

Part A: Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

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by

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Welcome to my portfolio, attached in this portfolio are my weekly reflective journals throughout the course of the year, in them I have mostly included the challenges I have faced during the course and I also cover some learning curves I have had. Following that, is the Poetics Essay, then the Writing in Community report which basically reflected on what I got out of this particular programme, to end off with, I have included my literature and book reviews which are just as important for writers to do.

Starting this course, I was uncertain about a lot of things such as how certain writing techniques add meaning to a text. Personally, I feel that I have learned so much from the course. The biggest lesson I have learned is how to express subjects I previously struggled to express in fear of how the next person will receive it. However, throughout the seminars such as the one on finding your voice and through reading research, I have come to learn that as a writer, you need to allow yourself to surpass such boundaries.

Background information on *Chaos!*

Chaos! is a combination of short prose forms in fragments that tackles difficult topics such as troubled marriages, child molestation, rape, infidelity and abuse in every way, whether it is mental, emotional or physical.

The stories contain a lot of horrific and violent acts that, often times in this day and age, happen behind closed doors or sometimes even openly, yet not a lot of people are ready to talk about these topics. In my thesis, I go into the minds of those that are abusive and those that are on the receiving end of abuse. In doing so, I aim to explore all the dynamics of abuse. Abusers, as I have portrayed in my thesis, tend to have a deranged sense of reasoning in performing abusive acts and one thing that is important to note is that, more than likely, in their own heads and according to their own reasoning, the behaviour that they act on is very much rational and reasonable.

Portraying these characters performing absurd actions as they see 'fit' does not in any way express my views in reasoning with them or supporting such actions, but rather, the aim is to show that people tend to behave in ways that are shocking and at times even beyond comprehension. I of course say 'fit' in inverted commas as I caution against being portrayed as supporting this kind of behaviour. The reality of these 'abnormal' acts is that we cannot shy away from the fact that they do happen and, unfortunately, many are suffering in silence, afraid to speak out in fear of not being believed, of being judged, or even in fear of their lives.

Kate Bernheimer argues that part of the problem why fairytales are underappreciated is that many interpretations of fairytales are burdened with clichés. I have to say that as I was writing *Chaos!* I found myself many times falling into the trap of writing clichéd lines which I later edited out as best as I could. I also however chose to make the conscious decision of staying away from writing stories that had the clichéd "and they lived happily ever after" storyline. A lot, if not all the stories I wrote in *Chaos!*, confront issues head-on and are sometimes left unresolved. I do this because even in finding healing or moving on from abuse, one may not always be given the closure one needs.

Another argument that Bernheimer brings up in her essay is that in fairytales, there is an absence of depth, that there is a flatness in fairytales that allows the story to tell about something happening, but we are not always told why something happens. I have, in some stories from *Chaos!* adapted this and the reason for that is, according to my beliefs of human nature, sometimes people can behave in questionable and monstrous ways for reasons not known to us or sometimes even the person performing the action. What my focus is on the fact that sometimes people do what they do, as perplexing as it may be. Oftentimes, victims search for the reasons behind what has happened, and I believe that this may not always be the answer one needs in order to heal.

In echoing Bernheimer's idea of fairytales being a negotiation between the real and unreal, I believe the unrealness in *Chaos!* comes from disbelief of just how crazy human behaviour can

get, but also there is a realness to it, as we are more than capable. "Normalized magic" or "suspension of disbelief" as Bernheimer calls it is a part of fairytales and when reading *Chaos!* again I intend to depict that in the world we live in, anything goes as far as irrationality of human behaviour is concerned. This tension, between the real we can understand, and the unreal, which actually sometimes happens, informs a lot of my writing in *Chaos!*

Although *Chaos!* tackles issues that may seem unheard of or unbelievable, I still stand on that these things do in fact happen and in my writing, I attempt to bring awareness of these things, it may be fictional, but it is fiction based off of reality. I will admit that many parts of *Chaos!* may be considered as triggering and very explicit to some, however I also believe that some parts of it offer healing and closure to those that have been suffering in silence, telling them that they are not alone. Hopefully, it also encourages some to come forward with their narratives with the confidence that someone will care enough to extend an ear and offer help.

Reflective Journals

The first quarter of the Master's in Creative Writing Course: 25 January 2021-28 March 2021

Politics and poetics of punctuation was the word of the day. Stacy Hardy was about to introduce us to something I was really anticipating. I had never really put so much thought in how punctuation added to the meaning of a text. Previously, my writing had been characterized by your common commas and full stops. I had always taken caution in avoiding making comma splice errors and adding a full stop when a complete idea had been expressed. My writing had also been characterized by your occasional exclamation and question mark marks where needed, dashes, strokes and colons, not so much. Here's to trying something new in my writing!

To start off my writing for the week, Stacy gave us a free writing prompt. "Day 28 of the pandemic". Free writing has always been an enjoyable exercise because it forces one to write even when there's nothing much you have to say. It's you against that timer and you have to have written something when it stops. After our three minutes of free writing comes to an end, a few of my classmates share what they have written and due to time constraints, we aren't able to get to everyone's piece but that's okay, there was still so much more to unpack.

When we got to the readings for the seminar, it was interesting to hear different ways in which my classmates interpreted how punctuation was used in the texts we read. I mostly found that I had to read some texts more than once in order to understand what the writer was trying to achieve. Just when I felt I understood the function of punctuation marks used in a text, one of my classmates would pose a different interpretation and I would start questioning how I understood the writing. But I suppose that is the beauty of writing at times, there is always room for interpretation. That brings me to my next point. Interpretation.

On Monday night I had opened a web page with “punctuation marks and their uses” typed in the search bar. I was not really sure which and how many punctuation marks I should use in my assignment. With that doubt hanging over me I decided to just start off with writing something and probably see how I could use punctuation later to enhance the meaning of what I had already written. After having read what I had written, one thing was evident. It was an angry piece and that obviously meant that I had to make use of exclamation marks where necessary. However, I was looking forward to implementing something new in my writing so that was not all I was going to add. Strokes, dashes, asterisks, commas and inverted commas all made the shortlist.

During our feedback session, Gaireyah pointed out that my use of asterisks to censor my anger did not really work so well considering the fact that I had used such stronger emotive language earlier on in the piece. I felt like she had a point and I made a note of this so that I could later revisit it. What I did not agree with whatsoever was when she expressed that the piece had a rather disappointing ending and how it would have been nicer had it ended it off on a more pleasant note. I say I disagree because I believe that in as much as this was a fictional piece of writing, I like adding realism in my writing. Not always, but I prefer to do so. Let me elaborate. We live in a country where so many women are victims of sexual assault and they either suffer in silence, scared or too ashamed to talk about it and even when they do, a lot of times, the justice system fails them. With that being said, I felt it would do little justice to the message I was trying to get across if I had just ended it on a rosy note, that is not the reality I live in. So I stand

with the tragic piece I wrote of a girl who was raped and ended up committing suicide. Perhaps one day the justice system will realize that not enough is being done to ensure that victims get the justice they deserve. Until then, one can only hope.

I have gone a little bit off track regarding reflecting on my week but I had a quiet week anyway. I have realized that lately I have been becoming more and more open minded to reading and writing poetry. I have always leaned towards prose but I found myself submerged in Mangaliso Buzani's *A Naked Bone* of which I am still reading but I am finding so amazing so far. I think the more I allow myself to read poetry the more I like the idea of writing it, so I cannot wait to see what I can do with it. But for now, I have to read the readings Paul sent for Tuesday's reading group. I have a good feeling about what is to come next week.

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Week seven was started off by Mxolisi. We had read poems from three readings and I was quite intrigued by the comments made by classmates all round. As usual, people were reading and interpreting the poems differently to how I was reading them and people were observing things I did not see. I always appreciate different insights because it makes you see perspectives you had not seen as a reader which makes it even more interesting.

At the end of the seminar, bra Mxo, as one of my class mates had now familiarized him to us as, assigned us with our weekly assignment. "The students will be expected to write three poems...on their first meeting with poetry." I read the assignment topic over and over again. It had seemed to make perfect sense when we were given the instructions in class and bra Mxo had explained it well to us. But now that I was reading it alone, I had no idea as to how or where I would begin. Being a prose writer, I was not even yet sure how I completely felt about poetry. My first meeting with poetry? This is one I had to think long and hard about. I decided to go back to the reading we read in class. I first went back to the poem that I had liked the most and reread it;

Write as you will

In whatever style you like

Too much blood has run under the bridge

To go on believing

That only one road is right.

In poetry everything is permitted.

With only this condition of course,

You have to improve the blank page

I had been so impressed by this poem; it was so short, yet was so impactful. The words that had particularly stuck out at me were “you have to improve on the blank page”. So as I started my assignment with these words in mind. I found that after having read this poem that my previous relationship or encounters with poetry would not be an obstacle regarding the assignment topic. With that reassurance, I started writing. My writing did not have to be a poem so I wrote a prose piece about my first meeting with poetry. It did not take me long to get wrapped up in my writing, I had so many ideas that flowed in that I had realized that in order to tackle the assignment, one had the option to use the word “poetry” metaphorically.

It was Monday evening and I was happy with the progress I was making, Tuesday however seemed to be a much slower day, I had no will to do any writing or reading for that matter.

I decided to read through some of my old pieces and as I was reading, I was asking myself what message I was trying to send across to the reader. After having read my old pieces, I turned back to the assignment that we had for week seven. I had been writing about poetry as rape. I remembered how one of my classmates had said that the way I ended my previous assignment also on rape was ‘disappointing’ in that she had hoped

the ending was a happier one. Still wanting to write something meaningful and with her comment echoing in my head, I decided that I would take that turn with my new assignment. I turned my assignment into a suicide letter advising those that had not met 'poetry'. The point of the letter was to tell them that they should not take the easy way out like the writer in the letter had, to fight and not let 'poetry' win.

Friday came and I was eager to share what I had written with my classmates and bra Mxo. After reading my piece, I heard two heavy sighs from at least two people and I wondered what they had to say. One of my classmates seemed to like the concept of the letter being directed to perhaps a younger sister that was still yet to grow up and meet the challenges of this world, so she advised me to direct it to a younger sister. I immediately fell in love with that idea because it was even more intimate and felt like it truly came from the heart. I made a note of her comments, which I would later implement into my work. Other comments included, 'try not to use words that are cliché' and 'you take too long to get to the point'.

I particularly battled with the last point that was made by bra Mxo about not making what I had written a prelude. I did feel like I had beaten around the bush with getting to the point, however I was not sure how to build up suspense in order to make the end impact harder when I got to it without beating around the bush. Nonetheless I edited my work and tried to get to the point sooner without making the build up too long.

I had taken a glimpse at the notes for week eight and I saw that we would be covering 'how to articulate your thoughts' so maybe this will help with the problem I had encountered with week seven's assignment. To end off my week, I read a few short stories from "Joburg Noir", I particularly chose short stories because in their shortness, they have to get to the point quickly and maybe that would help me.

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Before we began week eight, what was evident in our seminars is that we definitely had clashing views on how we perceive or how we feel about texts. Whether it was on

racial issues, cultural issues or even texts that are just normally lost in translation, we openly expressed our different opinions. So this week was particularly interesting seeing that we were given *The Library of Babel* by Jorge Luis Borges to read. I found the read a little complex and I had to read it a few times for me to get an idea as to how I would use it as inspiration to write my assignment for this week.

I believe that in order to be inspired to write by a certain text, the text has to speak to you or at least do something to you. I felt that the fact that I did not necessarily enjoy reading *The Library of Babel*, I struggled to articulate the ideas I had into words. As I was reading it, I could see how many could read it with their own biases as we had discussed in class. I could also see how it could be interpreted in many ways because of how complex I found it to be. Had we been allowed to, I definitely would have researched about the text to help myself get an idea of how others have interpreted it and what has been said about it, but I understood why we had been asked not to research it beforehand.

As I was writing my assignment, I had a clear idea in my head of where I wanted the story to go and how I wanted it to end. Although I personally thought it was the most difficult assignment we had received so far, I was confident that I had written a story that was easy to follow. So of course it came as a surprise to me when during Friday's feedback session, after having read my assignment to my classmates, they gave feedback that indicated that what I had written had been understood in a way that was completely opposite to what I was going for. What was most problematic with my assignment as I came to learn, was that towards the end, I had included a scene where the narrator had been woken up from a dream and I assume that in the way I narrated the story, it seemed as if the entire story had been a dream.

The other major problem that arose in my assignment was that I had made very silly mistakes in that I made the story very unrealistic to the reader because things that would not happen in reality were being said in the story. By the time everyone was done giving me feedback, I was given the chance to explain that not the whole story

was a dream but I saw why they would have thought that and to be honest, I really appreciated that this had been pointed out to me because it made me see flaws in my narration that I would not have seen had I not been told by someone who is reading the story outside of my own head. I came out of Friday's feedback session having learned a lot, and in particular reference to my assignment; that I had to articulate my thoughts better and substantiate what I write better and always do thorough research to make the story realistic.

Towards the end of the feedback session, different opinions were expressed again as per the norm. I felt that Nathan's feedback to everyone was very helpful and precise. One thing I did question though was to which extent a writer should write for the comprehension of the reader while trying to write what she likes. The general answer that I got was that there needs to be some sort of balance, and that that the writer needs to make these two factors coexist. I have not yet learned how to do this as effectively as I would like but it is definitely something I am working towards in my writing because I do not entirely agree with writers writing only for themselves because the writing is intended to be read and if the reader does not understand or get anything from the writing then my question is what is the point of the writing then. Nonetheless, there is still a lot to learn and I believe that this being my most challenging week, there is room for growth.

On the reading side of things, after finding it hard to choose which book to start with, between *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Blood and Guts in High School*, I finally went with the latter. On the very first page of the book, I came across a writing style that is not commonly used in most books when it comes to dialogue. The dialogue in this book as I had observed, is similar to how they write it in plays. The other thing that caught my attention was the way in which the characters emotions and actions are put in italicized brackets between the dialogues. This type of writing style caught my attention simply because I have noticed that when I write, I sometimes spend a lot of time of technicalities regarding quotation marks when making use of dialogue and the

back and forth between dialogue and describing what is happening in that particular scene.

I definitely want to try to implement this type of writing style in my writing, perhaps it will simplify things for me when writing or maybe I will find an alternate writing style. For now, I want to focus on the story that *Blood and Guts in High School* has to tell and when I am done reading it, I will decide on how much of it, I would like to implement in my own writing. I think I am yet to find a writing style that I am fully comfortable with.

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Between trying to find new literature to read, searching for fresh writing that speaks to me and learning to write in an unconventional way, week nine was quite a handful. Paul Mason introduced us to a few pieces that displayed unconventional writing. After the seminar ended, I still felt the need to go out and find unconventional readings of my own that were going to give me inspiration to get my assignment underway. I figured it was of little use to rush into starting the assignment without yet fully having a sense of direction as to what I wanted to do with my assignment.

What made writing considered to be unconventional is fact that the writing would go against what is typically considered 'normal'. According to *The Hero's Journey Model*, the protagonist starts off in an ordinary world before being called to adventure and like any conventional book, there needs to be some sort of conflict and the conflict needs to be resolved before the book can end and things can be deemed to be normal again. Taking all of this into consideration, in my unconventional assignment, I needed to ignore this formula and structure my work differently.

I looked at the prompts that I had been given and I decided that I would use them to create a story that was ambiguous and would keep the reader guessing what was actually happening. I found this to be a little challenging considering that I kept wondering if the reader would understand, Nathan's words echoed at me, write for

yourself. I tried to do that as much as I could but after having two friends read what I had written, I realized that they both very different understandings of what I had written about, one thought it was someone who had died and his spirit lived in the story and the other thought it was someone who had memory loss. After getting both of their insights, I did a little bit of editing and asked them to read it again without telling them what I meant. In the editing process, I added clues to my writing in order to make them understand better.

When Friday's feedback session came, One of my classmates mentioned that it would do my writing justice if I left out certain information in order to enhance the ambiguity in my writing. I completely understood what she was saying as I also was not entirely comfortable giving away too many clues as to what was going on in the writing. So without even thinking about it twice, I decided that I would return to how I had originally written the piece. I also felt that in writing; perhaps it is a good thing when the reader comes up with different ways to interpret what has been written. That way, you know that your writing is complex and not flat and therefore fails to challenge the reader. With that being said, I have learned not to worry too much about spoon feeding the reader and rather focus on giving the reader something to think about.

Taking into consideration that this week we were focusing on writing unconventionally, I put on hold the books that I had been reading from the previous week and went in search of books that were unconventional. And as I was doing this, I reflected back on previous seminars and wondered how much of a challenge it would be to apply all that we had learned into one single body of work. As I read now, from everything that I read, I try to find examples of all that we have covered in our seminars. I got the sense that it would be hard to try to focus on perfecting each aspect in one body or work or perhaps it needs time and practice.

I asked a friend to give me prompts, which I would use as experimental writing to see what I could come up with in three minutes. After she had given me the first prompt, I did not manage to get much on paper because I was so focused on trying to put all

these ideas together. I tried to do this again with a different prompt and I ended up having the same outcome. What I was learning from this exercise was that in order to write a great story, you do not necessarily have to add every single writing technique or implement all things that could enhance your writing. I am still trying to find my writing style and I can only go through trial and error until I find what it is that works for me. I have come to realize that I have read many books that I enjoyed and was completely mind blown by but was left uncertain whether I could write like that or I just appreciated the work just as a reader.

It is a journey that I am still yet to embark on, finding other writing styles that work for me and I believe that with more exposure to a variety of literature I will find what works for me. I think the mistake that I have been making is that I tend to hop from book to book in search for something. This coming week, I want to challenge myself to choose a single book and read it from start to finish and be able to make a sound decision as to how I felt about it or if it inspired me in any way. There are countless books to be read so if one does not work, I need to be patient until I find the ones that truly speak to me.

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This week we were discussing how we can use contradiction in our own work. The class was started off with a song called Cherry Wine by Hozier, a song about a lover in an abusive relationship. Upon studying the lyrics of the song, we were able to see many contradictions that were being brought forward in the song. We soon learned why that song was relevant regarding what we had to do for the assignment. At the end of the seminar, Mishka asked us to write a page long poetry or prose piece where we experienced desire. In that piece, we needed to write as much sensory detail as possible. In addition, we also had to try to encompass contradiction and paradox using as much imagery as we could to express ideas. To get our creative juices flowing, we had started off with free writing that we would later develop into a longer piece.

Just as we had done before, we had to write in an unconventional way and Mishka advised us to liberate ourselves from logic existing in an unconventional space in the assignment. Taking into consideration that I have recently been reading books that portray strong imagery, I felt that I would be easily inspired to write the assignment. Before starting my assignment, I reread an extract from *Blood and Guts in High School* where Janey had a strong desire to have a deeper relationship with her father.

Using the free writing prompt, I had chosen to write about a girl who had to get an abortion after her desires for having a better life were shattered by her lover who later informed her that he was actually married with kids. Having read *Blood And Guts In High School*, I found inspiration in the way that imagery was used to enhance the quality of the writing. The book also touched on the subject of the desire for love which related to what I wanted to write about. This week, I particularly wanted to focus on using fresh language in my writing and move away from 'overly used words'. Making use of fresh language was a suggestion that I had been getting during feedback sessions on more than one occasion. I was glad to know that my classmates felt I had achieved that when one of them pointed out that she had noticed an improvement in the language that I was using. I also appreciated all the other feedback I received as it helped me work on things I would not have seen had they not said it.

After spending some time editing the assignment that I had initially submitted on Thursday night, I felt better about the work I had submitted and I noticed a significant difference between my first attempt and my second attempt. One of my classmates had mentioned that she would love to read a more developed version of this story and it is one of the comments I will keep in mind so that perhaps when time does allow, I may consider developing this week's assignment into a longer piece.

I found our reading group on Tuesday to be very interesting, from the pieces that my classmates selected to read and the discussions around them. One thing that I left with from the reading group was that it does not matter if something you read does not speak to your culture and I understood that in that as a writer, when you read;

sometimes you need to put your cultural differences aside and look for other things in what you are reading. For me, when I read sometimes I look for a certain writing technique, how the narrative is portrayed or even the way punctuation is used in order to convey meaning. There are so many things, I have come to learn, that you can educate yourself with when reading a story that is besides the story being told in itself.

