

Part A: Thesis

**IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

of

Rhodes University

by

**Sonia Charity Sajjabi Namukuta**

November 2023

## Table of contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PART I : A killer instinct.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Blue-eyed girl.....	5
Easy to grip.....	9
So this is love.....	12
In an hour.....	23
A matter of time.....	24
Love-Hate.....	27
The sound of colour.....	28
Profile.....	32
<b>PART II : In another world.....</b>	<b>35</b>
The abandoned.....	36
The one I didn't see.....	50
The two of us.....	54
Of dreams and visions.....	58
Life when I sleep.....	62
<b>PART III : Death comes for us all.....</b>	<b>64</b>
The way to my death.....	65
The far side.....	67
After.....	68
Her inscriptions.....	69

## **Abstract**

My thesis is a collection of short stories that delve into the multifaceted nature of death, with a specific emphasis on murder, violence, death and their profound aftermath, including themes of loss, grief, and trauma. These stories offer diverse perspectives, narrated by perpetrators, voiceless victims, and those left to pick up the shattered pieces. Additionally, some stories are seen through the eyes of those tasked with handling the bodies. Often set in unnamed locations, they delve into imaginary and fantastical worlds, while remaining grounded in recognisable situations and spaces.

I draw inspiration from popular and genre fiction such as horror, crime fiction and true crime stories, but approach my writing from a psychological lens, employing stylistic experimentation to challenge readers' expectations. The power of silence is a recurring motif. Rather than focusing on unearthing facts or revealing the "truth" like crime fiction often does, my narratives delve into what isn't or at times cannot be told — the unsayable.

Some of my stories explore silence inherent in violence, grief, and the inability to articulate one's experience in the face of a violent act or a life prematurely ended. Others delve into the silence of untold stories and the dark secrets of the perpetrators. By exploring these contrasting perspectives, I aim to offer a nuanced exploration of death and its aftermath.

The writing styles of Stephen Graham Jones, Lydia Davis, and Kuzhali Manickavel influence my work. Lydia Davis, known for her mastery of very short, flash fiction, ranging from single sentences to a paragraph or two, inspires me with her precise observations of the human condition. Her minimalist prose, carefully selecting and arranging words and sentences, encapsulates the power of less-is-more storytelling.

Manickavel creates surreal yet tangible worlds, combining idiosyncratic, intense and eerie elements with unfiltered expression. Drawing from her ability to blur the lines between the surreal and the real, I infuse my stories with a sense of disquieting authenticity.

Stephen Graham Jones stands out for his ability to explore morbid themes in a compelling and unconventional manner. His experimentation with horror fiction tropes, the visceral realism of his prose, and his complex characters inspire me to capture the unsettling feeling that something dreadful has occurred without explicitly detailing the facts and intricacies.

**PART I**  
**A Killer Instinct**

## **Blue-eyed girl**

I saw it. Floating. That summer. I had gone to an abandoned lake house with the big kids of the neighbourhood. I joined them because it sounded like fun. I had promised not to tattle-tell. So they let me tag along.

I wasn't sure what it was at the time. Mist hovered over the lake, making it unclear. So I dived in. Swam to where it was floating. Held onto it, like a branch. But it sank under my weight. I groped for it in the dark water. It felt like my body. It was my body. Or rather, a body. Head. Shoulders. Limbs and all. I pulled back, legs flailing through the darkness. My mouth opened in a scream and water rushed in. Choking and gasping, I swam towards the bank.

The big kids pulled me out of the water. I looked at them — scared. They looked at me — scared for me. I held my mouth. Ran to the nearest shrub. Vomited the burger I had at the fuel station on the way to the lake house. I didn't tell the big kids what I thought I held. My shock turned to humour for me and the big kids who burst into laughter... This is how every scary movie I've watched started...

I saw it again. Floating. The next summer. I went alone this time. The big kids stopped going to the abandoned lake house because they thought it was too creepy. They also don't play with me anymore. I don't know why. Maybe because Uncle got mad when he realised I was away from home. Hanging out with the big kids without telling him. But it's okay. I don't need them to play with me anyway, because I'm a big girl.

I wanted to be sure what it was this time. So I dived into the mist-covered lake. Swam to it. Held part of it like a branch. It sank under my weight. Still, I held onto it. I dragged it out of the water, onto shore. It was definitely a body. Head. Shoulders. Limbs and all. Naked. No eyes. It wasn't complete.

Again, I held my mouth. Ran to the nearest shrub. Released the fries I had before heading to the lake. I wasn't shocked by what I found. It was the smell. Not exactly foul but off, like rotting fruit. This is what a dying thing smells like!

I saw it again. Floating. Last summer. It was becoming a routine visit. I liked the air by the lake house. Uncle travels a lot in the summer now. He doesn't like to take me places. He leaves me at home alone. So I can go to the lake whenever I want. This summer, the mist wasn't as thick. So I dived into the lake. Swam to the clearly defined thing. Gripped it tighter than a branch. This time, it didn't sink under my weight. This one was heavy. I dragged it onto the shore. Across the beach. Up to the abandoned house. It felt far away as my feet sank in the sand from the weight of the body and sweat beaded on my forehead. I glanced back at the body and noticed that it

covered my footprints with the long trail it left behind. When I reached the house, I dropped it, pushed open the rotting door then pulled it across the threshold. I closed the door and stood breathing, holding my hips in accomplishment. I was glad I got this one — that it was there. Head. Shoulders. Limbs and all. Naked. But again, no eyes. I sighed. Again, it wasn't complete. I wondered who took the eyes. And for what purpose?

I didn't lose the bacon and eggs I had earlier that day. Mostly because this one didn't smell as bad. That made me happy. I sat on the floor. In the corner furthest from it. I was just a little bit scared of it after all. I leaned my head against the wall. Pulled my knees to my chest. Wrapped my hands around my knees. Then I watched it from the corner of my eye. I watched it die some more. I sat with it for one more week. Until the smell became a bother. This is what it's like to be with a dead thing in dead silence!

I took it back to where I found it.

I saw it again. Floating. This summer. The air felt different this time. I didn't like it. It could be because when Uncle and I were watching a scary movie, I asked him if it was bad to discover dead things. He said yes. He said I should call him or the police if I find dead things. I thought about telling him about what I had discovered, but I didn't want him to be angry that I left the house without permission. So I kept it to myself. I waited until he travelled before I went to the lake again.

As I grew older, I liked swimming less. I disliked getting my hair wet and the way the dirty water dried my skin. Still, I dived into the mist-covered lake. Swam to the floater. This one I called Jane Doe. I'd seen a movie that explained that's what you call people who are lost — whose names you don't know. This Jane was not heavy. She was like me. Just enough. I dragged Jane onto the shore. Across the beach. Up to the abandoned house. It didn't feel far this time. I didn't break a sweat. So I liked this Jane even more.

My Jane's skin was pale. So I put her close to a window to get some sun. To dry off. I noticed her hair was nice. Not like mine though. The rest of her was like me. Except for those missing eyes. This still vexed me. This Jane was not complete. Like the others. How inconsiderate of whoever took them. How would I know how beautiful this Jane was without her eyes? Not that I didn't care about how the ones before looked. It's just that this Jane was different. She had a name at least. I had to see how beautiful this Jane was with eyes. So I decided to give her a pair. Maybe she'd like them. Maybe she and I could be friends after. If she liked her new eyes that is. I had planned to stay longer this summer since Uncle said he'd be away for longer. So I had taken a bunch of stuff with me. Mostly snacks. Nothing I could use to make this Jane a pair of eyes save for a spoon.

I took a trip to the store by the fuel station twenty minutes away. The lady at the store recognised me from the summers before. She always looked concerned because I was always alone. So she found stuff for me; gave me lots of free stuff. I liked her. I think she liked me too. This time was no different. I told her I had to make pretend eyes for a school art project. She picked out stuff that I could use. I paid half the price for them. She even gave me tips on how to make them look real. I liked her even more. If I had a mum or maybe an aunt, I'd want her to be like this lady.

I couldn't wait to get started making the eyes. But I had a few snacks first. I hadn't eaten all day. I was a bit tired. Carrying Jane and taking a trip was hard work after all. I needed to reward myself. The burger that the lady at the store gave me was delicious, and so was the orange juice.

I got to work on Jane's new eyes. The tips that lady gave me came in handy. It didn't take long to make the pair — three days. It would have been quicker if I didn't get Jane's eyeball size wrong. How terrible of me not to check first. Uncle calls people who don't get things done properly incompetent. I don't think that's me because I got them done. I even painted blue eyes for her, so she wouldn't be exactly like me. Mine are brown.

It was hard to fix them into her since she was so stiff. So I laid her down, got on top of her, and squeezed them into her empty eye holes. I sighed in relief once I was done — smiled even. Her face didn't say it but I think she liked them.

I put some lotion all over her. She looked much brighter. Her nudity was bothering me. So I put a cloth over her. I looked her over. This is how beautiful a dead thing can look!

I took Jane back to where I found her.

This summer isn't over yet. I've been home for two weeks now. I miss Jane already. She was fun to be around — beautiful to look at. Her smell didn't bother me. I just wish she could talk. Maybe we'd have had a lot to talk about.

Uncle is no fun. He hasn't been talking to me since he got back two days ago. All he does is sleep in the living room all day with the TV on. He brought lots of snacks and gifts from his trip though. That made me happy at least.

While Uncle sleeps, I hear a man on TV say that a girl is missing. She has been missing for two months. There's a picture of her on the screen. It looks like the Jane I gave beautiful eyes to. Not exactly like her. The eye colour is different. The girl in the picture has brown eyes. The blue eyes I gave that Jane look prettier. The man on TV says to call the number on the screen if anyone has information. I write it down.

The man on TV says that girls have been disappearing for a few years now. A string of missing

cases, he calls them. Maybe that Jane is this girl in the picture, I think to myself. I now want to know. So, I go to the phone box down the street. Uncle doesn't like it when I make unnecessary calls with the landline or his phone. I call the number I wrote down. They answer.

"The man on TV said to call this number..." I didn't wait for a response, "Have girls been missing a lot?"

"Yes, they have," the person says, "Are you with someone? Mum or Dad?"

"No, Uncle is sleeping at home," I say. "Do girls go missing in summer only?"

The person doesn't answer. I get annoyed. I hang up. I go home.

I wake Uncle because I want to know. He is annoyed, but still I ask him.

"If I have prettier blue eyes instead of brown eyes, is it still me?" I ask.

"Of course, it's still you. Now go play somewhere else," he says.

I don't go away. I ask him some more questions. He looks annoyed but he still answers all of them. He doesn't yell. That's why I like Uncle.

When Uncle goes back to sleep, I run back to the phone box. I call the police. Not that number from the TV. I tell them about the lake house. I tell them about that Jane. I don't tell them that I gave Jane new beautiful eyes. I don't tell them who I am — where I'm calling from. I wasn't supposed to be out of the house by myself. Uncle could get in trouble. I hang up and run home. I don't tell Uncle about the lake house. I don't tell him that I called the police. I don't want him to know that I left home for more than two days without telling him. He'll get mad.

Days later, the man on TV says they found Jane. I smile because Jane and the girl in the picture are the same after all. I find out that Jane's real name. I don't think it's important though. Jane sounds better.

## Easy to grip

I lost my fountain pen, quite a beautiful one, Montblanc, easy to grip, easy to run on any piece of paper. I bought it a few minutes before I met this person, as eye-catching as they come, moulded black, a classy three-piece suit, and a golden tooth as shiny as the gold cap of my fountain pen. His outstretched hand was smooth to the touch, and his grip reassuring and comforting to any frail heart.

Two days after I bought my fountain pen, we took a trip down South. I took it with me so I could journal everything we did together. Two strangers strangely connected by my clumsiness and his chivalry. I thought chivalry was dead.

That day, I should have remained on the floor with my books and Montblanc. I could have picked myself up and taken my Montblanc home to continue writing my novel. But now, here I am, far from home with this chivalrous stranger, smoothly writing on a low-quality piece of paper about the night my body would soon not forget. My Montblanc crafted a story as sensual as my body felt — the text looked heavenly. I wish I hadn't subjected my Montblanc to the torture of filling that unworthy piece of paper.

Two months after I bought my fountain pen, I slapped this person whom I met a few minutes after I bought it. I had already used several pots of ink to write about this less-than-chivalrous man. I used up all the books I bought a few months ago writing about this man who was no longer a stranger. I resolved that first impressions shouldn't matter after all. I was cursing more. My novel was nowhere near finished and my writing had turned angry. I hated that the writing always looked magnificent on paper because, unlike this disappointing less-than-chivalrous man, my Montblanc always ran smoothly on any piece of paper.

I lost my fountain pen, that very beautiful one, Montblanc with an easy grip that ran very easily on any piece of paper. I lost it the week after I slapped the person whom I met a few minutes after I bought it. He was still here — still hovering even though I wanted him gone, but I let him be. All I could think about was where the hell I put my Montblanc! I turned my room upside down in frustration and panic because I couldn't find it anywhere — not even in the jacket coat pockets where I swore I would never leave it. He looked at me like I was deranged, assuring me that it was just a pen that could easily be replaced. He clearly had never bought or used a Montblanc before. That statement was the last straw. I told him to leave, making it clear that I never wished to see him again now that the only pen that could beautify our ugly relationship was gone.

I never found that fountain pen, it was a beautiful one, Montblanc with an easy grip that created the most exquisite words on any piece of paper. I convinced myself that I lost it so I could let go of the man I met a few minutes after I bought it.

Five months after I lost my fountain pen, I made a new friend. We met in the store where I had gone to buy a new fountain pen, Montblanc. We bonded over our love for fancy writing material and small talk about past relationships.

She told me that she had lost her pencil a week ago, Montblanc, easy to grip, writing the most eye-catching words on any piece of paper. I shared my pain of having lost my precious Montblanc five months ago. She felt sorry for me because I had to go a long time without a good fountain pen. After sharing a deep similar sentiment, we swore to be good friends because she and I were the same.

As we parted ways, she ran to her lover's car who held the door open for her. It was the same chivalrous but appalling man I met a few minutes after I bought my fountain pen a few months ago, quite pleasing to look at, moulded black and pretty as a picture with the new friend I made when I bought a new fountain pen. We made eye contact briefly and acknowledged each other's existence but as strangers. As I walked away, I smiled because I had made a new friend. I smiled because she and I were the same. We both loved Montblanc.

Three months after I bought a new Montblanc and made a new friend, I got news of her. It wasn't as I imagined, over pen and paper and torn fragments from lost love letters. I happened upon her picture in a newspaper. It was towards the back, a small article. I circled it with my new Montblanc. She had been missing for a month or so; added to a list of women who had gone missing over the years. I tapped away mindlessly at her picture, wondering whether the disappointing less-than-chivalrous man was with her before she disappeared. I said a prayer for her safe return. It would be a pity to lose a friend with whom I share the same sentiments.

It had been four months since I said a prayer for my new friend's safe return. I was only five chapters into my novel. I was running out of cartridges for my Montblanc. I happened upon her picture again in a newspaper. It was towards the back, a wordy article. I circled it with my Montblanc. She had been found dead. I recognised the name of the hotel where her body was discovered from my trip down South. The article didn't mention the disappointing less-than-chivalrous man. It only said that no suspects had yet been arrested and the police were urging anyone with information to come forward. I wrote the number listed on a piece of paper in an unsteady hand that even my Montblanc couldn't still.

It's been nine months since I found out that my new friend was dead. I am now writing the final chapter of my novel. I never phoned the number but I still carry the paper with me. Sometimes I

take it out. I stare at the number but I don't recognise the handwriting or the pen that wrote those shaky numbers.

## **So this is love**

### **Part I**

It was the crack of dawn when I left home. My wife was asleep. Always asleep. She never saw me off. I didn't mind. I preferred it that way. My trips required a singular focus. Seeing her smile would distract me and make it hard to leave; make me miss her, and yearn for her while I was away. I decided to put her at the back of my mind — cage her there, until after my trip.

The hotel was one of those old colonial hotels, a monument to a history, long over but that seemed to persist in the present. To linger. I parked my car near the entrance and sat a while surveying things, before exiting. The place was a mess, the grounds untended and overrun by dust and weeds. The hotel itself looked desolate, an ugly grey stone building only saved from dreariness by the sun that shone brightly on it. A little too bright for my liking. As I walked through the front doors, the floorboards creaked my arrival. A doorman rushed to me, offering to take the suitcase I had in hand. I smiled but declined. He was typical of the places. Like the hotel, a relic of the previous era — a combination of arrogance and servitude. As it turned out, he was also the only staff member on duty. “Do you get many guests here?” I asked as he checked me in. He laughed then, discerning my earnestness, cleared his throat. “No, not really. You're only our third guest this week.”

Key in hand, I followed him down the corridor. The overhead lights had blown and loose wires hung from the fixtures like vines. In their place, the hotel had rigged up a few lamps that cast everything in shadows. I watched our shadows stretch out on the walls as we walked, the cracks in the walls breaking out figures into strange mosaics. Like outside, the interior was left to ruin. Mould was eating away at the wooden floorboards. The paint on the wall, probably originally white, was now a dusty brown.

I loved it. It was perfect for my hobbies.

The room was sparsely furnished — a bed, a couch and a cupboard. It was all I needed. The doorman lingered a moment too long — probably waiting for a tip. When I didn't comply he left swiftly, almost slamming the door. I looked around and wondered if we weren't alike — wasn't I too a product of our history; its violence and depravity? Sometimes I think it comes with the language. It lodges itself in your mouth. You drink it — a certain inflection. A poise. Feinted airs. A hollow politeness that concealed something dark and knotted. The way the language requires you to keep moistening your lips with your tongue. I ran my tongue along my lips. I could still taste my wife. I shook my mind free of the thought, laid my suitcase on the floor and unpacked it just the way my wife told me to. I thought about her as I unpacked. I thought about her until I finished unpacking. Thoughts of her made my body ache. I felt a heat rise to my face.

I sat on the bed and freed myself from the grip of my trousers. Imagined my wife on her knees, in front of me. She threw back her head. Mouth open — an invitation. I ran my hands through her hair as she swallowed me. Stroked her head, fingers gripping and kneading. She sucked. I took myself in my hand. Followed her rhythm. In and out, up and down. I let out a low moan. My body ached, begging to be completely freed from my trousers, to drown in thoughts of my wife. But I held back, only barely managing to pull myself together. I didn't let myself finish. "I didn't come all this way for this," I said to myself. I got up and shook my head. "She wouldn't like it if she knew what I was doing." I zipped my trousers.

Just before sunset, I headed into town. It was the best time to be out and about. That's what my wife said. She said it's good for my hobby; less suspicious. I took her advice. I've not had any problems since I started taking her advice.

The walk took less than five minutes. Unlike the run-down hotel I was staying at, the town buzzed. From what I could see, it seemed to serve the NGO sector that had blossomed since independence. Trade mark white UN jeeps lined the streets. The evening market was buzzing, merchants screaming prices and buskers competing for ears. Unlike my town where everyone kept to themselves, here everyone seemed so sociable and happy. She'd like it here, I thought to myself, I should bring her along next time.

I wandered down the street until I stumbled upon a small bar that wasn't as alive as the streets. Opening the door, I was enveloped by heat. The place lacked ventilation making it hard to breathe. Soft music played over a small radio close to the door. I could hear faint sounds of pool balls colliding from the back. I pulled back a wooden stool by the bar and sat. Flagged down a bartender, and ordered a beer. Whilst I waited, I looked around. A handful of people were crammed together in a dimly lit booth to the right, whispering amongst themselves as though what they were talking about was top secret. At the corner of the long counter, a woman was seated by herself nursing a nearly empty bottle. She looked like she was in her early thirties. When she briefly glanced at me, her eyes, like her face, looked stern and woeful, as though the walls were caving in around her. Or she wanted to die. She would be the perfect subject, I mumbled. But I remembered that my wife wasn't a fan of eyes that looked like hers. So the thought left as quickly as it came.

The bartender returned with my drink and placed it on a small wooden coaster in front of me. I stared at the glass of beer and the wooden coaster intently. I couldn't help but be bothered by the disproportion between the glass and the small coaster. As I fixated, I felt a hand touch my lower left back. It moved up to my right shoulder. I turned and found myself face-to-face with a young woman. She was standing close to me — almost leaning against me. Was she here when I got in? I don't think so. Otherwise, I would have noticed her. She was pretty enough in her dead man's clothes and a fake leather overnight bag slung over her. A village girl, I thought. She probably

did this every weekend. Got dressed up and came into town hoping to land herself a rich foreigner from the NGO community. Her ticket out of here. I also knew enough about her type to know she'd settle for a few free drinks and a hotel room for the night. I looked into her brown eyes and she held my gaze. My wife would love looking at these eyes, I thought to myself, smiling.

“Well, aren't you a beauty?” I commented.

She laughed, slightly thrown by my direct response. “Thank you.”

“Join me,” I pulled out the seat to my right and gestured for her to sit. She put down the fake leather overnight bag and made herself comfortable.

“Aren't you a little bit young to be in a bar?” I quizzed.

“I'm old enough,” she retorted defensively. I resisted a sneer. I wasn't particularly interested in her age. I just wanted to feel her out. I thought we were off to a good start.

“You don't look like you're from here.” I changed the subject. “What brings you to this little town?”

“How could you tell?” Her guard was still up. I glanced down at her overnight bag and then back at her. Although the bag was a dead giveaway, I'd seen enough runaways on my trips to sense one from a mile away. They were my preference for my hobbies after all. But she didn't need to know that.

“Oh, I forgot about that.” She shifted her focus to me. “What about you? You don't look like you're from here either. Sitting alone in a quiet lonely bar.”

“I'm here on a trip. To help me indulge in a few... hobbies of mine.” I explained. “Would you like a beer or whiskey perhaps?”

She nodded. I called over the bartender. She looked over the wall of alcohol bottles, confused.

“Uhhh.. vodka,” she hesitantly said.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes, I am sure.” She spoke more firmly. “Vodka on the rocks. Tall glass, please.”

The bartender and I exchanged knowing looks.

“Anything for the lady,” I told him. The bartender went on his way and I turned my focus back to her. An interesting one, I thought.

“You mentioned hobbies. What could you possibly do in this small town?” she asked.

“Sex,” I stated and took a sip of my beer. “And other indoor activities of course.”

She stared at me for a brief second, taken aback. She came to and asked if my wife knew; an intense gaze at the ring on my finger. I had forgotten I was wearing it. My wife hated it when I forgot to put it on or even take it off. I thought of her and how much I missed her. I huffed lightly, snickered and fingered the rim of my glass then took a big gulp from it. The young lady sensed my subtle irritation.

“But what she doesn't know won't hurt her, will it?” She attempted to alleviate the situation.

I placed my glass gently on the counter and stared into her eyes. I just have to have her. “Well, would you like to indulge in my hobbies with me?” I asked — offered. She took a large sip of her vodka then put the glass down, and returning my gaze, agreed. I would have been surprised if she hadn’t. We stayed until she finished her vodka. On the rocks. In a tall glass. Then we walked together to the hotel.

The main street was buzzing. Smoke rose in the air and the smells of meat cooking. Loud music pumped from a nearby taxi rank. People flooded the market, hopping from food stall to food stall, rendering it nearly impassable. I took the young lady’s hand and guided her through the crowd to the dirt road. She had a stagger in her step — a bit tipsy from the liquor, so she leaned on me for support for the rest of the way.

“I didn’t get your name,” she inquired more than stated, as we approached the hotel.

“You’ve been fine without it thus far. Why kill the mystery now?” I responded.

“Don’t you want to know mine?”

“That’s not a good idea. What if I accidentally say your name when I go back to my wife after our little adventure?”

She laughed. “That would be interesting. Okay. No names then.”

I inwardly sighed in relief. An accident like that happened once before. My wife wasn’t particularly unhappy about it, but she wasn’t too pleased about it either. For my wife’s and my peace of mind, I decided never to ask for my subjects’ names during my trips. We met the doorman on our way in. He gave me a sly smile before letting me know that he’d be out for the rest of the evening. An interesting person, this doorman. I was glad he would be out.

Before opening my room door, I again asked the girl if she was sure she wanted to go in with me. She nodded in agreement, briefly placed her head on my shoulder and a hand on the door handle. Her feet heavy beneath her, she plodded into the dark room and sat on the bed. She was probably more glad to have a somewhat decent place to sleep for free than actually being here with me. Her true intentions weren’t a big concern to me, as long as I got what I wanted. I got into the room, locked the door behind me and flicked the light on. Only then did I realise that her bag was still at the bar — if it hadn’t been stolen already. She wouldn’t need it anyway, so it was fine.

“What do you want me to do?” Her eyes oozed languid sensuality. Her forwardness sent an erotic shock through my body. “Come here,” I said. Like a trained animal, she slid to the floor onto all fours and crawled over to me, rested at my feet — tilted her head back to look up at me. I leaned forward, smoothed my hands over her hair until I grabbed her hair tie, tugged at it and freed her weave from its bun. I tucked my index finger under her chin and ran my thumb over her lower lip. I pressed my lips against hers. Her lips parted as I slipped my tongue into her mouth. She quivered. I pulled her up and stood her in front of me, our lips meshed. I gripped her

hair with my right hand while my left travelled under her skirt. Clasped her arse. I pulled her onto me until I felt her nipples harden.

I moved us to the bed, sat and had her straddle me while I continued to kiss her — hands, lips, neck. My hands moved over her body; only travelling to where she felt comfortable, until she let out a moan of submission, letting go of whatever wariness she had left. I then released her breasts from her shirt. They were full and bouncy; nipples hard from arousal. Her hands came up to cover them. “They are beautiful.” I looked at her, smiled and brought her hands down. I held both breasts, felt their softness and warmth, and fondled them. My crotch pulsed. I’ll do with you what I want to do with my wife, I thought to myself.

We stayed together — explored each other for five days.

Even after five days together, sex — the inner workings of each other’s bodies — was the only thing that we truly knew about each other. I taught her what I liked — loved her gently, softly. I learned what she liked — the way she liked it; rough and unhinged. We discovered our shared love for bondage. She liked the toys I had brought with me. We used all of them, but her favourite was the gag and choker. She said she liked the thrill of bondage. So we used them often when we had sex. The afternoon before I left to return to my wife was no different. We started with gentle but intense foreplay. I laid her on the bed and kissed her lips, then her neck and then focused on her breasts. I fondled the right nipple with my fingers while I teased her left nipple — traced around it with my tongue and then sucked on it. Her body responded to my touch and she moaned. She had said her breasts were the most sensitive part of her body. I loved how quickly she got wet because of it. She tried to get up and said she wanted to cater to me too. I told her that the afternoon was all about her since I’d be leaving the next day. She finally agreed and relaxed on the bed. I took the ropes and bound her hands and legs to the four sides of the bed. She chuckled in excitement and anticipation. I took the choker, put it around her neck and kissed her passionately. I’m going to miss this young lady, I thought in the middle of our kiss. I placed a bar spoon by the bedside table and looked for the gag.

