted that she would see the Location, even if light uncovered it to her. When we were here, she had eyes only for the hummer.

Of course, the only one actually standing on the hill, on those precise Cartesian co-ordinates, was the scribe. I was standing in the radius described by her faith in the hummer. They looked the same spot to me.

“I do not believe,” she was saying.

“In your Hummer,” I asked teasingly. It helped, I suppose, that she was not talking to me. I just happened to be the one listening. We stood in fraught silence for a while. She had her arms around hunched shoulders, hugging herself. My guess was that what I heard as a monologue was internally conducted as a dialogue with the hummer.

“I believe in *you*,” she said after a while. Sometimes the hummer and I spoke the same words.

“As you should,” I said, dutifully keeping up my part of the external conversation.

“But they won’t,” she said. I took the slight toss of her head at the darkness below as a pointing gesture. It pretty much captured all the ‘they’, even if it did include more than just them. A section of the Location, long accorded an inferior status in the stone church, were drawn to her. It was hard to tell how much of that was conscious action, and how much of it the instinctive holding on to anything floating of a drowning person. Whichever it was, she was becoming their symbol. I called them the townshippers.

“What if they believe in me?” It was the hold-on-to-anything-floating option for her then.

“Well....,” I started, and had to stop to think it through. I could see the shape of the problem, even if I did not agree that it was as simple as it implied.

“On the one hand is the Faith, and the power of the priest,” I said.

“I do not want to hold out false hope to them. Not when there is a chance that there is real hope,” she said.

Many were the monologues in which the Faith, and its representative, the priest, appeared as objects of scorn.

"On the other," I said, giving weight to the shape of what she considered potential hope "is the Rider, and the clans."

There were two doors by which one could access the Sanctuary. There were the two, huge oaken doors by which congregants and the public accessed it. The two doors, opening to the inside and away from each other, were open all day Saturday into the first few hours of Sunday. On Sundays only the right hand side door was open, and only till 3 o' clock. The priest closed the door himself on Sundays.

Through the oak doors, an aisle ran straight to a raised stage dominated by a massive pulpit behind which, on a nail on the wall, hung a bleeding and near naked Christ. The Christ was looking at the roof of the Sanctuary with sad, white painted eyes.

On the left and right of the aisle were evenly spaced rows of pews, made of a dark brown wood. Beyond the pulpit, and to the far right of the Christ, was a door. Through the door was a narrow corridor running the width of the church, and three tiny sleeping cells on the left with prisonlike bars for doors? There were no windows. Each cell had a single bed, on the bed an off-white sheet, two thin blankets and a pillow, and whitewashed walls. Adjacent to the bed was a small writing desk. In every cell hung a reduced in size Christ on the cross that looked upon the inside of the cell and, presumably, the occupants with compassionate eyes.

Though the church had electricity, and pressing a button lighted the front of it, the cell's occupants had to do with candles lit with matches. The priest and the scribe's desks spotted candles in various burnt stages. Blinding oneself reading in bad light was, I suppose, good for the soul. The priest's cell was the first on the left. The middle cell was empty, waiting for an ascetic or a heretic; the Sanctuary would give shelter to either. The scribe had the last cell. I unofficially shared it with her.

We were on our way to our cell. I had found the sudden displacement disconcerting in the first few thousand instances. We would be on the hill, the scribe holding forth on one thing or another, and I attentively listening when, suddenly, I would be inside the Sanctuary. It was a constant and unwelcome reminder of the new state of my existence.

We were halfway down the aisle when the priest came through the door behind the pulpit. He walked up the stage, disappeared behind the pulpit, rummaged about its innards, and reappeared clutching an old bible.

We kept on walking.

We will follow, we will follow Jesus.
We will follow,
wherever he goes.
We will follow, we will follow Jesus.
Wherever he goes,
We will follow.