This week, I also spent time going through *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*. I found myself so drawn to this anthology. Normally I do not read for long hours at a time but with this one, that is what I found myself doing. My interest in writing came from prose poetry and I have always been intrigued by how in prose poetry, writers are able to write something very short and to the point and be able to leave the reader with something to ponder upon. I particularly loved reading *The Mysterious Arrival of an Unusual Letter*, there was so much mystery in how it ended and when I read it for the second time, I was even more fascinated by how I was finding clues or suggestions as to what was behind the mystery in the story. I always appreciate writing that challenges me as a reader and leaves me inspired as a writer. As has a way to challenge myself in tackling this form of writing, I like I sometimes do, asked a friend to give me some free writing prompts that I would use to write something that was in the form of a prose poem. I enjoyed this exercise and I felt it was something I definitely would like to apply in my assignments to come. In the coming week, I still want to focus on prose poetry but I want to give myself new challenges by reading from other authors that have applied this form of writing in their work.

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The second quarter of the Master's in Creative Writing Course 29 March 2021- 11 July 2021

This week we had a seminar with Carol Leff on death and dying. After having a look at the readings and watching a clip of Zakes Mda talking about *Ways of Dying* we were given a free writing prompt on writing about someone we know that has died and had made an impact in our lives. I took this free writing prompt and in the time that we

were given to write, I wrote about my late grandmother. She had been a great part in my life and since her passing, I had never taken the time or really put much thought in writing about her. Considering this, I thought I was going to be able to develop the free writing I had written into a much longer piece.

However, as I was trying to develop the writing into a longer piece of writing I found that it was a bit of a challenge. In between trying to fictionalize the story and thinking about more content to add, I realized that I did not have much to say on the topic. I also did not have much inspiration of the day of the funeral to go off on. I finally decided to abandon the free writing completely and write a piece that was completely fictional.

As I was writing, I had to constantly to keep reminding myself that I was writing on something I had not experienced first hand and with that, I needed to be sure to make the story as believable as possible. In order to make sure that I could achieve this, as a person that was writing on giving birth to a still born, I took the time to research on its causes. I also did some research on overdosing as I had to implement it in my assignment as well. I particularly enjoyed reading up more on these two topics and I always appreciate the opportunity to learn more on a certain topic when I have to write about it. In a previous assignment, I made the mistake of writing something could not be believable to the reader due to the fact that I had not properly researched the topic.

I was glad to hear from one of my classmates in the feedback session that as she was listening to the story being read, she felt the story was very believable especially for someone who had not experienced what was being written about. This comment made me feel that I was growing as a writer by learning from my mistakes.

Amongst other things, we had our second week of the Writing in Community seminar. We were all asked for the topics that we had decided on teaching. My group members and I gave the class a general idea of what we were going to be doing under the topic Writing Under Harsh Conditions and Generating Stylistic Innovations. We had initially planned to feature writers from Western, Eastern and Southern Africa but after taking into consideration the time that we are given to present the lesson, we narrowed the

scope down to just South African writers so that we are able to be more focused as we present the lesson and fit in all that needs to be discussed in the allocated time frame.

Later on in the week, we met as a group and the agenda was to bring together what material we want to work from. We shortlisted those that we agreed on after having challenges on deciding what we felt fit in our lesson and what would not work. As it stands, we are happy with the reading packs we have shortlisted although we still need to revise and detail the assignment question that we will be giving to the students.

This week's reading group was quite long and the pieces that we selected by my classmates were lengthy so we did not have enough time to get through everyone's selected pieces or even discuss the last piece that was read. Stoffel selected Can Themba's *The Suit* to read to the class and as he was reading, I was paying careful attention to the story because Can Themba features in our Writing in Community reading pack. As Stoffel read, I was making notes of what I felt stood out for me especially things that I felt tied into our Writing in Community project. Since we did not get the time to discuss the piece, I decided I would keep my notes on *The Suit* and hear what my classmates have to say about it when we do get to discussing the short story next week. I am particularly looking forward to the discussion on *The Suit* because as a group, we struggled to select an excerpt that we wanted to use in the Community in Writing workshop and maybe the discussion about the story might help us get other insights as to where best we can choose to focus on the story as we teach it.

After having spent the past weeks reading books from either the MACW library or from my own collection, I finally paid the Rhodes library a visit this week. Although it was disappointing to find that most of the books that I wanted to borrow from the long reading list were unavailable, I did manage to get one which I started reading straight away. The book is entitled *Wittengstein's Mistress* and it is written by David Markson. In short, the novel is about a woman who is convinced that she is the only person left in the world. And as I probably mentioned in the holiday assignment, the reason I chose to read this book is because I am interested in seeing how the writer manages to narrate

something that is convincing of something so bizarre. From what I have read so far, I have picked up that as a reader, I find it difficult to trust what the narrator accounts for in the story because she does not seem sure the events of what has happened either. The more I read though, the more I want to understand the mind of the narrator and in general just enjoy yet another good work of literature.

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This week, we had a seminar with Henali Kuit. The seminar was under the topic *The Value of Writing Simply*. This seminar was of interest to me before we even stated it because it spoke on the value of writing simply whereas at times I would fall under the false impression that writing that was considered to be great was writing that was complex and full of big words.

I enjoyed the readings that Henali had selected for us. My favourite of the pieces were read was *Today I Am A whore* by xTx. I enjoyed the simplicity in how it was written and just the whole story in general. I found it was easy for me to engage in the discussions during this seminar because I found fulfillment in the pieces that we were reading and discussing.

At the end of the seminar, Henali took us through the assignment instruction and topic A was the most interesting to me. I liked the idea of having to write a story in five sentences or less. It was an interesting exercise, the idea of telling an entire story in such a few words. I read some of the stories taken from *300 Arguments* by Sarah Manguso and I really enjoyed them. Short and to the point as they were intended.

The feedback session that came after the seminar was also very enjoyable and fulfilling. I enjoyed the stories that were written by my classmates. I mostly enjoyed the short stories of no more than five sentences that each of us had written. The feedback session was also a few I had enjoyed engaging in a while. I felt everyone gave helpful feedback and Henali gave detailed and constructive feedback as well. One thing I appreciated from the feedback session was that in as much as there was ambiguity in one of my

pieces, the underlying message that I was trying to send in the story was well received and there was no confusion of any kind. I liked this because sometimes it can be a let down when I write with the intention of telling the reader something without actually saying it and they still do not get it.

This week, I read a story called *We Find A Body* by JT Ellison. I came across this story on the internet when I was looking for new thriller reads. *We Find A Body* was an excerpt from other thrillers in the book and as much as the two other stories I read were also interesting, I liked this one best. I liked how there were accounts for what happened in this say day story and how it made me want to read more and more. The use of imagery in the story was also great. What I liked about the story was also how it made me want to know what happened.

With the time I normally use to read, this week I spent a great deal of time reading book reviews as well as academic literature reviews published online. I shortlisted three book reviews that I wanted to write a literature review on. The books reviews that I chose were all on thrillers. Before I started writing the literature review, I did some of my own research on the books that had been reviewed so that I could also make a judgment of my own about the authenticity of the book reviews. I intentionally chose book reviews that I did not enjoy as well because I wanted to not only talk on how well the book review was written but also on how others had space for improvement.

With the research I had done and the notes I had made, I was ready to write the literature review, one book review at a time. This week was one of the most intense if not the most intense week we have had in this MACW course and I was unable to complete the review, however I am using the extension I have to work on it, to research further.

*

This week, we had been asked to revisit a piece of writing of our own and edit it. I spent some time going through all the assignments that we had written during the course of this year in the MACW programme and deliberated on the one I would use. From there, I also looked at some of my writing that I have never shared with anyone and eventually, I decided to opt for *Unmasked*, a short story I had written and also submitted as my portfolio when I enrolled at Rhodes University.

I did not take much time on selecting an excerpt that I wanted to edit from this short story, I jumped right to the climax of the story and started the editing process there. After reading the climax of the story again, I decided that I would base my editing on producing a different result to what had just been revealed in the story. In short, I gave my narrator and main character of the story, a platform to react in a much more monstrous way where her rage was felt and seen. In the initial story, I had let the narrator just walk away without reacting and the story ended with a cliffhanger leaving the reader not knowing what she would do next.

In the comments that I wrote regarding the editing of my work, I wrote the following;

I have edited this piece by changing the names of some of my characters. Initially, I chose the names at random. I had not fully found my voice in that I looked at the storyline and took into account preconceived misconceptions or stereotypes that I needed to unlearn. "White people can do something this crazy, having surgery to disguise identity". I wanted to bring out a voice that sees no racial barriers on absurdity.

In the initial story, upon finding out that she was betrayed, the protagonist walked away and the story ended with a cliff hanger with the reader not knowing what she would do next.

This time, I have allowed the reader to see how she reacts and allow emotion to be seen in which I felt I repressed in my characters before. As I see it now, I want a voice that demands to be heard and therefore, this is why I have allowed my characters to portray their emotions in my writing.

It was unfortunate that due to loadshedding, I did not get the opportunity to read revised piece to the class. During the feedback session, we touched a bit on the topic of knowing the difference between voice and style in writing and based on how I have reedited this piece, I wondered if it was the style or the voice that had changed in my writing. I am still yet to do some research of my own on establishing the difference between voice and style.

Monday was not only different due to not having had a seminar, it was also the first Monday we did not have a COIL seminar since the programme begun. I did however attend the *booze and books* ZOOM session that Vangi had invited us to. Amongst my other classmates that attended were Sibongakonke, Nelia, Stoffel and Teamhw. It would have been nice to have a full house, nonetheless it was quite a fun very light and informal meeting where we shared insights on writing and engaged in a crossword puzzle. I think I do not only speak for myself when I say that the COIL programme was a fulfilling experience to be part of.

On Tuesday during our reading group, I read a chapter from the book *Revenge* written by Yoko Ogawa. I have not finished reading the book but this was one of my favourite chapters from the ones that I have read. Although I felt that the story became flat and boring in the chapter, I really loved how it started. The use of imagery and just in the way the scene was set. As a writer still learning, what I can draw just from this chapter of the book, is that as difficult as it may be, one needs to find techniques to always keep the reader captivated rather than losing her somewhere in between.

*

This week we had a seminar with Carol Leff. The seminar was under the topic Reimagining Place. Going through the readings and watching the PowerPoint presentation slides that Carol had prepared was interesting. It was refreshing to get different perspectives of how place could be imagined. I particularly liked the fact that

in the readings that we went through, I was able to think about the concept of place not just as a building or neighborhood but also, as being in one's mind or a place on the body or even in one's heart. The possibilities are endless.

Given the assignment instruction, which required us to describe a place, I chose to write about the experience and conditions slaves had to go through and live in on the slave ships. Initially, I had chosen to write about the ocean as my place of focus. I wanted to go into great detail about the torment and trauma slaves that had been thrown over board went through; the force of the water as they were being drowned and the creatures that we in the ocean that could have attacked and eaten the slaves dead or alive.

Since I learned about slavery and the slave trade a long time ago, I had to familiarize myself with the subject again so I spent most of Tuesday doing extensive research on it, particularly on the sections that I intended to write about.

When the feedback session on Friday came, I got to read my piece to the class and I received positive feedback from Carol and my colleagues. I was however given a suggestion to make the story that I had written more personal to me and my own experiences. At first I did not understand what was meant by this and when I asked for further elaboration, the suggestion was pointed towards writing a story of my own inspired by the slave trade rather than writing on the slave trade itself. The apparent problem was that they felt as if I had written a story that they had heard before. Carol interjected by saying that in as much as I wrote on the slave trade, I still fictionalized it and wrote it in a way that portrayed creativity.

Normally during feedback sessions, I note on paper what has been said and I resubmit a revised version on Sunday, but this week I did not do that as I felt that this suggestion meant I had to change most of my story if not all of it.

On Tuesday during our reading group with Stacy Hardy, I read an excerpt from a book called *Jane: A Murder* written by Maggie Nelson. This is one of the books that had been

sent to me by Stacy as part of my reading research and I took an interest in it because from the way it is written as far a structure goes and the content in the book itself speaks to the kind of writing I want to do. I was undecided as to which excerpt from the book I would read because the book contained many subsections that I felt were great and worth reading to the class. As I was reading the book, I felt that in as much as it was one book, it contained fragments or sub stories that related to the book as a whole.

*

In week twenty five, we were hosted by Stacy Hardy. The seminar was divided into two, one part being on auto fiction and the other on epistolary writing. There was a third seminar that Stacy had prerecorded on writing the body. While I found the epistolary seminar interesting, I was even more interested in the writing the body seminar.

After having watched the seminar on writing the body and hearing Stacy's personal story, I was inspired to write about my grandmother who had a similar experience. One thing I have realized however as far as my writing goes is that I seldom write about real life experiences of my own no matter how hard I try. I finally decided to write about a variety of things in the form of a flash fiction. My assignment was fragments of different stories.

Later on in the week, I had a ZOOM meeting with Mishka regarding the way forward as far as our supervisor/candidate relationship is concerned and also just to iron out some things I had mentioned in my abstract. I was glad to learn that we are permitted to use our assignments from the previous assignments in the year as part of our thesis. I say this because there are some pieces that I have written over the course of this year that I feel could work as part of what I want to present in my thesis, the last assignment that I had to submit for one. Other assignments, I feel with revision, I can also feature in my thesis to form one body of work.

I am uncertain whether or not it is because we will soon be transitioning into the thesis side of things in this MACW course, but I have been feeling very overwhelmed and uneasy. I feel that I have a general idea as to what it is that I want to do for my thesis but the idea is still fluid, very far from solid. Perhaps I am putting too much pressure on myself and I will figure it out later but at times I feel as though I should know exactly what I will be writing in my thesis.

This week I have been reading a book by Jose Saramago, it is called *The Lives of Things*. More than anything, so far what I am appreciating most or what I am particularly interested in about this book is the form. The book is made of many short stories. As I have so far decided that I want my thesis to consist of short stories and flash fiction, of late, I am paying attention to literature that takes the form of the two. Although I am still not yet decided I also want to try and experiment with prose poetry, the only thing that is still making me feel as though I am still on the fence is if I can pull it off. There are certain aspects of my writing that I have been able to develop over the course of the year but there are other aspects where I feel I still have a long way to go as far as my confidence in those areas is concerned. I guess time will tell.

*

Our seminar for this week was held by Henali Kuit, and we were talking about how not to overwrite. This was a seminar I appreciated because when I first started writing, I would find myself wondering if the reader understood what I was saying in the story and as a result, I would explain what was happening in the narrative. I was also reminded of a time earlier this year when in one assignment, I had written something, then elaborated on what I meant. During the feedback session, a classmate pointed out that they understood what was being said before it was explained and that I should omit the explanation.

Also in another piece that I wrote sometime last year, I found that I left a lot of things unexplained. When a published writer that I had asked to read my work read it, she commented by saying that she as a reader had so many questions that she felt were not

answered in the piece. She also mentioned that she felt that there were gaps in the writing that made her find the narrative hard to believe. We had spoken about this a week prior to the seminar with Henali and I had not gotten to editing the piece before the seminar. So taking into consideration what we had been discussing in the seminar and the feedback that I had received on one of my previous pieces, I felt a bit conflicted as to what I had to do and how I was going to go about editing that piece.

After the seminar had ended, I stayed behind to have a discussion with Henali about what I was feeling conflicted about. To give her a clearer picture, I gave her an example that had been pointed out by the other writer I had been speaking with and basically said that in the story, a couple had been planning to get married but the groom to be faked his death and then from planning a wedding the bride to be ended up planning a funeral. The feedback I received based on this was that the reader found it hard to believe how the characters could have possibly gotten so much money for both events. In the narrative, there was no mention of what the characters did for a living and with that information not given, the reader felt it was to unbelievable that they could manage to afford to organize such expensive things in a very short space of time.

The time I was receiving the feedback I felt that she had a point but after the seminar with Henali I started realizing that it really is not always necessary to give away too much information. It may seem expensive to organize both a wedding and a funeral at once but it is not impossible. After having thought this through and received a second opinion, I decided to leave my previous piece as is without the explanations.

Regarding the assignment we had been given for the week, we had to choose one piece we had written before and edit it, taking out parts of the story that we felt were unnecessary or did not add value to the story. Initially, I was going to choose the piece I previously mentioned but I ended up choosing a piece I had written earlier this year on the topic *desire*.

*

This week was our last week of classes and we had Jo Ann Becker taking us for the seminar with the topic “writing in fragments”. During the seminar, we read through a variety of examples of writings in fragments, some of the examples coming from MACW lecturers. I mostly enjoyed pieces from Vangile Gantsho, Manga Buzani, Franz Kafka, Prenesa Naidoo and Selah Saterstrom.

As we were going through the readings during the seminar, I was paying attention to the different forms that the fragments took. Some were in longer prose forms, others were in the form of short sentences and others were in the form of a dialogue. I was glad to see some of these forms coming out of the seminar readings as I intend to make use of these forms in my thesis. One of the things I was also interested in exploring in these fragments was if the fragments from one story all had similar themes. Did they have to be of related themes or could they be random? While I discovered that a lot of them did have similar themes I also got to learn that they did not necessarily have to be the same or share similarities.

We then concluded the seminar by going over the assignment instruction which was basically to produce one or even up to four prose pieces written in fragments. I spent some time later on Monday evening reading through the selections we had read in class as I was still trying to decide what I would write about and if the fragments would share similar themes.

This past Tuesday was also our last reading group with Stacy Hardy and in the previous week, she had asked us to select a piece to share that would be our signature sign off, something to remember. Due to time constraints not everyone got to read the pieces that they had sent through to everyone but fortunately, I was able to read mine. I read from a novel called *The Other Side of the Door* written by Nicci French. I came across this book on the internet when I was looking for new reads and I was instantly drawn in by it. I had to read the first few chapters twice before I got a sense of what was going on in the narration and both times I felt the reader was able to hold so much suspense in the way that it was narrated. One of my classmates, Nelia, made the same observation that I had

made when she pointed out that the narrator's use of sensory added to the suspense and it felt as if you were there in the room with the characters as the story was being told, wondering what would happen next. Considering that someone had just died in the scene and there was a lady in the room evidently agitated, one could not help but wonder if she was the culprit and if someone would walk in and catch her before could leave the scene. In terms of keeping the reader captivated, I feel the author of the book did this very effectively and this has always been what I have said I wish to implement and achieve in my own writing as well. Another thing that kept me captivated as I was reading the book was that the chapters of the book were titled "before" and "after" and this pattern continues until the end of the book, I had never seen such in any book before and it made me wonder what that was about and with this, it made me want to read further to understand why this had been done. What happened before and after? Before and after what? I liked that as a reader, I kept asking myself questions.

Later on Tuesday, we had a meeting on ZOOM with the students and supervisors to discuss our abstracts and how we could offer each other advice as far as improving them. I found this meeting to be very helpful and also getting to read other abstracts written by my colleagues gave me a better sense of what was expected of us in writing these abstracts. I made notes on the suggestions I had been offered so that I could later make the necessary changes.

On Wednesday, I met with Mishka on ZOOM and we went over my further revised abstract and we also go to talk through some of the concerns I had as far as my thesis is concerned. My main concern was about my interest in including illustrations in my thesis and after discussing the matter with Mishka, I felt it made better sense to follow his advice on rather focusing on the writing for now and should I wish to publish the thesis at a later stage, it is something I could always consider. I am happy with that.

This was the day I had to send my abstract back to Paul Wessels and I had a bit of a panic as I spent most of the day with a power cut, however I found means to send it through in time so that I could shift my focus on writing Jo Ann's assignment. Since I

will be writing in fragments in my thesis, I was careful in selecting what to write on, perhaps if it fits, it is a piece I can add to my thesis. My assignment was focused on the theme of incest and I touched a little on the consequences and the trauma from it.

To kick off our final feedback session and our last class together, Gaireyah read her piece of which I followed. I received a lot of positive feedback from both my classmates and later, written feedback from Jo Annwhich was very helpful. We discussed what worked and what needed improvement and again, the issue of using illustrations came up in the feedback session. I received from more than one person feedback stating that they felt that the text was strong enough without the support of the images. This of course for me was them misinterpreting my work as they were not there to offer support to the text.

I spent some time editing my final version of the assignment which I enjoyed as I felt I produced something of much better quality. To end the day I read Rupi Kaur's book *Home Body* which I not only appreciated for the content in the book but also in how it is written as I want to follow a similar structure in some parts of my thesis. The book was written in three parts, each part talking about the different stages of healing. I felt this was a great way to structure the book as it made a clear indication of each stage and therefore, seeing and resonating with the narrator's healing journey was easy.