“That’s fancy. What is it?” she raised an eyebrow.

I smiled at her. “It’s a Cocktail Kingdom Hoffman bar spoon.”

“What do you need it for?” she quizzed.

“For the most exciting part. I don’t want to ruin the surprise.” I headed to the bathroom in search of the gag.

“Hmmm, the vibrator is in the bedside table drawer and the gag is by the window if that’s what you’re looking for.”

Uh, yes, the window, I recalled. We’d used it three or so days ago when I bent her over by the window. She had told me at the time that someone was watching us from outside. I looked out and noticed it was the doorman watching us. I convinced the young lady that we should give him a show and she obliged. Being watched must have thrilled her because she asked that we have

sex by the window early every morning after that. So we did. And early every morning the doorman watched us.

I walked over to the window and got the gag. After a brief thought, I drew the curtains and made sure there were no spaces where anyone could look in. I went and sat on the left side of the bed. I kissed the young lady and apologised for making her wait. She laughed, “You’re such a gentle lover. Your wife is so lucky to have you.” I smiled and traced a finger over her stomach, to the side of her right hip, down to her thigh. I squeezed it before circling back to her clit. I rubbed it gently until she let out a sigh.

“Shall I tell you a short story? About me. About my wife. About how we met.” I said, still playing with her clit.

“Uh hmmm,” she said between breaths.

“I was on a trip just like this one five years ago,” I started, “It was a big city. A big fancy hotel. While at the VIP bar, I saw the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen — elegant, petite, with beautiful hair and an equally beautiful smile. I thought I just had to have her. So I plucked up the courage and went over to talk to her.”

The young lady breathed heavily as I stroked her. I was certain she wasn’t listening to my story. But I loved telling my subjects this story before we parted ways forever. So I continued anyway. “We clicked right away. We were drawn to each other, physically and emotionally,” I said. “But mostly physically at the time. We made love to each other the night we met. And the night after that. And the night after that. I wanted it to go on forever but I enjoyed my other hobby more than I liked her at the time.”

She had gotten very wet so I paused and took the vibrator out of the bedside table drawer.

“So what happened next?” she asked. “What did you decide to do?” She was listening after all. I picked up the gag and put it tightly over her mouth. I switched on the vibrator and playfully placed it on her nipples back and forth. She tingled.

“The decision was hard to make but I was going to end her — end it with her,” I continued my story. “So the day when I was going to end it, I tied her up just like I’ve done to you. I didn’t gag her though. She’s not particularly crazy about not being able to speak, even during sex. But the room was soundproof so noise wasn’t going to be an issue.”

I briefly placed the vibrator on her clit which made her moan. It came out as a muffled sound from beneath the gag. I then slid the vibrator into her wet vagina as deep as it could go and then slowly pulled it back out. With a slow-paced rhythm, I pushed in and out of her and watched her closed eyes tighten.

“You see, I had planned a slow painless end for her since I loved the way she made my body feel. But that didn’t go according to plan,” I said, gradually increasing the tempo, “After I had made two deep cuts across her stomach, she laughed. I thought she would scream. But, no, she laughed. She said it was ironic how she came to the hotel to kill her fiancé and his mistress but

was getting killed instead. This intrigued me quite a bit. So I stopped her bleeding and told her to tell me how she was going to do it. She said she had animal euthanising pills that would instantly kill them both. The chosen method of killing was expected since poison is a woman's weapon. But what piqued my interest was what she said after. She wanted to take the mistress' eyes out after she died for daring to look at her man. I think I fell in love with her after she said that." I laughed at the memory and the change in the young lady's expression that shifted to one of terror. Maybe I told the story too fast, I thought to myself, she hasn't cum yet. I sighed and picked up the bar spoon from the table.

"Well, the devil is in the details, so I'll skip some of the fine print." I held the spoon by its smooth coil to the light. I rotated it between my left thumb and forefinger and watched the light reflect off it. I ran it over her thighs, her stomach and breasts. She began to fidget.

"So long story short, I helped her kill her fiancé and his mistress. I even took the mistress' eyes out and gave them to her as a trophy," I narrated. "She forgave me for cutting her and we got married seven months later. I've been with her ever since. My beautiful wife. What I love most about her is that she let me continue going on my trips, as long as I got her a souvenir."

I planted a kiss on the young lady's forehead and smiled. I got on top of her and planted my knees firmly close to either side of her body as she struggled and attempted to free herself.

"Do you not like BDSM anymore?" I asked, "That's strange. I could have sworn you were all for it just this morning." My sarcasm didn't bring her much comfort. Her muffled screams got louder and more urgent.

"Tell you what. You said I'm a gentle lover and I am. I really am. And I've been nice to you these last few days," I said. "So, if you struggle less, I'll give you tramadol to ease your suffering. How about that?"

My words fell on deaf ears as she kicked and pulled. I sighed, grabbed her face and stared at her dead in the eyes. I could see fear and regret swimming in her eyes. It sent a lurch of excitement down my spine. The anger that was building up in me because of her struggle melted away. It also came to mind that even though I wanted to see her suffer, I was still a gentleman. I didn't want to cause her any more fear than necessary. So I smiled at her, still holding her gaze.

"I love the look in your eyes," I told her, "so I'll be as gentle and as careful as I can possibly be." She shook her head from my grasp in rebellion. Why do they always squirm, I thought to myself.

Holding her head firmly in place with my left hand, I placed the bar spoon's stir side by the tear duct of her right eye and began to dig into it. The further I dug, the more she hollered. The louder her sound, the greater my adrenaline rush. I felt every vein in my body come alive. It pushed me — motivated me to continue. I grinned when I felt the spoon's tip poke at the nerve behind her eyeball. Using the nose bridge as a lever, I yanked the eyeball outwards and completely avulsed it from its orbit. I might have used a bit more force than I anticipated because the socket flooded red before the blood flowed back into her. I was a bit disappointed in myself. I thought I had

gotten better over the years but I guess not. Even the young lady's screams and huffs of pain didn't make me feel better. Her body convulsed and her left eyelid fluttered from the shock. I picked up the eye which had fallen on the bed sheet and held it up in front of her left eye. She stared at her eye in disbelief. Tears streamed down the side of her face. "I'm sorry. I wasn't supposed to pop it out so forcefully but isn't it beautiful?" I gave her a smile. "Fuck! My wife will definitely love it." I got up and let her calm down as I placed the eye in one of the containers that were deep within my suitcase. It contained a preservative solution to prevent the eye from drying out. I sealed it tightly and put it back in my suitcase. On to the next, I thought to myself. The young lady's breathing hadn't subsided and she was still crying. I stood by the bed and looked down at her. "Shall we go again?" I asked. She looked at me, eye widened — terrified; shook her head. She mumbled and sobbed and mumbled some more. I couldn't make out a single word. Her groans carried on as I picked up the spoon and got on top of her again.

"Something interesting to know is that I chose this particular type of spoon because I find it aesthetically pleasing during my extraction process," I said, fiddling with it. "Otherwise, a scissor or even a small knife would have worked just fine." I beamed. I held her head again and she began to pant. It reminded me of the time when my wife was pushing out our stillborn baby girl. It almost brought tears to my eyes. The beautiful ones always go first, I thought and shifted my focus back to the young lady. I placed the bar spoon's stir side by the tear duct of her left eye. I didn't want the last thing she saw to be something sad, so I smiled sweetly at her and hoped it gave her a good last visual memory. She kicked and screamed and pulled and almost made me lose my grip. Luckily her body had gotten weaker because of the initial trauma so I managed to subdue her. As the eye popped out, I felt a warm liquid flow beneath me, onto my legs and knees. This wasn't uncommon. I got up from over her and put the second eye in a container identical to the other one I had put the first eye in and sealed it tightly. I looked at the young lady and saw her body become paralysed from shock. I sat by her, careful not to sit in the pool that had formed around her. I held her left hand and massaged it gently. "Great news! Despite your fidgeting, the extraction was a success," I told her. "You'll probably haemorrhage before the shock and pain kill you but don't worry, I'll be here with you the whole time."

She wasn't screaming any more. She took quick breaths in and out like a dying dog and muttered incoherently. When her muffled sound faded, I removed the gag. Her tongue pulsed like a heartbeat for a few seconds — as though there was something it wanted to say — then became completely still. I removed the ropes and took the choker off her. It was only then that I realised that I hadn't taken the vibrator out of her vagina. I sighed in frustration. It probably won't work anymore, I concluded before I took it out of her and tossed it in the bin.

I sat by the young lady and held her hand again. Her fingers twitched, so I gave them a gentle squeeze. "I hope you're a bit more comfortable now," I said. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this hobby when we first met. It's not exactly the best conversation starter." I chuckled. "But I had a great time with you these last few days. The sex was amazing, especially mornings. I'll be

sure to tell my wife all about you. She loves a good story. I'll even gift-wrap your eyes to make them extra special. They'll be a great addition to her collection."

After I said all I wanted to, I sat with her in silence. Her breathing became shallow. I caressed her hand to let her know she wasn't alone in her last moments. It took about thirty minutes for her to stop breathing, four hours or so for her body to stiffen and another four to get cold. The cool afternoon had long bled into a cold night when I moved her to the tub to wash her. I wrapped a cloth around her body and rested her on the couch. I then changed the sheets and threw the used ones in the wash. After the doorman came for his routine evening check-ins, I carried her body to my car and placed it in the backseat.

The next morning I headed into town to find a gift box to put the containers with the eyes in. I came across a small second-hand store and popped in. A bell by the door chimed my arrival. Some people browsed through books and CDs while others wandered down the narrow aisles. I found it strange that no music was playing but light chatter from people whispering to each other covered the silence. I managed to find a gift box that my wife would like from their packaging shelf — the base box was crow black with a deep rose red cover. On my way out, I saw a stack of vinyl records. I haven't bought a vinyl for my wife in a long time, I thought to myself. I leisurely flipped through the stack and I picked out something that she'd like.

I headed back to the hotel and checked out. I gave the doorman a considerable tip. I thought he deserved it. Minus his morning snooping, he minded his own business; plus his competence — or lack thereof — and constant disappearance were things I appreciated. He didn't even ask about the young lady on my way out. He offered to carry my suitcase but I declined. I put it in my car trunk and set off. I was so excited to be going home to my wife — to tell her all about my trip. Just outside the town, on a small bridge, I carried the young lady's body out and threw it over, into the river. The cloth that covered the body flew off before the body hit the water. Maybe I should have dressed her up, the thought came to me. I shrugged as I watched the body float downstream. I got into the car and drove home.

## **Part II**

I dusted the record player as my husband put down his suitcase. He walked over to me and planted a kiss on my temple. He held up the vinyl record that he said he bought on his trip and smiled. I took it with both hands. It was a short collection with Ilene Woods' So this is love and renditions of it. I removed it from its sleeve, cleaned it and placed it on the record player's turntable. Woods' gentle humming soon filled the room with warmth and the instrumental carried a sweet nostalgic feeling. It took me back to when I first met my husband. I didn't think much of him at the time besides being a tool to release pent-up tension. The three nights we spent together were sensational. I wished they could go on forever. When he tried to kill me, and forever didn't seem so distant, I told him about my fiancé and his mistress and what I had

planned to do to them. His face lit up. He wasn't for my method but he loved my enthusiasm; so much so that he decided to help me. I gladly accepted his help because he knew what he was doing and was more confident than I was. When he went to dispose of them, he invited me to watch and I accepted. As I watched him kill my fiancé and then his mistress, a warm rush ran down my spine. He plucked the mistress' eyes from her body while it was still warm and offered them to me. I stared at the deformed eyeballs that sat in his bloodstained hands and then looked up at him. I saw the look of a child showing his parents a discovery he'd made. I couldn't help falling for the passion that burned in his eyes. Any fear I should have felt that day faded away in that moment. I was instead flooded with a desire. I slowly took the eyes out of his hands and held them in mine. I then squeezed them until they were nothing but mush. He grinned at me. I laughed, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

He later took me to a piano recital as an apology for almost killing me. The pianist's outro was a rendition of *So This is Love*. The melody caressed my ears and breathed life into me. It felt like a wave flowing onto the beach washing away my troubles.

"From your expression, I take it that you like the record," my husband said, pulling me out of my memory.

"I love it," I said.

"You'll love the second one even more," he said, presenting a gift box with my favourite colours — black and red. I already knew what was inside but that didn't take away my anticipation. I slowly lifted the red lid off the black box to reveal two clear vials each containing an eye. I lifted one of the vials to the light. The iris was a beautiful reddish-brown.

"This is so pretty." I hugged my husband. "They are a wonderful addition to my collection."

"I told her you'd like them." He smiled and then kissed me.

I had missed his touch so I melted when his lips touched mine, almost dropping the vial and gift box. He laughed, rubbing his nose against mine.

"I want to hear all about your trip," I said. "But tomorrow. There's something else I want today."

He gave me a grin, taking the vial and gift box from me and placing them next to the record player. He took my hand into his and gazed into my eyes.

So this is love. The words played in my mind as he lay on top of me; felt for what's his, and placed it on mine. So this is love. Like a stylus to vinyl, the words span in my head as he slid into me. As we collided. His groans of satisfaction made love to my ears. My moans responded in chorus to his every breath. I took all of him; felt every bit of him inside me and he became a part of me. His became mine. Mine became his.

The words he whispered in between groans, a verse to our song. His words sent my heart racing. My chest tightened as I felt a rush of passion where he and I united. With every stroke, he urged me to give more of myself to him. Our music got louder and our chorus more syncopated — a symphony that I didn't want to end. His melody wrapped around my senses as I wrapped my

arms around him — gripping his sweat-drenched shirt. My body swayed to his rhythm — an innocent dance of desire. My voice joined the dance, calling his name, begging for pleasure only he could give me. He moved his hands beneath my arms to grab my shoulders and held onto them, changing his tempo. He whispered my name like it was a secret of forbidden passion. Like music to its end, time for a split second seemed to stand still. The tension built up inside him mirrored my own. He was reaching his peak. He grabbed my neck as he always did when our symphony was ending. As our music rose to a crescendo, I surrendered myself to its seductive embrace and let it surge through my veins. His grip on my neck got tighter and I gasped for air. Every part of me tensed and I got a rush of anticipation. My heart beat faster, threatening to break out of my chest. I closed my eyes to savour the moment — that moment when he possessed me; when he released part of himself into me. A man's gentle kiss to his lady. He heaved a euphoric sigh of satisfaction as he let go of my neck. Our breaths synchronised as he rested comfortably on top of my chest.

“I haven't been on a trip with you in a while,” I said, “Can I tag along the next time you go?”  
“Of course you can,” he mumbled. “It's always more fun with you around.”

## **In an hour**

In an hour, you will be lifeless. Your body will be dragged down a flight of stairs. My friend will clean the red stain you've left on the carpet. She will complain that she doesn't like how I treat dead bodies. She will be angry because she knows I don't care about her opinion. She will do a good job anyway.

You will become the missing person on everyone's news feed. Your parents will talk to the press and appear on television. I will see their faces and feel bad. For a split second. I will pay them a visit with my friend. We will meet your brother at your house. He will ask who we are. We will say we're good friends of yours. Maybe he should join you where we left you. That thought will cross my mind. I'll tell him that I hope you come home soon. And leave.

Three months will pass and a hiker and his dog will find you in the woods. He will call the police. The police will call your parents. They will identify your body and cry for you. They'll wonder how their child ended up dead. Murdered. Their story will be all over the news. They will say that the killer is still at large. I will laugh at the thought of being called a killer. I prefer hunter. That's what they call other people who hunt animals.

I will attend your funeral and pay my respects. I will cry because I miss you; how annoying and entertaining you were before you became lifeless. I'll give my condolences to your brother. I'll tell him to keep in touch if he needs anything. And leave.

But, at this moment, you don't know that your day — your life — will end. At this moment, you're taking all the free drinks at the bar and yelling profanity at anyone who approaches you. How sad that you spill your drink on me while yelling at my friend. My favourite dress!  
In an hour, you will be lifeless.

## **A matter of time**

I woke up fifteen minutes later than usual, so I was fifteen minutes behind schedule for the busy day ahead. I took a bath, brushed my teeth, and complained to my friend, who I happened to live with, about how late I was for a class I didn't want to go to.

“What did I tell you about handling the body yesterday? I told you to just wait until today when you have daylight,” she nagged, “Anyway, just run, so you make it in time since it's not too far.”

The seemingly simple — and only — solution took me ten minutes to complete. Tired, sweaty and cussing my knees under my breath, I made it just in time to be called out for being late, but not too late that I'd be locked out. It reminded me of the time Uncle almost locked me in an air-tight casket for being late for a job. Being called out was better.

“Just sit quietly at the back,” the lecturer responded to my apology, “so you don't disturb my class.”

The art of silence left me. My shoes squeaked against the tiles. The chair creaked as I pulled it back — louder as I sat. The sound of my bag being unzipped rang across the room. The sparkling water bottle hissed as I opened it to take a sip. Heads turned. All eyes on me.

“Can't you just keep it down?” the lecturer voiced through gritted teeth.

An apology clearly wouldn't help the situation. I silently bowed my head. I held back a laugh, remembering the time Aunty and I were chasing a man in a container yard. His shoes made so much noise that we bet that whoever caught him first could choose the way he would die.

\*\*\*

I was going to be late for my doctor's appointment. I called ahead to let them know I was running late. The receptionist said something I didn't quite catch while crossing the noisy street but agreed to anyway. I passed by my house to drop off my bag and change into more comfortable shoes. I complained to my friend about how late I was but can't afford to miss this appointment. “Just take a cab,” she advised, “so you'll be there in no time.”

My bank account had not smiled at me in days, so I insisted that it was not too far and that I could make it in time for the appointment. The clock said otherwise with only five minutes to time, so I ran thinking I would make it just in time. I didn't.

“Just come back another time,” the receptionist replied to my plea.

I insisted that I needed to see the doctor no matter what. I would wait for the next slot if I had to, as long as I saw him.

“You should have just been on time,” the receptionist told me, “so you wouldn't have to take both of us through this. I told you the doctor's policy. Ten minutes late means it's not an emergency and the slot should go to someone else. Just reschedule.”

I hung my head and left silently. I wished Aunty stayed in the same town as my university. I would have asked her to run the receptionist over. She wouldn't pass up an opportunity for a hit and run.

\*\*\*

A few hours before the submission time, I was doing that assignment that I had three days to do. I wouldn't have been late but life and death kept on playing ping-pong with me so that was the only time I had. I just wanted to get it over and done with so I could rest.

“Just focus for a few hours. You'll be done in no time.” I told myself.

At least the assignment was on serial killers; people I could talk to and about all day. In the research, I found the subdivision “organised killers” interesting. It reminded me of Uncle. The research said that organised killers are meticulous in planning and executing their murders. They plan out every detail of their crime in advance and take caution to not leave behind any incriminating evidence. I saw the legitimacy of the research. I hate working with Uncle because he always plans everything down to the last detail. It's no fun but at least it's safe. The subdivision “disorganised killers” reminded me of Aunty. The research said that disorganised killers strike at random most times and don't care to cover up their crimes. Aunty is one such serial killer, which makes for thrilling and messy vacations. Because of my practical experience with these two types of serial killers, I thought I had a lot of material to work with and would be done with the assignment in record time. That was until I realised why I needed three days to complete it; the word count, the style, the number of references needed and how much it counted toward my final grade — a summary of my looming demise. I screamed in defeat, restraining myself from tossing my laptop in anger.

“Just breathe,” my friend came and comforted me, “so you can come up with a solution. It will all work out.”

Could she not see that I was breathing, but in need of a solution that wouldn't come just because I calmed down?

“Just do what you can till the deadline, so you can at least have something to submit.”

A solution.

I rolled up my sleeves, drank a sachet of Bioplus, wore my headphones and got to work. “Just until the deadline. Just until the deadline.” I chanted. Before long I was working in overdrive and

getting through all the key points in no time at all. Or at least that's what I thought. I was so absorbed in the work that I lost track of time. I didn't meet the deadline. I was two hours late. I wouldn't know my fate for a couple of days so I focused on the fact that at least I submitted and enjoyed working on the assignment. The situation reminded me of the time Aunty and I locked a man in a sauna while we laid waste to his establishment and made his wife drink boiling hot water. It was fun and games until we realised we had left the man in the sauna for too long. At least we let him out when we remembered. And we were going to let him off the hook but he threatened to call the police.

Laughing at the memory, I stood up and stretched, recalling how parts of the day just kept on going horribly wrong with every sentence anyone said. I could do with not hearing people oversimplify my issues — even myself.

My friend broke the silence that I didn't notice was covering me.

“Come eat, food is ready.”

“Yo, it's been a long day. I want to rest. I'll come eat later.”

“Just eat first,” she insisted, “so you can rest once.”

## Love-Hate

I love water. I love showers. I love baths. I love bathtubs. I love soaking in bathtubs for hours on end. I love the cleansing feeling I get while soaking; how it rejuvenates me. I love falling asleep in bathtubs, almost as much as I love watching other people fall asleep in them. I love watching people fall asleep in bathtubs almost as much as I love watching people drown in them. I love holding people's heads beneath the water; gripping them tightly to keep them under. I love watching their eyes widen in fear. I love it when they hold my arms and put up a fight; trying to get out from underneath. I love the back-and-forth struggle for control between us; the splashing of water. I love seeing them lose their strength. Then their breath. Then their life. I love seeing them lie peacefully at the bottom of the bathtub. I love washing their feet before taking the body out of the bathtub because they always forget to wash their feet. I love getting into the bathtub after I've taken the body out and laid it on the bathroom floor. I love soaking in that water for hours. I love planning how to dispose of the body while in the bathtub. I love falling asleep in the bathtub in the middle of planning. I love waking up and draining the bath water and scrubbing the bathtub clean. I love the sound of water running down the drain, carrying away all the impurities that were in the tub. I love driving kilometres away from home to dispose of the body and then going home to take a hot shower.

I hate that I love water in a town that doesn't have running water every day. I hate that I can't soak in the bathtub every day. I hate that even when there's water I might not get to see someone fall asleep in the bathtub. I hate that street kids and other homeless people are now more cautious because many of their friends have gone missing or have been found dead. I hate that I sometimes have to drug street people during load-shedding to get them into my house. Into the bathtub. I hate that the bath water isn't always hot enough when I put them in the bathtub. I hate that sometimes they don't put up a fight because they're too drugged to. I hate that the water isn't always warm enough when I take the body out of the bathtub. I hate soaking in lukewarm water. It kills my mood and ruins my planning process. I hate that I can't fall asleep in the middle of planning. I hate that I have to scrub the bathtub during load-shedding. My OCD won't let me leave it til the lights come back on. I hate that even the sound of water running down the drain brings me no comfort. I hate driving to the slums in the dark and dumping the body by a random road. The potholes damage my car and the dust dirtens it.

I love that I can do whatever I want in this town.

I love that I've never been caught.

## **The sound of colour**

Roses are red, violets are blue. When you see colour, what's it to you?

Mum said:

Roses are red, violets are blue. When I see red, I think about an unfamiliar view. We were going north of the Nile. We stopped by a guest house for the night. We were just passing through. The people staying in the room across from ours got into a fight. We heard banging and yelling. The lady threatened to kill herself. The man said he'd leave her to die. He stormed out of the room and left the lady by herself. Not long after, we heard glass shattering. Worried that the lady had followed through with her threat, we barged into the room and searched for her. We didn't mean to intrude. I found her in the bathroom. What a nerve-wracking sight it was. I stood wide-eyed, frozen like a statue. There were shards of glass from the broken mirror all over the floor. The lady had collapsed to the floor with her left hand hanging over the bathtub and her head resting on her shoulder. Her wrist was slit. The blood dripped into the tub. Its sound syncopated to the water that was dripping from the tap. My friend came to the bathroom and ran to help the lady as soon as she saw her. She is the brave one in our friendship. She struggled to stop the bleeding, shouting for me to call for help, snapping me back to reality. Fifteen minutes after I called, an ambulance arrived, sirens wailing. The man the lady was with had returned so he went to the hospital with the lady. We moved to another guest house because I was too traumatised to sleep in that one. The next day, we continued our journey north. I thought the traumatic experience was behind me. But now when I see red, I'm taken back to that scene. And all I hear is blood dripping into a bathtub and the blaring of ambulance sirens.

Dad said:

Roses are red, violets are blue. When I see green, I think about shoes. The first time I went to play basketball, I wore green sports shoes. They were a gift from one of my then lovers. I liked them because they were comfortable despite the fit being loose. The practice session was half-court. Shirts versus skins. Two-on-two. My teammate was patient. He understood that I was new. The coach and the other players were understanding too. They made me feel like basketball was the sport I was meant to pursue. I got tired in the middle of practice, so I excused myself and took a break in the locker room. I lay on a bench at the back of the room away from bright light. I looked at my watch and told myself I'd go back to practice at 10:30. It was 10:22. Before long, I drifted off to sleep. I was woken up by people arguing. It was getting heated and I didn't want to get between the two. So I remained silent and hoped it would be over soon. The argument got physical. They slammed each other into the lockers and the sound echoed throughout the room. They were taking it too far so I thought I would go and try to get them to talk it through. I had barely got up from the bench when I heard a loud bang. It was a sound I hadn't heard anywhere except my TV screen. I scurried beneath the bench. Pushed myself under until I was against the wall. Luckily, the bench was in a poorly lit place so if anyone came my way, they wouldn't see

me. I heard another bang and jolted. I heard someone fall to the floor. The room momentarily fell silent. The next thing I saw was someone dragging a body by the legs across the floor, his feet scuffing as he moved backwards. As he got into the shower area close to the bench, I tried to get a glimpse of him but I couldn't make out who he was. But his shoes grabbed my attention. They were green like mine but of a brighter hue. The hours that followed were agonising as I waited for him to leave. He went back and forth several times and I thought I'd lose my mind. All the while I looked at his shoes and even mastered their brand and design. When I finally managed to get out, I called the police. I later testified as the sole witness; though I mostly spoke about his shoes. The story was all over the news. I never played basketball again. I never wore those green shoes again because when I see green, I'm taken back to that day. And all I hear is the reverberating sound of a gun being shot.