We were no longer walking, a third down the aisle. Insistent and demanding, the absolute conviction with which the song was delivered from the pulpit hit us like a command. Every note carried the certainty of the Faith; that things should be this way and not another. I had heard that spider victims' thrashing, the black widow's male partner perhaps, sent vibrations up the web. The more the tiny bodies thrashed, and the more they entangled themselves, the more secure a meal for the arachnid they became. As the song washed over me, I strained against it with knees bent, left foot firmly planted in front for balance, and right foot behind, heel raised for quick movement. Had I a mirror, it would have shown a grimacing face.

The scribe, perfectly immobile, was standing straight. Her covered-in-a-*doek* head, bowed subserviently in the darkness before dawn, was held high. Looking at her, I doubted that the sense of danger rocking my world was transmitted to me through the radius of her faith.

As the song came to an end, the priest turned to us feigning surprise at our presence. "A good morning," he told us by way of greeting.

"I see you," I told him menacingly, corrupting the traditional greeting.

"Is it," the scribe asked lightly, "I'll take your word for it."

It was too good an opportunity and the priest, ever the vigilante for his Lord, took it: "Everyday with *Jesusss*, is *sweeeterrr* than the day before," he said, voice rising and drawn out on the key words.

We started walking, having no response to that. But the priest was not yet done, “Do you know that,” he asked, “*all scripture,*” hoisting the leather bound book high, he left us in no doubt about the scope of ‘all’, “*is inspired by God*”?

I stopped in indecision: I was not sure that I still knew this, but I no longer wanted to know it.

The scribe, whatever her opinions on this, continued walking towards the door in the wall.

“You know the rules,” he said warningly.

Past the pulpit, with an unobstructed line to the door, the scribe paused.

“*Scripture is profitable for correcting error,*” he continued, seamlessly blending his warning with the rest of the quote. It was, I supposed, thius kind of oratory skill that convinced the worshippers that the Priest was the voice of their god.

But we knew the rules: any three religions were welcome to make the Sanctuary a home at any given time, a representative occupying one of the three cells. Any system was a religion if it satisfied two requirements: it had followers, and it had scripture. The scribe had the townshippers, but not the scripture. Without scripture, she could not continue receiving worship, or whatever, in the name of her god. Without scripture, she had no place in the Sanctuary. The priest had the right to evict her, and he was itching to do just that.

Give me that old time religion,

the priest suddenly begged,

Give me that old time religion,

It was good enough for mother,

he informed us sonorously.

It was good enough for father,

It was good enough for aunty,

The scribe reached the door and went through. So did I.

It is good enough for me.

The priest concluded, the sound seeping through the cracks around the closed door.

“That song, huh,” I said, trying to dispel the lingering echo of the song. The scribe took no heed, instead going to sit cross-legged on the bare floor. After a moment of silence and stillness, she starts humming a tune. It is not anything I have heard before. She starts rocking to the hum, a slow back and forth.

It was at such moments, moments of foreign and incomprehensible ritual, that any suspicion that I was, in some way, really the hummer, was dispelled. I could not imagine the cross-hanged man surprised by the rituals performed in his name.

As the ritual continued, my attention wandered a bit. I was assailed by the old questions: is the scribe my believer; could she be anything else but my believer; was I just caught in the web of some generic faith; is she enough to cure what ails me? If her faith had noting to do with me, why I was not caught in the priest’s web of faith? Was I, in some way, anti the Christ? This thought, as always, did not bear close scrutiny, and I dragged my thoughts away from it.

The humming and rocking was winding down. I watched as it came to a complete stop. She stood up and started undressing.

“I’m still here, you know,” I say to her. That was as far as my attempt at full disclosure went. I was, as far as I could see, the closest thing to her object of faith. In relation to her, I was neither human, nor male, and my gaze far from that of a peeping tom. That, at least, is what I tell myself every time I watch her undress.

She has hair nowhere on her body, not even eyebrows. Her stomach is flat, her breasts large and heavy looking for her slender frame. There was a birthmark around the left nipple. A small, flat nose, large eyes, high cheekbones and a prominent forehead made her look haughty. I cannot tell if she is the kind of female I would have desired, nor do I care: my dependence on her transcended such considerations.

Of course, since I found the Sanctuary door closed, and was no ghost to walk through doors, and had to wait for someone to unlock the doors before I could enter, it is more accurate to say that she brought her radius to me.