Classes are over and going forward we will be working on our thesis, I am a little nervous about this but also very excited and I cannot wait to see what I will produce!

To give a final remark of what I have learned and covered this, I can confidently say that I feel I have grown from the writer I came in as at the beginning of the year and the writer I am now, I have learned new writing techniques, different ways to show expression in writing and a lot more. Of course we never stop learning so there is still a lot more to learn.

Poetics Essay

Call it unlearning

So you have successfully managed to drag yourself to a quiet coffee shop on the not so busy side of town, or perhaps you have snuck into the public library where you feel your concentration will be heightened. It is now you and the blank piece of paper that sits in front of you waiting on you to do to it what writers do. I suppose it would be sensible to start with what should or should have already come first; ideas. It is kind of like baking a cake, you have envisioned this big chocolate cake with an extra creamy topping for that extra satisfaction, but before it is ready for consumption, it needs to be prepared. Its ingredients need to be considered. There is a recipe that needs to be adhered to. Eggs? Check. Self raising flour? Check. Butter? Check. Oil?...Oil? Seems that the oil is missing. Does that mean we can no longer proceed with the baking of the cake? Too often we are scared of going ahead with constructing what we need to solely to the fact that we are so fixated on this recipe that has been handed down to us and must be all means be adhered to otherwise you would be betraying the family recipe. I for one recall a time I dared not to continue with putting together a meal because a certain ingredient I had been quite clearly told to include was missing. To my surprise, I was scolded for not bending the rules, making it work regardless. From then on, I have pretty much given the recipe the time of day to be heard but continued to do what I felt like doing anyway. And that is how I believe, you should treat your writing as well.

For the purpose of what I write here, allow me to continue using the analogy of a cake being baked. Let us assume it is being baked for your in-laws which you will be meeting for the first time. You are trying to impress them. They need to like this cake. They need to enjoy it. It needs to make sense to them. Right? We do not quite have the answer to that yet so let us do a bit of exploring into the mind of Barbara Guest. in *The Beautiful Voyage* (2015) while still bearing this cake that needs to be presented to the in-laws in mind. Here is the advice she has for the reader;

1. "Never 'negotiate' with the reader by projecting the reader's aims into the poem-, such as a 'desirable subject'" (78)

2. "Tensions between the poem and the poet create an empathy" (79)
3. "The rules are inside your head. They belong to you." (79)
4. "You have to have an idea of what you are going to do, but it should be a vague idea." (79)

Taking into consideration what has been listed above, that is, that should be how we bake our cake, and by your cake I mean how you will tackle this blank page that sits in front of you. So if you want to add that extra creamy topping, do not even for a second stop to ask yourself if it will be too sweet for your grumpy mother -in -law, just add it. Your cake, your recipe. The list is simple and straight to the point. And just to elaborate on what is meant by "you have to have an idea of what you are going to do, but it should be vague". The cake should look a certain way in your mind and you should want it to taste a certain way but I do not expect you to know exactly how many grains of sugar you will place where in order to get that exact taste. Yes, of course I am exaggerating but I do so in order to get my point across more effectively. So now, imagine that with the ideas that you have, you knew exactly which words to use in which paragraph and how long that paragraph would be. I have anxiety just thinking about it. It simply makes no sense to drive yourself crazy trying impress the mother- in -law that is the reader. Now I do not want you to get me wrong; I am not saying take no pride in your art, I just mean to say that your best may or may not impress all that get to experience it and you have to be okay with that. It will not always be the case.

Anna Kavan (2018) writes that she wanted to "abandon realistic writing insofar as it describes exclusively events in the physical environment, and to make the reader aware of the existence of different, though just as real, "'reality' which lies just beyond the surface of ordinary daily life and the surface aspect of things." (1) She continues to add that she "wanted to free the reader from the actual written word so that he would not be trapped in a piece of reportage". I like the idea Kavan uses on being trapped, it is like the recipe we have been referring to. The sooner we understand that it should be flexible rather than rigid, the better. The reader, whom from time to time (excuse me) I

will refer to as the grumpy mother -in -law , needs to also be open to the idea that as Kavan argues needs to be made aware of a world that exists beyond what she knows. If your grumpy mother-in-law has known cakes with vanilla icing all her life, do not hesitate to introduce to her chocolate icing and in the process of doing so, try not to worry about whether or not she will like it. I will remind you of this; it is your cake.

Let us move on to Ann Lauterbach's Use This Word in a Sentence: "Experimental" (2005). Still on the notion of baking a cake, Lauterbach touches on experimenting. She acknowledges that the experiment may fail, however, a willingness to risk failure and make mistakes seems essential. I am in full agreement with her, that treating the baking or in the case of writing as an experiment is worth the risk. I believe a lot of the time, people become so fixated on what could go wrong and neglect to even for a second to think, what if things actually go very right. Imagine trying to impress not just your grumpy mother-in-law with the cake that you are baking but her entire family as well. More than likely, they do not all have the same likings. What happens then when one does likes the extra cream you have added on the cake and the other deems it ruined the whole thing? You have impressed the one but would you rather choose to focus on the one that did not enjoy it? I reckon it is better to focus on what works. Also in either case if you are going to be a baker, and by baker, this time I mean a writer, there is very little space for you to grow if you seek approval. You should not have to rely on being comforted by another person. "Comforting art is art that you can make instant judgements about that confirms your view." (n.p) It does no justice to a writer when her own views are confirmed. They are confirmed and then what? Rather, take what you already know and try something new, mess with the recipe a bit and grow from there. What makes experimenting not possible is being so set on what is already known without allowing space for the unknown. Take for example what Lauterbach says regarding the words "experience" and "experiment"; they "share an etymological root, they are the flora of the *experiri*, to try, and related to *periculum*, which includes the ideas of both attempt and peril" (n.p) Simply put, there is a clear link between experimenting and experience, one just needs to take the leap of faith by turning experimenting into

experience. So the next time you add ingredients you have never even seen to the recipe and you start panicking about fucking it up, you are on the right track.

That brings me to Linh Dinh's advice on writing (2010). I will go through some of the points he makes and expand on them a bit. The first one is this; "have faith that you will get better at thinking and writing and that people will notice it, even if stingily and reluctantly, since you're not entitled to any attention" (252). So yes of course when you first start experimenting with your writing, chances are the writing will suck but that is where your belief in yourself comes in and since nobody owes you attention, it is best to focus on how your writing speaks to you and how you respond to your writing without worrying about external factors. Secondly, he advises that "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." (252) This gives the writer freedom to do whatever goes in her head but there is only one rule, it needs to make sense. If you yourself are not interested in what you have written, how do you think the next person will feel about? Thirdly, he says; "Don't be afraid to be as weird-meaning as PECULIARLY YOU-as possible." (252) That means you and just you, not what you think the reader wants, solely you. Fourthly, he says "Try to say it all. Be shameless." (252) Being shameless allows you to disregard what you think people will say about you. Lastly, he says, "Be as crazy and perverse as possible, be inspired to the point of madness, but don't be glib." (252) So there you have it, there is not a thing that should be stopping you.

Now that or at least I hope, we are comfortable to experiment with our baking, I trust I have created a safe space to remove the training wheels from this essay. From this point on, we will let go of referring to writing as baking and the world of our potential readers, the grumpy mother-in-law. We can also now very comfortably agree with Amina Cain in seeing it as right to not have to "think about accessibility or audience; some of [her] stories are accessible to some people, and some of them aren't." (Cain, 2015: 31) That cannot be controlled so it is best to not even think about it. Cain also states the fact that her writing wants to talk to her and that, I trust, is what our own

writing wants as well. All we have to do is shift our energy away from what we have no control over and move it to what we do.

As we experiment, we bring in concepts that are foreign into our writing. What I have realized though, is that we also tend to bring familiarity into the foreignness. What I mean can be better explained by Jackie Wang in *Aliens As A Form Of Life: Imagining The Avant-Garde* (2015). She states: "We strain to imagine foreignness, but we don't get very far from what we know." (323) She then goes on to asking why it is that everything she writes fails to capture the range of what is possible. As clichéd as it may sound, anything is possible. So as we write, perhaps it would be helpful to try to think of new ways to imagine foreign concepts and the easiest and perhaps more bizarre way of doing this is to think of a foreign concept without centring it on something else that is already known. The imagination is more complex than we let on and if given the opportunity, it can produce wonders. Wang, like myself, cannot exactly put her finger on it as to why our writing fails to drift too far off what is not foreign to us. She suspects that it is out of narcissism that we construct images in our likeness. While that may be true, I believe that it is simply narrow mindedness and an unwillingness to step out of one's comfort zone.

I particularly like what Wang does with her imagination when she tells us about this alien that she has created in her head. The alien, instead of falling asleep at the end of the day, dies and instead of waking up from its sleep the following day, it resurrects. Here is what blew my mind: the loved ones of the alien, do not know whether or not the death is the real death, meaning the final death. One can easily argue that such a concept is really not that 'deep' but sometimes in writing, it is simply just about to do something to the mind of the reader and when I read Wang's concept, I was left thinking about how crazy it really must be to die without actually knowing if you are dying your final death. In such circumstances, would the loved ones of the alien have to just look out for tell-tale signs of death and try to figure out if the ultimate death was near? The answer to that matters little here, what I am trying to actually bring to light

here is how this concept Wang has used as she was experimenting is successful. It is foreign, yet still accessible.

In Kathy Acker's article, *The Killers* (2004), she also encourages foreign concepts in that she expresses her total disregard of realism or at least what people perceive realism to be. Acker poses us with the question of why we should "bother with the lie of realism [or] why we should bother being so miserable, so reductive, when one could play". (17) I look at the words of Acker and ask myself the same question. Has this so called realism not run its course, why is it that we even have to write on what is considered realism. Imagine writing something that is far from whoever it is that even gets to decide what realism is and producing something that will linger in the minds of generations to come.

To elaborate further in the words of Acker, she says;

If I am going to tell you what the real is by mirroring it, by telling you a story that expresses reality, I'm attempting to tell you how things are. By letting you see through my own eyes, I give you my viewpoints, moral and political. In other words, realism is simply a control method. Realism does not want to negotiate, open into, even know, chaos or the body or death, because those who practice realism want to limit their readers' perceptions, want to limit perceptions to a centric-which in society is always a phallogentric-reality. 'I am the one', says the realistic writer. 'I'm telling you reality,' I have the same quarrel about narrowing anything to single identity...The desire to play, to make literary structures that play into and in unknown realms, those of chance and death and the lack of language, is the desire to live in a world that is open and dangerous, that is limitless. To play, then both in structure and in content, is to desire to live in wonder." (17-18)

Taking all that has been mentioned above into consideration, you as the writer then have to, if of course you are not trying to be grouped with the mediocre, create your own reality rather than confirming a reality that the reader has already been exposed to. When you allow yourself to bring play into your writing, not only are you allowing

your writing to talk to you but you are also expanding on what the reader had probably already boxed as being limited. Experimenting opens up a galaxy of what even your own mind never imagined and that is what every writer should at least try to tackle. While it is also true to say that a reader needs to approach a piece of writing with his or her own imagination, the writer also has the task to guide the reader into doing so. If I as the writer simply narrate a list of events to the reader, telling the reader what happens next, how it happened and tell the emotions the characters in those list of events felt, then I have done nothing but report an event to the reader. The reader has no motive to stop after having read what you wrote, if they even finished and ask questions such as: how did the characters feel? How did they look or even what happens next. What a tragedy. And that is why experimenting in your writing is so essential. Playing on the safe side challenges nobody.

How then do we avoid boxing the mind of the reader? How do we not bore the reader by merely stating a chain of events only to tell them that they have reached the end of the story? Well, one way of doing this is creating ambiguity in your writing. I cannot express enough how disappointing it is when you read something and the ending is clichéd or was predictable from a mile away. I for one even gag at the idea of happy endings in stories but perhaps that is my sinister side talking. Either way, your reader, has to constantly be on the edge, asking questions, filling in the gaps. That is what makes reading exciting. And just when the reader thinks they have their questions answered, do not hesitate to slap them with another plot twist. Play throughout your writing.

Tiff Holland (2014) states that “[she] embraced ambiguity in thinking and writing, and believe[s] that is one of the reasons [she] stayed away from traditional narrative and its demands for clarity for so long.” (5). One thing that I have picked up in writers and something I also struggled with, is that writers fail to allow the writing to do the talking when they try clarify what may seem unclear to the reader. That goes back to negotiating with the reader (Guest, op. cit.). Stay away from writing easy shit. If you are still worried about the reader not getting what it is that you are trying to say, then be

reminded that your writing will be accessible to those that can access it and if some cannot access it, it is okay. What is not okay however, is trying to do injustice your work by trying to clarify everything because you are so worried about the 'what ifs'. What if they do not quite understand what I am trying to say? What if they think my writing is incoherent? As long as it makes sense to you, let your writing take its course.

Holland also talks about a time she read about sculpting and she describes her experience as follows; "a sculptor can see the sculpture in a rock and simply chip away until the form emerges. I did not want the character or the story to be lost to the stone. I tried my best to chip away until both could emerge but nothing was lost" (9). I look at this analogy and think about how it can be applied into writing and simply I imagine the sculptor as the writer and if you sculpt away too much, what you have sculpted lacks ambiguity. If you do not chip away too much, making things quite evident, then the reader kind of gets an idea of what the sculpture is and enough space is left for ambiguity. I will give you two scenarios; you have just written a book and a group of people sit at a book club, gathered to discuss your book. "I saw that coming." One says. "Me too." Replies the other. "Zolile's character was quite flat" another adds. Then, the room goes into an awkward silence. Here is the second scenario, "Wait, I will go first, first of all, who even saw that coming?", "Did he actually die in the end or what?" "What? That is crazy, I did not even think of it that way!" "Who do you think was behind the murder?" "I suspect Lufuno" "Lufuno? No, it can't be, he is too innocent for that." The point is, there is clearly a distinction between the effects each book has had on the readers. The difference between the first and second writer is that the second writer did not care to spend time worrying about whether or not it was clear enough to the reader that an actual event took place or not or if the reader knew who the culprit was. The ambiguity in the piece is what adds that extra value to the writing. It therefore becomes more appreciated, in most instances anyway. I am not in any way encouraging writing something so vague that even you yourself as the writer fails to justify what you have written. I am encouraging evoking something in the reader. Your writing needs to serve its purpose to its full potential.

You may have picked up that earlier I had spoken about not negotiating with the reader and not worrying much about how your work will be perceived then later, I touched on evoking something in the reader and having the reader left with something to think about. It may sound a bit contradictory, however it is not. What it really means is just as you write, your writing needs to take priority over the reader, if you first do that rather than negotiating with the reader, then you are already helping not only your writing, but the reader's experience while reading as well. What I mean by prioritizing your writing over the reader is not writing each and every sentence thinking about if the reader will get it or if you sound clever enough or if you will be applauded. Simply write and write what makes sense to you.

Sometimes, I have found, writers end up being redundant in their craft because they get used to something that works and they stay comfortable with a certain style of writing or stick to writing towards a particular audience that has received their writing well. This is where growth ceases and where experimenting with your writing becomes stale. Every writer should shy away from that by all means. While there are people who tend to pigeonhole certain writers, writers need also to be careful not to pigeonhole themselves.

Taiye Selasi touches on this topic of pigeonholing in her article, *Stop Pigeonholing African Writers* (2019). On the topic of African writers for example, things do tend to get a little problematic. Selasi poses very important questions when she asks firstly who an African writer is. Is it a writer that writes content about or set in African or is it a writer that is of the African continent? Although too much importance should not be put on this, the question of who the writer is writing for also arises. Is he or she writing for Africans or is the work accessible to people from other parts of the world as well? I understand Selasi's concern in warning against grouping African writers are grouped together. She explains that "it is not [that she] lacks pride in the continent's literary tradition but rather that [she] is conscious of the west's tradition of essentialising African subjects." (47)

Grouping writers is dangerous in that once grouped, any hint of experimenting may upset the characteristics of what makes that group. While many have failed to define what an African writer is in literature as they debated on “what it should be: what it must say, what it must not say, who can write it, who should read it.” (47), what they have not thought of is why such questions are of relevance to begin with. These are the same questions that are the enemy of the avant garde. As soon as someone wants to pigeonhole a writer, in essence, that person is saying that your ideas are or should be limited. It is those people that need to be told where to get off. As a writer, you also first owe it to yourself not to pigeonhole yourself.

The act of pigeonholing can either be very compact where there is no question about it or very discreet whereby a writer has been pigeonholed but does not even realise it. Take Bettina Judd’s article *Writing About Race* (2015) for instance. The opening sentence says; “writing is attached to the body.” (266) Upon reading this opening statement, the first question I ask myself is, why does it have to be attached to anything? And so to find out why this is, I read on. Judd goes on to argue that she “do[es] not find any creative freedom in detaching [the mind from body and spirit] because they may constrict [her] writing - even [her] imagination.” (266) Though reluctant to continue reading, I do, and she ties what she writes about to her race, her gender and citizenship. While I do not contest any writer writing about any subject, what I do contest is justifying why you only write about a particular subject when there is so much to be written about. I do not see it being a matter of identity but rather imagination. I also find it puzzling when she says that she does not find creative freedom in detaching the mind from the body because for the fact that she needs one thing to be attached to the other already suggests that in order for her to think creatively she is bound to something. Taking that into consideration, I then ask myself if she leaves herself any space to experiment with her writing and if the answer is no because it interrupts her identity, then I too, in her words, think that is a *depressing thought*. What is also depressing is having to constantly keep trying to explain yourself to those that are trying to access your writing, Craig Santos Perez (2015) states that he “tries to write

poems that have multiple points of access". (257) This may be helpful but sometimes things just need to be left unexplained. Tough.

Having discussed all of the above, I turn back my attention to you sitting in that public library wondering if you will step on anybody's toes as you write or if you are not being too absurd in your ideas. I say go ahead, the world is already prepared to be offended by what they think is offensive before their minds have even grasped the concept of it yet. Give them the unimaginable, you owe it to yourself. Also to the writer sitting in that public library doubting herself, here is a little secret between you and I; I wrote this essay to myself as well. I have doubted and taken precautions for far too long and it is time we unleashed our writing potential!

Community in Writing Report

Earlier this year, Vangile Gantsho, introduced us to the COIL programme. To start off, I was really uncertain about what was expected of us in this programme that we would soon partake in and what the core aims of the programme were.

We were given a brief and the brief read as follows;

"Students from CUNY LaGuardia and students from RU will collaborate on developing a programme that feeds into the ENN 198.0946 Spring I 2021 and MA in Creative Writing 2021 courses respectively. Students will be immersed in collaborative and contextual reading of texts written by African Writers and will be expected to engage in the themes raised in these texts as part of the international exchange. They will use these texts as content and form models for their creative writing pieces. ENN 198 students will partner with the RU students (collaborative engagement) in small writing and feedback groups as part of the four-week unit cycle, culminating in a collaborative short film or chapbook. As part of their Reading/Writing in Community component, RU students – in three groups of three – will be expected to prepare and conduct poetry/prose workshops for

up to twenty-two LaGuardia students. Each workshop will be developed alongside an African-centred reading pack and will conclude with a peer-to-peer feedback group."

We then started off the programme with Stacy and Vangi, where they further explained to us about how the programme would run and we were also given details on how to compile our reading packs and what they needed to entail. I had a clearer picture of what was expected of us by the end of the first meeting and the next task at hand was to find group members to collaborate with. I partnered with Stoffel and Fortunate as my group members.

Our COIL meetings were held on Mondays and before our next meeting after the first, we had to have chosen our group members and be ready to present a course outline to our fellow students, Vangi and Stacy.

The first challenge we faced as a group was in that we were appreciative of different styles as far as literature is concerned. And so with our different preferences, we had to find some similarities or means to merge our interests into one topic that we would all be happy with presenting.

After deliberating on the topic, we finally decided to present under the topic, Writing Under Harsh Conditions brings stylistic innovations. We presented our course outline as follows;

This group will work on reading material of novel excerpts, short stories, and poems from Southern Africa. The theme of the workshop is titled "Writing under Harsh Conditions brings Stylistic Innovations". This theme will focus on writers during the oppressive regime of Apartheid South Africa. Therefore students will be presented with a background of Apartheid and its laws which hindered free artistic expression which writers who wanted their voices to be heard had to negotiate within their own writing.