Sister said:

Roses are red, violets are blue. When I see brown, I think about pain. When I was younger, my parents were strict about curfew. They never let me stay up late. I often had bad dreams so they let me keep the door slightly open in case I felt afraid. They always stayed up late working but Friday was movie night; just the two of them. I would sometimes pretend to fall asleep and once they started the movie, I'd watch with them through the door's space. One Friday, I tossed and turned in bed, struggling to sleep until I got up and stood by the door to watch the movie my parents were watching. I had tried to follow it earlier but it was boring. Since I couldn't sleep, I resolved to watch it anyway. I saw two men hit a woman with a whip. The first was of her skin colour. His face stained with sadness as blood trickled from the woman's back. The other man, not of the woman's skin colour, was not content with the first's display. So he took over. He whipped her until the bone beneath her skin showed. As the woman wept and wailed, so did my mum. She whimpered. I was transfixed and couldn't look away. My heart raced and my body tingled. When the scene was over, I was too heavy-hearted to continue watching, so I went back to bed and wrapped myself in the covers. I had nightmares about the scene for months after. I didn't tell my parents about it because I didn't want them to know I was up late. Years later, when we were learning about black people's history in America, I found out the name of the movie. My teacher showed us the trailer, before playing the movie. I recognised the woman who was whipped, so I couldn't find it in me to watch it. I found an excuse to skip the viewing. I didn't want a vivid repeat of that scene. It was already bad enough that when I saw brown, the scene would play in my head. And all I could hear was the sound of a whip tearing through skin.

I said:

Roses are red, violets are blue. When I see blue, I think about a swimming pool. There's a girl I met a few months ago. She was about my age and very tall. But that's not all. She was pretty and lovable. Not like me at all. So I got to know her because I thought she was cool. That was until I found out she was playing me for a fool. She was playing around with my person. I didn't think that was cool. So I came up with a plan to make sure she knew that I knew. I invited her to go

swimming at a private pool. She had never been to a place so fancy. So it was an invitation she couldn't say no to. Because I was a regular and they knew how good of a swimmer I was, they left the pool unattended. So we had the place to ourselves. We splashed around in the water and raced each other. We talked about lovers too. The more she spoke and the more she smiled, the angrier I became. She beamed saying the people we were talking about seemed alike. Under my breath, I said they are the same. She was trying to take what was mine and she was doing it with a smile. A look I couldn't stand. Infuriated, I thought that was as good a time as any. So I grabbed her by her braids and swam to the deep end. Between trying to get out of my grip and trying to stay afloat, she couldn't put up much resistance. I held her hands back and wrapped my feet around hers so she couldn't kick free. As a pro swimmer, being beneath the water was a breeze. I couldn't say the same for her. She screamed as our bodies sank. Before long, she passed out. I got out of the pool and ran to get help. I told them we were playing and I didn't know she couldn't swim. I cried saying I tried to pull her out but she was too heavy. By the time they helped her out and tried CPR, it was already too late. As they covered her body and put it in the ambulance, I sobbed and blamed myself. I told the police who came to the scene that it was all my fault. They comforted me and faulted the attendants for leaving us by ourselves. Blue became my favourite colour because when I thought of blue, I thought of someone drowning in a pool. And all I could hear was satisfying muffled screams.

Brother said:

Roses are red, violets are blue. When I see white, I think about you. I was seven when they came home and told us you wouldn't make it so we should say our last goodbyes. I was too young to understand so I was confused. My parents sat me down and made sure I understood. I saw you just two weeks ago. We played together for an hour or two. Then you had to leave because you had the flu. So the fact that you wouldn't be coming back from the hospital was out of the blue. The drive to the hospital was long and silent. I prayed that the doctors were wrong; that you and I could play outside together again. Because it was late in the night, the hospital, like its parking lot, was a ghost town. I held my mum's hand as we walked to your room. My parents said I could go in first. I was so excited to see you, I wore my best smile. You were not as I remembered you from two weeks ago. You were pale and your smile was dull. I was flooded with sadness. I trudged towards you and stood on the chair that was by your bed. We stared at each other in silence until I cried. You gestured for me to sit by you. I obliged. You told me my favourite story and sang my favourite song. Then we took turns asking each other riddles. This was your favourite thing to do. The last riddle you asked me was, "It brings back the lost as though never gone, shines laughter and tears with light long since shone; a moment to make, a lifetime to shed; valued then but only lost when you're dead." I took a few guesses but I couldn't figure it out so you gave me a clue: it's something I carried with me every day and I could use it when I miss you. You told me I was smart so I would get it eventually. You wrote it down for me so I could remember to solve it. Your hand shook with every letter you wrote, each filled with love and affection. You smiled as you handed it to me. I folded it and put it in my pocket. Then I

lay quietly next to you as you fell asleep. Before long, I too fell asleep. I woke up when my dad lifted me from the bed, taking me in his arms. A doctor standing on the opposite side of the bed called your time of death. The nurse next to him covered you with a white bed sheet. Everyone remained silent, tears rolling down their cheeks. That was the first and last time I saw my father cry. It's been five years since you passed away and I still think of you often. I asked my parents to take me to see you when I solved your last riddle. I wrote the answer on the same paper you gave me and placed it on your grave: memory. I promised to keep you there until I joined you. I also told you that I couldn't stand white because when I see white, I remember them covering you with that cloth. And all I hear is a deafening silence.

## Profile

She understands what it is to live and what it is to die. She learned this early. She has travelled. She spent four years and seven months abroad. She likes to look down when she's on aeroplanes and buses. She hates trips because they're like a good novel that ends with an anticlimax. She forgets things easily — good or bad. She wants to speak to someone who has killed someone. She's afraid of what comes at the end of life. She listens intently to what people say. She is slow to realise when someone mistreats her, but she's never surprised when she realises. Evil is real to her. Her life is difficult for her to describe to herself. Death is easier. She jokes about death. She does not hate herself, but she does not love herself either. Her brain remembers to forget but forgets to remember. She believes in the existence of Satan. Her favourite quote is by Shishio Makoto: Only the fittest survive in this world. If you are strong you live; if you are weak, you die. In this world, the flesh of the weak is food for the strong. Her rap sheet is clean. She wishes every country had summer all year round. She discovered that bodies decompose faster in summer. She doesn't mind being bored with someone else. She wanders around crowded places and eats alone in packed restaurants. When it comes to food, she prefers the sweet to the salty, the cooked to the raw, the hot to the cold, the aromatic to the odourless. She likes to see grey hair on people too young to have grey hair. She isn't sure whether she loves the spaces she has lived in. She carries her rubbish out the gate and throws it in the public bin on the corner instead of those located behind her building. She tries to avoid security cameras everywhere she goes. She sings well enough, so she sings often. She falls asleep easily next to someone who snores or breathes heavily, but not someone who steals the covers. She has somniphobia. She easily calls people "acquaintances" because it's the perfect word for people whom she knows and likes but with whom she has no special connection. She isn't saving for her retirement. She keeps track of how much money is in her bank account. Her bank account is often in the red. She has the names of her four dead dogs engraved on the dog tags she wears. As a child, she saw a boy snap the neck of a baby bird that had fallen from its nest. She broke the boy's leg because she was angry at him for killing the baby bird. After that, she hid under her bed the whole day with the dead bird and cried. She has alektorophobia. She loves to have her hair plaited with blue, purple, or red braids. She uses her grocery money to buy posters. Her favourite poster is of DC Comics' Joker. Her heart rate accelerates every time she walks past a police station. She sometimes feels like she is being watched. She hoards language-learning resources on her storage devices. She collects stationery faster than she can use it. She thinks having two as a favourite number is interesting. She finds a lot of humour in horror movies. She watches Hannibal when she is stressed. Her ideal type is that one person who she'll never admit is her ideal type. She likes being honest with others, but not so much with herself. She is a good liar. She knows the best way to be a good liar is to believe your own lies. She gets irritated easily. She likes her eyes, her skin, not much else. She dislikes her facial profile from both sides. She hates body hair that's not the eyebrows or on the head. She can't wink. She overthinks everything. She often spaces out when people are speaking to her. She thinks people want the right answers yet they are asking the

wrong questions. She has an inherited predisposition to admire tall people. She can't wear accessories when typing on a computer keyboard. Her internet searches are always in incognito mode. She password protects her computer and changes the password on her phone often. Before she leaves the room, she wipes down every surface that she has touched because she doesn't like to leave her fingerprints behind. She loves kids as much as arachnophobes love spiders. She doesn't believe in love at first sight. She doesn't think liking someone means you should date them. She thinks love is exhausting. She thinks love smells like the pages of a newly bought novel. She doesn't think people should talk before 10 a.m. Her comfort colour is black. She thinks white is best for funerals. Her guilty pleasure is walking alone, especially at odd hours. She thinks true evil comes from how terribly someone treats their immediate family. Her favourite serial killer is Edmund "Ed" Kemper. She thinks Ted Bundy is overrated. She has never found monsters under her bed. She prefers long phone calls once a month to inconsistent weekly texts. She is bad at communicating. She prefers stairs to elevators. She is claustrophobic. Her father drives way too fast. Her mother has trouble managing her time. Her older sister dislikes it when she speaks Chinese. Her older brother gave away the family PlayStation console. Her younger brother is slow to respond to texts. When they were young, she almost choked her younger brother to death when they were fighting. She only let him go when he started to cry. She feels guilty about it but will never apologise. Her favourite way to beg her siblings for something is by asking in any language except English. She loves driving at one hundred and eighty kilometres an hour. She once shouted, "You shut up bitch" in a children's library after hearing it in a movie. She understood the meaning of "spare the rod, spoil the child" after that day. She thinks "Mother, How Are You Today" is one of the greatest songs ever made. Watching *The Sound of Music* reminds her of movie nights with her mother when she was younger. She doesn't like to tell people her surname. She thinks anime is more realistic than Disney. Saying the Lord's prayer gives her more peace than any other prayer. She often plans to memorise biblical texts for her spiritual well-being. When she was twenty-two, she watched a hospitalised prisoner die. In order not to scare other patients, the body wasn't moved until later on. Everyone thought he was just sleeping. It was a new experience to watch someone die without her involvement. She prefers freelancing to a 9-to-5. She wonders how painful it is to have your head smashed into a car window. She thinks death by wrist laceration is more satisfying than death by a gunshot wound. She has watched all the episodes of *A Thousand Ways to Die*. When she goes shopping, she always stops by the aisle with knives and imagines the types of cuts each knife would make on the body. She loves learning language scripts. She loves calligraphy. She can write in more languages than she can speak. Her letters are too small compared to the average person's. She likes to listen to classical music while cleaning blood stains. Every time she stands close to a balcony, she pictures herself jumping off. She dislikes going to the doctor. She thinks "blood is thicker than water" is an overrated and abused phrase. She likes the dark. She likes to wear sunglasses indoors. She likes thick curtains. Being at the bottom of a swimming pool clears her mind. The first person to die in her arms couldn't hold their breath underwater for more than seventy-two seconds. She prefers silver to gold. She is sceptical of online shopping. She wears

hoodies and sweaters when it's twenty-eight degrees outside. She asks the price before she buys. She likes to randomly walk with her eyes closed. She often wishes for tomorrow. In university, she met a man at a club with whom she had a forgettable conversation. While they were parting ways, he shouted her name when she was across the street from him. That moment haunts her. She reads vocabulary lists for fun. She regularly dreams about dead bodies. Sometimes they follow her into the day. She wishes she didn't dream at all. She can't peacefully watch a movie while doing nothing with her hands. She doesn't understand why people like reality TV shows. She blows bubbles with her saliva when she is concentrating. She thinks concentrating should be spelt "consentrating". She talks to her plushies when she's sad. Her plushies talk to her when she's happy. Her best ideas come when she sits outside by herself. She takes a long time planning but she thinks complex plans are a waste of time. She believes actions speak louder than words. She avoids arguments to preserve her peace of mind. She wishes people understood that silence is gold. Every time she has an argument, the first thing she thinks of is choking the other person to shut them up. She is quick to say when she likes someone. It's hard to tell when she dislikes or is upset with you. Her best varsity days were spent lying next to her best friend. Her lucky number is seven. She doesn't believe in the best days of one's life.

**PART II**  
**In Another World**

## **The abandoned**

There is a story that the elders tell. A tale of a girl who was barely grown - her name: unknown. The elders often spoke of her beauty which was like the sun just before dusk. They often wished that that was all they remembered about her; that they never laid eyes on her. That she was never born. Her skin was smooth to the touch. Her palms were unscathed for she knew no labour. Her hair grew towards the sun, sitting like a crown on her head. It was said that her laughter could heal any aching soul, giving peace to all who saw it. But she was a child of many misfortunes. So she seldom laughed.

Cursed by the Earth because of her beauty, she was abandoned before she could walk. With only a blanket to keep her warm, she wept and wailed for days on the road of the abandoned. Everyone who walked by and heard her cry went to her. But upon laying eyes on her, they were terrified; filled with fear of what the Earth might do to them if they helped her. So they ran from her. When her well of tears dried up and she was on the verge of death, the Night Sky took pity on her and sent a woman to save her. This woman had a great number of children, all of whom she loved and cared for dearly, so the Night Sky found her fitting to care for the girl.

“There is a girl on the road of the abandoned who is like me. The Earth has cursed us and made it difficult for creatures to live in the presence of our divinity,” The Night Sky said to the woman. “You must go to her before it is too late and care for her like she is your own.”

The woman, who was working her fields, dropped what she was doing and went to the road of the abandoned. The Night Sky blinded her so she wouldn't see the curse placed on the girl. Looking at the cooing child, the woman wondered why the Earth would curse a child so lovely and peaceful. She carried the infant and took her home. Excited to have a new daughter, because the Earth had blessed her with only one of her own flesh, she called her fellow villagers to celebrate with her. All the villagers wanted to share in the woman's happiness because they loved and admired her. So they gathered in numbers outside the woman's compound, bearing gifts to bless the woman and her new child. She sat in a hut furthest from the compound's entrance, letting only a few villagers enter at a time.

One of the villagers was a merchant who had once travelled along the Nile to the lands that knew no rain. He presented the woman with a withered flower sealed in a glass box. “As soon as I got word of your new child, my ancestors convinced me to give you this rare gift, for you have touched a beautiful flower that was not meant for this world,” the merchant told the woman. “If this flower isn't...” The merchant croaked, suddenly unable to speak. In a panic, he held his throat and ran out of the hut. His voice only returned after he left the woman's compound. He didn't lay eyes on the baby. He left the village that day and never returned to it. The woman, unbothered by the merchant's words, took the glass box and placed it on a table next to the baby.

Another villager entered the hut to share in the woman's joy. He was the village's most prominent farmer and one of the woman's suitors after her husband had passed away. Although the woman turned down his proposal, he still had a great deal of respect for her. So he showered her with gifts. "For a new child, crop and cattle are a fitting gift so you may nourish the child," the farmer said. As he spoke, he pointed out the window, showing the woman the bags of various crops and a dozen cows his servants were putting in her compound. The woman smiled at the farmer, appreciating the gesture but thinking she didn't deserve it. The farmer then walked over to where the child lay sleeping, lifting the cloth that veiled her. His eyes widened in terror and his expression went cold. "What have you done?" the farmer turned to the woman dismayed. "Cursed is my land because of you!" Before the woman could respond, the farmer stormed out of the hut. He gathered his wives, children and servants and told them they would leave the village that day. He commanded them to take nothing but the clothes they were wearing. He ordered the youngest of his wives to leave their newly born child in the middle of their compound. The wife did as she was told. The farmer then abandoned all he owned and left the village, heading North. The woman, confused by the farmer's actions, stared at the baby who was cooing, unbothered by the world around her. Again, the woman wondered why the Earth would curse such a lovely child. The villagers continued to flock in to offer blessings and present gifts to the woman and see the child. All were angered or frightened after seeing the child. Outraged by their reactions, the woman chased the remaining villagers away, forbidding them from seeing the child.

One of the villagers, overcome by fear, cried out. "What did we lowly creatures do to deserve the wrath of the Earth; wrath we didn't intend to evoke? Is there no way to be saved from the curse this child has laid on us?" The other villagers who had seen the child joined in her mourning, tearing their clothes and rolling in the dirt until their skin was torn by the stones and bled. The Earth took pity on them because they did not know what they had done. "Your blood has cried out to me and I see the purity of your intentions, so I will spare you and your offspring," the Earth declared. The villagers rejoiced, thanking the Earth for her mercy. "However, this isn't without consequence," the Earth cut their celebration short. "Every full moon, every man who hunts and every woman who bleeds must soak themselves in the pond where creatures die. Only then will you and your offspring be spared." The villagers found the task simple and agreed to the Earth's terms. The Earth then went to the prominent farmer's compound and took the newborn that the youngest wife had left behind. "Weep not child," the Earth hushed the crying baby. "Blessed are you for you bear the burdens of all your predecessors." The baby fell silent, comforted by the Earth's words. The Earth met with the Day Sky concerning the prominent farmer's baby. On hearing the baby's story, the Day Sky took pity on him and sent him to a land where he would be blessed. That baby was never seen again.

The Earth was so angry at the woman for taking the baby girl from the road of the abandoned that she cursed the woman. "What was meant to die, you let live. I turned my back on her, so all the people of the land will turn away from her. Whatever thoughts and desires she has will be

yours to fulfil. She is now a creature that can only be sustained by you and your offspring,” the Earth said, “The children of your flesh will know no mother and will no longer recognise you. But you will recognise them and your heart will yearn for them.” The woman found the Earth’s punishment greater than she could bear so she cried out to the Night Sky. “You gave me a child hated by the Earth to care for as my own. Why did I not see the anger that the Earth has towards this child? How far goes the curse placed on the child that I must bear such a burden?” The Night Sky removed the veil he had placed over the woman and told her to look at the child. The woman was struck by the baby’s beauty and fell to the ground. “What have I done?” she cried, realising the gravity of her actions. “You have saved a divine creature,” the Night Sky said, “Your sacrifice has made it so that other creatures can live in the presence of her divinity.” The woman hated the girl from that day onwards. The Earth banished the woman from the land and told her only to enter the village when the girl had a wish that she wanted fulfilled. The woman gathered a few of her belongings and headed west of the village. She left at dusk having said farewell to her children. They cried throughout the night because they missed her. But when the dawn came, they had no tears left to cry because they did not remember having had a mother. The woman settled in the land where two rivers meet. There, she had two daughters who looked like the baby girl from the road of the abandoned.

The chief of the village heard about all that had happened concerning the woman and the infant that she had brought to the village. So he decreed that all must soak in the pond where creatures die except the baby girl and all thought him just and fair. He forbade the villagers from ever speaking of the banished woman or telling the woman’s children about the curse upon the baby girl. He named the compound where the baby girl lived “the home of the abandoned” after the road from which she was picked. And there the baby girl grew up with the children who no longer remembered their mother. The chief remembered the good deeds of the banished woman and her late husband, so he stood before the Earth to plead on behalf of her children. “The burden that woman carries protects her offspring as long as she fulfils what I demanded of her. I will not add to their suffering,” the Earth said. With those words, the Earth promised the chief that the children of the woman’s flesh would be blinded to the girl’s curse and not need to live in fear of her.

The oldest of the children of the home of the abandoned, barely a decade old, laboured day and night in the compound’s fields; planting crops and feeding cattle. With the little he yielded, he fed his six siblings and the baby girl, leaving nothing for himself. Even when the sun scorched the land and it produced nothing, he did not complain. He worked the lands as though it were a rainy season. The Earth saw the endeavours of the oldest and took pity on him saying, “Blessed will be the fruit of your labour”. The Earth then spoke to the Day Sky in favour of the oldest, asking the Day Sky to send rain to the lands. The Day Sky agreed. Rain fell over the land and it yielded a lot of fruit. And so the children of the home of the abandoned had plenty to eat in all seasons. The Earth took pride in the oldest’s work, so he gave him a warning. “Your fields will

bear much fruit and your animals will multiply. But this will only continue as long as you don't let the girl who is not of your flesh and blood work the land." The Earth showed the oldest who of the two girls was not of his flesh and blood. The oldest heeded the warning and when the girl was old enough, he forbade her from setting foot in the gardens or herding the cattle. The girl agreed, preferring to play by the huts rather than slave away in the sun. The oldest's only sister heard her brother's words and looked at the girl with envy. The sister had always been jealous of the girl because of her beauty. Seeing her brother favour the girl only added to the sister's jealousy.

One afternoon, as the girl and the sister played together, the sister struck the girl's head with a stone. She fell to the ground crying. Although the girl didn't bleed, she was in so much pain that she wished that the sister would also be hit by a stone and feel more pain than she was in. The girl massaged her head until it didn't ache anymore. When the oldest returned from working in the fields, the girl told him what the sister had done. The oldest didn't reprimand the sister, saying it must not have been intentional. The sister didn't offer an apology. This angered the girl so she stormed off and shut herself in the hut furthest from the compound's entrance. And there she stayed for a week without eating or drinking, even when the siblings pleaded with her. She would have continued her hunger strike if she hadn't heard the sister screaming at the top of her lungs. She ran out of the hut and found all seven siblings sitting in the middle of the compound; the six brothers surrounded the sister. A few villagers had gathered by the compound's entrance to see what was happening. When they saw the girl approaching the boys, they scurried away. The girl paid them no mind because they always walked away when she came around.

"What happened?" the girl asked when she saw the sister's face. She was bleeding from a deep cut on the left of her forehead. The brothers were trying to calm her down and stop the bleeding. "We had gone into the village to pick fruit from the tree which never withers because it's her favourite fruit," the fifth brother narrated. "While we were up in the tree, a woman who isn't from this village struck her head with a sharp stone and she fell from the tree. The woman who hit her started crying and then she ran away. The village healer wasn't home when we went to his compound, so some of the villagers helped carry her to our compound's entrance." The sister gnashed her teeth as the oldest cleaned the wound and put some herbs on it. "That woman didn't even apologise to me," the sister whined. "Don't take it to heart. It must not have been intentional," the oldest reasoned. "Go clean yourself up. It's a full moon tonight. We have to go to the pond where creatures die and soak with the others." They went to their separate huts and got themselves ready.

At dusk, the oldest gathered all the siblings and told them to go ahead of him. He held the girl back and told her that she was to stay behind. "Why can't I go soak in the pond with the others?" the girl asked, frustrated. "I'm old enough to go." The oldest patted the girl's shoulder. "It's what the chief decided before you and I became children of the home of the abandoned. Only when

the chief changes his decree will you be able to soak.” Distraught, the girl went to the hut furthest from the compound’s entrance. She lay on the mat in the middle of the room unsure of how to pass the time until the siblings returned.

“You are all alone,” the Night Sky stated, startling the girl. “Who are you?” the girl asked, more curious than afraid.

“I’m like you. Cursed by the Earth. Creatures cower in the presence of my divinity as they do yours,” the Night Sky told the girl.

“I’m not cursed,” the girl said.

“Of course you are. But you wouldn’t know because the villagers will never speak of it. Or speak to you. And the children of this land have had their memory stolen from them. So there is no one to tell you of your curse,” the Night Sky said. “Have you never wondered why the villagers flee every time you appear?”

The girl did not hesitate to respond, “Because I am of the land of the abandoned.”

The night sky chuckled. “What of the other children of this land? Are they not children of the land of the abandoned? Do you not all play and dine together, yet they go into the village and mingle with the villagers but you do not? Do they not pick fruit from the tree which never withers but you do not? Did the villagers not bring your sister home when she was injured? How are you any different from them that the villagers welcome them but flee from you? Have you ever gone beyond the land of the abandoned? But the others have.” The girl was taken aback by the Night Sky’s questions; things she had never paid attention to. With her curiosity piqued, the girl asked the Night Sky to tell her all that he knew about her, the land of the abandoned and the villagers. The Night Sky refused. “I have a curse of my own; one that I bear every nightfall. I only saved you from death because you and I are kindred spirits, cursed for the beauty that the Earth cannot bear. The words I have shared with you are enough to light your path. It’s up to you to fuel the flame and see the truth.” With those words, the Night Sky left the girl. Her mind raced, trying to make sense of all the Night Sky had said. She determined to go into the village to find out if what the Night Sky said was true.

The girl had never left the land of the abandoned, nor had she thought to. So it took her several days to pluck up the courage to ask the oldest to let her go into the village. “I’m going into the village tomorrow to get a few things. You can come with me since it will be your first time there. I can show you around after my errands,” the oldest said. Overjoyed, the girl danced around the oldest. He laughed, surprised at how excited she was. The girl was so thrilled that she barely slept. She imagined what the town would be like and how other people in the town lived. She hoped she’d get to see the tree that never withers and taste its fruit since the siblings spoke so highly of it. She forgot why she initially wanted to go into the village. She was up at the crack of dawn, ready to leave the land of the abandoned. She sat at the back of the oldest’s cart until he arrived. While the other siblings went to the fields, the girl and the oldest went into the village. Her heart raced as they crossed the gate of the land of the abandoned. She let the cool morning

air fill her lungs and held out her hand, feeling the breeze on her skin. She thought it felt different and she liked it. The girl asked the oldest about the village and what the villagers were like. She then chattered about the things the siblings had mentioned and what she expected to see, speaking faster than the oldest could keep up with. He hushed her, telling her to have a bit of patience so she could create her own impression of the village, the people and all the things she wanted to see. The girl heaved, calming herself.

The oldest stood his cart in front of the village market. He told the girl to stay in the cart, promising to show her around when he got back. She agreed and watched the oldest disappear into the crowd. Overtaken by excitement, the girl jumped out of the cart and ran down the first street in sight. She was fascinated by all she saw and felt. She noticed how close the huts and quaint cottages were to each other. This was not at all like the land of the abandoned. The ground was not uneven and soft like the land of the abandoned. Most of it was hard; paved with cobblestone, making her feet tingle. The unpaved ground was covered with grass. Different kinds of creepers, many of which the girl had never seen before, were growing on the sides of the huts and covering their roofs. She wanted to pluck a few of the creepers and take them home, but she wasn't sure whether she was allowed to pluck them without asking. So she didn't take any. The more she saw the village, the more she liked it. She appreciated the harmonious immix of the houses and nature.

As she wandered down the streets, a woman walked up to her and asked her who she was. The girl stared at the woman whose presence felt familiar before telling her she was a child from the land of the abandoned. The woman then smiled at her, asking if she had ever seen the tree that never withers. The girl's eyes glistened at the mention of the tree's name. She told the woman that she hadn't seen it yet. The woman held out her hand and offered to take her to it. The girl took the woman's hand, asking her to lead the way. The woman stayed off the main street, taking the girl through alleyways until they got to the village centre. There stood the most magnificent tree the girl had ever seen. It towered over the huts. Its branches grew outwards like outstretched arms, creating a natural canopy with its lush leaves. Its trunk was thick and sturdy and its weathered bark was etched with the dense patterns that told tales of countless seasons the tree had endured. The leaves rustled in the breeze and the fruit on the tree swayed along with them. The birds, which had made homes on the tree's high branches, chirped a song that welcomed the new day. While the girl was still taking in its grandeur, the woman went to the tree and plucked a fruit from its lowest branch. "I get the feeling you'll want to taste this," the woman said, handing the girl the fruit. The girl thanked the woman and kept the fruit in the satchel she was carrying. The woman then said goodbye to the girl, warning her not to touch the tree. The girl nodded, waving goodbye to the woman. The woman smirked as she left the girl.