Since the first time I came within it, I was never far from her. I stopped being aware of my own thoughts at some point after she went to sleep, and became aware of my thoughts

at some point when she came out of it. I saw her fall asleep; I saw her come awake. I saw nothing in between.

I was looking at her now, as she took the *doek* off last. I always expect a thick dread to tumble down her shoulders, but the *doek* covered a head as smooth as an egg. She walked over to the sculpture of the cross-hanged man and draped the *doek* around it. It might have been the smooth alabaster the figure was sculpted out of, but I suspected not. From under a pillow, she pulls a frock and covers her hands with it. From beyond the head of the bed, in the space between the bed and the wall, she brings out imbawula with several thin holes. In the perpetual darkness of the cells, the red-hot coals eclipsed the candlelight. I had watched with very little interest when she lit the mbawula earlier.

I was now watching with a lot of interest as she, hands protected by the frock, brings it to the center of the cell. She puts it down and pulls the frock on over her head. It hangs like a curtain from her frame; it has black marks as testimony of its protective capacities. She kneels in front of the mbawula. I watch her lift her left hand up, examine it closely. From one of the holes, plugging it, she pulls out a knife. It is almost translucent with heat. She takes a deep breath. I have stopped breathing. Swiftly, she places the hand on the floor fingers splayed, and cuts. She must have screamed, but I did not hear. The last thing I was aware of was her falling to the floor.

It is scripture boy, the old man had said.

We went out of the cell, out of the door and into the front part of the Sanctuary. There was enough light to see the pews, but not enough to see faces by. It was empty and silent.

Inside the radius I could detect no change, I was not wiser or stronger. The scribe, by contrast, looked haggard. All the blood she did not lose from the cauterized cut was nevertheless somewhere other than her face. She was pale, her face drawn. It was unusual for us to be stepping out at this hour but, I assumed, the need to commune with the hummer was pressing. She must have figured that as the morning star, so the evening star. It was, of course, a distinct possibility that the hummer had summoned her. But I doubted that, for more than my inability to do so myself.

We were across the first row when a group of three entered the door. They came in three rows and stopped, waiting for us to reach them. I was hoping that they were waiting

to ask for the priest's whereabouts. We were in no condition to receive supplicants. The first of the three, because he was bigger and older, was in coveralls and work boots. He looked a man used to giving hard labor for little wages; it made him look brittle, hard but easy to break. The dust and grime of his daily labor was ingrained in him, though he had taken the time to wash it off his face and hair. He, of the three men, looked the part of a supplicant to one of the residents of the Sanctuary. To his right, and parallel to him, was a younger man, quickly dismissed for his obvious junior status. In the company he kept, his role was to fetch. I should have likened the youth to myself, shadows both of us. To do so did not occur to me then.

The third character was behind and in between the supplicant and the shadow. Where they formed the base of a triangle, he was the pinnacle.

"Exalted scribe," he said by way of greeting. His voice was softly modulated, turning his language into an almost performance.

I thought she was going to continue walking; go past the base and either push over the man at the pinnacle, or go around him. She was woozy enough that it would have been understandable. But she stopped at the base of the triangle. The Rider-On-The-Wing was the representative of the Council of Clans, and carried with him its mandate. Pain was not enough to blunt his authority.

Still, positioned as she was between the supplicant and the shadow, she had turned the original, triangular formation into a diamond shape with two pinnacle points. It was not, I'm sure, lost on The Rider.

We are fast,

he extended the initial greeting with his clan boast,

We catch a cheetah by its tail,
It stumbles, we take its prey.
The eagle swoops on us,
We protect ours with bare hands.
It takes a fingertip.

“The morning star,” the scribe said, eyes on the deepening darkness outside. I wished I could explain to them why she was not all there.

“Ikhwezi Lokusa,” The Rider said, sliding into a row and sitting down in the pew. “Some people,” he continued conversationally, “imperfectly acquainted with our language might call it ‘star of silliness?”

The scribe looked right past him.

“Focus,” I said, trying not to spook her. I did not feel silly at all.