The Reading Material will have an emphasis on South African novel excerpts, short stories and poetry from the 1950s to the 1980s. During this time, there was a direct

relationship between Journalism and Literature. Most of these writers from this era worked for magazines such as the Drum magazine and Staffrider literary magazine and published works in the Classic magazine as well. These magazines were used for collecting stories that exposed the socio-economic and political conditions of Apartheid South Africa.

After having presented this course outline, along with our other classmates, we were selected to present first. And though it seemed like a daunting task, we took it up with courage and willing hearts. As a group consisting of myself and Stoffel who had previously taught professionally and Fortunate who is looking into teaching in the future, we were very excited to be given this platform.

During the time we were given to prepare, we faced further challenges which I believe is very common where group work is concerned. The biggest scare was by far having the PowerPoint file with our entire presentation get corrupted on the morning we were supposed to present. Fortunately, we were able to recompile the presentation and got to the present in time. Our presentation went smoother than expected and we also managed to finish presenting within the time frame that we had been given.

The following week, we had the next presentation by Sibongakonke Mama, Gareiyah Fredericks and Cornelia Cunningham and they presented to us under the topic *Quiet Stillnes Silence*. The one thing that I felt really stood out about their presentation was in how they so effectively included everyone to be part of their discussion. This for me, really worked because it not only puts one at ease but it also offers a space where people are free to offer their thoughts and get clarity of whether or not they are on the right track as far as understanding of the subject matter goes. The other thing that I felt the group really well and can be commended on was their way of making use of images as a writing prompt. I felt that was an interesting and different way to spark creativity.

Finally, we had a presentation from Xolani Mahe and Thobeka Kenene. Their presentation was under the topic *Surrealism*. This topic for me was interesting because it

demands creativity and when that happens, there is room for better, more enhanced writing to be produced.

For each presentation that was offered in this COIL programme was a feedback session where students both from the MACW course and LaGuardia got to share what they had written for that particular week's assignment.

The first feedback session was very rushed due to a lack of time and unfortunately not everyone was able to be given the chance to read their assignments. The second and third feedback sessions went much better than the first and there was more engagement amongst the students and teachers in the feedback sessions.

I also felt that it was very good that amongst the three teachers that took part in the course, they rotated themselves between the feedback groups. This gave way for the opportunity to get different opinions rather than one.

The COIL programme was finally concluded and we were later given the opportunity to meet and engage with one another on a less formal note which was a fun and light way to conclude the programme.

I believe that the idea behind having this programme introduced to us as part of our MACW course was so that it brings out a positive outcome and that it adds value to us as writers seeking to improve our craft and I can without a doubt say that I found the COIL programme very valuable.

The COIL Writing in Community programme was unique and exciting in that it was not just a matter of the Rhodes University MACW students meeting the CUNY LaGuardia and being given seminars at the same time by either of our lecturers then being sent off to write an assignment on it. The programme really switched things up given us the MACW students the chance to go and do research of our own before presenting it to other students. This gives way for students to be able to openly talk and write about their own preferences in literature and engage with other writers.

Another element of the COIL Writing in Community programme that I felt worked really well was that in as much as being given the choice in topic we would present, we were specifically asked to gather our reading packs from texts that had been written by African writers.

Considering the fact that this was a multicultural collaboration, more so African students presenting to American students, it was great to be able to educate them about writing written by Africans. I remember after my group mates and I had completed our presentation, one the LaGaurdia students mentioning that they had never heard of apartheid before. With that said, it really came to show that the programme was more than just about exercising our writing, there was a lot of educational value to it as well.

I feel every student that took part in this programme left having learned something, whether it was something that was brought to knowledge through the seminars or perhaps something they were offered as feedback in ways to improve their writing.

All in all, one cannot take away from the fact that the reason that this programme was such a success was due to how everyone involved really took what was expected of them very seriously and played their part. It was exciting and brought fulfillment. I think such collaborations should definitely be organized more and have people from different parts of the world educate each other in learning about their cultures and of course just have writers sharing and engaging with other writers. It seems difficult on paper but once done it really is a wholesome experience and one I was honoured to be a part of. Much gratitude needs to be extended to the organizers who put in the hard work of making this programme a success.

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Literature Review

When asked the question "what makes a good book review", one has to consider many factors. According to Graham Williamson, "a good review should be informative, engaging and opinionated. It should be informative, in that it tells readers what the book is about. The readers will want to know what the book is about, so include some information on what the chapters and/or sections contain, as well as the basic structure of the book. The job of the reviewer is to provide a summary of the subject matter." (Williamson: 2005).

I have specifically chosen to quote Williamson on his definition of what makes a good book review because I am in agreement with the definition he provides. However, there is one thing I feel is very imperative to add in this definition. While a good book review should definitely be informative on what the book is about, it should not give away too much to a potential reader of the book being discussed. In the following essay I will discuss three book reviews. The books discussed in the review all share a common genre; thriller.

Some of these book reviews fall into the above mentioned definition and others do not. I will also be discussing how I feel those that do not quite fit into this definition can be improved. The books reviews that I will be writing on are on the book *Body In The Woods* written by Sarah Lotz, reviewed by Allen Stroud, *Death in her Hands* written by Ottessa Moshfegh, reviewed by Erin Lewenauer and *Children of Chicago* written by Cynthia Pelayo, reviewed by Desiree Zamorano.

Allen Stroud writes a very good and to the point book review. He successfully encapsulates the contents of the book while offering his opinion. The book review is informative in that it captures what the book is about. In short, Stroud checks all the boxes in meeting the requirements as far as the criteria of writing a good book review goes. His review is also not all over the place where he goes around in circles about one thing then he jumps to something completely unrelated to what he was discussing.

In his review of *Body in the Woods*, Stroud carefully details a lot of information about the book without spoiling it for the potential reader. Stroud writes;

Lotz makes use of flashback to establish the relationship between Dean and Claire. We learn about the friendship between their sons, the breakup of Dean's marriage and the ways in which Claire has found herself owing him a favour or three. There is nothing supernatural about this, although the use of Claire's garden, that continuously gets overrun by mould and decay as 'something rotten in the state of Denmark', is quite magical as an allegory to the secrets that are eating away at Claire's soul. (Stroud, 2017)

In the above quoted excerpt of Stroud's review one is told about a complex friendship between two people, it is also brought to light that Claire owes Dean favours. Stroud does not reveal how or why this happened. He leaves this for the potential reader of the book to find out on his or her own. There is also mystery that Stroud leaves so the story is definitely not just retold.

Another great technique that Stroud uses in his book review is the use of hypothetical questions. "Who is the dead person? How did they end up that way? Dean holds the answers and further conversations reveal a web of lies and deceit." (Stroud) This use of hypothetical questions really makes one want to uncover the answers and although Stroud mentions that there is a web of lies that later get revealed, he does not mention how they are revealed or what they are about.

The next book review is written by Erin Lewenauer. Lewenauer reviews Ottessa Moshfegh's *Death in her Hands*. Lewenauer introduces the setting of the book very nicely. She mentions how the plot of the novel begins and gives a little background about the protagonist of the novel. When placed against Williamson's criteria of what makes a good book review, Lewenauer does very well. Her review on *Death in her Hands* is informative, engaging and opinionated. After briefly introducing us to the protagonist, Lewenauer informs us about the note that the protagonist, Vesta Gul has found. The letter she finds states; "*Her name was Magda. Nobody will ever know who killed her. It wasn't me. Here is her dead body.*" "*But there was no body. No bloodstain,*" Vesta observes; "*No tangle of hair caught on the coarse fallen branches, no red wool scarf damp with morning dew festooned across the bushes.*" (Lewenauer, 2020).

From the letter Lewenauer tells us Vesta has found, there is already enough for a story to unravel, we have enough information to go on and we also have questions that arise regarding this letter. Still without giving away too much information, Lewenauer speaks about what happens next in the story. We are given information about how Vesta reacts to the letter and what she is going to do about. It is normal for readers to wonder if Vesta could not just go to the police and report this letter and with this,

Lewenauer informs us that Vesta chooses not to take that route because investigating what happened on her own gives her a sense of purpose in life. At the end of her book review, Lewenauer makes sure to offer her opinion to the potential reader of the book. She describes the book as “eerie, elaborate, absurd, and profound.” She does not leave it at that when offering her opinion, she also mentions that the readers will never tire as they read the book.

One observation however, that I made on Lewenauer’s review is that she does not necessarily give out too much information so that she is ruining the book for the potential reader, but she offers information that I feel is not necessary or could just be completely left out and the book review would still be just fine without it. After mentioning that Vesta has found this letter and that she wants to further investigate it, Lewenauer says the following; “After musing on the possibilities, Vesta moves on to Google searches at the local library.” I feel this sentence from Lewenauer’s book review is an addition of detail that does not do much for her review. Yes, we know that Vesta has taken the decision to further investigate the note that she has found but I do not think that Lewenauer had to go as far as mentioning that Vesta moved onto Google searches at the local library. The potential reader can still be informed and well knowing of the fact that Vesta wants to further pursue the investigation of this mysterious death without details of where and how Vesta is investigating. It does not add any value to the review.

Other than this, I think Lewenauer did a commendable job with this book review. As a person who had initially shown interest in *Death in her Hands*, I would certainly be convinced to find out on my own how the mystery and investigation ongoing in the book turns out.

The last book review I will be discussing is written by Desiree Zamorano. Zamorano reviews *The Children of Chicago* by Cynthia Pelayo. Again, I will offer a judgement on the quality of this book review against the criteria Williamson lends us. It is true to say that Zamorano’s review is engaging. Zamorano quotes dialogue from the book to make

her review engaging. Zamorano quotes; “Her lips, once red, twisted up in rage, and when her mouth opened from it erupted black and brackish water. [...] She coughed and for a moment she could smell the rotten, stagnant water.” (Zamorano, 2021) I like that Zamorano quoted this because one gets the sense and feel of the book without giving away too much. Zamorano also offers a detailed review and gives her opinion at the end of the review stating that this is an utterly compulsive read. And based on what she previously wrote about the book, one does get the sense that the read is compulsive.

I do however have a number of points of reference to go to when critiquing this book review. Again, while it is good to offer an informative review, I felt that this review was too informative. I did not feel that Zamorano gave the book away by giving the potential reader of the book spoilers but when I was finished reading the review, I did not feel the urge to read the book. This was caused by the fact that there was just so much detail given. In one paragraph for example, Zamorano writes;

After a second murder, Lauren realizes she is hunting for a killer that reenacted what happened to her own sister: missing, abducted, later found murdered in a body of water. She feels her past is haunting her; she feels deep dread that buried with her memories there is a payment due. Despite outreach from her department and partner, Lauren snappishly insists she can find the murderer, and perhaps the clues that will lead back to the killer of her own sister. (Zamorano)

The above quoted paragraph has too much detail and it feels as though the story is just being retold. There is one event coming in after the other and it brings myself to the question of whether we are just being given a detailed summary of the book or a review. Yes, Williamson does in his definition of what makes a good book review mention that there should be a summary of the subject matter but this one comes off more as retelling and too much detailing.

Zamorano continues to give too much detail even in the paragraphs that follow, in one sentence she writes; “We waver between concern, admiration, and horror as we trace Lauren’s movements: as she befriends Jordan, a key witness, by posing as a literacy

coach; as she threatens violence against a young suspect.” (Zamorano) Again, this is a retelling of events.

The other thing that Zamorano does that takes away, I feel from her review is talk about the author too much. It is not a bad thing to talk about the author but one thing I feel Zamorano did was talk too much about the author of the book forgetting that a book review should be about the book and not the author.

Taking into consideration the three book reviews discussed above, one should be able to differentiate between what it is that makes a book review great and they should also be mindful of the things that take away from the quality of writing a great book review.

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Book Reviews

Book Review 1

One Hundred Days of Rain is a debut book written by Carellin Brooks, a Rhodes scholar. The prose poetry novel is set in Vancouver, Canada, a city well known for its heavy rainfall. The novel falls under the psychological fiction genre. According to Bernad Paris, psychology helps us to talk about what the novelist knows, but fiction helps us to know what the psychologist is talking about. The psychological approach employed by Paris helps the reader not only to grasp the intricacies of mimetic characterization, but also to make sense of thematic inconsistencies which occur in some of the books under consideration. For students of human behavior as well as students of literature, the

great figures of realistic fiction provide a rich source of empathic understanding and psychological insight.” (Paris: 2010). Through the way that Brooks (2015) depicts her characters in *One Hundred Days of Rain*, one is able to see how she has successfully apply the fundamental elements of this genre.

The novel opens with the protagonist being jailed for having allegedly acted violently towards her partner, we soon learn about her struggle of raising her son as well as her relationship with the father of her child. On top of all that, she has to deal with her marriage that has fallen apart.

The presence of the rain theme in the book is a very prevalent one and it is presented in both a metaphoric and literal sense. Metaphorically, it refers to the unnamed narrators struggles throughout the novel. In my reading of the novel, the constant rain, in the literal sense throughout the novel makes subtle commentary to certain issues faced in society. The character Brooks portrays in the novel is also physically affected by the rain as far as the social class that she is in. She faces the consequences of the rain throughout the novel and this remains constant.

Like the rain in the book, Brooks remains consistent in finding different and very creative ways of describing rain in her writing. Of course, from one reader to the other, her descriptions of the rain could be interpreted in different ways; some of them being her metaphorical reference of rain as stress, grief, heartbreak and interpersonal conflicts.

The stress, grief, heartbreak and interpersonal conflicts that ultimately lead to divorce in this novel touch on the traditional conflicts that one would find in fiction. We get to see the narrator battling domestic fights and even ending up in court as a result. However, the traditional touch to the novel does not make it less unique as it allows the reader into the insights of new ways of thinking.

The book successfully delivers the moral of the story as we follow a woman who has probably been hit so much by the difficulties that life comes with that one would not be surprised if she gave up. But instead of doing so, she endures through her difficulties

while bearing in mind that she also has a son to take care of. The book takes the reader through an emotional rollercoaster where so much turmoil comes to the protagonist in a short space of time.

It was also interesting and noteworthy that Brooks writes her novel in ninety nine chapters, despite the fact that the book is entitled *One Hundred Days of Rain*. The fact that she has intentionally ended the book in the ninety-ninth chapter is indicative that perhaps after all that the narrator has gone through in her life, she is finally at a point where she can take steps towards moving on, it makes the reader wonder what happens on the one hundredth day/ one hundredth chapter; especially considering that we have gone through this long journey of an endless ending of her marriage. It is, in my opinion a genius touch for Brooks to leave it to the reader to decide what happens on the last day.

All in all, Carellin Brooks' *One Hundred Day of Rain* is a great novel in my opinion, Brooks' very successfully leaves a powerful message to her readers about life challenges and enduring.

Book Review 2

The #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall protests of 2015 and 2016 were significant moments in post-apartheid South Africa as they highlighted the issue of transformation and change (or lack thereof) in post-apartheid South African universities. The Fallists (as they have been dubbed) are students who protested against the exclusive practices of universities and the terrible effects that these have on mostly black students. These protests highlighted the struggles and trauma that poor black students encounter in many universities and how they receive little to no financial support from these institutions and from the government, which results in many students being excluded or dropping out. Over a decade before these historic and necessary protests, Niq Mhlongo provides readers an insider's view into the struggles that black students face in the unwelcoming and exclusive ivory towers of post-apartheid South Africa. In his debut novel aptly entitled *Dog Eat Dog*, published in 2004 and set in 1994, Mhlongo

represents what poor black students encounter in historically white institutions of higher education. It is the dawn of democracy and Mhlongo's protagonist Dingz is a first year student at Wits University. As a first-generation student, which means he is the first in his family to enrol at a university, Dingz is very excited to escape the terrible living conditions in Soweto and live the "cheese life" in Braamfontein where Wits is situated. He hopes that a university qualification will help him get a job and free his family from poverty, a dream that seems possible in the transitional year in which the novel is set.

However, the novel opens with a rejection letter (his third one in a short space of time) from the bursary committee. Although Dingz is clearly from an impoverished family and background, he still does not meet the funding criteria. This is just one way in which the university, as portrayed in the novel, excludes black students. After fighting to speak to her, Dingz manages to convince the bursary chairperson to grant him the bursary and he does this by lying, a tool he successfully employs throughout the novel. Lies and duplicity play a major role in the protagonist's survival in university, which is represented as a microcosm of the dog eat dog world that defines post-apartheid South Africa.

After getting the bursary, he lives comfortably in a Braamfontein student residence named YMCA, which acts as a stark contrast to the dehumanising poverty that he experiences in Soweto. While Dingz considers university as an escape from poverty, he does not fully apply himself to his studies; he is, at times, irresponsible and often neglects his studies in favour of having a good time. The novel is written in a humorous tone and follows Dingz as he tries to navigate life as a first-generation student in these two contrasting settings of Soweto and Braamfontein.

However, beyond the humour, the novel contains serious undertones and explores the ways in which universities in post-apartheid South Africa are lacking in transformation and are therefore unaccommodating spaces for poor black students because of

expensive fees and structural racism, which remain pervasive even after apartheid has been abolished.

The fact that Dingz has to lie to the bursary administrator about his poverty suggests that the university is still an exclusive space that is reserved for those who can afford it. Dingz is also a product of Bantu Education, an unequal education system which does not adequately prepare him for university. All these factors make it difficult for Dingz to succeed in this alienating space.

Because the novel is set in 1994, it also looks at the ways in which the newly elected government has failed to live up to the promises that it made to many impoverished black people. Through the character of Dingz, Mhlongo shows the disappointment felt by many black students who were promised better access to higher education and financial assistance by the new government, who, as the novel suggests, has failed to live up to them as not all deserving students get to benefit from these promises.

The novel is written in the first person and the reader therefore experiences the narrative world through Dingz's eyes. Dingz is very observant of the ways in which the new South Africa operates and after recognising that lies and duplicity are effective tools of survival, he uses them to his advantage and also to maintain his space in the university. Central to the novel is Dingz's struggle to get an aegrotat. Upon realising that he has not properly prepared for an exam, he feigns a blackout and has to get an aegrotat. Unfortunately he cannot afford to get one from a doctor, so he has to lie and cheat his way into getting it. Many are tricked in the process, but the protagonist's successfully attains the aegrotat. His success opens up many questions about corruption and lies in the democratic South Africa.

Moreover, Dingz and other students experience racial discrimination and a lack of financial support from the university, which hinders a smooth experience in this alienating environment. Thus, *Dog Eat Dog* also explores the disappointment and disillusionment experienced by black students who were promised equal access to

universities and financial support by the post-apartheid government. The themes that are found in the novel give readers an idea of the complex nature of post-apartheid South Africa and also an understanding of the many student grievances in the post-apartheid university, many which echo those shared by Fallists in 2015 and 2016.

Book Review 3

Enlightenment in the decay: A review of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) is a classic novel that contains a powerful critique of post-Independence Ghana. It explores the disappointment that fills the air when the new government (who promise to bring about change and a better life for all) fails to live up to their promises, but instead lead with corruption and end up mimicking the Europeans that they fought in order to gain independence. The novel explores themes of corruption, the lasting effects of colonialism and the failures of human rule. In a more philosophical reading, it asks questions about the value of integrity in times of ethical decay. Even though it is set in Ghana, this novel proves to be an important classic African text as the themes that it explores are not unique to the country in which it is set, but it can be applied to many African countries that faced similar struggles after their individual independence.

The novel features an unnamed protagonist, who is referred to as "the man", who works as a railway clerk, a low-income job that is not enough to satisfy his family's needs. He is one of many impoverished people who have to work hard daily, with little financial compensation. The working class, who are referred to as "walking corpse[s]" (1968:2), are portrayed as being powerless and depressed. The novel highlights the struggles of the impoverished, whose hope and faith in the post-Independence government has faded and there seems to be no escape from their precarity in a corrupt-filled Ghana where hard work does not seem to pay off.

The opening scene is very important as it paints a picture of the terrible conditions of Ghana. The bus that the protagonist takes to get to work every day is described as having an “unending rattle” (1968:6), an image which highlights the oldness and inadequacy of the bus. The bus seems to be symbolic of everything around him. As he steps out, he is greeted by polluted streets and decaying buildings, including the one in which he works. The protagonist is surrounded by decay and vile smells and the overemphasis of this decay throughout the novel highlights the failure of the reigning government and the corruption with which they deal, which is a form of moral decay.