The girl stood and admired the tree for a bit longer before resolving to go back to the oldest's cart. She didn't remember the route the woman had taken her through, so she decided to walk on

the main street in the general direction from which she came. The street was livelier with people setting up stalls and children running from house to house. The girl figured she'd ask one of the adults for directions to the village market. As she walked down the street, she noticed the strange looks people were giving her. She thought they were curious because they had never seen her before. So she waved and smiled at them. Much to her dismay, they didn't reciprocate her greeting, stepping back as she passed. She thought the villagers to be strange and rude people. She picked up her pace, glancing left and right for anything that could lead her to the village market. She saw an elderly woman standing alone, setting up a fruit stall and paying her no mind, so she went to her and asked the way to the village market. As soon as the elderly woman looked up from what she was doing and saw the girl, she stumbled backwards, knocking over the sack of fruit next to her.

"Get away from me," the elderly woman hissed. Frightened by the elderly woman's harsh tone, the girl froze, gripping her satchel's strap tighter. The elderly woman barked at her again, picking up her walking stick and waving it in the air frantically. A few passersby watched from a distance afraid to get involved. As the elderly woman's blares continued, a middle-aged lady came out of the hut behind the elderly woman to see what the commotion was about. "Mother, what are you shouting about this time?" she said. The elderly woman, with tears in her eyes, shuffled to the middle-aged lady. "I must have angered the Earth for me to see a child who bears her curse at the break of dawn. Will today be the day that my life is required of me?" the elderly woman howled. The middle-aged woman held her mother and stared at the girl with disgust. "How dare you show up here?" she screamed at the girl, "Is it not enough that we suffer because of you? Now you torment us with your presence. Leave!" Other villagers joined the middle-aged woman, demanding that the girl leave. Unsure of what she had done wrong, the girl crouched to the ground and began to cry. A chorus of yelling and sobbing ensued. The middle-aged woman got agitated and tossed a fruit at the girl, knocking her to the ground. "I told you to leave," she shouted, continuing to toss fruit at the girl. Her cries got louder as she lay at the mercy of the middle-aged woman. The crowd that had gathered egged her on, jeering and cussing at the girl. The Night Sky's questions replayed in the girl's mind, reminding her why she wanted to go into the village in the first place. She concluded that all he had said was true as she prayed for someone to save her.

"What do you think you're doing?" someone yelled, making the crowd fall silent. The person pushed through the crowd and helped the girl up. It was the oldest of the children of the land of the abandoned. He looked at the girl with pity, dusting her off and removing the fruit that had stuck to her body. He gazed into her eyes, asking if she was okay. She shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. He held her hand, turning his attention to the crowd. The faces he saw were not of the people who had warmly welcomed him. Instead, they were filled with hatred and malicious intent. The oldest remembered how excited the girl was to enter the village and meet the villagers and was angered by their reception of her. In a fit of anger, he lamented, "I was a

year short of a decade when I started working my land. None of you offered to teach me the way of the land. But in each season, I shared what I had with you. Even when your fields did not bear fruit and your animals were too malnourished to give you produce, I took from my stores and fed you and your offspring. Is this how you repay me? By treating one of my own with contempt? What is it that I have done that you must treat my own this way? Has the dawn of this day taken away your morals that you would attack an innocent child?" He rendered the villagers speechless and his words hung in the air like an ominous cloud. The heavy silence that had fallen over the crowd was broken by a man in the crowd that had gathered. He jeered at the oldest and spat at his feet.

"Treating you like one of us must have made you forget that you are a child of the land of the abandoned. We do not need you to be the judge of our mores. You will never know nor understand them because you are not truly one of us". The words struck the oldest like a spear through the heart. He had never heard any of the villagers speak with such disdain. His body trembled as he stared into the man's eyes. The man held the oldest's gaze, attempting to assert dominance over him. "When the rains do not fall on your land and you and your house have nothing on your table. When you are a penny short to buy provisions and no one offers you a meal, remember the words you have said this day because I will not forget," the oldest told the man. He glanced over the crowd as they whispered amongst themselves and exchanged looks. He gripped the girl's hand tighter and led her to his cart. The crowd parted like the Red Sea as they walked towards them. As soon as the oldest and the girl had ridden out of view, the villagers sent word of what had happened to the chief.

The ride back to the land of the abandoned was sombre. The girl whimpered and sniffled as the oldest brooded over what had happened. As soon as they crossed into the land of the abandoned, the girl jumped off the cart and ran to the hut furthest from the compound's entrance. The oldest told the siblings not to bother her and offloaded the supplies he got from the village market. He then told the siblings what happened in the village. The brothers were angered by what they heard, wanting to confront the villagers about it. The oldest advised against it. "I will visit the chief later regarding the matter and see how it can be resolved. For now, do not go into the village for I fear how the people will respond." The siblings, except for the sister, found logic in the oldest's words and agreed to stay out of the village. The sister was angry, convinced that the girl had done something to provoke the villagers and she stormed off. The oldest said to let her be, sure that she would come around.

Days went by and the girl refused to leave the hut. The face of the middle-aged woman constantly flashed in her mind, taking her back to when she was being hit and scorned, caging her in fear. The brothers' words of concern from outside the hut brought her no comfort, so she chose to remain hidden away. When she grew weak from hunger, the Night Sky came to her, asking if she now believed his words. From the foetal position in which she lay, she nodded.

“Those people have caused you a great deal of pain yet you have done nothing to them. What do you wish could happen to them?” the Night Sky asked. In her anger, the girl didn’t hesitate to wish that the woman who struck her would suffer greater pain than she did. “I hope she burns,” the girl hurled. As she continued to rant to the Night Sky about how terrible the villagers were, her stomach grumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten in days. She still didn’t want to leave the hut and was wondering what to do when she remembered, the fruit that she got from the tree that never withers. Hoping it was still good enough to be eaten, she reached for her satchel and got it out. She was fascinated by how fresh it looked and smelt. It was as though it had just been taken from the tree. She took a bite. Her taste buds danced as the sweet flavour melted in her mouth and her eyes sparkled. She had never tasted a fruit so sweet, and couldn’t get enough of it. As she ate it, she remembered the woman who was kind enough to give her the fruit and thought she was the only good thing about the village. She wished to meet her again and thank her. Since the girl was absorbed by the fruit, the Night Sky left her to it.

When the girl’s anger subsided, she returned to playing by the huts while the siblings worked in the fields and chatting with them when they got back. The siblings didn’t ask her how she was feeling, afraid of sending her back into depression. One day, the sister snuck out of the land of the abandoned and went into the village because she wanted to see her friends and get fruit from the tree that never withers. The reception she got was so unexpected that when she returned to the land of the abandoned, she took her anger out on the girl. She shoved the girl and cursed at her. “The villagers have never treated me that way before. It’s like they hate me. It’s all your fault. You have to apologise for whatever you did because now they won’t even let me take a fruit from the tree that never withers.” The girl shoved the sister, shouting that she didn’t do anything wrong. The sister didn’t believe her and pushed her back. The brothers heard the two girls screaming and rushed over to them. They found the two girls pulling at each other’s hair and scratching at each other. They ran and pulled them apart. “What happened? Why are you fighting this time?” the secondborn asked. The sister started to cry, narrating what happened when she went into the village. The oldest became angry, reprimanding her for going against his word. “Why must I suffer for something she did?” the sister asked. “You said you’d speak to the chief but you haven’t. I don’t know when you will and I’m tired of being stuck here, just waiting around.” The oldest sighed, unable to refute the sister’s words. The other brothers asked the two girls to calm themselves in their separate huts before having a discussion with the oldest.

“What should we do about this situation? We've seen many dawns and still, the villagers haven’t changed. We can’t let this go on.” the third-born said.

“I sought an audience with the chief but he will not see me,” the oldest said. “What am I to do?”

“The dry season is fast approaching,” the secondborn said. “We will make good on your word and cut supply to the village until they rue their actions.” All the brothers agreed with the second, deciding to go to the next village if they needed anything.

“What will we do about the soaking ceremony?” the third-born asked. “It’s in two days.”

“I suggest we skip this one,” one of the twins said.

“Missing a few until this issue is resolved will be of no consequence,” the other twin said.

The fourth born, who was the quietest of them all, advised against it. “We can use the soaking ceremony to make amends with the villagers and speak to the chief since he will be present. We shouldn’t anger him by breaking his law. How the chief and the villagers respond to us during the ceremony can determine whether or not we cut supply to them during the dry season.” The brothers mused on the fourth’s words for a moment and agreed with him. They then went back to their work having decided to revisit the matter after the soaking ceremony.

Dawn broke. Then dusk fell. Then dawn. And then dusk. And so came the day of the full moon. The brothers gathered and headed to the pond where creatures die, dragging the sister who had determined not to go. The girl wanted to know what would come of the siblings’ trip to the pond where creatures die so she followed closely behind them, ensuring that she wasn’t seen. “What if you get caught?” the Night Sky suddenly spoke to her. She hushed him, afraid the siblings would hear him. “You need not worry. Only you can hear me if I will it,” the Night Sky assured her. “I will cloak you in darkness so you can walk with them. They won’t be able to see or hear you.” After the Night Sky covered the girl in darkness, she walked alongside the siblings until they got to the pond. The soaking ceremony had become a happy occasion for the villagers; chattering, eating and drinking together while taking turns to soak in the pond. When the siblings got to the pond, the villagers fell silent, scowling and watching their every move. The oldest went to where the chief was seated and sought an audience with him, having instructed the rest to carry on with the ceremony. The girl followed the oldest, uninterested in the pond or what the villagers were doing. The chief agreed to see the oldest.

“We have come to address an incident that happened many dawns ago,” the oldest said. “I take it that you heard about it.”

The chief nodded, gesturing for him to continue speaking. The oldest stated his case before the chief, making it clear that he was displeased with what the villagers had done to the girl and what the man said to him on that day. “What is that you want me to do?” the chief asked after the oldest said all he wanted to.

“I wish to make peace with the villagers and put this matter behind us, so I would like an apology from the people who were involved in the matter that day,” the oldest said.

Knowing how much the oldest had given to the villagers in their time of need, the chief thought it best to remain on good terms with him. So he agreed to have the villagers involved apologise to him. The oldest, delighted, asked which day would be best to bring the girl to the village so she could reconcile with the villagers. The chief thought that the oldest would be the only one receiving an apology, so he was taken aback.

“You will do no such thing,” the chief said. “She is not to set foot in the village again. The apology I offer is for you and you alone. I will not make an elder apologise to a child.”

The oldest was angered by the chief's words. "I am only a few moons into my second decade and you offer me an apology, but not my own because she is a year over a decade. Is she that much different from me that I deserve an apology and she doesn't?" The chief's advisors who were listening to the conversation reproached the oldest for questioning the chief, getting into an argument with him. The girl was saddened by what the chief said and decided to return to the land of the abandoned. On her way back, the Night Sky advised the girl to use the village's main street so she could get fruit from the tree that never withers since she was pleased with the taste. The girl hesitated, remembering what happened the last time she walked down the main street. However, the Night Sky convinced her that all the villagers were by the pond where creatures die and she didn't have to worry. So she used the main street and walked until she found the tree that never withers. Even in the darkness of the night, this tree is so beautiful, the girl thought. After staring at the tree for a while, she climbed the lowest branch, plucked a fruit and ate it.

"What have you done?" the girl heard someone yell. Startled, she fell to the ground, landing in front of the person. It was the woman who had taken her to the tree the last time. This time, however, she wasn't smiling. "Did I not tell you not to touch the tree?" the woman asked. "Do you know what you have done?" The girl was confused by why the woman could see her yet the Night Sky had cloaked her. "I'm... I'm sorry. I just wanted to have another fruit," the girl stammered, getting up. The woman heaved. "You're not supposed to be here. Go back to the land in which you live." With those words, the woman left the girl. The girl dusted herself off and began her walk back to the land of the abandoned. Although she was upset about the encounter she had with the woman, she still wished she had thanked her for being kind to her when they met during her first trip to the village.

When the new day came, the village was in an uproar, having suffered two tragedies. One of the huts had caught fire in the wee hours of the morning, killing the people inside. And the tree which never withers had shed all its leaves, and all its fruit had fallen to the ground, rotten. The villagers mourned the passing of the people in the hut and grieved over the tree. They wondered why such misfortune would befall them the day after a full moon. They gathered outside the chief's compound, asking him to plead with the Earth to restore the tree that never withers. "The season of no rain is upon us and the river of tears will soon be without water," one of the villagers said. "Without the tree that never withers, we will not make it to the next rain." The chief heard the villagers' cries and implored the Earth to revive the tree that never withers. "That which was meant to die has touched the tree and in so doing poisoned it. The tree has embraced death so I cannot bring it back," the Earth told the chief. While in conversation with the Earth, the chief discovered that it was the girl who had touched the tree that never withers. The chief was outraged, so he sent some of his soldiers to the land of the abandoned to get the girl. The soldiers stormed into the land of the abandoned, ransacking all the huts that they saw until they found the girl. The brothers, who were working the fields, heard the girl screaming while being

dragged out of the compound. They ran to free her from the soldiers. The soldiers overpowered them in strength and numbers making the brothers' efforts futile.

The girl's screams could be heard from every corner of the village as the soldiers took her to the chief. The chief looked at the girl kneeling before him with a stern expression. "Did you come into the village and touch the tree that never withers?" the chief asked her. The girl wondered how he knew that she was in the village. Maybe the woman I met yesterday told him, she thought. She nodded, not daring to speak. "Do you know what you have done? The tree which bore fruit before my ancestors came to this land has dried and no more fruit will come from it because of your actions," the chief said. "I let you live because of the kindness of the woman who once lived in the land of the abandoned, but I see now that the misfortune you carry will only bring greater suffering as you grow older." The chief then accused her of causing the fire that burned down the hut. The girl denied it, admitting to only getting fruit from the tree. Her words fell on deaf ears. "How is it that the home that burnt down was of the woman who struck you and all that was around her remained unaffected? It was your revenge. Your way of punishing her and her mother. And still, you deny it?" the chief said without inflection. "An eye for an eye. Take her to the hut by the river of tears. She is to remain there until the next full moon. And then we will set the hut on fire and avenge the lives she took." The girl kicked and screamed as she was taken out of the chief's compound and locked in the hut by the river of tears. Word of the chief's decision spread and reached the children of the land of the abandoned and they were dismayed. They tried to go into the village and meet the chief to reason with him but he had placed guards around the village and refused them entry into it.

The hut by the river of tears was small and dark. Its floor and walls were mouldy and damp from neglect, giving it an unpleasant, musty smell. A draught ran through the holes in the walls making the room cold. The girl sat in the warmest spot she could find and wrapped her arms around her feet to keep warm. And there she cried for days on end until her tears dried out. "What did I do to deserve this?" she asked herself. "Was picking fruit from the tree so terrible that I should be treated this way? Why will the chief not believe that I didn't cause the fire?" The Night Sky came to her. "It is the curse that is on you. The people are turning from you because the Earth has turned from you. Nothing you say or do will change their mind." "I don't even know why the Earth has hated me, that I must bear a curse," the girl lamented. "Why must I die because of it?" The Night Sky didn't answer her question but offered to teach her a song that would lift her spirits. "This song is special. If you sing it at the break of dawn, you will be able to escape the death that awaits you." The girl was willing to do anything to survive, so she listened to the Night Sky.

*Sleep! Oh, Sleep! Take hold of these, your children. If you do not, then you are a slave to the Earth.*

Day and night, the girl practised the song until she could sing it like the Night Sky. A few days before the full moon, she sang the song at the break of dawn. She found so much peace in singing the song that she sang it throughout the day.

The Day Sky heard the girl singing the song and realised what the Night Sky had done. The Day Sky met with the Night Sky and expressed concern over the matter.

“You know that the creatures are not supposed to know that song. Why did you teach the girl cursed by the Earth the song? Do you not fear the consequences?” the Day Sky asked.

“You and the Earth have long cheated me. The Earth broke the promise she said she’d fulfil after a few millennia. So, I am simply making good on the promise that she made,” the Night Sky said. The Earth heard the Night Sky’s words and joined in on the conversation. “You interfered in the matters of creatures because of that? Will you bear the consequences of your selfishness?” The Night Sky was not afraid of the Earth. “What more can you do to me that I have not endured? You made it so that people close their eyes in my presence; afraid to walk alone when dusk falls. They love the Day Sky because they can plant and harvest and appreciate the mountains and seas. They hate me because they think I steal the light and hide the beauty of the world from them,” the Night Sky ranted. “You make it seem like you are the most righteous one of us, but you cursed a newborn merely because she is a beautiful creature. In that regard, she and I are kindred.”

“Because I let you have your way, you think you can question my actions,” the Earth focused on what the Night Sky said about the girl. “Because of you, the girl will have no voice until the villagers have avenged their dead for it was her wish that killed them. Only as she is dying will her voice return. Since you feel like the two of you are kindred spirits, you will carry her cries in your darkness before the dawn comes.”

The Earth put a spell on the girl and she was unable to sing or speak. On the night of the full moon, after the villagers had soaked in the pond where creatures die, they gathered around the hut by the river of tears. They stacked dry wood and bales of hay around it and poured oil into the cracks of the hut until it flowed from beneath the door. They then threw flaming torches on the hay and watched it burn until the dawn came. Only when the girl’s body was fully engulfed by the inferno, was she able to let out screams of agony for the Earth had lifted the spell on the girl. The screams echoed through the night, being heard from the far reaches of the village. In desperation, she cried out to the Night Sky for help, but he did not go to her.

When the children of the land of the abandoned got word of the girl’s fate, they were overcome by grief and left the village, heading south and were never heard from again. The woman who was cursed because of the girl was freed from it. When the fire subsided and the villagers left, she went to the burned hut and placed the glass box with the withered flower that she had kept over the years in the ashes. She then headed west of the village, to the land where two rivers

meet and never had to return. There, she raised her daughters, who looked like the cursed girl, into her sunset years.

And to this day, the elders say that in the wee hours of the morning, after a full moon, if you listen closely, you will hear the cursed girl crying out to the Night Sky. It will not stop until the day breaks, to remind the Night Sky that he abandoned a kindred spirit.

## **The one I didn't see**

I spoke to the water but it silenced me. A penny for your thoughts, it said. I released the penny I had clasped in hand into the wishing well and watched the ripples die as quickly as they formed.

Tell me, daughter of Eve, what is it you yearn for? the water asked.

I want to see her. The one who came before me. The one I didn't see.

I felt a pull too strong for my body to fight. I sank into the water, slowly — like one into quicksand.

Fear, anxiety, a hint of regret. I want to be on the other side. I want to meet the one I didn't see. But I was afraid that I wouldn't return. I didn't want it to be forever. I held onto that feeling — fear. I held onto that feeling — desire. I didn't want to forget them — not in this lifetime. Not before I met that person. Not before I returned to the world I came from.

Sing! Chant! the water demanded the tune that appeases the ones in between. The ones who will guide you to the one you didn't see. Don't stop singing until you meet them. I obeyed. I did not know the tune or words but still, I obeyed. I sang the first words that chose to escape my lips. A doleful ancestral chorus. A sound I had never heard before. A sound sent by the one who came before me. Louder and louder, I chanted as I sank deeper and deeper until I was fully immersed. Even then, I chanted. Till my lungs could take no more water. Then, before I died, I saw the ones who would guide me to the one I didn't see.

\*\*\*

I awoke in a vessel the size of two small fishing boats. Two formless beings were beside me. I wasn't afraid but I remembered my fear from before. I knew not to forget — it was my way home. They roamed all over my laid body as though searching for something.

You've travelled a long way, daughter of Eve, the first said.

Your first light has yet to be broken yet you've ventured where sons of Adam fear to go in their dreams, the second one added.

I had only seen twelve red moons in my lifetime but I felt like they were more. I have known no peace since the passing of my third red moon — since the one I didn't see came to the land I travel in now. I was in constant battle with myself, with the ones who called me but I couldn't see and with the sons of Adam. The push and pull I've been in refused me the luxury of breathing like other daughters of Eve.

The other daughters of Eve delighted in the company of the sons of Adam. Why can I not be like them? I often wondered. I didn't want to be like them though. Many daughters broke their first light before their tenth red moon — unhinged, disrespected. Only a few had their first light after their fifteenth red moon. An almost impossible fit that those who broke their first light after seeing fifteen red moons were called noble — honorary. I cannot see my first light until I meet the one I didn't see.

Journeying through this land as you are is a blessing, the first stated.  
As you are, the second echoed, your unbroken first light will protect you from the ones you do not see.

It was only as they said this that I realised that the vessel wasn't moving.

Where do I go from here? I asked.

Through, the formless beings responded in unison, the only way through is through. Again and again, they said those words. Louder and louder, until their words were nothing but a screech in the echoing darkness. I covered my ears which had begun to ring — bleed. I watched the formless beings hover over me as I began to lose consciousness. You must remember, the only way through is through, one of them said, listen, daughter of Eve, to the silence. For a brief moment, before I lost myself, I was almost afraid.

\*\*\*

There's no sense of time in this place. The blue moon was always hidden. Darkness only shifted in inconsistent shades of black as though controlled by someone's emotions. I don't care much for time though — I have plenty.

I didn't know for how long I was unconscious or how I got there, but there I was on solid ground, waking from the most peaceful sleep I'd had in a long time.

Don't you have where to be? a voice snickered.

I staggered to my feet; my ears still ringing.

What do you want? I yelled into the darkness.

Daughter of Eve, it is you I want, the voice replied, one not of this darkness. You have seen many red moons.

I felt a spirit try to creep into me through my temples. Cold like the first breeze of winter. It was almost therapeutic. I didn't know what was going on but I wasn't afraid, but I remembered that I should be.

What do you want from me spirit? I asked with more urgency, show yourself.

As though it had been in battle, the spirit took form in front of me and knelt in defeat. This one didn't have a face.

Forgive me, Daughter of Eve, I didn't know you're yet to break your first light, the spirit explained, the water did not say that an unbroken would be coming from the land of the wishing well.

I didn't care for the spirit's formalities or explanation. I didn't need to understand why I was being treated this way. No one cared enough before to explain anyway.

I told the water that I wanted to see the one who came before me. The one I didn't see. Can you take me to her?

The spirit asked my name. I said I had none.

All daughters of Eve have a name, the spirit pushed, tell me what it is.

The one who came before me; the one I didn't see knows my name, I said, I must see her.

Then sing the song of your ancestors so that they may take you to the one you didn't see.

The spirit probed me to call the ones who came before me, to sing to them, to ask for help... but nothing came to me. Louder and louder the spirit hounded me.

Listen to the silence, a faint voice spoke to me — reverberating the words in my mind. I stood still, closed my eyes and listened. To the silence. The louder the spirit's probes got, the more I focused on the silence.

Come to me, the silence spoke.

\*\*\*

She was always cold.

Every time we went to the red moon viewing ceremony and sat together, I hated holding her hand. It was like the coldest day of winter. But I had no choice. She always held my hand firmly, that way I could see the red moon through her eyes. The energy that she used to link my eyes to hers — my darkness to her light could only be transferred through physical contact.

As we held hands, she gazed at the red moon and the world around it so I could see her world of light and colour. She never looked into the water when she held my hand — or a mirror. She didn't want me to see her through her eyes.

One day, when you have seen many red moons with your own eyes, you'll see me through your eyes, she assured me once.

Even now that I've come all this way to see her, she is as cold as ever, as she lies still. Her hand, as uncomfortable as always, but I don't hate holding it anymore. I missed it — the cold warm love it gave.

I held it firmly and sent my thoughts to her.

I saw my first three red moons through your eyes. I hope you can see a lifetime through mine; now that I see you.

## The two of us

It had been a long day. I was tired, but I needed someone to talk to. So I went to her room, tossed my bag to one of the corners and stood by the bay window seat. I always found her seated at her work desk. Today was no different. She swivelled in her chair to face me, not surprised at all by my intrusion.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable?”

She gestured for me to take a seat.

“I’m okay the way I am,” I said, turning away from her.

I stared out the window — at everything, but nothing in particular.

She sighed.

“What do you think he looks like?” I asked.

“Who?”

“The devil, I mean.”

Silence. I breathe evenly — counting my breaths, waiting for a response. I could feel her incisive gaze rest on me, calculating what to say next.

“Hmmm. Probably like you.” Her words were dry but her reflection in the window smiled. She found humour in my question — and her response.

“Really? Why?” I indulge her.

“Whose smile is more deceitful than yours?”

I smirked. “You’re right about that. Everyone seems to like it. Fall for it, I mean.”

“Why would you want to know what the devil looks like?” Her tone shifted. She was serious now.

I don’t like it when she gets serious. But it’s what she does when she thinks there’s something wrong. Something wrong with me that is.

“It’s just an interest of mine. Maybe he and I can exchange notes, I mean,” I say nonchalantly.

Another burst of silence. More counting of breath. Waiting.

She starts to swivel in the chair. Back and forth. Until I heave in frustration.

“Do you think you’re like him? The devil?” she finally speaks.

I feel like I can be. “No, not particularly. But maybe, yes. I would need to meet him to know, I mean.”

An exasperated sigh from her. Her reflection rolls its eyes. She hates my indirect answers almost as much as I hate her slow-paced analysis of what I say. And the questions. She asks way too many of them. But I tolerate them and she tolerates me because that’s how we communicate — most of the time at least.

“And the notes?” she asks, “What would you be talking about?”

“Nothing serious. Just a thought that came to me. Why it’s easier to look at something foul than something divine.”

“Do you think he is foul?”

She’s doing it again. Cross-questioning me that is. I was the one asking the questions. She’s supposed to be the one answering. It always ends up this way. I don’t like it. It upsets my breathing. Throws me off my tempo. I inhale deeply and reset myself — my breathing — before responding.

“No. Not particularly. Maybe, yes. Like I said, I’d need to meet him to know.”

I couldn’t get more detailed than that. I didn’t want to get more detailed than that. Otherwise, she’d think I’m crazy.

“You’re doing it again.” Another exasperated sigh. “Not giving me straight answers.”

“Well, you’re doing it again too!” I retaliated. “Asking questions to my questions instead of giving me answers. You know I hate when you do that!”

I’d been looking out the window. I wanted to turn away. There was no longer anything worth staring at. I wanted to turn and face her. But I resisted the urge to. I thought it might get confrontational if I did. She clearly thought otherwise and suggested I turn around so we could have a “proper discussion.” I refused. The air got tense — quiet.

This was always where the tolerance ended — the discussion hit a wall. I had questions that I wanted simple answers to. She had questions that she wanted complex answers to. I didn’t want to get into it. She wanted to get to the heart of it. We couldn’t agree. We couldn’t disagree. We couldn’t even agree to disagree.

“What’s actually going on in your head?” She broke the silence. “Why are you here?”

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies,” I said in a sharp patronising tone.

“Then why come?” I saw the frustration on her reflection’s face as she struggled to control her voice. “I’m just trying to help and you’re not leaving much room for that.”

I knew I was being petty. I knew she was trying to help and she was the one person that I could talk to. I just didn’t know how not to feel attacked by her questions — how not to dislike them.