“Would you call it that too, exalted scribe? Do you also think Ikhwezi Lokusa is the same as Ikhwezi Lokugeza?”

It was a straightforward play on the last words, synonyms under the right linguistic conditions. It was also a complicated question on the boundary of meanings.

The scribe reluctantly turned her attention away from the world beyond the Sanctuary. “I see you Rider-On-The-Wing,” she said, formally acknowledging him, and by extension his companions. “I apologize, you came upon me as I was about to attend to other matters. Not all of us possess your speed.”

“No, most exalted scribe,” he responded formally, “it is we who must apologize. Our concerns are mundane, our needs readily met. But they are many, and we hope not to hold you up.”

The two of them, speaking the same language, spoke in softly modulated tones: hers was modulated by a township school education, his by a private education. It was common knowledge that the councilors to the throne were frequently drawn from the clan of The-Riders-On-The-Wing.

“What can I do for *you-whose-fingertip-was-taken-by-the-eagle*?”

“Ah,” he beamed, pleased by the way she addressed him. “But you have me at a disadvantage. I am ashamed to admit that I am not acquainted with a Clan-Of-Scribes. I do not know the exploits of your ancestors.”

“I am not clan, Rider-On-The-Wing.”

“Oh,” he said, seemingly abashed. After a few minutes of playing this out, looking down at his hands, patting his pockets for some unknown item, stealing furtive glances at the scribe, clearing his throat several times, he said, “Please forgive me, I did not mean to pry.”

To this the scribe said nothing. Her full lips were compressed into a thin line, her pupils dilated. The strain of being on her feet was beginning to show on her face. I willed her to sit down.

"Please sit down," The Rider invited her.

"It would make it awkward for us to talk," she politely declined.

But The-Rider, unused to being refused even a simple request, or just unwilling to talk to someone who looked like she would pass out any second, persisted: "What I have to tell you, exalted scribe, might take some time and patience."

Relenting, she slid into the pew opposite him. The supplicant and the shadow remained standing, as did I.

"It was a dark stormy night," The Rider began theatrically. None of us reacted.

"It was just beyond this mountain," he continued more sedately, "four men managed to evade their jailers, stole a boat, and started rowing to shore. But the waves were too big. There's a reason why this," he pointed a finger in the general direction of the mountain, "was known as the Cape of Storms."

I nodded vigorously at the history and geography lesson. The Rider took no notice.

"Two of the four were dragged under by the currents. The great sea regurgitated two, bedraggled and half drowned, but alive. They skulked around shore for some days, afraid of being caught; loathe leaving without being certain of the fate of their comrades."

By squinting hard, I occasionally caught movement from where the Rider was sitting; it was truly dark in the Sanctuary now.

"On the third day after the escape, the sea spewed out another of their comrades, dead."

The door in the wall opened, and the priest came through. He fumbled for the light switch. The bulb over the stage and the pulpit came on casting a feeble light that marginally brightened the inner space.

"Revered teacher," the Rider said.

The priest first made his way up the stage to stand behind the pulpit.

"Brother Rider," he said. "Why make darkness your abode? Is the light not so much better?"

"I cannot stand the light, Mfundisi. Would you, if it showed you your stolen lands?"

"The land, my brother, *is the Lord's and everything in it*," said the priest.

The-Rider-On-The-Wing was out of the pew and directly beneath the pulpit in a heartbeat. The supplicant scrambled after him, the shadow never even made a move. I guess I was not the only one taken by surprise.

"This land is not," The Rider said, startling me with his words. The sentiment, if not the exact words, was the old man's.

The priest was not impressed, neither by the speed at which The Rider had reached him, nor by the fury barely masked by his genteel tones. "Oh, not that old story again' he said, shielding his eyes from the light as he peered into the darkness, "Is that you Scribe?"

"It is," I said. Straight backed, her left hand cradled in the right hand, the scribe made not a sound in response.

"Was he telling you the fantastic story of the return of Nxele?"

> Ulindele bani?
> Ulindel' uNxele.
> Tyhini, tyhini, tyhini,
> Uzalwa ngubani?