The new government, which is made up of the “sons of the nation” (11) is marred with corruption, which leaves working class citizens like the narrator stuck in a state of impasse, with dwindling faith in the government. When they started ruling after the independence, the politicians made a lot of promises to the citizens, many of which had not been fulfilled and these citizens are filled with discontent and disappointment. The novel explores this disappointment through its visceral imagery of containment and physical decay and vile smells that fill the air.

The word “decay” is reiterated throughout the novel and it seems fitting considering the conditions that are described. There is rotteness everywhere, from the banisters in the office in which the man works to the bottom of his bathroom door and it seems there is nothing that can be done about the rot that eats away at everything. The man even notes that no amount of polish was enough to cover the rot of the banisters. The only solution, it seems, is to live through this rot, as uncomfortable as it is. These descriptions of rot and decay are powerful because they also work at a figurative level and read like an allegory of the moral rotteness of these corrupt politicians. No matter how they may try to conceal the rot, there is not enough linguistic polish that can conceal it, it is pervasive and cannot be hidden. However, the novel also shows that the political corruption persists and even when the people try to overthrow the government, there is no complete sense of relief as there is no guarantee that those that come after will not continue to make personal gains.

The corruption from the heads of state spreads into the whole country and many view it as an acceptable way of life. The protagonist refuses to participate in the corruption and his decision is met with contempt from those who are corrupt and those who are close to him, including his wife who criticises him for not accepting a bribe at work. The hostility he receives makes him ponder the value of integrity in a country that is morally decaying. His wife and her mother, his mother-in-law, believe that corruption is the best way to escape the poverty and the lack that plagues them. In fact, they respect and admire those who thrive because of their shady dealings. The man's mother-in-law also sees him as useless in comparison to his former classmate, who is now a minister and who convinces the man's wife and her mother to sign a corrupt deal, which they do without hesitation.

The other issue explored is the mark of colonialism that continues to stain Africa and how it results in stagnation and impasse. The novel is critical of the politicians insistence to mimic the Europeans that colonialised them, and from whom they independent. The corrupt politicians spoke and dressed like Europeans and even gave their children English names. The man's former classmate, Minister Koomson and his wife Estella Koomson exemplify this obsession with Eurocentric standards. When they visit the man's home, Estella, who was wearing a wig and who, according to the narrator, acted like a white woman, is very vocal about her distaste of the selected drinks that were served. She states that "the only good drinks are European drinks. These make you ill" (155). Here she is referring to the local beer that was served. Beyond this example, there are many others that show how politicians mimic and value European standards more than their own Ghanaian culture and values. The novel's exploration of this theme suggests that the obsession with these Western methods can be linked to the decay in the government. For the citizens who suffer and live in terrible conditions because of the corruption, there is not much change in the country in comparison to the time before independence, when they suffered oppression from the white colonizers. This consistency suggests that the corrupt politicians are acting in a similar way to those who oppressed them; the oppressed become the oppressors.

A prominent figure in the man's life is a man named Teacher, who has chosen to live a life of solitude. He experienced the independence of Ghana and felt the hope that came with the major change. He also experienced the rapid decline of this hope and the disappointment that surrounded (and still continues to surround) it. In a chapter that contains his musings about the past and the present, the Teacher recounts the great hope that surrounded Ghana in the lead up to independence and the corruption that decayed and eroded these great expectations. He does not have faith that Ghana will become better and he, unlike many in his generation, chose to maintain integrity in the midst of many who chose corruption. The path he took, of integrity and honesty, has left him very lonely and without loved ones. The man models what it means to remain with integrity in a decaying world and he realises that, just as it is for his Teacher, he also faces a deep loneliness. It is a lonely path, but it is worth it. In the end, the man's integrity leaves him clean in a decayed country. However, it is this wisdom that he learns from his Teacher that makes him more accepting of the big changes that occur in Ghana as the novel reaches its end.

With many African countries, including our own, still plagued by corruption, greed and the overpowering effects of colonialism, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is a prescient text that feels current and relevant even over fifty years after it was published. It requires us to ponder, like the man does, whether we will follow the path of corruption that is taken by many (as the novel suggests) or the road less travelled, the lonely road, of integrity. We have the power to be the beautiful ones, our integrity in times of decay will determine this.

Book Review 4

"I want to be torn apart by everything": Truth and healing in Terese Marie Mailhot's memoir *Heart Berries*

In her 2003 essay entitled "Love, Actually" author Zadie Smith writes about the ethical value of literature and the affective possibilities that arise when we read attentively. She argues that "when we read with fine attention, we find ourselves caring about people

who are various, muddled, uncertain and not quite like us (and this is good)” (2003:np). While she speaks about fiction, this can be applied to any form of text and I agree wholeheartedly with her argument. A fine attention to any text requires one to read carefully and appreciate the complexity that is presented. In other words, attentive reading requires empathy from the reader. I found myself empathising a lot as I read Terese Marie Mailhot’s memoir entitled *Heart Berries*. As a literary student, I mainly read works of fiction and this memoir was my first intimation of the genre of life writing, and what a wonderful and emotionally charged experience it was.

This memoir requires one thing from the reader, and that is empathy. Reading Mailhot’s story does not leave one close, it asks you to be open, open to listening to the childhood trauma that spills over into her adulthood, which strains her relationship with herself and others. Reading this memoir requires the reader to understand that she is not just a lovelorn woman who is obsessed with a man, who she has an affair with, an affair which unravels her and leaves her at his mercy, time and again. The relationship breaks her, degrades her and leaves her feeling worthless, but she goes back. It is not up to the reader to judge her, but all we can do is listen and be attentive. In the memoir, she addresses Casey, the man with which she had an affair, which led to a tumultuous relationship and finally ends in marriage.

While the memoir is written in a poetic and lyrical style, it is far from being fiction. Instead of resorting to fiction and hiding behind characters, Terese Marie Mailhot resorts to life writing as a method to present her story. She does not rely on metaphor to represent her childhood trauma, her failed marriage with her first husband (who she married when she was a teenager) and her present struggles with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, an eating disorder and bipolar II. She receives these diagnoses at a behavioural health service where she starts writing the memoir. The writing is very descriptive and she gives great detail of her childhood that was filled with neglect and the abuse and suffering she felt in her first marriage. These descriptions give us some understanding of the diagnoses and her behaviour throughout her narrative.

The author's vulnerability permeates throughout the memoir, and it reads like a well-written story, one that reflects human experience and thought. The story is muddled, but in its muddle, there are plentiful lessons (or things that are relatable) for the attentive reader. She does not attempt to provide a linear narrative, because memory is not a straight line. She moves back and forth between the past and the present in a way that might be confusing for an inattentive reader. I believe that this is intentional and works as a way for her to understand the impact that her traumatic past has on the present.

As a native Indian woman, she recounts with great detail and vulnerability how worthless she felt in her relationship with Casey (who is a white man), yet she was dependent on him.

This dependence is reflected in the narrative style that she employs in most of the text. She uses the second-person narrative and addresses Casey throughout. While this might be read by others as the author's obsession with this man, it can, on the other hand, be read as a series of letters from the author to the man that she loves deeply. In the letters, she does not declare her undying love for him throughout, but she uses them to understand their relationship and possibly understand why she loves him so much. It is this vulnerability to share these letters to him (and readers of the memoir) that makes the memoir special.

Beyond sharing her feelings with Casey (and the reader), the memoir is also deeply reflective. With every mention of the tumultuous relationship she has with Casey, she goes back to the haunting memories of her neglectful mother and the abuse and lovelessness she endured in her first marriage when she was a teenager (and losing her son in a custody battle). As the book progresses, she recounts details of her therapy sessions and in these sessions, she is challenged to think about how her past affects her present and as we, the readers, follow, it is clear that in order for her to find healing she has to reconcile with her inner child and address issues that she struggles to discuss.

The memoir also reads like a reflective response to her therapy sessions. In the beginning of the memoir, she appears to be very self-loathing and is haunted by her past. This makes it difficult for her to share and own her story, she constantly refers to how her story was maltreated. As the memoir continues, and she starts seeking psychological help, she rapidly comes into her own and takes ownership of her story. She becomes increasingly self-aware and confident in her voice. In chapter 9, there is a change in narrative voice: she moves from the second-person address that occupies the preceding chapters and now begins to speak in first-person. Significantly, it is in this chapter that she faces, with the help of her therapist, a traumatic moment from her childhood head on. When she does this, she is able to come into a place of acceptance and healing. It is not an easy chapter to read because of the revelation of her trauma, but it captures the power that comes from facing the truth that you have concealed and the healing that is a result thereof. The healing she receives opens her heart and makes her develop more empathy for her mother and also forgive her for the neglect she suffered at her hand. She is also able to mend her relationship with her husband, Casey. Most importantly, she learns to love herself and feel worthy, something that she struggles with throughout her narrative. In the memoir, truth is presented as the antidote or the remedy for the childhood traumas that result in broken relationships and a distorted sense of self.

This memoir is very important because of its focus on and encouragement of therapy as a method to healing the troubled self. As Mailhoit learns, reconciling with her inner child and learning to show her the love that she did not receive and also removing the blame she placed on her is the key to a freedom that she deserves. Although coming to terms with the dark horrors of the past is scary and leaves her broken, she appreciates the relief that it brings. She is no longer afraid of the pain and she is ready to face it in her own, healthy way. She makes a brave statement and says that she wants “to be torn apart by everything” (125) and it is this vulnerability that makes her a braver and more confident person even after all the struggles that she has had to endure. These words are a true marker of the resistance and strength of the human spirit.

This memoir made me think about the power of narrative and how reading other people's stories, in whatever form, can make us feel empathy towards them. It also crystallised in my mind that linear narratives are not the only route to understanding, but it is in the muddle of our minds and the muddle of the narrative that shapes them that we can also find understanding. While I may not know the author personally, my attentiveness and my patience to follow through the many strands that impacted her life made me more empathetic to her and to those who suffer from childhood traumas which spill into their adulthood. The psychological depth of the memoir makes it a recommended text for all kinds of readers.

Reader Report Response

During the Master's in Creative Writing course, we were constantly afforded the opportunity to write on a weekly basis and receive feedback from our fellow colleagues. This proved to play a major role in my learning curve as a writer throughout the year. I am grateful for the feedback and both positive and constructive feedback I received. Receiving feedback meant getting to realize mistakes or area of improvement that you did not see in your own writing and for me, more times than often, as I was reading through the feedback notes I had written, I would find pleasure in taking part in bettering my work.

In this essay, I will discuss the following as part of my observations as far as receiving feedback went; the impact positive feedback had on me as a writer, how I handled the not so positive feedback and lastly, how the feedback both good and bad helped me grow as a writer.

To start off with, I will talk about receiving positive feedback. As a writer with still so much to learn, I have always been skeptical about what I choose to write about and how I write it. Prior to starting the Master's in Creative Writing course, I was and to an extent am still burdened by questions of how my writing will be received. Am I making sense? Am I getting my point across effectively? Does the reader remain captivated? Am I taking too long to get to the point? These have been a few of the questions that I would constantly ask myself.

So when we had our weekly feedback sessions, I would pay careful attention to what my classmates and lectures felt was working in writing. Though of course, positive feedback is flattering, I was particularly interested in highlighting what worked so that I would continue doing it. In talking about what I felt worked in my writing, the positive feedback I received was normally in areas I expected to receive it in. Another thing that I had to learn was that receiving positive feedback in certain areas did not necessarily mean that there was no space for improvement in the writing. When the weekend came and it was time to revise the assignment that had been handed in earlier in the week, I reread what I submitted and looked for ways in which I could even better improve what I had written. For instance, at times, there were pieces that I had written that my colleagues had asked me to expand on as they wanted to find out more on what happens next. At times I would expand on the stories that I had written while at other times I would leave the story as is.

At this point, I would like to draw on Linh Dinh's advice on writing (2010). I will go through some of the points he makes and expand on them a bit. The first one is this; "have faith that you will get better at thinking and writing and that people will notice it, even if stingily and reluctantly, since you're not entitled to any attention" (252). So yes of course when you first start experimenting with your writing, chances are the writing will suck but that is where your belief in yourself comes in and since nobody owes you attention, it is best to focus on how your writing speaks to you and how you respond to your writing without worrying about external factors. Secondly, he advises that "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." (252) This gives the writer freedom to do whatever goes in her head but there is only one rule, it needs to make sense. If you yourself are not interested in what you have written, how do you think the next person will feel about? Thirdly, he says; "Don't be afraid to be as weird-meaning as PECULIARLY YOU-as possible." (252) That means you and just you, not what you think the reader wants, solely you. Fourthly, he says "Try to say it all. Be shameless." (252) Being shameless allows you to disregard what you think people will say about you. Lastly, he says, "Be as crazy and perverse as possible, be inspired to the point of madness, but don't be glib." (252) So there you have it, there is not a thing that should be stopping you. With the above mentioned being said, I

learned not to be so hard on myself with regards to how my writing would be received. The writing as I believe, will speak to those it needs to speak to and as a writer, one needs to make peace with the fact that not everyone will receive your work the way you intended or hoped for.

As far as handling the less positive feedback over the course of the year, I found myself making changes to my writing according to every piece of feedback that I received. Simply put, I had a 'they probably know what is best' belief or I took it as a different perspective that would make my writing more appreciate if implemented. And with that, I would just add in every input I received in editing the writing. It was only later in the year that I started questioning my editing process more. As Brian Moeran (2011:3) argues about the editorial moments we have as writers he states that, these moments involve editing of both the self and others. As anthropologists, we are aware that selfediting starts when selecting the kind of research we want to do, where we want to do it, and how to go about doing it. Fieldwork is one long series of editorial moments, as we make choices about what is and is not relevant to our observations, participation and communication. Who do we speak to, and whom do we ignore? What's the best way to broach a tricky issue like money? What questions are better left unasked? What do we, and what do we not, record? Do we write more than one 'record': a 'subjective' diary, for example, as well as 'objective' field notes? How much do we consign to memory? How much to the tape recorder or video camera? And when we start to analyse all we've learned, we make more editorial decisions. How are we going to organize our material and structure our results? What sort of theoretical frame should we use? How much detail should we include? What sort of style should we adopt? Who, if anyone, is going to be our audience? (2011)

These questions are amongst the ones that I was asking myself when I was editing my work. When focusing on implementing what has been learned and making editorial decisions based off that, I recall a time we were tasked to reread a piece of writing and find a way to write it in a simpler way. I remember finding so many parts that I either edited out or found a way to write in a much simpler way. Not only was this task fun to do but it also made me realize that writing can be just as impactful even when written simply.

After having read my reader report, part of what I had to edit was the tenses I had used as they were not corresponding. This is one of the things that I had not picked up in my own writing and I was grateful for having had someone read my work and find these mistakes. Sometimes when editing your own work you do not pick up on things that someone else would.

As a writer, one should always expect both negative and positive feedback and use both of them to grow as a writer; this is one of the places where learning curves come in and I appreciated both sides when it came to receiving feedback. Somehow I have learned to take both the good and bad and turn them both into something I can use as a point of growth and I can say that I have been able to grasp that both during the coursework and as I was I was busy working on my thesis.

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CHAOS

-a foreign fragrance lingered in the air. her lover lay on the marble floor, his guts rearranged by a broken bottle. frantically looking for the basement keys. a quick wipe of a bead of sweat. a glance at the body, then another at the wine glass that sat on their kitchen counter with a lipstick stain of a colour she did not recognize.

the calm before the storm

- I don't appreciate your tone!
- There is no storm sweetheart.
- Not anymore there isn't.

Shifting Perspectives

When asked to present both sides of the story, the first rule is never to be biased: tell the truth and the whole truth, refrain from protecting one or the other. And if the truth means the end of an era of broken promises in the name of getting them to stay one-last-time, then by all means, tell the truth.

When you are a wall caught between versions of the truth, things become trickier. You could go with the choice of testifying against the other, making it known that their fist ricocheted against you, leaving a mark big enough to stand in court. Alternatively, you could see things from the other's perspective; that they were asking for it, should have been more obedient and should have never offered you an ultimatum.

If these walls could echo conversations heard, vibrate back heated exchanges, one would wonder how they still manage to stand. How they don't tremble as they collapse in despair. After having not been transparent enough to draw attention for help. So, when they finally decide they can no longer just stand there, they close in on whoever the designated victim is until their soul rises to their throat, before separating from the flesh. The earth shakes beneath the walls and overhead, the dark clouds fill with rain.

Broken:

1. My bedroom mirror.
2. My skin. Three cuts, a bruise and a scab.
3. Daddy's knuckles.
4. My virginity.

Infidelity

Dinners haven't been the same. I think ma knows that things between yena nobaba are long over. Why does she stay? She sits across the table from me; dad next to her. She still has flour left on her face from the steamed bread she made earlier; It's dad's favourite, I like it too. Neither of us will tell her to wipe her face though. I think she ought to apologize for catching dad cheating on her. Until she does, the cutlery will continue to drown out the awkward silences.

●

I hear ma sobbing on the phone, a few rooms away. It's pathetic. At 47, she should know better.

*

Desire

WHORE-KILLER-SLUT-SINNER. Banners held by the pro-life protestors polluted the streets outside the family planning clinic as a means to shame her.

The thin walls painted in a sickening crimson red were inviting to the inquisitive ears that cared to eavesdrop on the other side. A barrage of questions would be presented to her by the nurse. Certainty that the patient wishes to abort? "Yes," she mumbled, letting a sour stench slip through her lips. She had been vomiting all morning. "How far along are –" "Thirty weeks," she interrupted. She knew the lecture that would follow; "*it is extremely dangerous to abort at this stage.*" She soon got lost in her maze of words that floated in the air. Peering over the rims of her glasses and straight into her eyes, the nurse looked at her disapprovingly. "He promised me the world," she whimpered an explanation. "And where did you reckon the rest of us would live, young lady?" dismissed the nurse.

A fortnight later, her legs, covered in boils that appeared seemingly out of nowhere, were spread on a mouldy mattress that had been smuggled in a block of flats. Her eyes landed upon a deteriorating umbilical cord that wrapped itself around what looked like the lower limbs of a foetus. The cord blossomed with blisters that breathed a greying slime. The remains of previous clients were fetid and overpowering, yet nobody seemed to care.

The instruments scraped excruciatingly against the bedside table beside her before what she was pretty sure was a kitchen fork invaded its way into her uterus, rummaging for any piece it could grab hold of. With her fainting being her only form of anaesthesia, she was quickly overtaken by a blackness. She could not say for sure how long it lasted.

Standing at a wasteland hours later, her knees were clumsily knocking against each other. Her hand gripped tightly onto the refuse bag that had taken over the duties of her placenta. Her former lover's words resonated in her thoughts: *I have a wife and kids, I can't be a part of this, take care of it.*

*

Only for a while

“For God’s sake, fuck off!” My fists were clenched in a ball of fury, my eyes blazing. I felt everything, yet nothing at the same time. This was the confrontation I had long been avoiding, and now, all was in the open. Is this really how it ends? Some bullshit excuse telling me, “It’s not you, it’s me.” I spit on the ground and the vibrations raced through my body as if to unnerve me, but quite the opposite happened. My chest was hot and on the brink of exploding. The romantic walks on the beach, the stargazing, the long phone calls and us fighting about who would hang up first. It all hit me at once.

“Charlie, after everything, you toss me aside like we never mattered.”

*

On voices that were drowned

Thrown alive into a crocodile infested river, my spirit lingers, begging for anyone to lend an ear. I see children full of hope and bubbling with laughter as they race to see who can fill up their bucket the fastest. I hear conversations of how they can't wait to grow up.

"When I grow up, I will live in a big castle and make all the bad things in the world go away."

"Don't be stupid, the bad things will never go away, at least not all of them."

This one is wise, and if I don't get to tell her first, perhaps her wisdom will open her eyes up to why the river water looks murkier on some days more than on others.

*

"Why did you do it?" her face cold and still fixated on the body, doesn't move.

"Why did you help me?"

"I've never needed a motive. Question is why did *you*?"

"Jonga, isemhlabeni apha, if shit's rotten, we burn that motherfucker. Uyay'qonda?" she keeps quiet for a bit, then continues: "You get sick of it: the apologies, having to deal with homewreckers disrespecting you. So maybe that was my motive. I had to put an end to it."

*

Decomposing. Cause of death unclear. Head barely attached to the brutally bruised neck and left arm severed. Insides turned into his outsides. A meter away from the body, shoes lay clumsily, one with the detached foot still in them. Skin peeling, some of it already fully peeled. Pink flesh that maggots have already started consuming.