\*\*\*

I was always working by my desk when she came into my room. I knew from her aloof demeanour that something was wrong. She always stood by the window — refused to sit — when she had a lot on her mind; had a lot to say but didn’t know how to say it. Then came the strange questions that made me worry about her. She looked out the window. It was her way of avoiding eye contact. That’s how I knew she just needed someone to talk to.

I sighed. I knew a back-and-forth was coming. I wasn’t in the mood for it, but what could I do but listen, analyse, ask and respond?

“Hmmm. Probably like you.” I tried to keep the conversation light — smiling because I knew she was looking intently at my reflection in the window. I take no pleasure in indulging in her

bizarre questions. Ok. Maybe a little. But only to the degree that they were humorous, which isn't the case when our conversations continue. I switch to a more serious tone relatively quickly with her.

"It's just an interest of mine. Maybe he and I can exchange notes, I mean," she said indifferently. I was taken aback by this. I already knew that she was one to throw out wild statements, saying the most unexpected things, but this devil business was something new. So I remained silent for a while, swaying back and forth in my chair — thinking. Was the devil a metaphor for her? A way of exteriorising her demons. I sat, lost in thought until she sighed heavily; impatient as always.

"Do you think you're like him? The devil?" I ask.

"No, not particularly. But maybe, yes. I would need to meet him to know, I mean." Her tone showed an aversion to my questions.

I rolled my eyes and sighed — irritated. I hated her responses. They were never straightforward, making it difficult to get anywhere. But I tolerated them for the sake of peace.

I probed her with more questions. She continued giving surface-level answers. I could tell she was getting upset; trying to pace herself through the conversation. I wanted her to give me more to work with — anything at all. She didn't want to scratch the surface.

"You're doing it again," I let her know. "Not giving me straight answers."

She became tense because she felt attacked. I wanted to let her know that that was not the case. That I just wanted to understand. I suggested that she turn to look at me so we could communicate better. She adamantly refused, so I sat in silence and let her cool down. If she'd let me get to the root of the problem, I'd know how to make her better.

I decided to be straight up with her, "What's actually going on in your head? Why are you here?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," she decided to be condescending.

Frustration got the better of me. "Then why are you here?" I said, barely managing to gulp down a yell, "I'm just trying to help and you're not leaving much room for that."

She hung her head and became unresponsive. I wanted to be more aggressive with my questioning. But I held back. I knew she wouldn't be able to handle it — might shut down completely if I did.

There was no reason for the conversation to just end here. So I made a last attempt to get through to her.

\*\*\*

I could tell that she was making an effort to reach me.

“This session won’t help,” she told me. “I’m making you uncomfortable and this isn’t good for either of us.”

I was past the point of discomfort. We had lost track of where we started — what we were talking about. Now she was making it about me, my state of mind — not the devil I wanted to know. So, I didn't want to have the conversation anymore.

As I contemplated how to escape this situation, I heard the door behind me swing open. Still in defence mode, I turned suddenly.

“Who are you talking to?” I immediately recognised my housemate’s voice and let out a sigh of relief, welcoming the interruption.

"Oh, no one important."

I saw her confusion and quickly added, “Just the devil.” And we both laughed.

## **Of dreams and visions**

They were always the same. Dreams and visions of Father passing away. I cried the first time I had one such dream. I was afraid. I didn't know what to make of it. So I kept it to myself. The second time I had one such dream, I held my tears. I ran to Mother and asked if all was well with Father. If he had done anything to anger the gods. "alibulungi," Mother said. I didn't tell her why I was asking. She didn't ask why I was asking.

The dreams and visions continued, driving me insane. When I was at my breaking point, the Ancestors revealed to me what the dreams and visions were for; the symbolism behind them. They assured me that Father would live a long life. I didn't believe them at first. What if they were trying to comfort me? Trying to be the calm before the storm? I did not believe them until they put me to sleep and took me back to the first dream. "You must remember," their voices echoed around me.

One of them appeared to me as an Entity. It took on a faceless human form; its body mirroring a shadow. "To believe you must first remember," he gently said to me. "Walk down this path and you will remember." As he spoke, a narrow tiled path lit up before me. Just enough to see two steps ahead of me. With the Entity behind me, I followed the path until I came to a cracked black door. I pushed it lightly and it creaked open. The other side of the door was so dimly lit that I could barely see. I only managed to make out a single bed that was against a wall and a person sleeping in it. She was breathing heavily and tossing and turning. She appeared to be having a nightmare. I looked at the Entity that was now beside me, then back to the person in the bed. "Should we not wake her?" I asked, concerned. "She looks distressed." The Entity simply said, "You must remember."

The person woke up suddenly and burst into tears. She didn't notice me there. She cried for a long time and we watched her cry. My heart grew heavy and ached for her. I wanted to comfort her. I wanted to let her know that all would be well. I tried to go to her but my feet wouldn't move, as though I was cemented in place. I struggled for a while but my feet wouldn't rise from where they'd been rooted.

I watched her grab a pillow — grip it tightly — curling her legs into the foetal position and cooing herself back to sleep. Only after she fell asleep was I able to move. I sat beside her and looked at her intently. She had broken into a sweat. I reached out to touch her forehead. As soon as my fingertips touched her skin, she vanished. I jerked up in shock.

"Where did she go?" I asked the Entity.  
"You must remember," the Entity uttered.

The bed disappeared shortly after, replaced by another narrow path. This one was of dirt and gravel. I could see a single-story brick house at the end of it. The white paint on its walls had long been soiled. The casement windows to the right of the house were open with the curtains drawn but no light came out of them. The front yard was overrun by all kinds of flowers that grew til the house's steps.

As I drew closer to the house, I saw two ladies picking flowers and placing them in baskets. When I set foot on the house's cold grey verandah, they looked up at me. Their eyes were red and swollen.

"Why didn't you come and visit?" they asked in sync. "The old man wanted to see you." They then burst into tears and rocked back and forth vehemently, repeating their words like a chant. As the tears from their eyes fell onto the flowers, the flowers wilted. I looked at the ladies, confused and petrified. A great sense of guilt enveloped me. I fell to my knees and began to apologise. I apologised until the ladies' tears turned to blood. I apologised until their tears wilted all the flowers and turned the soil from which they grew black.

"You *must* remember," the Entity said, urging me to get up and continue forward. I got up and proceeded to the door of the house. As soon as I knocked, it swung open. The room it led to was brightly lit. Two men were seated on a couch on the left side of the room. They appeared to be having a serious conversation. Their voices were drowned out by the wailing that came from the right side of the room. About ten ladies were on the cold floor — some cross-legged, others kneeling — rocking back and forth. Clad in black gomesis, they wailed in chorus, "Ngakitalo, ngakitalo."

My heart grew heavy again. Like before, I was stuck in place, unable to comfort the ladies. Tears ran down my face as I watched them cry into the night. When their tears ran out and silence blanketed the room, they slowly vanished. Only the two men on the couch remained. When they noticed me staring at them, they stopped speaking. One of them got up and walked over to me. He smiled comfortingly and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"You're not too late," he said, "You must go see." He looked to where the ladies were before. I followed his gaze. A brown coffin, which I was sure wasn't there before, lay closed on the floor. "You must go see," he repeated, giving my shoulder a gentle squeeze. I looked at the Entity, which the two men didn't seem to see, and sought reassurance.

"You must remember," the Entity said.

I took its words as a go-ahead and walked over to the coffin. Kneeling in front of it, I took a deep breath, slowly opened the coffin and looked inside. I stared into the coffin for a while. Puzzled, I

looked at the two men who were watching me and then back into the coffin. It was empty! I wasn't sure what, better yet, who I was supposed to be looking at. I turned to the two men to ask but they too had vanished. The light in the room began to fade until only a faint light emitted from the coffin. I tried to close it but the Entity held it open. "You *must* remember," it said, shoving me into the coffin. *You must remember.* The words echoed as the Entity slammed the coffin shut. I screamed, kicking and banging at all sides of the coffin. *You must remember.* The words got louder and louder. I didn't know what the ancestors wanted me to remember. If being trapped in the coffin was a way for me to remember, I didn't care to find out. I just wanted to escape the darkness. I tried but, I couldn't get the coffin to open. My breathing shallowed and my body numbed as I ran out of air. I lay panting. I could hear my heart; its accelerated beats. I fought to keep my eyes open until I couldn't anymore and everything faded into blackness.

I jerked my eyes open and sprang up, gasping for breath. I took a minute to get, my bearings. I was seated under a mango tree outside my home in my paternal village. The sun shone through its leaves. It seemed to be late afternoon. Another nightmare, I thought, sighing in relief and stretching myself out. I had probably drifted off while sitting under the tree. Hmmm, wasn't this tree cut down a while ago? I tried to recall when last I sat under this tree but nothing came to mind. My thoughts were interrupted by someone calling my name. The voice sounded familiar so I responded. "I'm outside." An old man came out of a small house similar to the one in my dream. He was smartly dressed in a kanzu and well-polished shoes. The hair that remained on his balding head was neatly brushed back. I looked down at myself. I was casually dressed in clothes not even suited to welcome guests to the house and my feet were dirty. Embarrassed, I smiled awkwardly.

"Dhadha, why are you so well dressed?" I quizzed, "Are you going somewhere?"

He smiled excitedly. "I've been invited to a wedding. It's starting soon."

"Can I come with you?" I asked, getting up and walking towards him. "I can get changed quickly."

"No, no, no," he strongly declined, "You'll go for another one when it's time. But I must get going. I have to be there before the sun sets." What does he mean by another one when it's time, I asked myself. I brushed the thought away and saw him off. I waved until he became a small figure in the distance. A tear ran down my face as he disappeared over the horizon.

"Do you remember now?" a choir of voices asked. I looked around but didn't see anyone. The small house that the old man came from and the mango tree were gone. "Do you remember now?" a voice said from over my shoulder, getting louder and louder each time it spoke, until it became a deafening screech. I flinched, pressing my hands against my ears to block out the voice. It screamed at me until the moon revealed itself. When silence finally fell over me, my ears rang and blood oozed from them. I collapsed to the ground and stared blankly at the starless sky. The Entity appeared again and stood over me.

“You will remember,” it said softly. “But your time is far spent. Now, you must wake up.” My eyes became heavy and my body felt light. It was a familiar feeling, almost sensational, but I couldn’t remember when I had felt that way.

I got out of bed, my head pounding and the world around me spinning. Dizzy, I clasped my head, shut my eyes and I stood in place for a while to find my balance. Slowly, I began to feel okay. I made my way to the shower. I opened the tap and let the cold water rush over me. What a time to be alive, I said aloud. After a quick shower, I went back to my room and drew the curtain. The sun’s warmth kissed my skin as the light cascaded into the room. I smiled, revelling in the moment. I sighed and then went about prepping for the day ahead. I stood in front of the mirror trying out a combination of clothes before finally settling on a black sweater and black trousers. I simpered, pleased with myself. My reflection didn’t share the same sentiment. She stood still, her head tilted to the left with an eyebrow raised. Convinced my eyes were playing tricks on me, I slowly drew closer to the mirror.

“Did you remember?” she asked me, her tone cold and distant.

“Is there something I’m forgetting?” I asked without thinking.

She fell silent, anger written all over her face. I stared at her, holding her intense gaze. Nah, this isn’t happening, I thought to myself. I stretched out my hand to touch the mirror. She did the same. When our fingers touched the mirror’s surface, the glass shattered. I winced as a shard cut my forefinger, and a drop of blood fell to the floor.

## Life when I sleep

When I was younger, the people I love started visiting me in my dreams. This is of course not unusual. But after they visited my dreams I used to wish I didn't love them. Or that I didn't dream. My dreams followed me into the morning. Sometimes I'd wake in a pool of sweat. Other times my mouth would be dry, my throat choked with tears. Often I'd reach for my phone without even getting out of bed; waking those I loved with unexpected phone calls in the middle of the night or early morning. Those calls were mostly awkward because how do you say, I phoned to check if you or this other person is alive? Sometimes my dreams felt so real that it was hard to call them dreams so I called them *life that happened when I was asleep*. After all, what's more frightening than real life? Some would say, "Don't think much of it, it's just a dream or nightmare." But if anyone experienced that *life that happened when I was asleep*, they'd understand.

The first *life that happened when I was asleep* happened when I was twenty-two and still lover of sleep. I had trouble sleeping for days after it happened. Finally, after I'd convinced myself that it was just a bad dream, I got news that someone I loved had passed away. That was the first time the *life that happened when I was asleep* crossed over into reality. I hadn't realised it then because the person who passed away in the *life that happened when I was asleep* wasn't the same as the person who passed away in real life. But the two were related in real life, which I found strange. I should have taken it as the first sign but I brushed it off as a coincidence. I had forgotten that dreams aren't straightforward. Life became a loop; seeing someone die in the *life that happened when I was asleep* — being in limbo for days; a purgatory of anxiety and restlessness — and hearing my phone ring.

The ringtone became a death notice.

The first ring would take me by surprise. "Who has gone this time?" became the first question I would ask myself. On the second ring, I would take a deep breath, and pick up the phone after the third. The formality of greeting built an uncomfortable suspense in the pit of my stomach. The voice, heavy with sorrow, named who passed away. My throat would tighten, restricting me to silence. I would clench the phone and hold back tears as I listened to the bearer of bad news' justifications. He was old. It was his time. The sickness had taken over the entire body. Living would have only prolonged her suffering. It was dark and raining; the accident was unavoidable. After a coincidence too many, I was forced to concede that this was more than that. I felt helpless. I was unsure of how to deal with the torment that I experienced twice over; in the *life that happened when I was asleep* and the eventual death in reality. The crossovers happened so often that by the time I turned twenty-three, I lost the desire to fall asleep and gained a fear of it. I was driven to madness, unsure of when I was asleep and when I was awake. I slowly withdrew

from my social circles and began avoiding phone calls from close family and friends. My prayers became pleas to have dreamless nights.

I'm older now. The people I love still visit me in dreams. I wish I didn't love them. Or that I didn't dream. The *life that happens when I'm asleep* taunts me with their untimely demise. But I am at a point of acceptance. I don't wake up in a pool of sweat anymore. The tears that once soaked my face have turned into a sun-scorched barren land. I no longer call to check on the people involved in the *life that happens when I'm asleep*. I still find real life more frightening than the *life that happens when I'm asleep*. I'm becoming numb to the phone calls about people's passing. I don't tell people about the *life that happens when I'm asleep* anymore. I grew tired of hearing how I shouldn't think much of it. I can't make them experience the realness of the *life that happens when I'm asleep*. I no longer need anyone to understand.

Every *life that happens when I'm asleep* is still as frightening as the first one. I now find sleep distasteful. I still have trouble sleeping for days after it happens. I know now that the person who passes away in the *life that happens when I'm asleep* won't be the same as the person who passes away in real life. But the two will be related. I know now it's not a coincidence. I know now that dreams are not always straightforward. I believe in the power of dreams. I wish I was Joseph the dreamer; that way I could make sense of the dreams I have. Maybe then I could cope better with waking from my dreams. I no longer frequently receive news of loved ones passing away. I'm glad the crossovers into reality don't happen often anymore, but I still have no desire to fall asleep. I'm still afraid to sleep. When I'm not sure whether I'm awake or not, I slice the palm of my hand. If it bleeds, I know I'm awake. At first, the cut only brought pain. Before long, it brought me comfort and relief. It was proof that I was awake. Insanity only dances with me in the wee hours of the morning. We entertain and comfort each other as the only ones who understand what it means to be part of the other. I still pray for dreamless nights. I am grateful for the few that I get. I also pray that the next *life that happens when I'm asleep* isn't as terrifying as the last because every day I am reminded that death comes for us all.

**PART III**  
**Death Comes For Us All**

## **The way to my death**

My beautiful bed – in which I will die – one of these fine days.

As a child, those words tainted my perception of death, clothing it in romance and mystery. I pictured a dying me. A beautiful death. A bed, surrounded by family and friends. Sorrow, present, of course, but my jokes about my last moments would warm the ailing hearts of my grievers. Upon saying the Lord's prayer together, I would leave this world, peacefully, having lived a life with love and laughter. I knew how I would die.

I am no longer a child. I have felt Death's cold touch, witnessed its presence in the weeping of the living and lived in the grief of the absence it creates. Death has razed any veneer of romance from my perception of it.

I know now how I will die.

The sun will rise from the East as it always does. I will be going about my day unaware of what will soon unfold. What will be the death of me? A heart attack? An undiagnosed ailment? This remains a mystery. However, I do know that I'll take the first steps towards Death by fainting. Collapsing into dreams. The vivid dreams of death I've had since my paternal grandfather passed away will marry reality. The fear of unexistence that I have carried since I was twenty-two will creep into every fibre of my being, consuming me. I will die before I leave this world.

I will wake in a hospital room. I will be hooked up to machines I've only seen in movies. I will blink. Once. Twice. I will turn my head to the right then to the left, and realise that I am surrounded by familiar faces. Worry will be written all over their faces. Some will have tears running down their cheeks. I will ask them why they are crying. They will not hear. I will tell them that I am afraid. They will not hear. Someone will go tell the doctor that I am awake. Another will take my right hand in theirs, continuously smoothing their thumb over it. Everyone else will look on, unable to do anything except offer their presence as comfort.

The doctor will utter words that no loving family is ready to hear. I will stare at the ceiling and tears will escape my eyes. The weeks ahead will be long but feel short. My speech will gradually return. People will be in and out of the hospital; taking care of me, visiting, saying their final goodbyes. I will receive lots of flowers and appreciate them, even though I don't like them. I will see people I haven't seen in years. I will hear stories that I will have to take to my grave. I'll be asked if I'm okay every time I cough or wince. I will nod, smile and say that I'm okay. I won't be okay. The physical pain will only join the multitude of my concerns. I will be silently grieving for myself and feeling apologetic for the hole that my absence will create. I will constantly be scared of the moment when I will finally pass. The day before I die, my breathing will be

laboured; my vision, blurry; and my body, numb. The doctor will say that I won't make it through the night. The people present will take turns holding my hand, bidding me farewell and weeping. They will say how sad it is to see me go. I will find humour in their final words; a way to cope with the fear that will be swallowing me. Someone will fall asleep by my bedside, not wanting me to be alone in my last moments. The morning of my death, the doctor will be surprised that I am alive. He will sound disappointed because of his wrong prediction. I will assure him that he isn't too far off the mark because I am walking towards Death. He will not hear my thoughts. I will be monitored every hour of the day. As night begins to fall, I will take my final steps towards Death. The pulse monitor will begin to beep. I will hear the people around me yell for a doctor. Death will take me in its embrace. I will feel its fingers on the bones of my back. It's cold will enter my body. The beeping will turn to the sound of my heart flatlining. For a while, after my heart stops, I will listen to this sound of myself dying. I will hear the silence of death, what it's like to hear a body without the persistent beat of life. I will feel my blood, settle and begin to cool, as if ice has been injected into my veins. I will listen to the wails as the doctor announces my time of death. They will fall into the hollow that is now my gut like a dead weight. These cries will accompany me for eternity. They will remind me that I was loved. But it makes no difference anyway. I hope we will remember to pray before I pass.

## **The far side**

Where am I on this far side of reality?

It is silent, more so today when I'm supposed to die. I lie in this empty space, lost, uncertain. Where do I think this far side of reality is? What time do I think it is? Are my eyes open or closed?

I feel myself slip further into this far side of reality. Its silence is loud, more so today when I want so badly to be alive. Gazing into the bright nothingness of the dark — being one with it — sets something in motion and I feel my body quiver, with what? Not fear exactly, but a dark uncertainty. It leaks into me and I try to fight back the tears. I blink against them but there is only darkness. It swallows me. I looked around in search of the faintest light, anything, a glimmer. Nothing. It's just me and the dark. I want to know where I am. I want to know what time it is. Do my eyes even exist?

I make peace with the darkness, but not with the feeling of uncertainty. I walk on an infinite, erratic path — moving but stuck. My footsteps, swift but heavy. Every step echoing; each echo louder than the last. My accelerated breath choruses with the echoes of my steps. All the sounds that I usually ignore scream at me through reverb. I wish these sounds would fade away, more so now that I miss the silence. I run to escape them, but they follow me. They remind me that I am alone on this far side of reality. More so now that cowering is my only safe haven. Cowering with no one to embrace me; to assure me that all will be well. Can no one save me from this far side of reality? Where I am — on this far side of reality — is lonely.

## **After**

I told you:

The year after your death, the sun is still shining, the birds are still chirping and the earth is still spinning. The sun is no longer sad, and it scorches me to prove how it has moved on from your death. The birds' chirping no longer carry a sad song. They sing of the wonder of the new day to remind themselves that they can live on without you. The earth is still going around the sun with its multiple inhabitants, living, breathing, laughing, loving, growing and growing some more. A year after your death, I'm still living, breathing, laughing, loving and growing but dying a little. When I think of these your favourite things: the sun, the birds and the earth, I become sad because of how easily they moved on without you.

You told me:

Two years after your death, you are still where I laid you to rest. You can still hear the cries that echoed around you when the doctors pronounced you dead. You are still wandering in a darkness that doesn't seem to end. Two years after your death, you have grown to find comfort in that darkness. It doesn't scare you anymore. Two years after your death, you wish you weren't alone in the darkness. You wish you weren't lonely. You wish you could feel the warmth of the sun again. You wish you could sit under a tree and feel the earth beneath you. You wish you could hear the early morning birds sing one more time. You wish you could give me one more warm embrace. You wish I wouldn't learn to live on without you.

I promise:

Ten years after your death, I will still bring you flowers even though I know you don't like them. I will still play your favourite songs when I visit. I will play new songs that I think you would love. I will talk to you as though nothing has changed. I will rant to you about everything that is going wrong in my life. I will narrate all the wonderful things that have happened to me. I will ask you for advice but I won't take it. I will tell you all about the wedding that you promised to attend but didn't live to see. I will pour you a drink from a wine bottle that was made in the year you left. I will still shed a tear every time I leave the place where I laid you to rest. I will tell you that I still haven't learned to live without you.

## **Her inscriptions**

I always believed that every day was a beautiful day to die. But on the day I died, I realised it was a beautiful day to be alive.

Honestly, dying isn't so bad. For one, I can't tell that I'm dead.

In life, you're unique, just like everybody else. You're extraordinary, just like everybody else. Try being ordinary. Now, that's a uniquely extraordinary thing to do. After all, in death, you're just dead.

Life is an unscripted drama that always ends in death. My script happened to be a few years shorter than others.

You. Me. We. Us. Them. All of us. Together. Alone. Alone together. At peace. At war. Laughing. Crying. You are. I am. We are. We are. They are. All of us are. Breathing. This is how we live. This is how we die.

If death is the greatest adventure, why do I feel trapped in a box?

Death comes for us all, but when we go is up to God.

It surprises me how quickly I became a citizen of the city that sleeps below.

I have a few questions for God, so I've gone ahead to find answers. Join me when you're ready or when it's your time.

Everyone wants equality but no one wants to die, but what greater form of equality is there?

People who say "You Only Live Once" have never escaped death.

Just because I passed away doesn't make me your ancestor. Don't consult me. Let me rest in peace.

Rest In Peace sounds nice, but sleeping was the least peaceful part of my day. So, I'm not sure I'm resting now, let alone in peace.

I liked to plan. So, I planned my own funeral, bought my own casket, and even stood on the ground where I'd be buried. It's a shame I couldn't oversee it. I know someone messed something up.

Whoever laid a wreath on my coffin clearly didn't know me well enough. But plant a few flowers around my grave; Mother Earth will appreciate it.

No greater lies are told than at a funeral.

The only unwanted guest at the funeral was me — the one in the coffin.

I was a hero, so in life, I got my Happily Ever. And in death, I got my After.

My life was based on a true story. How much of it was true and how much of it was based is relative — debatable. I lied to myself sometimes, so even I don't know.

I came. I saw. I breathed a little.

I saw. I breathed. I lived a little.

I breathed. I lived. I died a little.

I lived. I died. I died till I could die no more.

Part B: Portfolio

**Portfolio**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

of

Rhodes University

by

**Sonia Charity Sajjabi Namukuta**

November 2023

## Table of contents

Introduction.....	70
Reflective Journals.....	71
Reflection 1.....	71
Reflection 2.....	73
Reflection 3.....	75
Reflection 4.....	77
Reflection 5.....	79
Reflection 6.....	81
Reflection 7.....	83
Reflection 8.....	85
Reflection 9.....	86
Reflection 10.....	88
Reflection 11.....	90
Reflection 12: The poetics essay.....	91
Topography of language: A poetics essay.....	92
Reflection 13: Book reviews.....	98
Book Review 1.....	99
Book Review 2.....	101
Book Review 3.....	103
Book Review 4.....	105
Reflection 14: Working on the thesis.....	107
Writing in Community Report.....	111
Reader Report Reflection.....	115

## **Introduction**

I wasn't one hundred per cent sure what to expect from the MACW course even after reading the information provided before applying for it. I had heard good things about the course from my writing and editing lecturer in the Journalism department so I wanted to get into the course and see how I could improve my writing. So, with an open mind, I started the course. I've since explored multiple writing styles, picked up new ways of interpreting prose and poetry and found a niche that I want to explore more of even after completing the course.

## Reflective Journals

### Reflection 1

In the first week, we dived into “Fierce writing”. The pieces we focused on were heavy and thought-provoking. We looked at the emotions pieces can stir in us and how writers portray these emotions. We also discussed a writer's style; choice of narrative, the use of short sharp sentences and repetition for impact, choice of tense and creating imagery with descriptive words and metaphors.

It was emphasised that when choosing a writing style, we mustn't generalise certain elements of the writing but explore them and that there is richness in learning to say things indirectly; adding layers to a piece of writing. For example, expanding on sensations or personal experiences to convey raw emotion. It's from here that my initial desire to experiment with different writing styles to see how they appeal to various emotions came.

In the reading session, I began to see how stories take up their own voices. I had never considered the separation of a writer and the voice in their work. A key note that stuck with me was that the author isn't always the storyteller so there shouldn't be an assumption of who the *I* is in a piece. I rediscovered the value of reading aloud. Being accustomed to a language can be deceptive when it comes to reading silently. Sometimes, there's a false sense of understanding; other times the value of a piece might be lost to the reader when they think they don't resonate with the piece when reading in silence but find its value when reading it aloud. This was the case for me when I read “The Old Man of Usumbura and His Misery” by Taban Lo Liyong by myself in silence. Reading it aloud during the reading session revealed many hidden gems.

I also learnt that although we're always seeking to decipher the piece of writing before us, it's okay to be confused by the writing. Being puzzled by a piece in itself reveals something else about the piece, the reader, and the writer.

In the feedback session, we got deeper into understanding the emotions of a piece while reading each other's work. I focused a lot on what kept me in the piece, where I felt connected to it and what pulled me out of it. Things like abstract writing instead of giving specifics; using clichés instead of creative wording; or overly using adverbs like very, as opposed to interactive and expressive diction. Since using adverbs is something I am prone to, I thought being more cautious of this would go a long way in enhancing a piece's emotional delivery.