I laughed in delight; I was impressed. It was Simphiwe Dana effortlessly, if in a deep voice. I would not have thought a zealot like him would know she existed, let alone sing a song of hers.

"It's going to be a long wait, brother."

"Not as long as you think, old man."

For the third time I was startled. Sure, the priest was bald and short, and was never going to see his forties again. But he was trim, with broad shoulders, his rolled up sleeves showing muscular arms, his belly flat and he walked with a spring in his step. There was about the man an agelessness that made the tag 'old' seem misplaced. Besides, I knew only one 'old man', and right now a lot of what was happening reminded me of the last conversation we had.

If the priest felt slighted, or threatened by The Rider's words, he hid it well. "Shall I leave you to it, then," he said, walking down the stage and through the door. He switched off the light, plunging us into sudden darkness.

A bump and a muffled curse later, the supplicant and The Rider rejoined us, taking up their earlier positions. After a further moment of silence, The Rider said, "Forgive us the intrusion, exalted scribe, some things are just beyond our control."

Still she said nothing.

"The cross hanged man, before he got nailed to the cross that is," The Rider said, "promised his flock, sheep like that old man, that should an establishment like this be torn down, he could rebuild it in three days. So…"

A loud whispering interrupted The Rider. It was the supplicant.

"Just go, man," The Rider said, slightly exasperated.

The supplicant shuffled out of the Sanctuary, letting in a draft of cool air as he opened and closed the door. After another moment of silence, The Rider stood up from the pew, and came to stand in the aisle. "I am a rider on the wing," he said. The scribe was on her feet: a boast in the beginning as a greeting, and an affirmation of clan identity at the end. A host received both on their feet.

Another draft of cold air announced the return of the supplicant, interrupting The Rider. Whatever it was that the supplicant had needed doing, had been quick. The whispering, combined with the exasperated permission, now made sense: the supplicant had asked permission, like a schoolboy from his teacher, to relieve himself.

"Have you run out of time, *You-Who-Catch-A-Cheetah-By-Its-Tail*, or have I run out of patience?" she said, concern and apology in her question. "You must forgive me if I have given you this impression. I can assure you I was listening attentively."

'Oh no, exalted scribe," he hastened to assure her, his apology even more abject, "it is I who must beg your forgiveness. It is true that I have kept you from your duties for too long already. Still, I am disturbed in my spirit, and should not tell the story of the Long Wait in that spirit. Forgive me, but I will have to tell you another time."

"There is nothing to forgive, Rider-On-The-Wing. Go well."

At the door The Rider paused a moment to look back. I lifted a hand in farewell; the scribe just watched him. When the door closed, we turned to the door in the wall and the cell beyond. There was to be no communion with the hummer tonight.

"All that clan talk?" I said to her retreating back. I wanted to talk about it some more. But there was too much there, and I could not work through it alone. I needed someone to hear me.

Just through the door, she stopped. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, walking ahead, "you can tell me why I'm still with you?" Spoken aloud like that, it was suddenly a true concern. There were many interconnecting threads to the story of my living death: the old man, the village, the clans, the scribe, the faith, and more clans. I held none of these strands in my hands. Sometimes, like now, I sensed some unraveling, but I could not see which or even *if* a thread was unraveling. "You can help me work through the story of my death." I looked up to see what she was doing, but she was not in the cell. She has been far from me before, but never out of sight for long. When more time passed, and I was still alone in the cell, I went in search of her

"What's happening," I said when I caught sight of her still standing by the open door.

Her shoulders were relaxed, arms slightly away from her body, feet apart. In her frock and a baldhead, she looked like a monk. She nodded, then, after a few seconds, shook her head. She repeated this move a couple of times, all the while looking at someone in the inner space of the Sanctuary.

In the inner space, the feeble light was under siege from the darkness that held sway. The scribe must have flicked the switch. Taking a step in and out of the light was the Rider-On-The-Wing's shadow. Every time he retreated into the dark, the scribe shook her head; when he advanced into the light, she nodded.