"The hell happened here?"

"Not here to negotiate with your memory."

"Who's next?"

"Now we're talking!"

*

Chaos creeps into dysfunctional families, into demons in search for fuel, into restless souls looking for reason. When it comes, it conquers. The lust. The instigators. They always win.

*

Skin

-You carved scars into my skin, scars that bled incomprehensive tales into your new lover's ears, scars you claimed as trophies. My body was no stranger to foreign invasions: a finger down the throat after every meal, illegally prescribed anti-depressants, razors to the wrists. But bleeding from the scarring insults you poured into my ears? That was new, a pain I never imagined you would ever cause me.

-I bled for two weeks and a night, bleeding a shattered heartbeat of a promised life I would never meet.

*

Stories from the ER:

"We really tried." How could words aimed at bringing comfort destroy your entire will to live, shatter your bones and dry your lungs to the point of having to learn to breathe again?

From the other room, murmurs float, sobs are muffled, apologies are given, but not accepted. Grief stands at the door waiting for acceptance.

If I die young, keep the flowers for the girl in the coma next door, keep them for the girl fighting for her life, keep them for someone still holding on to hope.

She's begging you to pull the plug, but you don't listen. She does not have the strength to do it herself. Unplug the machine, put her out of her misery. She's living, but at what cost?

*

-We have a complicated relationship: my body and I. It won't let me live, it won't let me die either. It holds me hostage, demanding nutrients for ransom and once satisfied, it drags me out into the world, forcing me into human interaction, making me wonder who I will, again, fall prey to if I reveal too much skin.

-My body is heavy on me. Getting out of bed each morning weighs on me. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean in the physical sense. I am talking about the unsolicited tags I receive each day: 'fat kid', being the most prevalent. The constant reminder that hisses at me: "Stop normalizing obesity," they say. "I'll try to shrink myself to your standard," I tell them. And so almost starving myself to death ends with me in this ER.

-Society will teach you that your fat body is repulsive, nothing close to desirable. A member of society will steal your virginity, society will have you all the way fucked up. So at the end of the day, it is what it is. Just because your body does not meet the criteria of what sexiness is, does not mean that you are safe from being sexually assaulted.

*

- My lover threatened to leave me last night. He told me I didn't see myself the way he sees me and that's problematic. However, if I turn his eyes to the scaly corns on my feet, the fat rolls I wear on my waist, the beard that grows so slyly out my chin and my knees that knock against each other, he would realize that I was right all along, and still he would leave.

I could tell you everything about him; I knew how he tasted, how he smelled and even how his body reacted to mine. Your anger tends to suppress when you have dick scheduled on a weekly basis. It exhausts you, until it doesn't. I don't know who he is or how he found his way into my body.

A safe space

I don't know how to bring this matter up with him. Every time we get past one issue, another one follows. Maybe I'm starting to become a nag. After we successfully completed couples therapy, things got better. He no longer raised his voice at me when he was angry. And my fear of him slowly faded, or at least I thought it did. It's the way he looks at me every time I open my mouth to say something. I see how he is probably thinking, "*What is it this time?*" and I am forced to smile and say something else. How about I just blurt out to him that I have been diagnosed with breast cancer? I mean he looks as if he is not in the mood to "get into it" as he reads his newspaper on the couch.

Without looking up, he speaks: "I can see there is something you want to say, so just come out with it."

I sigh, "Actually, yes, I'm afraid it isn't good."

"Here we go," he flips the newspaper, still not looking at me.

I go silent.

"Well?" he persists, finally peering up at me from his newspaper.

"I - Thuli lost his father," the words fall out of my mouth.

"Oh," he says. "Sorry." he goes back to his reading.

Thuli doesn't even exist.

It boils down to this

I watched my father shoot my entire family, starting with my mother, then my older sister. After he was sure my sister was out cold, he pointed the gun at me and simply asked if I would like for him to untie me. I only managed to let out a whimper, I wondered why he wanted to spare me, it did not make sense. Only later on did I find out that my death would be a much more painful and slow one. I lived for his sexual needs that my mother could no longer fulfill, and soon, if I did not do the same, I would follow the rest of my family.

Domino Effect

Wildest fantasy: An interview with a sex offender

Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to have this interview with us. So as we know, you have just finished serving twelve years for molesting over two hundred kids. Please take us through your story.

Offender: I was often afraid to be out in public because I knew how my thoughts could get. No matter how much I fought them, they came and they got more and more violent. I was afraid to be left alone with my own thoughts because I was afraid of the monster I would become. I knew it was wrong but as someone who was molested as a child myself, I became obsessed with feeling in control, I wanted to make someone else feel the way I did.

Interviewer: And how did you feel, before and after?

Offender: As a minor, powerless. It started with thoughts of how I wanted to dominate, to feel powerful so long before I ever acted on anyone; I had sick thoughts, sicker than what I was put through. When I became an adult, I got to feed the hunger I had for power: I was always the dominant one in the situation and seeing them squirm as they tried to unsuccessfully fight me off, made it even more satisfying. So of course, I wanted more of that. I preferred children because I needed to make sure I conquer, sure they would put up a fight, but it was useless really.

Interviewer: Do you mind taking us through your thought process.
.....

The girl still fresh, spat a yellow puss that bubbled in the heat. The sweat, like an unripened fruit attached to a tree, clung to her chest. A bottle green housefly danced on the rheum formed in the inner corners of her slightly parted eyes. A thick crust caused by the heat and dehydration padded her lips.

I have these reoccurring thoughts: She's a fine fuck.

My thoughts continue to dominate: I bet

Silence.

Still in my thoughts: Now fuck outta here. I need to get busy.

A click of a pocketknife latching back in place before being shoved into my pocket follows. I wait until the sound of receding footsteps completely fades away. Firmly presses my thumb into the oozing wound before scraping the puss off with my nail. With my eyes closed, whiff the slime collected neatly under my nails. Breathing, shaky from the excitement, bounces off the walls of the room.

Thoughts run wild. Where to begin? I cup her chin and tilt her face so that she is looking up at the ceiling. The woman dangles her arms on the sides of her body, two of her fingers on her right hand plucked off. I suck the puss from under my nails and grab the girl's three-fingered hand.

I want my thoughts to be less wild: Mmhm, fuuuuuccccck lady

The girl hears none of that or maybe she does, but the drugs consume just about all her consciousness. Sucks on the amputated site. Feet curl up inside my boots.

Still thinking: Mmhmm

I've always had sick thoughts. Pulling out my hard member and initiating a rhythmic massage on the still growing erection, my other hand now stroking her cunt. The girl's labia minora flaps in and out of her bleeding opening with each plunge of my invading finger. I shove my bloody finger in girl's mouth forcing her to lick it off.

My sick thoughts: You like that, don't you, you nasty, nasty whore.

Silence...

Presses on her neck as I rummage for the pocket knife then slices a perked nipple off. I pop it in my mouth and suck her venom out of the nipple in a grotesque manner. Her areola gushes a maroon liquid between two second intervals. I'm not too bothered by it. I slice the flaps off her cunt and thrust my member in. My groin smashes against hers, once, twice, thrice. I lick more of the maroon liquid gushing from her cunt savagely. Before I continue to stick my fat member in her swollen cunt, I carelessly make an incision that runs all the way down to her anus. She excretes a somewhat green pile. Her guts hang and I continue pounding. The veins on my bulging member threaten to pop.

Thrust.

Thrust.

Pound.

My member vomits a milky substance, which splatters on the girl's remaining nipple. I sink my teeth into it before packing my now flaccid member back into my trousers.

My mind having its normal conversation with itself: "Well fuck me! You fucked the shit out of her!"

The girl now a mere corpse, lay in multiple streams of bodily fluids.

"Plenty whores to go around. Now help me drag this one out, she's of no use to me anymore," my mind reassures me of this.

Interviewer: Those were some really violent thoughts you had, did your actions ever get to that level.

Offender: I can't say I never wanted them to, I guess I never had the guts to. I only molested them and it was enough for me. But after I served time, I realized that this cycle needs to end and it is up to me to find healing and to those I have hurt, I hope they find healing too.

How do I find healing? Well first, by forgiving those that hurt me. I am in no position to offer psychological help to the victimized and I do not expect anyone to accept help from me,. So what can I do, start an awareness campaign perhaps, have people (not me) on the team psychologically checked before coming on board? I don't know, but it's a start.

*

Two lovers who have had enough

- I'll be damned if you think I will sit here and let you fuck me in the ass with another one of your stupid ultimatums!

-Walk out that door and I will stab us both.

-You're a psychopath! How do you possibly not see why nobody wants to be around you?

-You made me this way.

-Fuck off. You have me all the way fucked up.

Next

Pulling a scrunched up piece of paper from the pocket of my trouser, and a pencil from the other, I scratch out the second name from the list.

I spit on the ground and shove the paper back in my pocket before mazing my way out of the bushes onto the main road.

As the rain starts falling hard, I hear my father's words echo in my head, "You're not a man until you've banged up at least one hundred bitches." Why did his approval matter so much to me?

There aren't any taxis back to ekasi available at this hour. I figure I'll just make a run for it.

After several minutes, I arrive at Mama Chinotenda's spaza shop where I find shelter while I wait for the rain to pass.

Mama Chinotenda peers at me through the window with a, "Can I help you?" expression on her face.

Without thinking, I fiddle in my pockets again and I'm met by a mucus-coated tissue.

After further rummaging, I managed to pull out a ten rand note.

Before I could ask for Rizlas and a box of condoms, Mama Chinotenda looked at my hands with great concern.

"Heh, you know mos, boys will be boys," I say.

The rain finally comes to a drizzle and I continue with my journey until I reach the corner house with a green wall.

Bafana is leaning against a pole, seemingly agitated.

I nod.

He nods back.

I nod once more to reassure him.

"Ke kopa ong'gaye 3 klipa nyana daso, ke tla kgo kgafa kaosane boyzin."

(Please give me R300 boy, I'll reimburse you tomorrow)

"Ntwana yami uyacava mos ang'nafokol." I tell him.

(My boy, you know I don't have anything though)

We fall into a silence before iGusheshe lika Sihle pulls up.

Riding shotgun is Lwandle, his head is bandaged.

Nobody bothers to ask. We get in.

“Siya waar?” I ask, seeing that we are off route.

(Where are we going)

Sihle glares at me in the rearview mirror, with a look that seems to ask if I cannot see that there’s a passenger in need of medical attention.

The wait outside Tshepo Themba Hospital is long and cold.

A girl walks towards us. She’s alone.

“That’s her,” I say.

I look at her then at Bafana, with whom I am left with in the Gusheshe.

Bafana nods in approval and hands me a beer he has just pulled from under the driver’s seat.

I open it, give him a fist bump, then tell him to tell the boys that I’ll see them later, perhaps over a few beers.

“Askies, I had a slight detour,” I tell her.

“Nevermind,” she says, “I’m here now.”

*

Her bedroom smells like baby formula and sage.

“Waitsi. I forgot your name, baby girl.”

(You know)

“Lelethi,” she says patiently.

She proceeds to unbutton the top of her blouse.

“Right. Mind if I use the bathroom before we get to it?”

“Second door on your right”

Locking the bathroom door, I plummet onto the toilet seat.

I pull the paper out again, its condition has worsened.

With my pencil in hand, I jot down the next name on my list, ‘Lelethi’

I catch a glance of my reflection in her broken bathroom mirror and head back to the room.

The 37th floor

-I want to tell you my side of the story. My memory is not the greatest but you will just need to trust me. Trust that everything that I am about to tell you is the truth and nothing but the truth. I hope you are writing this down. Her name is not important, so I will leave it out. I want to focus on how I ought to be given justice for what was done to me. I am speaking to you, man-to-man, man-to-woman, it does not matter. Let us leave gender out of this, we men have rights too.

With that being said, we can begin.

If I could even remember the fragrance that coated her wrists that night, the colour of her skirt or even the rhythm in which the earth danced when her feet graced the 37th floor. Or was it the 36th? My memory constantly fails me. She was boozed up, and staggered about like a toddler learning to walk.

I remember her reaching out into the night. It flinched every time she neared, spitting and hissing back at her. She wore an unbearable stench. Her last bottle extended its arm deep into her throat, reaching for her liver; tearing it up.

You wouldn't believe me in any case, but I did plead with her. My voice sent vibrations that desperately, but to no avail, tried to push back the hands of time. She pulled me in, giving me a passionate wet kiss. She burped leftovers from the previous night into my mouth. I did not indicate my distaste of this.

I can very easily tell you this much, in her drunkenness; her trousers aggressively dragged mine down. She wore trousers. I remember now. I knew she had been around. Shit gets around in this small township. The night streets licked the soles of her feet without fail every time anything that possessed a cock hollered or catcalled.

I hadn't done either that night. I did one time, long ago but that night? I have no recollection of such. Nobody ever believes the ex-convict, especially one with numerous counts of rape and manslaughter. But I can prove to you my conscience is clear.

Her hands plunged their way into my underwear and met my somber cock. This turned her on even more. Her juices bubbled in her panties and it soothed her raging gonorrhoea. I hadn't had a hard-on since my parole began.

Are you now piecing together my innocence in all this, or am I still the dirty rapist you perceive me to be?

She pushed her pussy lips against my groin and her clitoris, acting like a tongue on a mission, grinded against my cock. There were muffled moans in between the grinding. When she was done, her lips vomited the gonorrhoea on my still somber cock. She violated me and gave me herpes. After her guilty pleasure escapade came to a halt, she pulled her shorts back up to her narrow waist. Her hips jiggled in approval as she walked out.

I was sober and depressed. She was drunk and horny. I was the victim here.

*

-Sir, I don't mean to cut your conversation short but it's time for him to take his medication

-Medication?

-What medication?

-Schizophrenia

-Makes sense...`

The woods

Our cottage house is situated in the woods far off the city and its bullshit. That's why we moved here. Except, we didn't know that we'd have it worse. The neighbours warned us about a murderer on the loose, but after taking about three walks around, we felt rather safe in the woods.

It rains a lot here, so we hardly ever go out. On cloudy days, we take the opportunity to disappear deeper into the woods, racing and playing hide-and-seek, which one day got too heavy on us. I don't know just how much I believe in coincidences, but when the late night arguments that were always sure to dominate the night stopped, there was an unbearable stench of human flesh that made us question whether the neighbours were really speaking the truth about the killer.

I don't know whether or not it's a good thing that my senses haven't led me to the source of that smell, which so persistently screams at me, but what if someone in those woods needs my help? What if they want to protect me from them? The stench repels me, yet I so badly want to find out what it might be.

Love isn't

I was never taught how to love you the way you want to be loved, how to suck the soul out of you when I should be doing all that I'm good for. No one taught me how to time perfectly when your plate should be warm in front of you or when to not even bother at all. I have always gotten the timing wrong and it's because of this that you, my love, are halfway out the door. I have countless times failed to live up to your fantasy. You're constantly changing this fantasy, so when you cut me with your words after yet another failed attempt at pleasing you, I am reminded that I only have myself to blame. My genitalia should have salivated more convincingly at your rising manhood. Opened up more and had you fed at your earliest convenience. So, for having failed at the only thing I was good for, I am sincerely sorry.

I grew up liking snakes and ladders. That was my game, my "everything will be alright," charm. Hell, I finessed it. Beat the odds every single time. But I guess when you hear whispers about your luck running out, you need to believe them because it does. Luck runs so empty to the point that you end up questioning why you were even afforded such a privilege (or is it a curse?) to begin with. I know I may not be making sense, but fuck your need to make sense out of a senseless world. If you're a female like me, here's what's going to happen:

1. You'll build yourself up, some will clap, some will try to throw you off. Fuck 'em.
2. You will then meet the man of his dreams. Love him. Love the hell out of him.
3. And when you have done that, you will understand why the snakes were so necessary in snakes and ladders. They were trying to teach you something. Something you were too self absorbed to pay attention to, Stupid girl!

*

I punched a hole in the roof on the first night of our honeymoon, I needed to believe that someone, something would be there for me when he rips off the bandage that convinced me that joining him in matrimony was what I was destined for. The "I promise it won't happen again," bandage. And if tonight you rip that bandage off, I can only hope the hole I've punched through the roof suffices in getting my message across. Dear, I am shit scared of you but this bandage is my remedy.

You dragged me through the mud, my pyjamas drenched in disappointments and stains of a myriad of voices muttering, "I told you so". Midnights are scheduled for bitter truths to be told, for those that couldn't love you to remind you of how you were the fucken problem. I'm angry as I write this at 00:30, I am raging in different cries. All of them fell on deaf ears. You must think I am pathetic to even be in a position where I am expressing such shit. I have run out of cares to give. Yes, I hate to disappoint you but you've come across yet another girl who had it all fucked up in the name of love.

To his next victim

May I have your attention please?

To whom it may concern, I hope this letter never finds you but if it does,

The first time this “man” told me he “loved” me, I was 12.

His finger was stuck up my vagina, or, as you will later learn, “his”

The first time I wanted to self-sabotage, I did ...

The first time I wanted to disappear, I did that too ...

He found me – yes – broken, hurt and damaged

Lying in a bloody sheet with bruised beef curtains between my legs, I begged him to stop.

Isn't it messed up? That I must find metaphors to censor the anguish and torment some horny idiot who couldn't keep to himself caused?

“It'll be our little secret,” he said.

Oh! You silly sad boy,

I remember how he told me how my body was now his to access?

However & whenever the fuck he “please?”ed

I remember how my body trembled in response to his invasive fingers against my clitoris.

I remember it so well! There was also a time he convinced me a few more // strokes // was all I needed to fulfill his guilty pleasures.

I am still disgusted just at the thought of it!

He begged me to !SCREAM! for more

And yet, my scream was choked in sobs, sobs he perceived to suggest that he was fucken killin' that pussy.

Huh?

I never said no, so did that mean I wanted it?

Here's the fucked-up thing. He made me, made me think I wanted it as bad as he did

“Please don't stop” – stop – Don't! Stop!

No meant yes, and fighting him off meant he should fuck me harder

See? He wasn't the problem, I was!

I should have locked the door - I should have worn something less revealing

Because the word “no” ceased to exist in his vocabulary the second he could not put his trophy in its “place” – It’s his lifelong companion that compasses him to find direction

Direction at the cost of my life?

The forensics scraped his filth from under my fingernails and carefully placed it in a Ziplock bag labeled, “consent”

If this suicide note ever reaches your ears - tell my killer I bled in colours foreign to my ancestors. I lay hopeless on the sheets where he took what belonged to me before I decided that his loneliness was no longer my responsibility————

Also tell him that I hoped my death would not open a vacancy for his shaft to reside in another girl’s throat.

This isn’t just any other suicide note –

It’s an open apology to his next victim

I’m sorry my brokenness wasn’t an expired Checkers product I could simply return

I’m sorry that in my b r o k e n n e s s, I failed to break generational curses

Most of all, I am sorry that when asked how I overcame all this shit and took back what he took from me - the only answer I have to give is that.

I -

didn’t

Cause of death: Another slutty kid who was “asking for it”

I sometimes wonder when I will find the courage to take myself out of my misery, I also wonder whether or not this suicide note will ever be more than a mere page from my journal, perhaps it’ll become a major piece of evidence in a court case. All I am capable of doing right now is to write in my journal and I don’t know what to make of that...

Lighter

People often asked me what life was like after my divorce. Despite the fact that the question was super insensitive, it really just wasn't any of their business. Some would even go as far as being more specific: "Did you cry after walking out of the divorce court or did you feel relieved?" "What about the kids? It must be devastating to lose all custody of those wonderful kids." Meeting them at the mall, others would cry, "You poor soul. You lost a good one, you don't find ones like that these days." The brave would ask, "Was it because of your mental illness?" Then there were those who would say, "Girl, go get your man back." One of them is currently married to him.

Countless times I tried to provide the answers that they so desperately sought, but not a single one offered an ear in the purest form. Curiosity disguised as care. I saw through it and it angered me.

How did I feel? I don't know, perhaps lighter, and no longer a burden to my beloved family. But then again, the weight of these emotions I carry every single day only get heavier. It's a mindfuck of a feeling.

Love May Not Always Conquer

This is a story of a man in search of a woman's heart. A story of a troubled relationship; a forbidden one, one where Sphe would have to travel back in time and face many challenges.

*

"Did it work? It must have worked, right?" Sphe asked, wiping a bead of sweat off his forehead. "Did what work? Sphe uyayiqonda ingxaki esijongene nayo okanye usagcwele ukudlala? Sukundibuza imibuzo yobudenge."