I picked up on the need to ask what the character of a story is focusing on; what their mindset is and what the most effective way to *show* this mindset is. Here, going into the details of a scene is crucial to helping a reader visualise the scene and understand the character's state of mind. I applied this in the piece which I wrote this week when editing it. I initially wrote “The fullness of that sexual body” which I then edited to “Her unsmiling luscious lips that dared to

cuss at me. Her generously plump and firm breasts that were happy to be free from restraint. Her curvy sedative hips that twisted in rebellion.”

While editing, I understood what *showing* for a writer means a bit better. Although the interpretation from the reader may not align with what the piece intended, I found it better to show more than leave too much room for debate or questions that could have been answered in writing. I also observed that my writing drifted easily to morbid topics compared to other emotions.

## Reflection 2

This week, we focused on “Meeting poetry”. We looked at the similarities that poetry and prose have. They’re often viewed as being far apart from each other but, through the seminar, I found that they’re not. Both are aimed at telling people's stories and manage to do so through different forms of delivery and detailing. Because of this, the emotions they stir and the questions they raise may vary and may attract different audiences.

We explored the safety nets that most poetic works have. We found that while writers have to be witty at times to get their message across, other times the writer has to let go of wit and venture beyond the borders of conventional poetry and be experimental. The trial and error approach to writing helps the poet to become innovative in their writing process and *disrupt* their usual way of thinking. This reminded me of week one's discussion of stepping out of one's comfort zone to expand one's writing possibilities. I focused on the fact that poetry, and writing in general, doesn't always require sophistication; the text doesn't have to be clean but it needs to be beautiful and there is mastery in simplicity.

One of the poems we read, "Young Poets" by Nicanor Parra stated, “In poetry, everything is permitted. With only this condition, of course: You have to improve on the blank page.” This stood out to me because I tend to focus on being complex and miss out on getting the main story out while trying not to break any of the rules of writing that I’ve picked up. I also liked that I could re-imagine the poem as a short prose piece. Nicanor Parra chose this style of prose-poetry to emphasise what poetry can be and do when well explored.

I learnt that when telling a story, it doesn't need to have all or any answers. It can carry confusion or frenzy and leave the reader with questions so that they can go in search of answers.

During the feedback session, we looked at how stiff academic writing can make non-academic writing. Mxolisi Nyezwa, this week's lecturer, encouraged us to make our pieces our own by not being caught up in responding to the assignment prompts. This would help us make the pieces independent of the set prompt and free of rigidity. And also, to take out things from a piece that are not adding value to the overall poem or prose. Elements used in one piece can be taken out and used to create a separate piece and allow the original piece's main message to be seen through the “clutter” of unnecessary words or stanzas.

In the feedback session, we discussed word choice and the archaic feel or less modern style of the pieces I wrote during the week. It's something that I'd noticed a lot in my writing; not just the words but the undertone of my writing as well. Because of the books, movies and other influences that I've had from childhood, I'm accustomed to the *sound* and *colour* of older forms of writing, so I tend to write some pieces in a way that I think “old language” would sound like. It's something I want to try to move away from a bit, but not do away with.

Reading Diane Williams' “The Source of Authority” and Lydia Davis' “The Mother” highlighted the necessity for precision when it comes to shorter forms of writing. I was able to see how a

complete story can be told in a few lines, without failing to be gripping; a style I hope to explore and possibly emulate.

I was captivated by Christina Kloess' "The Hardest Button" and its unconventional style and use of characters. The use of imagery brings the scenes to life while also leaving questions as to how such a thing could exist or how one comes to be so cruel in the unexpected unfolding of events. The piece highlights how important *how* you're saying something is when creating a powerful or impactful piece of prose and poetry.

I found Afua Hirsch's "What does it mean to be African?" from the *New Daughters of Africa* (2019) anthology intriguing. We're often told to write in strict academic formats and let go of non-academic formats or vice versa, depending on where one is applying oneself. However, in this prose piece, Afua Hirsch balances the academic style of writing with academic referencing with a creative writing form to tell her story. Because of her choice of format, the prose felt like a well-referenced opinion piece which could appeal to both academic and non-academic spaces. This style isn't a personal preference but it's something that caught my eye and expanded my view on how writing can be used outside the forms of writing that I know or would normally use.

### Reflection 3

This week, we looked at “Writing Obliquely”, using an indirect form of writing to tell a story or put across a narrative. The use of definitions or defining common concepts to put across a narrative struck me since I wasn’t familiar with this style of writing. It took a while to grasp what was happening in some of the seminar’s reading selections like, “schizophrenia: some definitions” by Vangile Gantsho and *If I Stay Right Here* by Chwayita Ngamlana (2017). It was interesting to see the juxtapositions and to identify the themes highlighted by the pieces. We also focused on the importance of titles since it's what may first draw a reader to a piece. Titles can create tension or anticipation for the story. I think, in oblique stories, the simplest title works best since the story is already written in a very indirect way. The title can guide the reader to understand the underlying plot of the piece. I found that “Inventory” by Carmen Maria Machado and “The Wolf” in *Kassandra and the Wolf* by Margarita Karapanou (2009) made good use of their titles to highlight the stories’ contents.

In the reading group, Diane Williams’ “All American” was one of the pieces whose writing styles struck and stuck with me. Williams captures the emptiness of an individual, making you feel the narrator's detachment from her own story from the first paragraph. She has an effective way of using time and a somewhat backwards-moving order that manages to bring out the past as though it’s the present. This form of writing coupled with the brevity of the piece added to the richness of the piece and its overall feel. The paragraphs didn't feel misplaced in any way and the movement of the piece felt very natural like the narrator is having a flashback of sorts.

Reading Henali Kuit's *The Incredible Beat of my Heart* (2021) this week reminded me of the importance of writing concise stories. Henali’s pieces don't feel busy and every word seems to be carefully selected to make the most of a few lines to tell compelling stories. This is something I want to learn to do during the year because sometimes I get caught up in unnecessary details that don't add to the story or cover up the intention of the story.

When writing this week’s assignment, Lydia Davis’ “The Sock” from the seminar readings influenced how I crafted my story. I focused on the length of sentences and the hyperfixation on an object that’s not necessarily the main issue in the story. I also took inspiration from how Peter Markus used a few words and repetition in *We make mud* (2011). The repetition gave the piece an emphatic feel that I wanted to emulate in my writing. When we read an extract from *We Make Mud* in the reading seminar, someone likened Peter Markus to an artist who only uses two colours in his art. I view Peter Markus as an artist who found his colours and mastered their shades. The piece I wrote is included in my thesis as “Easy to grip”.

At the end of the week, we discussed how grammar can be used in a piece. I learnt that there is a time to use and focus on grammar, and there are times when its rules can be broken for emphasis

or a certain type of delivery; not letting the rigidity of grammar overtake the story that's meant to be told. If certain aspects of a piece, like metaphors or adjectives, are not transformative in a piece, they can be taken out. Clichés should be taken out of a piece or at least reworked to make them enhance the piece.

A key takeaway was that it's important to let a piece be what it wants to be and that often, the pieces that don't work are the ones that teach us the most.

## Reflection 4

This week's seminar focused on "the politics and poetics of punctuation", discussing what punctuation is beyond being marks or symbols on paper. We saw that punctuation gives breath to a piece the same way we have pauses or expressions in daily speech and can bring musicality to the piece.

I learnt that there isn't necessarily a wrong way to use punctuation but how it's used can add or remove from a piece's entire meaning. And although there is no wrong way to use punctuation, if one chooses to use punctuation unconventionally, it has to serve a purpose or effect; not placing marks thoughtlessly for the sake of breaking grammar rules. A key quote from the seminar notes stated, "At best, one can advise that punctuation marks be handled the way musicians handle forbidden chord progressions and incorrect voice-leading. In every act of punctuation, as in every musical cadence, one can tell whether there is an intention or whether it is pure sloppiness. To put it more subtly, one can sense the difference between a subjective will that brutally demolishes the rules and a tactful sensitivity that allows the rules to echo in the background even where it suspends them." It summarised how punctuation should or can be used to create meaning and give rhythm to a piece of writing. We were encouraged to think beyond the need to be clever and calculative with the punctuation to our unique style of using it. A key takeaway was that the best punctuation is covert where less might be more; functioning subliminally to create the intended meaning. The piece that came out of this seminar is included in my thesis as "The far side".

Another part of the assignment was to look at a piece we had written in the past few weeks and alter the punctuation to give the piece a different feel. The piece I edited is part of my thesis as "The way to my death".

During the reading group, we explored how narrative can be used to focus on telling the writer's story, not necessarily satisfying the reader's every query. Although detailing is important when constructing a narrative, a writer doesn't always have to spoon-feed the reader. Readers can create their own details based on the information presented to them.

While reading "The City of Radiant Objects" by Norman Locke, we highlighted the use of similes and how they can weaken the degree or intensity of an element of writing. This focus came from one of the piece's characters saying, "We do not use similes here, not any figurative language, which distracts from the object, thereby dimming its radiance." Instead of likening things to other things, equating the objects could carry a greater intensity and enhance the meaning of what would have been a simile; for example, saying "She is a frog." instead of "She is like a frog."

While reading *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009), I noticed the differences in the lengths of the sentences. Lydia Davis uses minimal punctuation when making complex sentences. I particularly liked "A Double Negative", a one-sentence story; and "The Letter",

which has lengthy sentences and limited punctuation. This affected the pieces' pace and the emotions they carried forward. "A Double Negative" gave a fast-paced feeling while "The Letter" was slower and allowed me to understand the character's emotions better. I found both styles engaging, effectively eliciting different emotions.

## Reflection 5

This week, we looked at writing book reviews, focusing on the importance of writing and reading book reviews and what makes a good review.

We saw that book reviews give prospective readers an assessment of a piece of writing; give a book visibility and highlight the pros and cons of the book in question. A book review should go beyond sharing an opinion of a piece of writing. It should show one's understanding of the work being reviewed; the impression that the book left on the reader; highlight the work's strong and weak points; and provide information that is relevant to the reader without giving away too much about a piece of writing. Writing a book review should stem from having a passion for the book in question and having felt the need to write a review for a piece of work that you believe others should read as well. So, the reviewer strives to get people to notice the book through the review.

Reading book reviews helps a reader know which works are "up their alley" and which ones. It also helps writers discover writers and books that would otherwise remain unknown to them. Some people find it a waste of time to buy or read a book because they know little to nothing about the writer or genre into which the writer ventures. Reading reviews of such books might help diversify readers' literature consumption by helping them find new content they might like.

I learnt that a reviewer must position themselves in the shoes of someone who hasn't yet decided to read a particular book, and thus stating facts that they think will make the reader decide to pick up the book.

While searching for book reviews during the week, I realised that there aren't enough reviews for books produced, regardless of how famous the books are; plus, preferable review source sites charge hefty fees for access to reviews which may demotivate people from looking for good quality reviews.

I found reviews of Lydia Davis' "The Sock"; Peter Markus' *We make mud* (2011); and Richard Thomas' *The New Black* (2014). The review by Nick Ripatrazone on *We Make Mud* was my favourite one because it's an easy read and very concise. Having read only a small section of the book, the review motivated me to read the entire book. In the review, he mentions that "prior publication of many of the smaller chapters causes them to have a feel of standalone", which is true of the section that I've read from the book. The review manages to capture the writer's style, summarise the plot without giving too much away, hold the reviewer's opinion and suggest who the intended audience of the book might be.

During this week's reading seminar, "Sweet" by Diane Williams, "How to Write an Ebook of Poetry" by Oscar Schwartz and "Upon Finding a Knife" by Suki Wessling stood out to me. Diane Williams' use of the title "Sweet" was particularly captivating because as the story unfolded, I kept on thinking about its irony; the story being far from sweetness or lightness. An

example from the story is when the narrator says, “I get into bed when I become displeased. My brother and his wife stop by and I tell them we will eat a late dinner. I have a bad case of food poisoning. All in all, it is a fine Christmas. It’s efficient and polite.” The story has many unexpected turns before getting to this point. The “sweetest” moment of the piece is when the narrator says, “It was sweet of you to come. I am glad you are here because otherwise, I’d be so lonely.” This is at the beginning of the story and it made the piece feel like it was being retold to a close friend as opposed to happening in real time.

Oscar Schwartz makes use of short and long lines to tell his story in “How to Write an Ebook of Poetry”. The longer lines contain detailed information about parts of the story that the narrator deems important to expand on while the short ones are more like quick statements, though still relevant to the plot. The absence of full stops in the piece gives it a sense of continuity and although Schwartz doesn’t necessarily mention time, the shift is felt as the piece gradually unfolds, showing the progression through life from birth to death. The piece reads like a to-do list which I found interesting.

Suki Wesslings’ “Upon Finding a Knife” captivated me because of the sense of “character layering” that it has. I saw the presence of two characters but also got the feeling that another character was also present in the writing. The piece has two obvious characters Carl and a writer who is writing about Carl’s journey on a train. The third character that I believe is present is another writer who is writing about the writer mentioned in the book. This second writer observes the writer mentioned in the story and documents that writer’s thought process to make Carl do the things that he does. Wesslings uses a direct form of likening that I believe intensifies the meaning of the statement. “He couldn’t understand why a jail should be more expensive than a vacation hotel. His favourite Hawaiian shirt cost eight dollars. This suit was expensive.” This stood out for me because when we looked at “The City of Radiant Objects” by Norman Locke the week before, the use of similes and how they can weaken or intensify the writing is something we focused on.

## Reflection 6

This week, we looked at “Writing Simply” and explored the use of motifs as literary devices to tell stories. We focused on using simplistic ways of writing to tell a story instead of using complex forms or “roundabout story layering” to get a message or theme across. The story created is more directed/straightforward, and it’s easy for a reader to decipher. I found this to be an interesting contrast to the Writing Obliquely seminar which focused on indirect ways of storytelling and could take a reader through multiple layers before understanding a piece’s focus.

Repetition is another element we looked at since it’s something that many writers use in their writing, most times subconsciously. In my writing, putting emphasis on repetition and paying attention to what it's doing or trying to do, brought a different life to how I wanted the repetition to be received and understood.

I learnt that a writer must choose or know when to leave gaps in writing so a reader can bring something to the piece; questions, conclusions or even fresh perspectives. I tried to use this in the piece I wrote for the week where I left gaps in areas of the character's life that would somewhat justify how or why events were unfolding the way they were. I also tried to keep the piece as simple as possible but also engaging, directing the reader from point A to point B. This piece is part of my thesis as “A matter of time”.

For my analysis of a motif in a piece of writing or music, I chose the song “Runaway Love” by Ludacris featuring Mary J. Blige. The song tells stories of different girls and the households and environments in which they grow up. The introductory hook “Runaway Love” which is sung about eight times and reoccurs throughout the piece sets the pace for establishing the theme of escape. I believe it functions as a reminder to the listeners of what the musicians wish the characters could do. In the three verses of the song, Ludacris unpacks the stories of underage girls who are suffering different kinds of abuse, ending each verse with “Forced to think that hell is a place called home. Nothing else to do but get her clothes and pack. She says she's about to run away and never come back.” This way of ending his verses makes his words a motif, showing themes of desperation and helplessness. It also links the stories of the different girls, showing what struggles they share while drawing attention to the girls' experiences of their homes and immediate spaces. The words "She's steady trying to figure why the world is so cold" also act as a motif that connects the girls' perception of the world because of the things they are exposed to in their communities; further emphasising the prevalent themes.

An excerpt from *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) by Henry James, which we looked at during the seminar, uses descriptives to establish the motif of a peacock for example, “having features that suggested some tropical bird — a long beak-like nose, small, quickly-moving eyes and a mouth and chin that receded extremely.” The song “Runaway Love” by contrast uses direct emphatic statements when establishing motifs.

I read *The New Black*, edited by Richard Thomas (2014) this week and I found that the stories take indirect and twisted approaches to storytelling. In one of the book's stories, "Father. Son. Holy Rabbit", one becomes more inquisitive about how certain elements of the story are occurring as the story unfolds. Even though there is something horrific happening in the story, it's told in a subtle way that if one is not attentive, one might miss it. This highlighted the importance of leaving gaps in writing to create curiosity and make the story interesting.

The piece "Intuition" by Aimee Parkison from the reading group was quite striking because of the writer's choice to use the perpetrator's point of view and the justice done by the use of a one-sided point-of-view form of storytelling. The story is told from the perspective of a student who touches the school guidance counsellor inappropriately in the office; the school guidance counsellor doesn't consent or reject the advances. The descriptions used make the story's events very vivid and propel the story forward, all the while one quizzes what the character, Miss Rayburn's thought process is as the story unfolds. Not knowing her thoughts throughout the piece made me inquisitive and to this end, I think Parkison achieved her goal, holding me, the reader, in the story from beginning to end.

## Reflection 7

This week, we looked at “Rewriting” and how rewriting can be used to tell stories from those that already exist. My understanding of rewriting before this seminar was editing a piece; moving parts of it around and seeing what to remove or add, so this was a refreshing perspective. We saw that rewriting can be about finding something that no one else is expressing and bringing it to life in your own way; adding conversation to an existing story while giving a different perspective to it or reimagining the story in a different context.

I learnt that re-writing a piece goes beyond just mimicking the piece in front of you, or countering it. It can carry similar nuances but convey completely different emotions; the key being to look beyond what’s in front of you as a reader and writer and visualising what it is about the piece you want to put across that seems hidden within the story.

In “Popular Mechanics”, an excerpt from *What we talk about when we talk about love* by Raymond Carver (1981), we saw the reinvention of a story from the Bible about King Solomon and two women who fought over a child. The characters in Carver's piece are different but the underlying plot relates to the original story. The same way King Solomon wanted to determine ownership of the baby by splitting him in two is the same way the parents in “Popular Mechanics” tagged their child to establish ownership. As Carver concludes, “In this manner, the issue was decided.”

I tried rewriting using my country's national anthem as the original text. I was aiming to create a satirical piece that highlighted things that I believe are issues in the country. The piece isn't included in my thesis, but I learnt a lot from the writing process and drew inspiration from it when writing “Profile”, a piece that's in my thesis.

I read *Kassandra and the Wolf* by Margarita Karapanou (2009) this week and appreciated her use of short chapters, ranging from half a page to just a few pages long per chapter. Each one works together to create a coherent story while also being able to stand as an independent piece. One of the chapters titled “The Wolf”, is only a few lines long and effectively uses the fairytale of the little pigs to allude to a more sinister act that's happening in the narrator's reality. The novel manages to take the reader to the darkest spaces calmly and quietly while carrying light elements of (dark) humour. The overall simplicity of the text is something I'd like to experiment with. One of my favourite chapters that does this is titled “Jesus and the Virgin Mary”. Like “The Wolf” chapter, this chapter is only a few lines long but manages to have very strong imagery that sets the entire scene and sends you into the twisted mind of the child Kassandra, for example, “I pinned him to the wall and stuck the first nail in. Konstantinos started screaming.” ... “I raised the hammer again, after first tossing the tablecloth away. To get a better swing.”

For me, *Kassandra and the Wolf* carried the same emotions as the stories in *The New Black*, edited by Richard Thomas (2014). The contrast between the two books is that the writers in *The New Black* write much longer pieces. But, both books have dark, morbid themes that incorporate

crime, violence and gruesomeness. This subtle approach to such themes is something I hope to emulate in my writing.

In the feedback session, we discussed how one must focus on the language of a piece; choosing to give things volume whereby one moves away from just saying things; and highlighting a key part of writing — showing, not telling. And understanding that one doesn't have to state everything; making the reader interact with one's writing, a common element mentioned in previous seminars.

A key takeaway for me was that after finishing a piece, we should think about whether the first paragraph is necessary since it's sometimes the "voice-clearing" paragraph and may not add to the piece. Questions like "Can this paragraph go somewhere else?" or "Do I need this?" or "Why am I using this word instead of another?" are essential to the rewriting and general editing process. I learnt that if something in the first paragraph is irrelevant, it should be removed; if it's relevant, it should be kept or rewritten to put one's narrative across better. The uniqueness of writing shouldn't be hidden behind poetic or "smart" language in a bid to fit into specific forms of writing that "everyone is using".

## Reflection 8

This week, we looked at “The art of making a clay pot”. The core of it was finding tools that we can use to create stories or pieces that are unique to our writing styles to make one's writing stand out, and in so doing, stand out as a writer with a different voice in the world. An analogy we used was in the form of a question, “What type of soil are you picking your clay from to make your pot?” I believe this is the core principle that each lecturer throughout the seminars has been trying to help us get to as individual writers. So, I liked how this seminar fed into each of the seminars we’ve had so far, tying them together while drawing on their different elements.

The seminar highlighted the need to cut to precision and appreciate the delicacy in each piece of writing. The point of cutting to precision resonated with me because sometimes I get too caught up in the intricacies of a scene or two at the expense of the overall story. This tied into the second point of appreciating the delicacy in each poem or prose; knowing where to place each piece of the puzzle; knowing when or how to remove a puzzle piece from somewhere and place it somewhere else to enrich the story; and presenting things in a way that makes the pieces of the puzzle feel new and striking to the reader while evoking the intended emotions. Lecturer Mthunzi Mbungwana encouraged us to put a degree of honesty into our writing and use simple forms of writing; as important as what we write is, the way we write plays a big role in putting our narrative across.

The seminar's assignment proved to be a challenge compared to the other weeks despite the simplicity of the assignment focus; writing three to five pages of a topic or story of choice. I usually try to keep my pieces as short as possible, so the assignment took me out of my comfort zone, allowing me to try my hand at a slightly longer form of writing. I was initially fixated on trying to fill the pages with words instead of enriching the story on the page. This led to numerous trials and errors. When I thought back to a discussion we had in week two, I decided not to get caught up in the fear of not reaching the required number of pages. Despite the blocks I had during the writing process, it helped me remember the joy that comes with writing longer pieces and the detail that goes into them to make the story and characters come alive. This piece is included in my thesis as “The one I didn’t see”.

I read Stephen Graham Jones’ *Zombies with Metal Teeth* (2013), looking out for the similarities it might have with the other books since I’ve been focusing on elements like brevity, quietness and morbidity. Stephen Graham Jones' clever approach to fiction and horror in a subtle form is a skill of his that I'd like to learn how to use while adding my voice to it. The contrast and relationship between *Zombies with Metal Teeth* and his story, “Father. Son. Holy Rabbit” shows the uniqueness of Jones' style where he adds life to what would usually be taken as mundane stories. The plot might feel familiar but the way he writes about it feels unanticipated.

## Reflection 9

Fantasy, reality, fact and fiction, myth and history. These were the prevalent topics during this week, particularly when it came to reading.

The piece “History of the Minotaur” by Zbigniew Herbert, translated from Polish by Alissa Valles, piqued my interest because it felt like myth and history were coming together to justify each other's existence. The style of writing reads like an encyclopaedia or textbook where a person is stating facts but also adds elements of a fairytale, telling the story of the Minotaur as though it were part of actual history; a line that is blurred a lot when it comes to myth. This translation gave a feel of the minotaur being personified and the half-bull aspect of the creature being removed from the story. Although the piece itself isn't telling a new story, it gives an interesting approach to writing about myth within history and how naturally the line can be blurred. The piece highlighted the need for a writer, who is reading another writer's work, to get accustomed to the idea of not understanding something or everything in what they're reading; this way, a writer may be prompted to explore more of what the story is trying to say, leading to research, breaking the wall of being a passive reader and becoming an active one which in turn affects the way one writes.

The story “Eye for an Eye” from *African Folktales*, edited by Roger D. Abrahams Panteon (1983), tells a folk story of the son of a chief, a poor young man, the young man's father and another chief's daughter and her mother. Because of the way the story is written, one sees a shift of main characters where, in the beginning, the story leads us to believe that the son of a chief is the main character and sheds light on him. Later, as the plot develops and the story unravels, we see a shift from the son of the chief being the main character to the poor young man who he picks up on his journey becoming the main character. The organic shift and natural flow of the story are quite fascinating because the writer doesn't allow themselves to be tied down to one character to lead the plot. It has a relay race feel to it where one character hands the baton to the next character to complete the race. Although it's a good, well-written story with a fascinating writing style, it leaves many issues regarding the characters unresolved, and a few questions unanswered. The story has an open ending, as though the writer is leaving a question for the reader to ponder and respond to themselves.

The piece “Last Seen” by Michael J. Lee had a few lines that piqued my interest and got me thinking about perspective; how objects appear based on the characters' mood or state of mind. The lines were, “It's late afternoon. The light is ugly and yellow and violates the darkness of the kitchen as it streams through the blinds. At least that's the mother's opinion.” Interestingly, in my writing, I always use light in a way that portrays something beautiful, happy and promising regardless of the situation the character is in; but to see it used in this way opened my eyes to

more possibilities of how I could explore using light and other objects based on the characters' mood opposed to what the object could or should make the character feel.

Something else I found fascinating about "Last Seen" is that it stylistically used an outside party to tell the story of this mother and her son who are looking for some people while also using dialogue to explain what has happened, whereby the mother and son tell another story through their conversation. In this way, the style choice gives a sense of presence and absence at the same time; the outside party, as they tell the story, distances themselves from what the mother and son are feeling, but also gives a very intimate look into their lives, evaluating what they may be feeling based on what they see. This reminded me of another piece of writing, Suki Wesslings' "Upon Finding a Knife", where we see the writer speak about what they are making the character feel and then take us into the character's world.

We got information about doing a Writing in Community project. Its aim is to create oneness with the community in which one lives, allowing us to explore writing that is around us, beyond the academic space of the university. In the outreach section of the project, finding a group of people to work with sounded daunting. My initial thoughts were to play it safe and organise my project with writers who I am familiar with. I decided against it and will be looking for people who haven't been in my writing circles, particularly for the writing workshop section of the project.

## Reflection 10

The concept of “Still life” that we looked at this week was enthralling; focusing on an object in its natural or unnatural element and developing a story around it. A series of objects were placed in front of us during the seminar and we were tasked to write five different paragraphs about the different objects and later come up with a coherent story that could tie the paragraphs together. This method of storytelling is intriguing, not particularly because of the technical style of writing that emerges but because it takes every bit of the world around us and turns it into a story which expands the possibilities of the stories that we could tell, especially interacting with nature since these were the primary objects presented to us. The assignment helped me explore the personification of objects that exist in nature and those that might be misplaced. Personification wasn’t exclusively part of the writing assignment prompt but came to light because of my approach to writing. I drew inspiration from this seminar when I gave a voice to elements of nature in “The abandoned”, which is in my thesis.