"Come," she said when he advanced into the light again. Not waiting to see if he followed, she walked to the cell. It took him a while to come through the door. When he eventually managed it, he cautiously inched his way forward, hugging the wall.

"Really," I asked from the cell door, half expecting him to hear me. He looked mentally challenged enough that this was a reasonable expectation. He gave no sign that he could hear me.

When he finally entered the cell, the scribe was sitting cross-legged on her bed, her back to the wall. She indicated the straight-backed chair at the desk.

"Who is this?" I asked her; a little surprised that he understood her invitation to sit. There was a vacancy in his eyes that could be mistaken for profound introspection, but I was not fooled. His deep-set eyes added somewhat to the illusion, they reminded me of the Law-Speaker's eyes. He looked a few years older than I was when I died, and thinner.

My birth is the fall of leaves,
the wilting of wild grass.
In the death throes of the land,
the long struggle that drive the
animals of the wild deep into their burrows,
I am the son of autumn.

"Son-Of-Autumn," the scribe said, dipping her head in acknowledgment. "I am a shameful host. I apologize."

"No, exalted scribe. It is I who is covered in shame." In the language he spoke, the word was 'painted'. "I came into your presence as a Rider-On-The-Wing. How else can you receive me but on your backside?" Although the word he used for 'backside' was vulgar, the vulgarity underscored his shame rather than that of his host.

"What can I do for you, Son-Of-Autumn," she asked.

For a moment we lost him. It was peculiar, but right there in front of us, he seemed to retreat into the shadows around his chair. Indeed, I caught the scribe looking at the candle, not even a flicker to the flame. At the same time she must have caught something in the corner of her eye, for she suddenly whipped her head around. I turned, tracking her eyes to something behind me, but the shadow recalled my attention before I caught sight of whatever.

"I am named a prophet in the Order of Nxele, exalted scribe," the shadow said.

Looking through me still, she took a moment turning back to him. "Should I call you 'a prophet in the Order of Nxele'?"

"That is your question?" I asked incredulously.

"I saw your hand. I saw the pain. I am yours," the shadow was saying.

“Are you mad,” I asked him.

“I do not understand you,” the scribe said, and after a slight hesitation, added, “Son-Of-Autumn.”

“I have something to give you,” the shadow said. He stood up and unslung a rucksack from his back that I had not noticed before.

“Is it an explanation,” I shouted in his face. I might as well not have been there, that’s how much he noticed me.

“Son-Of-Autumn,” the scribe said, “sit down please. Sit,” she said when he went on fumbling with his bag. He sat.

“What should I call you,” she asked gently, so as not to spook him into madness I supposed.

The man told her his name.

“The Order Of Nxele?”

“That is why The-Rider-On-The-Wing came to you today.”

“To name you a prophet,” she prompted after nothing more was forthcoming.

“The story he was telling you? It is the story of how this,” he pointed at the floor, “became the place from which Nxele will emerge when he returns. And to persuade you to help remove the priest of the cross-hanged man from the Sanctuary.”

The scribe uncoiled herself from the bed to get a new candle from the drawer. The shadow held himself stiffly until she returned to the bed. The light from the new candle did nothing to brighten the room.

“And why are you here now?”

He fumbled with his bag. This time she let him get whatever it was from the bag. “Here,” he said.

It was unclear, from where I was standing, what it was he held in his hand.

“What is it,” the scribe asked, but there was knowledge in the question.

“A fragment of scripture,” the shadow said.

She leaned forward, but could not reach it without coming out of the cross-legged position.

The shadow stood up from the chair, and took a step forward. With his right thumb and index finger, he lifted the bone from his palm. Where, at first, she would have taken it off

his hand, she now held out her hand. The shadow gently put the fragment on her upturned palm.

"It is a piece from the original," he informed her. When he did not return to his seat, she looked up questioningly. He was looking down on her expectantly.

Too much was happening, too many strands that needed following. But I understood the shadow perfectly. I, too, was itching to hold my fragment in my hand.

"You do not disappear in the zone," he said. Whatever that meant, it made the scribe nod at her pillow.

With care, as if handling paper thin china, the shadow brought forth the scribe's bloody stump of a finger.