Jeza looked tired and almost hopeless. He gazed towards Sphe and Tumi's direction and half heartily gestured for one of them to come to him. Sphe would make his way to Jeza, it would be quite evident that his energy was still fixated on the conversation he had just had with Tumi.

Jeza had white foam in the corners of his mouth and seemed not to care much about the flies that dance around at his feet. He reaches for his bread before sinking his teeth in it. "Sphe...", he starts in a low and strained voice. "We have failed countless times to defeat the Mpisi tribe, right now, our lives depend on it and as heir to the king, it is your duty to ensure that we conquer come hell or high waters. "Bab'omkhulu this is what I have done, I defeated them, every single one of them." Sphe explains.

Jeza would tell Sphe how wars had to be fought and how there was so much to lose. Again and again he would tell Sphe the very same thing. What does one do in such a situation? Sphe knew this and he knew it very well. "You don't understand. I took care of it, believe me." Sphe would continue explaining. Shaking his head, Jeza would soon dismiss Sphe. The night would soon cover the orange African sky of Kalala and only then did the trees of Kalala wrap their fingers against Sphe's wrist, pulling him into the bushes that were pregnant with secrets of the village that once was. "Ndibanqobile abakwaMpisi, I need you to believe me when I say this." Sphe would find himself at 4:16 in the morning trying to convince the elders of Kalala. The only elders left? None other than the trees of Kalala. After a long silence, the trees would hum in unison. "It's a cycle. One you will never understand." "Uthetha ngantoni?" "What I mean does not matter now, even last time you had forgotten what I said." "Last time?" The trees of Kalala would nod off into a deep sleep. Sphe would hold onto every piece of information the trees of Kalala fed him. It was futile. Hopeless. Sphe would envelope his encounters with the trees of Kalala deep in his heart, perhaps as proof of something he was so desperately trying to prove.

The year is 1962. Jeza takes a bite of his bread. "Did it work? It must have worked, right?" Sphe asks wiping a bead of sweat off his forehead. "Did what work?" The trees would hum in unison, tired. They would tell me that this was a complex matter, one I would never understand. The trees with a dying energy would say, "You will be back, even several years before now, you will be back. You will be just as confused. Sleep Sphe. Sleep once again."

Emotionally unavailable

You know, if there is one thing that I have realised; it's that it is always, "You are so emotionless" or "You lack emotion, you need to be more in touch with your emotions" but it's never, "Why are you the way that you are?" or "Have you healed from past traumas?" And I get it, people are rarely ever ready to have such conversations. They are always either too deep, too emo or it's considered as oversharing. So, I have learned not to tell strangers at bars about how the only woman I ever truly loved hurt me in the most unimaginable way possible.

As part of my healing journey, I write about it, post it where I can and let those who will read it, mostly strangers, do so without me worrying about oversharing or weirding anybody out. On occasion, I get responses from anonymous accounts telling me to get help or that nobody cares. This makes me wonder why they bothered reading it to begin with.

Anyway, my story is about her: Her name was Mihle. In telling my story, I normally refrain from getting into the details of how we fell off because I am sure that wherever she is today, she tells her side of the story with details that differ significantly from mine. I vowed that no matter what happened between the two of us, I would still speak highly of her, and not drag her name through the mud when people cared to ask what had happened. This was until she brought out a side of me that even I did not recognise.

Exactly a year and eight months after we broke up, I received a call from a strange number. When I picked the phone up, I recognised her voice almost instantly.

"Jason..."

"Mihle, is that you?" I responded with worry.

"I know you have probably moved on with your life and want nothing to do with me and I totally respect that, but there is something you should know..."

"I got tested after the breakup, so don't worry about it," I said.

"What? I – did you think? In fact, never mind. Are you available to meet sometime this week? Are you still in town?"

"Sure of course, just say when and where and I'll be there."

*

Two days later, there she was in a beautiful summer dress, looking even better than the last time I saw her. She had a kid with her, but I was too distracted by her beauty.

When I saw her, I wanted to run and hug her, for old time's sakes. I came back to my senses when I remembered how cold she had been on the phone, so I did not get my hopes up about us rekindling our forgotten romance. I calmly walked towards her, and she towards me until we were standing in front of one another. She was not the goofy person I had

grown to know and love. But of course, I understood, we had practically become strangers all over again.

She looked at me, then at the kid.

“Hello Jason, meet Litha, your son,” she said.

I must have stopped functioning because I didn’t hear much of anything after she said that.

“My – who?”

“I’ll get us a table, we have a lot of catching up to do. I just wanted you to see him first. My husband will be coming shortly to pick him up.”

I hadn’t said much of anything else to her since she broke the news to me. I think it would be fair enough to say that I was still in too much shock to process the fact that in just the space of two days, my ex-girlfriend had called me out of nowhere, scheduled a meeting for us and then not only told me that she had gotten married but had a kid too. One that happened to be mine.

“So – you’re married now? T – to who?” I stammered.

“I think you are focusing on the wrong information here. The baby? That’s the reason we are here.”

I looked at the baby in her arms long and hard.

“Sir?”

I was immediately snapped out of my gaze.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” I asked the waitress.

“I was just asking if there was anything you would like to order,” she said.

“Uhm, no, nothing for me thank you, I’ve lost my appetite.”

The waitress tried her best to keep a straight face wondering what was happening. “Okay, sure, how about something to drink?” she suggested.

“I will have a double of your best scotch. Neat,” I said.

Mihle looked at me as if I was out of my mind, but honestly, if anyone was out of their mind, it was her.

“Sir, this is actually a coffee shop, so I’m afraid we don’t have alcohol on our menu,” the waitress replied.

“Well, I could have guessed that, but could you have guessed that a man who has not seen his ex in almost two years suddenly has a baby with her?” I realised that my voice had gone up but I didn’t care.

The waitress' face turned red, and she started looking very uncomfortable.

"Keep your voice down," Mihle said while gnashing her teeth. She turned to the waitress and apologized to her. "He'll have an espresso with an egg and bacon bun."

I started laughing loudly. "Hah! So you think you still know me? Ordering my usual combo. You don't know shit about me anymore! All you know about me is that I suddenly have this kid that you just happened to forget to tell me about for almost two years, Mihle! What the hell, man?"

"You know I thought it was best if we met in a public place, but I was clearly wrong. You're causing a scene," she was still trying to divert the attention away from us. "I think I should give you some time to process all of this and we can meet another time when you're calmer."

The audacity of that woman! What was there to process? She had not even given me any details.

*

Two weeks passed and I heard nothing from her. I was not going to contact her, until I found myself in the middle of my morning jog thinking about how my own father neglected me. I did not even have any memory of him. I started getting very emotional and wondered if I was doing to my son, what my father did to me.

Without even completing my jog, I hurried home, picked up the phone and called her.

"I'm ready," I said.

*

Three months down the line, my whole life had changed. When Mihle first made contact with me, things in my life were a bit rocky, financially that is, but when I really got to understanding what having a son entailed, I was forced to step my game up and help his mother out financially. She had told me about how she met her husband not long after we broke up and I found it rather strange that he was willing to court a pregnant lady. But of course those were my own fucked up views, I personally would not.

"Did he flip when you told him that you would bring me into the child's life?" I asked her.

"His name is Litha, you can stop referring to him as 'the child' and no, as a matter of fact, it was his idea. I've already told you why I preferred raising him on my own, but my husband made me see that you had a right to be part of his life, and if you chose not to be, then at least I would have tried," she said.

"He's a strong man" I said. "I ought to meet him sometime, you know, just to thank him properly." I'm not sure whether I meant that.

"That won't be necessary," she told me.

“Right, I understand, but for what it’s worth, I think you have secured a good man.”

“I have,” she said.

Considering how badly we had fallen off, I was glad that she and I were able to be civil with each other. Maybe it was for our son’s sake. Whatever the reason, I was glad. I knew that I had lost her for good, but I was glad that she was happy, even if it was with someone else.

So anyway, everything was good and rosy, until that bitch almost landed me in a coma.

As months passed, Litha became a big part of my life, even though I only saw him fortnightly. I formed a bond with him, one that nobody could taint, or so I thought.

To make sure that I would be able to provide for my son, I found a truck driving job. It did not pay much, but at least I could provide the little that I could for my son. I felt like the present father that I always wanted when I was younger. I knew that it would be only a matter of time before I found something more solid.

Thursday, the twenty-sixth of April, I will never forget the date. I had been on one of my normal delivery routes on the road when I was interrupted by my phone. I know I should not have been on my phone while driving, but I had to check it. I had set a different SMS notification chime for every time that Mihle texted, as I did not want to miss anything that involved my son, so when her SMS came in, I reached for the phone from the passenger’s seat and read her the text message.

*

Not knowing what had happened I woke up in a hospital bed with a nurse standing beside my bed. “Mr Sereo, good to see you awake,” she smiled. “How – who?” I could not articulate myself and the pain in my leg was demanding to be felt.

“Take it easy” she said, “You got involved in an accident, thankfully your injuries were nottoo fatal, it could have been much, much worse,” she told me.

*

How did I land here? Bitter and miserable. But wouldn’t you have been the same? How does a person toy with someone’s emotions like that? Why would she introduce me to a child, only to tell me that it isn’t mine? It was not making any sense, no matter how much I tried to rationalize it. I could not fathom how anyone could be this cruel. After getting that life altering text, I began to harbor great hatred for a person I once so dearly loved. I was convinced that there was more to that scathing message. I had never known Mihle to be so shallow and a lover of money. Yes, people do change, but the Mihle I knew could never be that person. Why was the husband so understanding? Was Litha his or mine? I had to get the answers, but with the protection order Mihle had against me, doing that was not going to be easy.

*

After losing myself in the obsessing and fussing about what Mihle had done to me, I finally got to the bottom of things. Here's what happened:

- i. Mihle, as I learned, had not gotten over our breakup.
- ii. She wanted me to pay for leaving her with a broken heart.
- iii. She was never married. The husband, who was too good to be true was, indeed, a figment of her twisted imagination.
- iv. Litha was not hers either, she was just his babysitter.
- v. On weekends that she had to babysit, she would have me do her job without the parents knowing.
- vi. She wanted me to experience the pain of getting attached to a human being and then have them ripped out of my heart with an inadequate explanation.
- vii. She succeeded.

In Case of Emergency

- ~~1. Her husband~~
- ~~2. Her mother~~
- ~~3. Her sister~~
- ~~4. The police~~

Her husband beat her until her bones were broken. They had gotten into a disagreement about which restaurant was the best option for their anniversary celebration. On that day, she received a parcel at work with a note:

to my beautiful wife

Happy anniversary, I love you so much. Please use this voucher to buy yourself an outfit and I hope you love the necklace, my babe. I will pick you up from home at 7 pm sharp. I can't wait to see you!

Your loving husband :)

That evening, she was standing outside their front gate in anticipation, waiting for him and not being able to contain her excitement, she ran towards the car as soon as she saw it appear from around the bend.

“Careful now,” he said, opening the passenger’s door for her, “we don’t want my queen getting hurt.”

“Where are we going baby?” she asks him, her face beaming.

“It’s a surprise, I know you are absolutely going to love it.”

They continue to drive, engaging in silly conversation and reminiscing on the good times that they have shared. After almost forgetting that they were even going out on a date, because of all the talking and laughing, they finally arrive at their destination.

“Wait... is this... where I think it is?” she looks at him in shock and confusion.

“The one and only,” he responds, smiling from ear to ear.

“Don’t you have to book at least six months in advance before you can get a reservation at this restaurant?”

“For you my queen, I booked as soon as our honeymoon ended. I knew how much you longed to come here, so I made your dream come true.”

“No, no, no, no – NO! Don’t you think that this is a bit much? Honey, we are meant to send Jamie to school next year, we just bought a new house. Debt collectors are calling left right and center and you choose to waste the little money that we have left on a single night out. We are leaving right now, drive elsewhere, anywhere but this place.”

“Without saying a single word, he drives out of the parking lot, the tires screech and he drives at about one hundred and sixty kilometers an hour.

“Slow down! Are you out of your mind? Are you actually trying to get us killed?”

He accelerates faster.

When, by some miracle, they manage to get back home safely, she storms out of the car and heads towards the house. Her hands are shaking as she fumbles for the keys in her handbag. From behind her, he grabs her arm, turns her around and slaps her across the face.

“After all that I have done for you, bitch” he strikes her again, this time with greater force.

“Stop, I am begging you, STOP!” she whimpers, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Just for one night I would have loved to just be with my bloody wife, without worrying about debts, the kids and finances. But you had to go and fuck that up. You wouldn’t know a good thing even if it fell right in front of you!” he yells and kicks her continuously until he is out of breath.

"I AM SORRY, PLEASE. I SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE THAT!"

"The damage is done, you are so damn good at making me feel small. Do you have any idea how emasculating it is to have your wife constantly remind you that you are not man enough to provide for the family?"

"That's not what I – "

"Shut up, bitch!" he continues kicking and punching until she falls into a dark unconsciousness.

*

She wakes up to a black eye and an empty house.

*

Her mother warned her about this man. She never liked him from the beginning and begged her not to marry him. She, of course, as we know, went ahead and married him anyway.

"Mom it would mean so much to me if you gave us your blessings," she said.

"My child, not even in the next lifetime would I ever happily have you marry that man, especially not after everything that has happened. Have you got no shame?"

"Fine, if you won't give us your blessings, then keep 'em. This wedding is happening with or without them," she said with youthful optimism.

"You are making a huge mistake and you are my daughter, I cannot say I love you, then hand you over to that monster of a man."

She scoffs. "I take it we shouldn't be expecting an RSVP from you then. You and Kelly."

This was the last time they spoke.

*

She and her sister, Kelly had been very close. They shared everything, from secrets to clothing, until they shared a man, except only one of them knew about it.

"You know I couldn't shake the feeling that he was seeing someone else. I mean, it was just so obvious. I just never imagined it to be you."

"What him and I have is rare, the truth is that I can't make you understand and that's okay, you don't have to. But you do have to accept it sooner or later."

This was the last time they spoke.

*

Her fiancé laid his hands on her in the moment of a heated exchange. It was the first time he did this and she had to let him know that she was not going to stand for it. So she did the first thing that she felt would teach him a lesson he would not forget anytime soon.

At the time, she did not have a car of her own, so she woke up early the following morning after having spent the night with her fiancé. She convinced him that they were now okay regarding the past events of the previous night.

She woke up and got on the first taxi that she could find. It was only when the taxi reached its final destination that she asked the driver where the nearest taxi station was.

“Sisi we passed it a while ago, why do you people not talk?” he says. “I’m not from around, uxolo bhuthi.” she answers. “I can take you if you like,” he looks at her with pleading eyes waiting for a response. “I’d love to take you up on your offer but I don’t have much money left on me,” she says. “Is that not always the case?” he laughs. “Truly, I do not have much.” she tells him. “That’s not a problem, I will take you anyway. Police station you said?” “That’s right” she says.

He starts driving back the opposite direction and she finally feels a sense of relief. “So, the police station, huh? What could a pretty lady like you possibly be paying a visit to the police station for?” he looks at her. “It’s quite a long story, one I would rather not get into,” she says. “Oh come on, we still have a while before we get to the police station. Besides it can’t be that bad, right?” he asks. “You and I are just meeting for the very first time and we obviously do not know each other.”

“What gives you the impression that it can’t be that bad?” she challenges him, anticipating a response.

“I apologise, I realise that that was extremely forward of me, I was only just trying to make conversation,” he looks at her with remorse in his eyes. “I’ll drop it.” They continue the rest of the drive in silence.

When she gets to the police station, an policewomen assists her.

“Thank you for your statement ma’am.” the policewomen says after she has finished opening a case. “We will try our best to prioritize your case”

“Do you have counselors I can talk to?”

The policewomen casually points down the hallway. “Third door on your right,” she says.

*

“It is that bad... my fiance’ slapped me last night, we got into an argument and he completely lost it.” After she says this, there is complete silence in the counselors room. “I know he will not do it again though, I am just trying to teach him a lesson so that he does not do it again,” she tells him. Finally the counselor responds to her, “Do you honestly believe that he will not do it again? Be very honest with yourself.” he has a concerned look on his face.

“Well I am glad you asked that question,” she begins, “because I have thought about the possibility of him doing it again and that brings me to why we are where we are today. Here is what you need to understand, if I do not go to the police to report him, he will see it as a free pass and see it fit to treat me in a similar way in future. But if I report him now, have him arrested then drop the charges will have him shaken for just a bit, he will know not to mess with me ever again. Does that make sense?” she looks at him with an expression as if to say that she has made sense. He looks at her and sighs, “I hate to say this ma’am but- what did you say your name was again?” “I would rather not say,” she responds. “Alright that is fine but since you asked for my opinion, here is what I have to say. The point is, as I have established, that you are clearly not willing to leave this man. I mean, the fact that you are just trying to teach him a lesson is confusing because you also don’t want to leave him. So how will he perceive it? Well of course he could either learn from his mistake and never do this again or he could see it as a means to disrespect you further, seeing that you know what you are willing to tolerate.” “I am not tolerating it!” she snaps. “I did not mean to step on your toes.

She snatches her bag and walks towards the counselor’s door ready to leave. “They won’t do anything about the case you opened you know. We know people like you, you are the very same people that return the next day asking us to drop the charges. Have a good day lady.”

This would be the last time she heard anything from the police.

*

So, after it all, broken and battered, she sits on the bed with a lump in her throat going through her contact list. And upon realising that between her husband, her mother, her sister and the police, she has nobody to turn to.

Guilt does that to you

She hears her boyfriend making plans on the phone from the other room and her face quickly turns hot.

“My love? Where are you!?” he shouts as he looks for her.

“In here, sweetheart,” she turns to the door and picks up a t-shirt from the bed, pretending that she had been folding the laundry.

“I brought you an ice-pack to help with the swelling,” he sits her down on the bed and gently places it under her eye, where the bruise is. “I know we already spoke about this and you seem adamant not to escalate the matter to HR but at least talk to the cops. I understand you are worried about your job being on the line. I can’t just sit back and let that woman get away with disrespecting you like that.”

“For the last time please, can we just drop this, I know you mean well but honestly, it just is not worth all the hassle,” he sighs. “Fine, I promise I will drop it if you promise me one thing.” “And what might that be?” she asks. “Promise me first.” She laughs, “Come now honey, how can I promise you something I don’t even know yet.” “I want you to promise me that you will be okay in exactly two weeks from now,” he says. “Why, what’s happening in two weeks?” she asks him. It is very clear by the way she shifts away from him to sit up, that she has become uneasy.

“You remember the deal we signed at work last Friday?”

“Uh-huh?”

“Yes, my colleagues and I are going to be celebrating securing that deal and we will have pre-drinks at Tasha’s before the big celebration.”

“Sounds interesting, so what’s the big celebration?”

“That part, my lady...” he leans in to kiss her, “is a surprise.”

“I love surprises! Dress code?” she asks him, forcing a smile.

“You honestly look amazing in anything. Let that be my surprise.”

“Okay, babe. You got it.”

“Here, please just keep applying the ice pack to the bruise for a little bit more. I am going to head out in a bit to take care of a few work things and I will see you soon, I love you so much.”

“I will do that, my love, should I prepare dinner?”

“No need, I want you to rest.”

“Okay, love, take your time, I will see you later.”

He gives her a kiss, grabs his phone and leaves.

As soon as he exits, she jumps to her phone, and makes a call, “I need to see you, as in yesterday!” *Not now.* “Meet me at our usual spot in an hour.” *Fine.*

*

“We can’t keep meeting like this, you’ve done enough damage!”

“Me? It’s that tramp of a wife of yours that attacked me first!”

“Come on, you had it coming.”

“You are unbelievable! You know that?”

“This needs to stop.”

“Yes but here’s the reason we are actually here. I think he might be onto us.”

“There *is* no us. And what makes you say that?”

“He has been extra nice lately, I can’t shake the feeling that he wants to do something drastic. Overheard him on the phone, I did not catch much, but I’m telling you, I know him and he loves playing it cool just before lashing out.”

“I really don’t have time for your conspiracy theories. Stop contacting my wife and do not contact me either.”

*

“Babe, I want to ask you something, please be completely honest with me.”

“Sure babe, what is it?” “Is there anything you may be upset with me about?”