We were reminded of the need for a good title and the effect that it has on text. It’s something I highlighted because from time to time, I struggle with choosing a title that justifies the text; a title that adds relevance to the story but also doesn’t take away from it. This reminded me of “An Eye for an Eye?” from *African Folktales*, edited by Roger D. Abrahams and the way the title is punctuated. The title gives a quizzical approach to the story, as though there is a question to be answered. Its relevance is seen at the end of the story where a reader is left with a similar reaction; wanting to know whether the protagonist ends up answering the question positively where it’s an eye for an eye, or whether the protagonist chooses to go with a different path that would take the story to a different end. Because of the way the story is written and concluded, the title works well with the text, supporting its narrative.

Reading Jordan Castro’s “The Apartment” from *40 Likely to Die Before 40: An Introduction to Alt Lit*, edited by Cameron Pierce and Michael J. Seidlinger (2014) in the reading group led to a discussion about prose or poetry that sees writers in self-deprecating states of being. Unlike fairy tales where the readers enjoy a good hero’s journey story, some non-fiction focuses on an almost villain-like nature of the writer and the creation of unconventional characters and stories that occur in reality. In a way, the reader engages with a piece of writing solely because of the life experience of a writer which may seem far-fetched, unusual and sometimes unacceptable in society; almost living vicariously through a writer’s shortfalls or bizarre adventures displayed in writing. Needless to say, such narratives are always of interest and writers may (or may not) enjoy writing them. The topic interested me because it highlighted an aspect of certain elements of my writing and reading communities in a way that I can’t quite put into words. If I were to try to do so, it would be a statement I’ve heard before, “A hero is a hero, but everybody loves a good villain.”

We looked at reading genres out of our usual selections to expand our worldview and writing sphere of influence. I learnt that I should look into other worlds of writing which might seem unfamiliar so I can learn from their forms of writing, their devices and tools among other things, to increase the writing styles available to me.

The piece, "Hotel Rot" by Aimee Bender from *The best bizarro fiction of the decade*, edited by Cameron Pierce (2012), is captivating in the way that its unconventional characters are built. It starts with a strong line, "They came to town in long cars, and gathered up all the birds they could find." It immediately leads the reader down a rabbit hole and holds the reader throughout the story. Aimee Bender uses vivid descriptions that transport the reader to the scenes and see the plot unfold very clearly. Besides this, it is difficult to pinpoint what about the story is fascinating enough to keep a reader going to the very end. However, it evokes intrigue and curiosity to know what goes on in the piece in a strange way.

## Reflection 11

This week, we looked at “Soliloquies, monologues, rants, raves and disquisitions” within writing. The main aspect was critiquing different institutions or commonly held perceptions or well-known public figures. In this seminar, spoken word met written text, as I saw that this "style of writing" or critique is common among poets and people who question political institutions. I liked that we looked into an aspect of writing which I'm not familiar with. For the assignment, we had to choose our topic of discussion and dissect it and many possibilities presented themselves. The piece required a lot of rawness and little delicacy since we needed to "rant in an inventive manner", which proved to be a challenge during my writing process. I struggled with breaking the barrier of giving facts about my topic of choice, dissecting the topic and critiquing it.

In the feedback session, we talked about the need to limit over-explanation when critiquing. I had to look at the longer sentences, which I had written in the assignment, that carried a lot of matter-of-fact elements and get more into the criticism element of the piece; seeing the need for more rawness, anger, less politeness and urgency in the tone of voice.

We looked at how to appreciate brevity as a part of writing by cutting out words like “it's” or “was” from a piece, knowing that sentences don't have to be written in full in this style of writing. The point gave a contrast to a discussion we had in a previous seminar where cutting to precision tied to appreciating the delicacy of a piece and knowing where to place or remove which part of a story to add to the story. While both forms of editing vary in their intent, the goal is still to create a striking effect with one's writing that can evoke or appeal to a reader's emotions.

In the reading seminar, we looked at “Afrika Road” by Don Mattera, from the anthology *Under African Skies*, edited by C.R. Larson (1997). It linked to the week's focus on critiquing societal issues where, in the “Afrika road” piece, Don Mattera personifies a road that each black township has and talks about what the road has witnessed. Although there is no definite criticism of a matter, a reader can understand what the underlying criticism is. Don Mattera uses metaphors and descriptions inventively to create vivid imagery that takes a reader to an ideal scene, given his subject matter.

The folktale “The Letter Trick from Strange Things”, edited by A. Carter uses a lot of repetition in a way that's almost discomfoting. Given that it's a folktale, the writer might have opted to write the piece as though narrating it aloud. Because of this, there are elements of repetition that feel redundant and somewhat unnecessary. However, it showed how preservation of the authenticity of narrating a story passed down for generations can be done and in a way, capturing voice.

## Reflection 12: The poetics essay

When reading for the poetics essay, I looked at essays and articles including “Slowness” by Amina Cain; “What I Usually Say to My Students” by Linh Dinh; an extract from “Surfiction: A Postmodern Position” by Raymond Federman; “Language is the site of our collective infection” by Lara Glenum; “The beautiful voyage” by Barbara Guest; “On Poetry” by Velimir Khlebnikov; “Use this word in a sentence: Experimental” by Ann Lauterbach; an extract from “I heard rhythms” by Mxolisi Nyezwa; and “Notes to a modern storyteller” by Ben Okri.

I got to appreciate the different ways writers perceive and approach writing and what inspires their writing process. It got me thinking about my writing process, what I take into consideration when I write, what’s possible in my writing, how I can improve various elements of it and the directions my writing can take in the future.

Raymond Federman’s extract from “Surfiction: A Postmodern Position” greatly influenced the focus on language for my poetics essay. I was intrigued by how he addressed form on a structural level. I have interacted with different structural forms from other languages, but I had never thought about how these other structures can be used across languages. While agreeing with Federman, I brought my narrative, focusing on the grammatical syntax and conventional structural norms, particularly for prose writing.

“Language is the site of our collective infection” by Lara Glenum and “Slowness” by Amina Cain also grabbed my attention. Glenum’s article’s list format and content about language is something that I found interesting. She looks at language broadly, including voice, syntax, form and words. A point that I focused on was “There is no natural voice, no natural work of art. Everything is artifice, which is to say, everything is style. You are a maker, so make according to your own spasms and blindness.” It was inspirational since finding my style and voice is something I’m working towards. In Amina Cain’s “Slowness”, there’s a paragraph that I resonated with. It said, “I don’t think especially about accessibility or audience, some of my stories are accessible to some people, and some of them aren’t. I can’t control that. My imagination gets everything, and it determines everything too: form, language, narrative voice, character, setting, and so on.” When I write, I think about whether I would want to read the story I’m writing if I weren’t the writer because I’m of the view that writing should appeal to the writer most before it caters to any audience.

## Topography of language: A poetics essay

### Language

“A story exists in language, but lives in the imagination, in the memory. When does a story live?  
It lives only when it is read or heard. A story is part telling, part hearing. Part writing, part reading. It dwells in the ambiguous place between the teller and the hearer, between the writer and the reader.”  
– Ben Okri

My first understanding of language as a child was that many of them co-existed within everyone and through a chosen language, one could communicate with those around them. At least, that was the case for my multilingual parents, and I was fascinated by what seemed so phenomenal to my young mind — my mother and father understanding each other in English and Lusoga, but not when my mom spoke French.

This fascination carried to my interaction with literature and the worlds that were created just by the way words interacted with each other on paper. These words are how we communicate and through them have the power to create, build or even destroy.

The simplicity of language and the ability of the words to create suspense, to guide a thought process and include the reader in the storytelling process...

...I believe that a known, unspoken truth is that our relationship with language and its relationship with us and those around us has a heavy bearing on *what* we write about and *how* we write what we write about. In this way, language affects form as much as content determines form. Knowing what to say and knowing how to say it heavily affects one's delivery and ultimately the effect that the piece of writing has on one's intended audience.

So what is language in literature? What role does it play in writing and to what extent? Why would you read a 200-page book by a specific writer you might know nothing about? You might get bored or tired. How do you know that this is the world you want to live in? You'll have to step out of that world eventually. For what reason are people attracted to books by the Brothers Grimm and at the same time to those by Enid Blyton? In between each word on the page, something incredible happens. It's intriguing how language is employed to take the reader to great highs and lows.

Not to be misunderstood, I look at language beyond being a means of communication, but also as the style of a piece of writing or speech that's alive in each and every piece; and unique in all — or so I would like to believe.

## **The how of language: form and syntax**

For the sake of experimentation, it's OK to write badly, even foolishly, but don't try to pass off  
crap you yourself are disinterested in.

— Linh Dinh

In literature, there are set forms — styles — of writing that are standard to the craft and have solidified themselves over a long period of the existence of reading and writing that these forms are looked at as conventional — acceptable.

Raymond Federman, in “Surfiction: A Postmodern Position”, proposes a reinvention of the conventional structure of books and pages to adapt to new forms of writing and subsequently give rise to a change in the way readers interact with fiction (and books in general), stating that “the typographical design of the pages and the numbering of these pages must be reinvented. The space itself in which writing takes place must be transformed. That space — the page, but also the book made of pages — must acquire new dimensions, new shapes, new relations [...] It is within this transformed topography of writing, from this new paginal syntax rather than grammatical syntax that the reader will discover his freedom in relation to the process of reading a book, in relation to language.”

When I first read this, I thought Federman's way of thinking was a bit extreme when it came to changing how books are presented. However, on closer examination, I began to think that the Western presentation of books is “overrated”. This has nothing to do with my interaction with some Asian forms of book presentation; top right corner to bottom left corner and vertical presentation. I found that I had very different reading experiences from my interaction with literature from both parts of the world. I don't consider one superior to the other in terms of typographical design but I agree with what Federman was trying to argue out and understood his desire for more creative freedom in this regard. I believe that it's those creative typographical designs that make children's literature compelling even to adults.

On the other side of the coin, I'd reason that the transformation of the topography of writing should be in grammatical syntax in relation to the process of writing, in relation to language. In this way, as readers gain freedom from the conventional structural norms associated with books and reading, writers gain freedom from the conventional structural norms of using syntax and set form. For literature dwellers who might say “That's not how it's done”, Federman's argument might be an annoyance. But, for me, his argument provokes/inspires me to play around with my words and use them as much as they use me; tearing apart literature as we know it today. This could be as simple as going from A to C but talking about Z before I get there.

This is not to say that these conventions are not already being deconstructed, since more flexible forms of how syntax are used are seen in poetry and thus present more leeway in poetic forms of content presentation; poetry doesn't follow the same syntactic rules as prose writing. This is to

say that this should be extended more to prose writing, allowing for greater exploration of the use of language and syntax. A venture for prose writers.

Ann Lauterbach, in “Use this word in a sentence: Experimental”, asserted that “In the world of poetry, to be experimental is sometimes taken to mean you have, as the poet Charles Bernstein has remarked, an aversion to form, rather than an aversion to conformity.” This was after being introduced as an experimental poet. Diversion from set norms, particularly in literati spaces, isn’t always well received, hence the possible questions that might arise about forms that do not align with pre-existing writing forms.

However, conventional (textbook) use of syntax and form, like assumed (or aesthetically conservative) narratives, gives a mundane existence to some narratives and an even more mundane relationship between the narrative’s cause and its effect; which in itself isn’t a negative thing, nevertheless it has the potential to box inventiveness. Lauterbach assesses that “those who view form as static and reified are doomed to repetition, historical as well as personal”. I am of the same view. I don’t think experimentalism equals an aversion to form; but rather an expansion of it — opening new windows to its possibilities for writing; that way we enrich our literary spaces and prevent stagnation of style and creativity.

So, how would we go about giving ourselves access to these new windows? A simple concept is *to learn by doing*; the greatest way to genuinely comprehend something is to actually do it. So, as prose writers, we should experiment with syntax; and manipulate it for the sake of narrative, but not in a way that compromises the narrative or its dialogue.

In that case, is letting go of textbook usage of syntax or form the solution to boxed creativity and a road to a wilder relationship between a story’s cause and effect? A short answer is yes and no. The question is paradoxical in the truth it carries, but also the other factors that affect writing that it undermines or rejects. Textbook usage of syntax in writing serves its own purpose in giving structure and understanding to both the writer and reader; Like Lauterbach stated, “the tradition of the old can be very useful.”

I assert that the basis of experiments with syntax and form should be guided by the context in which one is writing and the greater picture that both syntax and form will serve in the *unconventional* piece of writing. Successful experimentation should marry the conventional and unconventional and readily adapt to the contexts of narrative, because as Ben Okri, in “Notes of a Modern Storyteller”, asserts, “the way a story is told affects the reality of the story. A story is altered by its telling, its slant, its accent, its angle. The mode of telling is a portal. A new portal makes a new story.”

## The strength in simplicity: Access is power

Languages are neither poor nor rich. They fall by the wayside, become forgotten or extinct because of concerted and deliberate efforts not to use them  
— Mxolisi Nyezwa

Arguably, the greatness of a piece of writing is not rooted in the complexity of one's vocabulary or diction — how one chooses and uses words and phrases in writing. As much as having a dictionary of words to work with can colour a piece of writing, this vast array of vocabulary, as Mxolisi Nyezwa, in an extract from “I Heard Rhythms”, puts it, “often erodes a language's expressive power by depleting its images” and could possibly undermine the text and overall narrative. In light of this, as writers, we need to consider the necessity of the vocabulary we use when it comes to the purpose it serves in a text and its relevance in the narrative that we're trying to create. Barbara Guest in “The Beautiful Voyage”, states it well, saying, “A poem stretches when pressure on a word causes the poem to stretch. Go to the poem, observe, see if the word is consistent within the poem — never desert meaning for a word.”

This is especially relevant on the African continent, in an African context, where vernacular languages are often sidelined in favour of non-African languages. Vernacular languages have a long-standing history with oral storytelling — a mode of narration — which has slowly made its way into written storytelling. Because of the gradual progression, there might not be as wide a vocabulary to choose from in some local languages as opposed to other languages. However, writers who use African languages should consider how this limited diction may widen their reader base as opposed to narrowing it; an opportunity rather than a limitation. Complex language often floats in the clouds of the educated and the circles of a few literati, so meaning and interpretation may be lost to but a few readers.

To understand the effect of the simplicity of language, let's use the English word *pulchritude* as an example in a sentence:

Her irresistible pulchritude was enhanced by the neon lights that shone on her.

In high society or amongst learned people, the sentence might be easily understood and the use of pulchritude might seem ingenious. If the target audience falls in that category, the word might well fit in the context; but if a wider audience is the target, a revision of the diction will have a greater impact on the reader. Compare the same sentence to this:

The neon lights shining on her emphasised her beauty that was impossible to resist.

Although both sentences mean the same thing, their accessibility is different. Needless to say, a similar concept can be applied in one's language of choice; substituting a complex diction for a simpler one. Stephen Graham Jones says, "We need to always be remembering that the purpose of this text; it isn't just to look whacky and difficult on the page, or to illustrate this or that about the true nature of narrative, or the inherent difficulties entailed with reading, it's to *get read*."

This begs the question, is a wide vocabulary then still relevant? Yes, by all means. A Pandora box of vocabulary is beyond relevant and as one grows along with their writing style, they will discover, as Barbara Guest states, "the special circumstances within which it makes sense; circumstances upon which it is used."

In retrospect, one cannot do away with their chosen diction but they can discover and learn the strength and possibilities that come with simplicity and in turn, use language in a way that will enrich a wider readership. If readers encounter words they use daily in a piece of literature, it not only encourages reading but also increases people's knowledge base and gradually leads to a spread of information.

### **Notes from the other side of simplicity**

I don't think especially about accessibility or audience, some of my stories are accessible to some people, and some of them aren't. I can't control that.  
— Amina Cain

There is beauty in simplicity, but I cannot outcast works of writers of the complex; those who may or may not be understood. Like I said, one cannot do away with their chosen diction. Even as a strong advocate for the simplistic, I cannot argue that there is no beauty in more complex forms of writing.

Velimir Khlebnikov, in "On Poetry", argues for that which may or may not be understood:

- Poems may be understandable or may not, but they must be good, they must be real.
- ... it is clear that we cannot demand of all language: "be easy to understand, like the sign in the street." The speech of higher intelligence, even when it is not understandable, falls like seed into the fertile soil of the soul and only much later, in mysterious ways, does it bring forth its shoots.
- I certainly do not maintain that every incomprehensible piece of writing is beautiful. I mean only that we must not reject a piece of writing simply because it is incomprehensible to a particular group of readers.

There's so much yet so little we can do with the words on a page to put our narrative forward. But, be it simple or complex, every piece of writing has language with which it chooses to associate, for its intended purpose.

We cannot demand too much of language but we can push its boundaries and test its limitations, exploring the possibility of narrative through it.

Even languages — the very words we use — are not pure. They constantly push boundaries, experiment with each other, and evolve to make meaning and tell greater stories. Languages expand themselves. That’s why English integrates German and French words; for the sake of meaning and expanding narratives. In the same way, we must “cultivate a highly tactile sense of language. Perform experiments not *with language* but on language.”

Works cited:

- Cain, Amina. “Slowness” in *The Force of What’s Possible: Writers on Accessibility & the Avant-Garde*. Lily Hoang and Joshua Marie Wilkinson, eds. Nightboat Books, 2015.
- Dinh, Linh. “What I usually say to my students” in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Joshua Marie Wilkinson, ed. University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Federman, Raymond. Extract from “Surfiction: A Postmodern Position” in *Critifictions: Postmodern Essays*. State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Glenum, Lara. “Language is the site of our collective infection” in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Joshua Marie Wilkinson, ed. University of Iowa Press, 2010.
- Guest, Barbara. “The Beautiful Voyage” in *Forces of Imagination: Writing on Writing*. Kelsey St. Press, 2015.
- Khlebnikov, Velimir. “On Poetry” in *The King of Time: Poems, Fictions, Visions of the Future*. Harvard/University Press, 1985.
- Lauterbach, Ann. “Use This Word in a Sentence: ‘Experimental’” in *Ann Lauterbach, The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*. Viking, 2005.
- Nyezwa, Mxolisi. Extract from *I Heard Rhythms* – Unpublished MACW dissertation, 2015.
- Okri, Ben. “Notes to a modern storyteller” in *The Mystery Feast: Thoughts on Storytelling*. Clairview Books, 2015.

### Reflection 13: Book reviews

The book reviews I wrote were *Things We Found During the Autopsy*, short fiction by Kuzhali Manickavel (2020); *Kassandra and the Wolf*, a novel by Margarita Karapanou (2009), translated by N. C. Germanacos; *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis (1991); and *African Psycho* by Alain Mabanckou (2007).

I chose *Things We Found during the Autopsy*, short fiction by Kuzhali Manickavel as a focus because of the bizarre and provocative nature of Manickavel's writing and the brevity of the stories. She approaches storytelling in a way that surpasses the boundaries of dark humour and morbidity, all while keeping the prose short. She depicts what many have said about a piece not being longer than it needs to be. She plays around with structure a lot which captured my attention. I was influenced by the format of one of the book's stories called "This is Us and This is Us Outside" and wrote my thesis piece "Process" using the same format. The review writing process was insightful; having to inspect what works or doesn't; almost the same way we do with finding tools we want to use in our writing. I had a positive reception of the book and didn't have much criticism for it. Something we mentioned when talking about writing book reviews is that one should write reviews of writing that they enjoyed reading. As much as I think this holds water, I felt like I had a biased view when writing the review and might have not been as critical in my analysis of the writing.

I reviewed *Kassandra and the Wolf*, a novel by Margarita Karapanou, translated by N. C. Germanacos because of its format, the perspective that it used and the simplicity of its language. The book played a big role in influencing how I wrote one of my thesis pieces "Blue-eyed girl" because I was using the perspective of a minor. Writing a review about the book helped me analyse its content and find out how Karapanou approached writing from a child's perspective; what worked well and vice versa; and what I could take away from the story. As it was my second review, I felt like I was getting more comfortable writing reviews and being more objective.

I read *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis and *African Psycho* by Alain Mabanckou when working on my thesis and the inspiration I got from them fed into my thesis piece "So this is love". I reviewed them because of the relationship between the two. They reminded me of the "Rewriting" seminar that we had where a piece can be a response to another piece while having its originality.

## Book Review 1

*Things We Found During the Autopsy* - Kuzhali Manickavel. Blaft Publications, 2020.

*Things We Found during the Autopsy* (2020) is a collection of short fiction stories by Indian writer Kuzhali Manickavel. Looking at the book's back cover will give you a glimpse into the book's contents from simple entries like a dragon, Indian culture, and girls among others; to unexpected entries like voluntary homeless youth, ash and the people who eat at and wannabe naxalites among others. These entries give insight into Kuzhali Manickavel's unique and beyond-out-of-the-box inventiveness. Her strange summary of fiction gives a sense of urgency to hunt for each entry throughout the stories.

In her short stories, Manickavel uses unconventional forms of writing fiction from very short eyebrow-raising stories like "The Ash Eaters" to slightly longer pieces like "The whore raft". The title story, "Six Things We Found During the Autopsy" takes the form of an innovative autopsy that is performed on the body of a girl and unearths strange objects. The investigators come up with even stranger conclusions to justify the existence of these objects. "We thought she must have been a closeted Catholic," they concluded upon finding angels. In this way, Manickavel pokes at the need for the mind to justify the bizarre, leading readers down rabbit holes of drowning whores and harsh residents, and much darker topics like rape and suicide. "Six things we found during the autopsy" dissects traditional views on femininity and the body, and challenges what constitutes a person through the phantasmagoria of humour, melancholy and provocation that defines the collection.

While tackling sinister topics like rape or abuse of power, Manickavel uses a rational tone that feels slightly distant. For example, in "The whore raft" she narrates how the owner of the local whorehouse "did not think horses were into longevity and honourable things like that". In this story and others, the tone comes off as brazen and overly conventional, so readers might get caught up in the emotional tide of the stories and cannot distance themselves from the discomfort of the narratives. While this takes a positive turn in that readers will want to know what comes next, it's not always effective in that self-obsessed characters may become unrelatable to a few readers. For instance, in "Throwing Rocks at Dogs", a woman throws a rock at a child from the slum trying to sneak into her garden. Although the child becomes unconscious, she is more concerned about how people from the slum might retaliate. She complains that "Everything is so hard".

This, however, doesn't take away from Manickavel's brilliant use of imagery that transports readers to the scenes she paints. One such example of this is the story "This Is Us and This Is Us Outside". Its unconventional form of writing, using the future tense paired with its vivid imagery, paints a clear picture of what is to happen in the near future. This story gives a sense of "Back to

the Future” which makes for exciting reading. Its experimental forms and vivid imagery challenge traditional forms of linear storytelling and upends conceptions of time as continuous and predictable. This is reinforced by the bite-sized length of many of the stories. This promises to make for an easy read, but there is nothing readily consumable about Manickavel’s fiction. Rather the length draws us in, only to have the startling images and unconventional form, trip us up.

The barriers of imagination and reality are broken as Manickavel explores the weird, bizarre and unsettling things that may or may not happen around you. If you're one for experimental forms of writing, slang, Tamil and references to Indian home spaces that you may or may not be familiar with, diving into this collection is for you. As long as you leave room to be uncomfortable, you will thoroughly enjoy this book.

## Book Review 2

*Kassandra and the Wolf* - Margarita Karapanou, translated by N. C. Germanacos. Interlink Publishing Group Incorporated, 2009

Margarita Karapanou's *Kassandra and the Wolf* is a beguiling and puzzling novel that gives a psychological take on a child's experience of abuse and how she expresses her emotions because of her experience. This novel, originally published in 1974, and translated from Greek by N.C. Germanacos, combines dark fairytales and a bit of Greek mythology, creating a world where what's real and what's imaginary meet in an intriguing and disturbing narrative.

The story follows a six-year-old Kassandra's life through her view of the world. Different elements of her childhood memories and the *questionable* relationships she has around her, are unfolded as she experiences love, desire and abuse. From early on in the novel, we see that Kassandra is subjected to abuse but she doesn't process it that way because of the innocence of her childhood. She uses the analogy of a wolf, a character present in fairy tales, to put into words what she equates the perpetrator to. The recurring presence of the wolf along with the vivid descriptions reveal a great deal of casual sexual abuse that's been done to Kassandra; but this stuttering young girl who is unable to express herself properly, doesn't think much of it going as far as sympathizing with the wolf: "It was the wolf I usually felt sorry for. How could he gulp down so many piglets at one go?... Now, when they caress me, I always think of the wolf and feel sorry for him."

From the first chapter, we see Kassandra suffering from a lack of affection from her parents, particularly her mother: "I was born at dusk, hour of the wolf, July, under the sign of Cancer. When they brought me to her she turned her face to the wall". This lack of affection, along with what's being done to her, leaves Kassandra lonely and guarded with little understanding of emotional self-expression and interaction with others. This is made worse by how Kassandra is left to her own devices creating her understanding of what's acceptable and what's fun which makes people around her uncomfortable and in some cases frightened. However, she is very nonchalant about the things she does, which will make you ask yourself how someone can do something so vicious and be so calm about it. At least that's what I asked myself when she hammered a nail through her cousin, Konstantínos.

Despite the shaky relationships around her, Kassandra seems particularly close to her grandmother who seems to genuinely care about her. In what might be the most jarring chapter, Kassandra's grandmother gives in to Kassandra's demands for a kitten, borrowing one for a week and making Kassandra happy. Before long, the kitten falls victim to Kassandra's twisted affection: "I'd never give him back. I'd rather kill him first". Beyond the abuse Kassandra

experiences, her cruelty in this chapter left a pit in my stomach. The grotesque event delves into the darkest parts of the child's mind with unfiltered honesty.

Through *Kassandra and the Wolf*, Karapanou explores the human experience through the eyes of a *mostly* innocent child. The vivid descriptions create lasting impressions through acts of violence, moments of vulnerability and despair. The chapters are quite short and the language is simple, making for an easy read. The structure is nonlinear; there is no chronology to each chapter. This can be off-putting for readers who prefer straightforward narratives. However, the structure aids the fairytale atmosphere present in the novel. Because Kassandra is such a complex character, the fragments of her life are pieced together in a similarly complex way — not such that a reader won't understand. These fragments work together to reflect Kassandra's fractured mind and mental instability as well as encouraging reader participation as they piece the story together like a puzzle. If you leave enough room for imagination, a bit of discomfort and darkness, you will make it through this book without wondering if Kassandra is really six years old.

### Book Review 3

*American Psycho* - Bret Easton Ellis. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1991

To cut a long story short — a masterpiece.

“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” This phrase, scrawled in blood-red lettering on the side of a bank, is the opening statement of Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho*. It references an older piece of literature, Dante’s *Inferno* and serves as a warning to the reader of *American Psycho*. Ellis immediately tells the reader to continue reading at their own risk. This is a much-needed forewarning as we are tossed into the world of a young and rich investment banker. *American Psycho*, set in the 1980s, explores privilege, materialism, consumerism culture and the perturbing mind and life of Patrick Bateman, the protagonist. At first glance, Bateman is the poster boy for suavity and success, with shortfalls of being overly materialistic and classist. He understands that in the society in which he lives, perception is everything and that he is viewed in a certain light, saying, “I can be someone who you think is successful or who you think is a loser”. This holds water at the beginning of the story, making Bateman seem like your typical protagonist. However, as the story unfolds, we discover Bateman’s dark side.

The story has a slow beginning that almost prepares you, unsuccessfully, for the violence and graphic imagery that’s to come. Ellis explicitly writes about Bateman’s appalling escapades of rape, torture and murder, leaving very little to the imagination. Bateman’s casual narration of his sadistic acts as though they were daily to-do activities adds to the story’s fear factor. One such scene is when Bateman nonchalantly states, “The axe hit him midsentence, straight in the face, its thick blade chopping sideways into his open mouth, shutting him up”. I questioned whether certain parts of the story were reality; actually happening, or merely Bateman’s delusions as Ellis blurs the lines between fact and fiction. This was intensified by Ellis’ use of the first person where the reader sees things from Bateman’s perspective and in turn, participates in the acts with Bateman. This can work to draw the reader further into the story, forsaking any sense of right or wrong, real and unreal, and allowing one’s self to be fascinated and captured by Bateman to fully understand his character. At least, that was it for me. However, this can work differently; completely removing the reader from the story, causing outrage and disgust because of Bateman’s brutality. Regardless of which side the reader falls on, one is bound to experience a whirlwind of emotions.

Away from the gore of it all, *American Psycho* satires the consumerism culture and materialism that was present in the 1980s and is prevalent in our society today. We see this with Bateman’s obsession with expensive designer brands, how he talks about the quality of business cards of his peers and how he interacts with people who don’t match his standard of living. Even with his extravagant lifestyle and high level of education, Bateman lacks personality, and proper social

skills and is without empathy, mirroring the society in which he lives and in a way made him that way. Some may turn away from *American Psycho* because of the evident misogyny, racism, classism and the explicit pornographic scenes which quickly become horrific. However, these are not without purpose. Without them, Ellis wouldn't be accurately depicting the gruesome nature of the society in which we live. The discomfort that the story creates is necessary to unmask society's prioritisation of wealth, class and success, among other material things over meaningful relationships and healthy states of mind.

Although *American Psycho's* subject matter and mode of delivery are difficult to take in, it's well worth the read. Ellis uses vivid descriptions and repetition to carry the reader through the story. His narrative style that's devoid of emotion may come off as unnerving but intends to make Bateman's perspectives clear. *American Psycho* is a relevant criticism of the world today because of how it openly addresses materialism, high society, violence and capitalism. I would recommend it to anyone with a stomach for the horrible and grotesque and anyone willing to face uncomfortable truths in a conventionally unconventional way. Or at least is willing to close an eye, clench their teeth and make it to the end.

## Book Review 4

*African Psycho* - Alain Mabanckou. Soft Skull, 2007.

To jump the gun, there's a lot of African going on with a debatable amount of Psycho.

Alain Mabanckou's *African Psycho*, originally published in French in 2003 and later translated to English in 2007, is a fictional work of prose that delves into the mind of an aspiring serial killer Gregoire Nakobomayo. The story starts on a high note with Gregoire declaring that he will kill his girlfriend, Germaine. This enticing and thought-provoking introduction immediately grabs one's attention and sets the stage for getting into this *African Psycho*'s mind. Gregoire then narrates how he got to the point of wanting to commit murder. He idolises Angoualima, a serial killer who is famous in *He-Who-Drinks-Water-Is-An-Idiot*; the place where Gregoire lives. Gregoire wants to commit crimes as newsworthy as Angoualima and be like him. Although Angoualima is dead, Gregoire visits him at his grave in the cemetery of *The-Dead-Who-Are-Not-Allowed-To-Sleep* and spends hours conversing with him. In spite of Gregoire's numerous attempts at murder and becoming a well-known serial killer, he is unsuccessful, only managing to carry out unmemorable petty crimes that are barely mentioned in the local news.

Mabanckou writes in the first person, giving readers a unique insight into Gregoire's thought process and experiences. As I read the book, I felt as though I was walking with Gregoire from the beginning. Because of Mabanckou's narrative style and Gregoire's inherent incompetence and misfortune, there is a great deal of humour that pops up throughout the story. One such scene is where he attempts to assault his rich uncle, hoping to take his uncle's wealth if he is successful. However, Gregoire was unprepared for the assault; underestimating his uncle's strength leading to his defeat and humiliation. This scene and other humorous moments of Gregoire's failed attempts at assault and robbery, in the midst of the morbid, lighten the severity of the fact that he actually wants to kill someone. You might even be inclined to sympathise with Gregoire at certain points of the story as you learn his history.

Looking at *African Psycho* in relation to *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis (1991), the novel to which the title alludes, will make for an interesting literary experience. Both novels explore the minds of troubled characters although they are set in completely different worlds. While *American Psycho*'s main character, Patrick Bateman is a wealthy man and carries out gruesome acts of violence and murder for entertainment, *African Psycho*'s Gregoire Nakobomayo is a poor, aspiring serial killer who is incompetent and unable to accomplish the tasks he gives himself. The places where the novels are set: New York City for *American Psycho* and the Republic of Congo for *African Psycho* have a major role in shaping the characters and their stories as a whole. You'll find that *African Psycho* uses a satirical and comedic style to downplay some of

Gregoire's actions which greatly contrasts *American Psycho*'s use of deadpan style of presenting gruesome content.

In hindsight, *African Psycho* tackles issues of identity and recognition. Although Gregoire takes a wrong approach to try and be noticed and acknowledged in society, his ultimate goal is simply to be in the limelight through his crime, saying, "The worst would be that it goes unnoticed". As a character that has suffered abandonment from his birth mother, paired with a chaotic childhood, Gregoire lacks human connection and a sense of self and tries to find a purpose by being like Angoualima; and even this attempt is futile. His failure to reach Angoualima's level of success makes Gregoire "hear" Angoualima call him "an imbecile, an idiot, or a pathetic character". Gregoire takes the insults as "a sign of affection that only he shows me". If you look closely, you will see fragments of a struggling society and the product of such a society. As I read this story, I constantly thought there was a lot of African going on with a debatable amount of *Psycho*. Gregoire's life painted a picture of the lives a great number of Africans are living. Maybe not planning a murder, but definitely the difficult childhoods many have because of the environments they have to grow up in; an incline to violence in order to survive; a feeling of lacking identity and a need to discover one's purpose whatever way possible. I pegged Gregoire as a man prone to violence because of the company he kept growing up. He might also be suffering from mild schizophrenia which compels him to give in to his intrusive thoughts, so I find that his narrative of certain events may not be very accurate. This made him a character not completely undeserving of empathy despite his ill intent.

*African Psycho* is undoubtedly a great piece of literature that brings the dark and the comedic together. It might pose a challenge if you're not a fan of violence, but it's a story worth getting into. Mabanckou's unconventional style of narration makes for an insightful and thought-provoking story. If nothing else, the peculiar names of places will keep you entertained.

## Reflection 14: Working on the thesis

When choosing material to read for my thesis, I focused on works that centred around morbid and dark themes to feed into my topic. I looked back on many of the works we read throughout the seminars, especially for the pieces I created during that period to remember what inspired the stories and to guide my editing process.

For the pieces that I chose from what I wrote during the coursework period, my focus was on adding detail and editing them. These pieces are “Easy to grip”, “Process”, “A matter of time”, “The one I didn’t see”, “The way to my death” and “The far side”.

In “Easy to grip”, I experimented with repetition to carry the narrative forward, trying to be consistent with the repetition throughout the story. I believe the form was successful in creating a building block story where readers are reminded of where they came from and how the character got to that point. This conclusion is based on feedback I received from people who attended a reading session I held for the Writing in Community project.

In “Process”, I mimicked the format in Kuzhali Manickavel’s “This is Us and This is Us Outside” which begins with future events and ends with the present. While the structure might pose a challenge to readers since the form isn’t common, it keeps one engaged and gives meaning to the phrase “begin with the end in mind”.

A “matter of time” and “The one I didn’t see” are written with conventional linear structures. However, I used a motif of time in “A matter of time” to show the character’s relationship with time. This piece works mostly because of its simplicity. From the feedback I got for the draft, I added details about the character that gave her more depth and strengthened the motif. “The one I didn’t see” was a stepping stone for me to write longer short stories; something I had struggled with. It was also the first piece that I wrote which incorporated fantasy and personification. I focused a lot on the consistency of the narrative and careful transitioning so readers don’t get lost in the story.

When editing “The way to my death” and “The far side”, my focus was removing clutter, adding descriptions and reworking how I used punctuation. In these two pieces and for a lot of stories I wrote, something I needed help with was painting vivid pictures of places and objects. During the editing process, I was tasked with shifting from writing abstractly to writing vividly. I’m now more comfortable with writing vivid descriptions so that readers can better see what I want them to see.

In the pieces I wrote away from coursework assignments, there is a division between reality and fiction/surrealism. However, in the stories that seem real, there are elements of surrealism; and in those that seem surreal, there are elements of reality/fact. The stories that mostly cater to reality are: “Blue-eyed girl”, “So this is love”, “Love-Hate”, “The sound of colour”, “Profile” and “Her inscriptions”. The stories that mostly cater to fiction/the surreal are: “The abandoned”, “The two of us”, “Life when I sleep” and “Of dreams and visions”.

When I started writing, my initial goal was to set my characters anywhere and nowhere; not giving a geographically specific place. As I progressed, it became evident that the “nowhere” that I was writing could easily be perceived as being set in the Western world. I was challenged to create stories that wouldn’t be perceived that way and create a “nowhere” that could be in African spaces. I read *African Psycho* by Alain Mabanckou (2007) and looked into African serial killers to get insight into writing about African environments. I learned how adding subtle descriptions can greatly change where the story is situated.

Since folktales are a strong part of African culture, I experimented with writing a folktale which is “The abandoned”. Reading *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, translated by Jack Zipes; “Little Pot” by Ilya Kaminsky; and “The Gone Children They Said Tell Us a Story” by J.A. Tyler gave me insight into the genre and inspired the story. I loved the flexibility of the stories where some followed linear forms and others didn’t; some were straightforward and others confusing. I aimed to create a story that could remind the reader of the folktales or fairy tales that they might have read as children and to leave the reader intrigued by the relationship between the characters. I also used personification in this as I found it worked well in another piece “The one I didn’t see”.

Diane Williams and Lydia Davis were strong influences in my choice to use short-form writing. Some of the first pieces of theirs that I was introduced to were “The Source of Authority” and “The Mother” respectively. Both pieces are only a few lines long but they appealed to my imagination and emotions and left room for me to expand the stories with my thoughts. I was inspired to use short-form writing to recreate the effect that these stories had on me; using brevity to put across intense emotions in a few paragraphs or pages and spark readers' imaginations.

“Blue-eyed girl” and “So this is love” are some of my longer pieces. It’s in these two pieces that I wanted to emphasise the existence of silence in gruesome and horrifying spaces. Both pieces used a linear progressive form and stuck to most conventional forms of storytelling. Given the nature of their narratives, the simple structures served the stories better and would make it easier to navigate them. I aimed to evoke moral and ethical questions in regard to the characters and challenge the boundaries of the reader’s values. *Kassandra and the Wolf* by Margarita Karapanou (2009) and “Intuition” by Aimee Parkison influenced my use of a minor’s voice in “Blue-eyed girl”. I learnt how to capture the curiosity and innocence of a child. I also saw that using simpler language went a long way in capturing this. From “Father. Son. Holy Rabbit” by Stephen Graham Jones, I learnt how to write about something terrible happening without overstating the severity of it. When writing and editing “So this is love”, *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis (1991) fed into how I wrote the morbid descriptions. Because Ellis leaves no stone unturned when describing the gruesome crimes of the protagonist, I got an insight into how to describe my scenes and paint a vivid picture.

In the piece “Profile”, I applied the rewriting concept that we looked at during the course. *Autoportrait* by Edouard Leve was the focus of the rewrite so my piece took its format. The telling of self and the block text format drew me to his writing style and made me want to create something similar; to find my own “self” in his writing. I used the story’s first few lines and its last statement as part of my piece. This way, I was in conversation with Edouard Leve, responding to his statements with my own. I like this writing form because of its simplicity and factual narrative. It was easy to build on and would be comprehensible to any reader.

Unlike the other pieces, “The sound of colour” and “Love-Hate” weren’t inspired by readings I had done. “The sound of colour” was inspired by the songs “The Sound of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel, “Roses are Red” by Jon Caryl and the phrase “Roses are red, violets are blue”. I experimented with flash fiction where I placed multiple narratives in one story; and used rhymes in prose since I hadn’t encountered much of it in my reading. I didn’t follow the rhyme through to the end of each paragraph since my main aim was to create a strong captivating rhythm at the beginning of each paragraph. Since each paragraph could stand alone, I didn’t stick to a particular flow or timeline for each story.

“Love-Hate” was inspired by a water ad and Makhanda’s water situation. I wrote the piece using a “contrast” style of writing where the protagonist highlights the positive and negative elements of their situation. I was hoping to create a story that gives two sides of the same story in the eyes of one person. While I use this style in “Love-Hate” to weigh pros and cons and show possibilities, I use a similar style in “The two of us” to show the character’s contrasting state of mind. In “Love-Hate”, the style focuses on showing the character’s joy and frustration; while in “The two of us”, it focuses on showing the fragmented mind of the protagonist.

“Of dreams and visions” and “Life when I sleep” are rooted in surrealism. In these pieces, I offer a narrative where the world of the dead meets the world of the living through dreams; showing death as a nonlinear conclusion to life. In the pieces, there’s a constant push and pull in and out of reality which might make a reader question what’s real and what’s not. I hope for readers to experience the pieces as though they were drifting along with the characters, trying to make sense of what’s unfolding. In this way, the reader may be engaged in the pieces and understand the emotional struggle of the characters.

I found the overall writing process enriching. I learned when to use adverbs and adjectives and when to let them go when they were weighing down my writing. This applies to removing details that pull the reader out of the story. While editing, I understood how to use points of view better. At first, I struggled with detailing when writing in the first-person point of view. I wanted readers to understand all the characters’ emotions, so I would at times forsake the perspective I was using and take away from the story. However, with my supervisor, Stacy Hardy’s guidance, I was

able to get my message across without losing the lead voice. I got to delve deeper into the power of silence in murder, dreams, death, and fiction; exploring how it conceals the unspoken and creates voids in our narratives. Grief, as a central theme, reflects the human experience with its circular quality. I used repetition to show this and the cyclical nature of life and death.

## Writing in Community Report

### Introduction

On October 7th and October 8th, 2023 respectively, I held a reading session for my draft thesis and conducted a writing workshop. My report is divided into two to account for both sessions.

### First session: The reading session

- Overview

I held a reading session on Saturday, 7th October 2023 that took about two hours and read to a small audience of eight (8) people. I opened up the session by explaining to them that a lot of my pieces focus on death and could possibly make some people uncomfortable. In event of this, they were allowed to excuse themselves and would be notified when that particular reading was done. I then invited the attendees to select a story from my thesis that they would like to hear me read based on the story's title. We narrowed down the selections from the short collection to three stories that grabbed their attention. The chosen stories, and the order in which I read them, were: "Easy to grip", "The two of us" and "Profile". Towards the end of the session, I chose to read segments from "The sound of colour".

Every after a reading, I opened up the floor for discussion of the piece that I had just read and answer questions that the attendees had about the piece. I made it clear that they were free to ask any questions but not all would receive responses, especially if the question required that I interpret a certain phrase or clarify a speculation that they had about the story or a specific character.

- The audience's interaction throughout the session

To start off, I asked the attendees to choose a story for me to read based on the story's title. The aim of this was to give an overall feel of the stories in the collection; grab their attention with the titles; encourage audience participation and close the writer-listener gap instead of strictly dictating the flow of the session; and to see which story captured them based solely on the title. Two of the attendees expressed that when they heard the title 'Easy to grip', they created their own impression of what the contents of the story could be and didn't expect that the story would go in the direction that it did. The titles from the other pieces we read were more straight forward so it gave them a general sense of what the content may be. They commented that the presentation of the content was "refreshing". The mundane things that were spoken about in "Easy to grip" and "The two of us" resonated with some of the attendees' real life experiences, helping them connect more with the characters. One of the attendees asked, "What message would you say you'd want someone who has gone through something similar to what the character in "The two of us" has gone through to take from the story?" When I wrote the story, I didn't focus on how the story would resonate with the readers so the question was thought

provoking for me. It made me think of how relevant it is to know one's target audience and the impact that storytelling has on them.

Throughout the reading session, the attendees were very engaged with the stories, paying close attention to how the stories developed. When I finished reading, a few remarked on the repetition used in "Easy to Grip". They said it worked well and helped with the evolution of the characters. They speculated on who the killer was, asking me for insight and hoping that I confirm or disprove some of their speculations. I left these unanswered, giving them a scenario of reading a book alone in one's room where the writer isn't around to confirm or disprove their theories. Thankfully, the attendees understood my argument. In "The two of us", they enjoyed the shift of voice, where they got to hear both character's take on the discussion they were having and the ending that focused on the first character again.. They pointed out that the story is written simply but deals with inner turmoil that many people face, enjoying the realism of the story. With "Profile", they enjoyed the subtle inclusions that hinted at the character being a serial killer or simply prone to violence, and had a discussion surrounding the possibility of it.

- Challenges faced

The main issue that I struggled with during the reading session was stopping myself from clarifying speculations of content that was outside the story. I had to keep reminding the attendees and myself that even though I was reading and present for the discussion, the writer isn't always there to give all the answers to questions that arise or correct someone's understanding of a character or a scene. However, most of the curiosity was from wanting to know what happened to a specific character, as was the case for a character in "Easy to grip"; why the character did what they did or spoke what they did, as was the case for "The Two of us"; and wanting to know what was fact and what was fiction in the piece "Profile". Reminding myself not to evaluate on these elements was challenging since I felt the need to 'defend' my work, but I'm glad that I let my work 'speak for itself'.

The discussion for "The two of us", took a mental toll on me as I got questions that concerned my mental state and what experiences and emotions I drew from to write the piece, amongst others. It was a struggle for some of the attendees to separate the character from me, the writer. I had to respectfully decline responding to some of the questions they were probing me to respond to. I didn't want for the character to be seen as just another part of me that can't have a story on their own. So I let them know that, even though the character was inspired by my experiences, once the story got on to the page, the character became their own person. A similar thing occurred after reading "Profile", where the character was not separated from the writer. Since the attendees know me personally, the discussion drifted to deciphering what was true and what was false, and less on what was happening in the story overall.

Second session: The writing seminar

- Overview/Outline

I held a writing workshop on Sunday, 8th October 2023 that took an hour and twenty (20) minutes. It was attended by four (4) people via Zoom. My focus was on free writing prompts, and this is the outline I used for the writing workshop: Four writing prompts will be given, each with a different time interval. In between each prompt, people have the opportunity to share what they've written. However, this isn't compulsory. We can talk about what each session was like in between free writes and then give an overall opinion at the end. The only rule of the free writing session is don't lift your pen or pause to plan or think about what to write next. Just write until the timer stops. If you are in the middle of a sentence when the timer goes off, you can finish off the sentence but not start a new one. Once you hear the prompt, you can start writing.

I started the session with a 2 minute prompt then increased the time to 3, 4 and then 5 minutes. The prompts, and the order in which we used them, were: Since you asked; If I had my way; At 2 in the morning; A year after your death.

- The writing session and responses

It was in the workshop that I had to engage with the attendees, not only as a fellow writer but also as a host who was going to guide them through the session and share valuable information with them. All the attendees had prior writing experience in either prose or poetry. However, some had not tried using free writing and others had used free writing but not while having a time limit. Some had not written in a while and so, were sceptical of how their writing and participation would contribute to the session.

After the first writing prompt, the attendees gave positive feedback on having gone through the session. Some went with a more serious approach to the prompt than others. I let them know that whatever came out of the free write was okay and it shouldn't be judged as that's where the mind drifted to in that time. I also mentioned that the beauty of free writing, especially in such a space, was that it helped the group see the various directions that a prompt can take; a serious one or a silly one or something in between. When it came to reading the free writes aloud, I read mine first to create a safe space and let them know that nothing they had written would be considered wrong. The attendees felt encouraged and majority of them read their pieces aloud.

One of the comments that I liked during the discussion after the first prompt was, "I wouldn't have thought that I would be able to write two minutes in one go without putting the pen aside." And another one was, "I really didn't think I'd have anything to write because my mind usually goes blank but because I had the instruction to not lift the pen, I told myself 'don't think, just write'. I was surprised that I managed to write anything and when you said the timer went off, I found that I still had more to write which was surprising." It reminded me of how I felt in the early days of using writing prompts and I was glad that they were experiencing it as well. The attendees became more relaxed after the first prompt and gained confidence for the next prompts.

We talked about how the time affected their focus on the writing. I mentioned that having more time for a free write, especially when you're not used to it, might tempt one to pause and

think. But the key thing is to get back into it, even if one's mind drips for a few seconds. One of the attendees shared how she was experiencing writer's block but the session helped her put pen to paper and write. Another shared that she had never read her work to anyone besides her sister so she pushed herself to step out of her comfort zone and read one of her free writes aloud.

Overall the writing session received a positive response with the attendees sharing how their writing developed in the session as they relaxed into the entire writing process. They were able to think/worry less about what needed to come next after starting the prompt. There was a consensus that free writing is a practice they want to carry on with.

- Challenges faced

There were no major challenges throughout the seminar. However, some of the people who had confirmed attendance pulled out of that the last minute, so I had to work with a much smaller group than initially intended as I couldn't find people to replace those who couldn't make it. And we struggled a bit with the connectivity because we were working via Zoom. But this issue was resolved quickly and we finished the session successfully.

- General observations

The reading session helped me get valuable feedback on how my work might be interpreted and also enabled me to get a feel of receiving an audience's response to my work outside an academic space. However, I'd want to hold a reading session with people who don't know me personally to see how the responses would contrast with the responses I got in this session. Taking the lead in the writing workshop helped me put the information I've picked up in my writing journey into practice. Seeing this practicality and seeing people get ah-ha moments to aid their writing process reinforced one of my goals which was to add relevance to people's work. Determining the direction that the writing workshop would go gave me a sense of responsibility over what information the attendees would receive. This made me strive to give as much accurate information as I could to help them throughout the session. Their closing remarks on having gained a new approach to writing assured me that I added to their writing basket. On another note, I'd like to continue holding writing sessions as this one not only helped me get people's takes on specific prompts but also helped stimulate my own writing. I felt like I was reconnecting with writing, as I had felt distant from it and had low motivation to write since submitting my draft thesis.

- Conclusion

Initially, I was nervous about holding these sessions; worried about people's perception of them. However, I was pleased with people's engagement and participation in both sessions and the positive reception of my work and the free writes. Given the opportunity, I'd hold more of these sessions.

## Reader Report Reflection

I got a reader's report on my draft thesis, *It's all in your head* with comments, highlights and suggestions on what worked and what could be improved.

The reader found the draft thesis to be compelling and promising where "the writer's voice is assured across a range of genres and forms". This was wonderful to read as it assured me that the different experimentations I did throughout the thesis were working well. The reader mentioned key elements that make the thesis strong like the title, the motifs, the tone, form and things left unsaid, among others. As these are all elements that I paid particular attention to when writing, I was glad that their intention was seen and spotlighted. When mentioning the unsaid, the reader says, "By leaving much unsaid and unknown, the writer adds to the suspense and menacing atmosphere." This stood out to me because having things left unsaid and seeing how this impacts a reader's response to the piece is a key part of using silence as a motif in my pieces. Something else that stood out to me was how the reader spoke about form saying, "The writer displays equal proficiency in 13-page short stories and 500-word flash fictions; horror stories and fairy tales. Each experiment with form feels like the right fit for the content of that story". When writing and editing, I was constantly worried about whether or not the form I was using was working. This was a particular concern in the longer pieces since I sometimes struggle with consistency as pieces get longer. Knowing that the form worked and got the narrative across was encouraging.

The report highlighted that the thesis needed to be restructured in terms of where certain pieces were placed and where they could work best. The report mentioned that the thesis could do with the creation of sections so that the reader is aware of shifts that happen in the thesis. This helped me move some of the pieces around, find major sections and give the thesis breathing room.

I looked at the issue of punctuation as it was noted that I used an excessive number of semicolons that made some parts of some stories difficult to read. I adjusted this accordingly to create more breath in parts of the pieces. I also unified the quotation marks that were inconsistent in some of the pieces to create cleaner and clearer text. I reworked one of the titles as the report suggested to change it so as not to give away the whole story. I was able to see how the initial title took away from the story and found a more suitable title. This reminded me of the importance of a good title as it can make or break one's perspective of a story; something we spoke about during the seminars of the course.

The report pointed out my use of English as a focus language except in one piece "Of dreams and visions", suggesting I explore different languages more. Since the use of a specific language is a key part of the course, keeping non-English words to a minimum was intentional and made only an exception in "Of dreams and visions" because I wanted to give the piece a clearer location compared to other stories.

For “The sound of colour”, the report noted a need for clarity in who the narrator might be from paragraph to paragraph, suggesting an introduction of clues that clarify who the narrator is. This helped me make subtle changes to the piece and make the narrators’ voices clearer to readers. For “Easy to grip”, the report pointed out that I lost the motif of time and shifted tense as I got deeper into the story, so I reworked it for consistency and so that the focus of the story isn’t lost. For “Profile”, the report mentioned that the story’s strength was in “the mix of banal facts, psychological insights and horror.” However, it highlighted that some parts unnecessarily shifted from the use of “she” or “her” and therefore took away from the piece’s crafted repetition. I took note of these parts and made changes where necessary.

I felt that the report fell short when it came to considering the pieces as separate from each other. The reader took a holistic view of the stories; looking at most of the stories as being possible continuations of each other as would be the case of a novel, instead of seeing how they could stand alone as it’s a collection of short stories. When highlighting the linkages that exist within the pieces, I believe the reader was overly concerned with how the pieces can work as one, at times neglecting the fact that even though one piece might make one curious or think about another piece, the stories aren’t necessarily to be read holistically. This made it tricky to approach some of the feedback. However, I liked that I got to see how a reader may view the links that exist between certain pieces.

Receiving the reader’s report was enriching as I got to see what worked, what didn’t and what could be improved on. It captured many aspects that I wanted to focus on in my writing and highlighted many things that I’ve spoken about with my lecturers and fellow classmates during the course and with my supervisor when working on the thesis. I have been able to change my view of writing and how I write; expanding the literacy skills available to me. I appreciate prose and poetry and its impact on the world a lot more than I did before the course. I have been able to improve my editing skills and become more comfortable with the process, especially in regards to my own writing which I found difficult before. Key takeaways from this course for me are how to read for writing and how rewriting makes a story grow as one collects information that can feed into it.