He stops what he is doing to give me his full attention, “What do you mean? How can I possibly be upset with you? I have just signed the biggest deal probably will be the biggest in my career and I could not have done it without your tireless support. Now tell me, why in the world would I be upset with you?” “I don’t know,” she says “just making sure, you know me, always getting paranoid over the smallest things. Thank you for reassuring me.”

He looks at her with a smile on his face which suddenly fades as soon as she looks away.

*

Two weeks later

“Ladies and gentleman, may I have your attention please.” he says as he taps his cutlery against his champagne glass. The room full of his colleagues, family and friends goes silent

and everyone turns their attention to him. "I would like to propose a toast. First of all, let me just take this opportunity to say thank you all so much for coming out tonight to share this celebration of a huge milestone with me. I appreciate each and every one of you for being here. Secondly, I would like to give a special thank you to my beautiful girl, for helping me achieve this." He turns to her and says, "Baby, you have shown me what true love is and I just want to show you how much I am grateful to you for your loyalty towards me." She looks down as soon as he says "loyalty". "Come on now, don't be shy." He walks towards her, gets down on one knee, "With all of that being said, please do me the greatest honour of being my wife." The audience chants and gasps in excitement. She looks at him long and hard, words failing to come out of her mouth. "Yes! Yes!" she finally says, tears streaming down her face. "I'll marry you!" Everyone in the room cheers and he gets up to put the ring around her finger, then kisses her passionately.

After everyone has settled down and each person has had their chance to extend well wishes and congratulations, he pulls his fiancé to the side. "How about we ditch this place and go somewhere more intimate?" he suggests.

Their night ends in some steamy love making and a little too much to drink.

*

"Good morning sweetheart!" she wakes up to her now fiancé.

"My word! My head is banging! How much did we drink last night!?"

"You mean to say how much did *you* drink last night," he laughs. "I had four glasses at the most"

"I can't believe I get to marry the man of my dreams," she says twiddling with her engagement ring. "It's beautiful, baby. I love you."

"I love you too. I made us breakfast, cooked your favourite!" he stands up

"What did I do to deserve you?" she gushes.

"Let me warm up the food and we can have the whole day binge watching our favourite series, how's that?"

"I would love that."

He smiles at her then proceeds to the kitchen.

As he walks out of the room she sends a message to her secret lover: *not sure why you insist on ignoring me but I get it. I am going to leave you alone, don't come running to me once I'm married.* With the message, she attaches her engagement ring.

*

Shortly, he emerges into the room and in his hand is a big tray. "Mhm, that smells delicious," she says. He places the tray of food in front of her and offers her some sauces. Before he has

even finished adding the sauces on her plate, she indulges in her meal. He looks at her eating and neither of them say anything. He barely touches his food but casually sips on his coffee. She continues to eat and she is so immersed in her meal, that she does not even notice her fiancé staring at her. When she finally gets to finishing her food and after she has licked her plate clean, she leans over to give her fiancé a hug. "Thank you so much! That was the best meal you have made in a while!" she tells him. "So I take it you enjoyed it," he responds. "Enjoyed" is an understatement. What was it actually? The meat I mean." His face turns cold, "I'm glad you asked, you have actually had it before." "Really ... duck?" she guesses. "Try again," he says. "Uhhh, horse?" this time she seems more enthusiastic. "I believe his name was David." he says. Her face freezes.

Goodbyes

It was the beginning of the end. I knew one day the visits would probably get shorter and shorter. Life had to move on, right? Or perhaps it would be the other way around? Maybe in time, the visits would get easier. Maybe the stale air that lingered in the cemetery would one day be the fresh air I so longed for. Perhaps I would not even need it anymore and the staleness of the air would be sufficient for me. What good is fresh air to a corpse anyway? Perhaps it was the staleness of the air that numbed my entire being. I remember how it suffocated me, how I could not find a way out, how my chest tightened into a million knots. It was in the staleness of the air that I was, again, reminded of the now lifeless soul I once loved.

Lemon Tree

What can we learn from this lemon tree?

Nothing

Wrong, actu...

Nothing, I have nothing left to live for. My heart's bled for nights on end. I want to be left alone, with my thoughts.

Why'd you bring the rope? Is it a n-?

I SAID- I have nothing left to live for

-But look at how far you've come, surely you did not fight so hard pursuing your dreams for nothing.

What are dreams when you've lost everything else?

-We don't give up, we rebuild.

I'm a mortal being, we'll all die sooner or later, stop making me delay the inevitable

-

A narrowed down itinerary during a girls' night out

First, list all synonyms for murder known to you

Second, employ as many as possible. Application is of utmost importance.

verb

kill

put/do to death

assassinate

execute

liquidate

eliminate

neutralize

dispatch

butcher

cut to pieces

slaughter

massacre

wipe out

3. Dress to *kill*

4. ~~Execute~~ conversations that will, if need be, support the "she asked for it" version.

5. *Eliminate* all possible alibis

Wipe out all evidence forensics may find & that my dear, is how you *butcher* murder

Dear girl in a man's world:

One does not start a revolution

One does not dare start by questing the man's world

Stomach in, titties out

Now flaunt your hourglass figure

One simply cannot start the day with a plate full of ambition – No

One starts by waking up and doing the day-to-day chores

One starts by giving the man the respect he deserves

One starts by knowing her place

You will do as you are told, not as you please

One starts by shrinking themselves in a man's world

You will not dare be too ambitious

I hope I have made myself clear

Poetic Justice

To my beloved little sister,

I have always dreamed about the day you would grow up. I had so many plans for us. I wish I could have spent more time with you before I eliminated myself from this cruel world. I am writing you this letter, not to make you miserable but to caution you about this crazy life. For what it's worth, up to this point, I lived a happy life, well until my first meeting with poetry anyway. To be brutally blunt, poetry in its simplest meaning is rape.

My first meeting with poetry was an unpleasant and unwelcomed one. I now belong to the underworld. The land of the living failed me dismally. If you thought Mother Nature was beautiful, I want to tell you that you are so wrong. I am your big sister and I would not mislead you. I sometimes wish mama had still been around to give me guidance. I would hate for you to suffer the same trauma.

I still have nightmares of the events that introduced me to my first encounter with poetry. I resent the day I came to know poetry. There was no beauty in it at all. It was an ugly slap in the face that had a sting that lingered even after they had placed flowers on your casket and told you to rest in heavenly peace. Hanging on to the cliff of life wasn't as enticing as jumping from the edge. When meeting poetry for the first time, one should know that the waters of the river would turn bloody, I would have avoided the encounter entirely. Had I known that meeting poetry for the first time meant even the prettiest, most worshipped flowers of the valley would die only to be left drenched in a rotten stench, I would have stayed at home. When growing breasts and developing a curvier more appealing body would lead to my very first encounter with poetry, I would have found means to join the underworld long before I started growing into a young woman.

On my first encounter with poetry, I held the recipe for an invasion into my space. You do not get the privilege to meet poetry unless the skies are dull and grey. Had I known that my breasts would have landed in your hands by accident, I would have been more careful and I wouldn't have had to apologise for being in anyone's way. I wouldn't have forced poetry's hand. Had I had a good enough reason to say no at the invitation to meet poetry for the first time, I would have given it. Had my lungs not dried up like autumn leaves from the screams of rebellion that poetry did not seem to fathom, I would have screamed a fuck load louder.

My first encounter with poetry meant that I had to walk around with the glittering sun on my back telling me that it's just another day. With a kiss on my forehead, it would gently tap my back while whispering in my ear, "Try not to get harassed today, it's a dog eat dog world," then send me off into the day.

The first encounter I had with poetry, my smile was clothed in a beautiful red dress, but under that red dress were scars that nobody would ever know how to fix. The first time I encountered poetry, the mouldy walls of his basement closed in on me. They did not seem to care about my suffocation and that my blood threatened to boil over from beneath my scorched skin. I remember how poetry snickered wickedly in my face at my expectations for

my feelings to be nursed. *See that shrink, have as many sessions as you need, sure you'll get the help you need but in this world, our second encounter is almost inevitable.*

Poetry doesn't prepare you. It makes no appointment. It demands its presence to be felt. It clears out your schedule regardless of what you have planned even if it means clearing up your schedule for life and had I known it was rude of me to dress anything short of appropriate when meeting poetry, I would have dressed more decently. Had I not dragged poetry's name through the mud, my corpse would not have been stripped of everything only to be bandaged in tape written in bold: "CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS".

Poetry is no friend of anxiety. You cannot have anxiety and experience poetry. It is just not possible. And I will tell you why. Once your soul is sold to poetry, nothing else matters. On my first encounter with poetry, my mouth was an abandoned cave that echoed nothing but silence. My stomach was clogged with bitterness that no plumber could manage.

Poetry found its meaning between my legs and made it known that my body was mine to rent until our second encounter. The animosity that poetry possessed would mark my departure from this world. Poetry wiped its manhood on the mat that was my pubic hair. It came in the form of a strong, vicious vulture that bared no remorse to anyone seeking to be soaked in self-pity. It's pathetic to even expect remorse when you first meet poetry. When poetry is done with you, it will finger out the rest of the contents left unscraped by its manhood like a child emptying the inside of an avocado after a long streak of starvation. When poetry is done with you, like that avocado you will be left empty and that is how poetry conquers you.

The agenda with poetry was pretty straightforward. Poetry doesn't really care about who you are, if you are convenient at the time poetry needs its own needs met, then you have to comply. I will help those that are yet to meet poetry for the first time. I do not have the capacity to help anyone really, but I will try because if you have not yet met poetry, I do not mean to sound pessimistic, but like a midnight candle lit, your time will run out eventually.

Here's what you need to know when you first meet poetry;

1. I would say stay at home in order to avoid meeting poetry at all, but sometimes you will meet poetry in the discomfort of your own home.
2. In the case of the above, its best to keep your door locked at all times, from there, you can only hope that it doesn't insist on having the door unlocked.
3. Poetry prefers to be met in a short skirt, anything longer than that will, however, not prevent your meeting but be warned, poetry will not be pleased.
4. Do not waste poetry's time trying to avoid the encounter; you are only going to make it more vicious.
5. When you meet poetry, it's always best to greet it while on your knees. Suck its manhood to the best of your ability and maybe if you're lucky, that's where it'll end. I am fully aware it is by no means at all 'luck' to have a shorter encounter with poetry. I ask to be pardoned for a lack of better words.
6. When your meeting is over, vow not to tell anyone about this encounter. However, please do speak out, but tell poetry, for your safety, that you won't.

I can't promise you that things will get better, however what you must know is that once you meet poetry it will be life changing. Let me elaborate further. Poetry does not leave you the same, it is life-changing. Your life does not remain the same after meeting poetry, if you have one left at all. I chose to end mine with a pen and letter in my hand. In primary school, my teacher thought she introduced me to poetry. She told me that poetry was musical, gentle and soft. She taught me that there was beauty in poetry. I don't think she lied because perhaps all that was true and poetry came in different versions to the one I came to know. The poetry I came to know was in the form of an ugly truth I only knew how to escape through a casket. I never once wished to be a writer, but when I first met poetry for what it really was, I wrote this letter with blood oozing from my wrist. I wrote it with a passion in my eyes that yearned for the survival of the next person on poetry's schedule. I could not live another day wondering when my second encounter with poetry would be, so I took the decision not to wonder at all. Please do not take the decision I took because then like me; you would have let poetry win.

*

Indicators

There's a fire that burns deep inside of me. I have over the years learned how to contain it, how to tame it and how not to let its rage burn those that come near me. I do not let anyone in because they would be burnt to the ground by a fire that should have been put out several generations ago. Those that cross paths with me and choose to be kind to me do not fear getting burned, they seek warmth from this fire until the smoke chokes them into realising that they should never have come close to begin with.

Suicide

On the other side of the 10111 dispatcher, is a strained voice, a “Ma’am, what is your location? Please stay on the line,” persists. Gunshots ... then a scream, the breathing getting heavier and finally when no location is given by the woman on the line, the lines cuts –

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!?”

*

Broken families

No results found, please try a different search. I ruffle my hair in frustration. MCV? I need something more than that. “Cummon, give me something to work with here,” I mumble under my breath as I look at the engraved initials on the dusty briefcase. I pick up one of the few photos that sat in it. The photo, like the rest, is cut out at the face. With scrutiny, I study what is left of the photo. There are two people in the photo: mom in a wedding gown and a man in a tuxedo by her side. The man is tall and lean, and that is pretty much all the clues I can get. I study his hands which are the only exposed body parts in the picture, he seems to have a fair complexion. I stare at the wall; I am coming up with more questions than I am getting answers. The mustard walls in my room stare back at me blankly. Perhaps I need to shift my attention to something that will actually give me answers. Jumping out of my bed, I start making my way to Rae’s door.

I gently knock on her door twice before letting myself in. I cannot tell if she is sleeping or pretending to be. My doubts are quickly cleared when, upon opening her drawer, she asks me without opening her eyes, what I want. I slowly reach for her hairbrush and as I hold it up in the air, I answer, “I can’t find mine, I hope you don’t mind if I borrow yours for a bit.” She looks at me with queer eyes, “Khwezi, your hair is perfectly fine to me.” Glancing at my reflection in the mirror in front of me, I look at it, “Heh,” I laugh nervously, “I wanna rearrange it.” “Sure, whatever. Close the door behind you,” she says.

Carefully placing Rae’s hair strand in a plastic sleeve, I pick up the phone and dial the last person on my call log. *Miss Mackie*, the person on the other line says, “Yes it’s me again, as I was saying in our previous call, something does not add up. I have collected all six of my siblings’ and mom’s hair strands for DNA testing. Did I mention we all look nothing alike? I am not imagining things. Mom refuses to give me any information about dad. It’s always: *Only God knows what happened to him, we have to accept what is and live with it.* He has been absent from our lives probably even before birth. I found a briefcase that I assume belonged to him; all I know about him are his initials. My main concern here is that I look nothing like my siblings. My entire family is evidently mixed race, but me? My skin is much darker, my hair is a different texture and all I get, when I ask, is a repeated *your father had strong genes.* Mother claims we all share a father, but that’s the bullshit I refuse to buy. I’m bloody eighteen and I deserve the truth. She acts like she’s a god, she knows the truth and it’s high time I got to the bottom of it. You remember my first theory? Electroconvulsive therapy. Why do we all not remember our childhood? Why do we all speak different languages? My memory is fragmented, that much I know.”

It’s the day of the DNA test results and of course my plans are completely messed up when I get a call to rush to the hospital. They tell me that mother has been in a life threatening car accident. “Send me the address,” I say before hanging up.

I have always despised hospitals. I could never fathom why people ever had to go in there with the hopes to live, only to die. What the actual fuck? The doctors being pretentious and shit; *we tried the best that we could, I’m sorry.* I snicker at the lady sitting directly opposite

me in the waiting room, who asks why a young girl like me is in the waiting room. "None of your goddam business," I reply. Looking away without a bother in my bones, I wonder how she even had the nerve to open her raggedy ass mouth to talk to me in the first place. Two men in blue step out of the operating room with facial expressions I cannot read behind the surgical masks. Putting his hands together, one of them says, "We are doing the best we can." I am now looking the other way, the rather forward lady that thought she could be my friend is standing now, seemingly with the hopes that if she elevates herself, lives will be spared. I can't tell who the doctor is addressing. I don't seem to care enough. At least not until the clock hits 2 a.m and countless times after the nurses have told me that visiting hours have passed and at least four doctors have told me I cannot enter the operating room, I am a shaking in my boots. It does not last too long though, my body has seemingly found a way to calm down and before I know it, while still seated in the waiting room, my eyes slowly close.

There's no easy way to say this

We did the best we could

Your DNA tests were not a match, Miss Mackie.

We unfortunately could not save her

Rae's DNA did not match either

Well, fuck it then, she deserved to die. Who was I to save a stranger that had lied to me her whole life?

"FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, KWHEZI AWWUKE! Wake up I can't. I CAN'T LOSE YOU.

"Rae?"

"I got to the hospital as soon as I could, you were dreaming, I'm glad you're up. I couldn't afford to lose you too. Why are you even sleeping here at the hospital, normal people wait at home. Come on, get up."

"What do you mean 'me too', Ra'eesah?" ...

The Interrogation Room

When asked where you were on the night of the murder

You only have two options:

You lie, you lie through your teeth

Until you one hundred percent believe that your truth is the truest version of the truth

--- Or---

You tell the truth

The truth he ordered you not to tell

Your truth

The truth will set you free

Until he finds you

Finds you before they find him

He will vacuum the air out of your lungs

Until your bones scream for hydration

Until your tongue turns into stone

It's the price you pay for having not honoured a simple order

---the choice is yours---

Tell the truth

Save yourself

Escape the twenty-five to life

And live the afterlife instead

I will ask again: Where were you on the night of the murder?

The death of a loved one should never not hurt

I remember being faced with the ghastly task of writing my father's obituary. I describe it this way because I was mad! And rightfully so. You could be under the influence of grief and your so-called loved ones will go about their lives, sending empty messages of condolences before scurrying back to their lawyers. Lawyers whom they hoped would convince the court how they deserved to be a part of the last will and testament of a person they spoke to probably once or if by luck, twice a year.

Condolence

/kən'dəʊl(ə)ns/ (n)

plural noun: condolences

an expression of sympathy, especially on the occasion of the death of a person's relative or close friend.

Sitting in my room, with Beethoven playing softly in the background, I read the definition again, and probably twice more. I wondered if they knew the meaning of the word or if they were just following protocol; simply doing what one is expected to do when one passes. The morning my father overdosed on over the counter pills, he hadn't taken them with water, but with bleach. The night before that? He was okay, except for the fact that he had just learned that I had finally given birth. Time of delivery: 22h15. A stillborn.

Months after the passing of my father, I would hear whispers of those I once called friends making judgments of how I was doing based on my weight. Omalume still bickering amongst one another about my father's will. I was merely just surviving each day that came and I was incapable of tasting the sun even when it desperately knocked at my doorstep. I longed to have had the chance to hold and feel the warmth of my baby's hand and have her breath linger in the sunny, blue skies. I wondered why I had been robbed of the chance to hear her giggle or have her utter *mama* when she first learned to speak. But that isn't why I was angry.

When we found my father on the kitchen floor with foam flowing from his mouth, loud wails of bereavement burst from the wives of my uncles as if to signal to them that it was the appropriate time to start contesting for all his monies. The day we laid my father to rest, I decided against writing the obituary as I really had no words to express the conflicting thoughts that filled my mind. We had a viewing of the body and his face reminded me of the fact that we were all going to die someday. He had very fine wrinkles engraved on the corners of his eyes, which had become droopy over the years. I would be lying if I said I felt the slightest bit of sadness during his funeral ceremony. I say *his funeral* because regardless of the fact that the family had felt that it was a brilliant idea to combine my father's funeral with my child's, the limelight was on him anyway. The same limelight he had stolen when he had selfishly taken the decision to rid himself of this world. If you ask me, he had done

the world a great justice. So it was good riddance for me. We had not been on good terms for months on end anyway.

When asked to share some words about my baby's death however, I became overwhelmed with so much emotion; my knees were awkwardly pointed towards each other as I stood in front of the congregation. I felt a rock stuck to the back of my throat when I tried to open my mouth and then I had a brief flashback to earlier, when the bodies were being brought in out of the hearse. A little girl, who I imagine was six, excitedly pointed at the hearse yelling, "Jonga mama! iLimousine! Just like in the movies!" Her face was beaming. I envied her oblivion. Even if she did comprehend a bit of what was happening, she was way too young to be forced into being heavily intoxicated with grief. Even though I had birthed a stillborn, I was sure of the fact that my tongue would be mistaken for my child's tombstone. That's how well I had gotten to know my little one in the nine months I was graced with her.

The atmosphere at the graveyard wasn't any different to how it had been during the send-off service; the vultures, who call themselves family, had only money on their minds. The rest of the attendees were probably trying to decide whether they'd opt for beef or chicken curry when we return home. A gentle breeze flowed through the graveyard and was somewhat music to a part of my emotions. I hadn't afforded myself the mental or emotional capacity to properly grieve my would-have-been daughter. As my baby's tiny coffin lowered into the earth, the sunflowers that had grown from my heart the day I received a positive pregnancy test shriveled up into ash. I remember how desperately I wanted to rip off my skin and wrap it around her tiny body but it would have been pointless anyway because it held no warmth. My father's eldest brother had pulled out all of my father's front teeth prior to his burial. He had made a necklace out of them which he placed around my daughter's neck as a sacrifice to abaphansi for good luck. I lacked the much needed energy to even bother asking how my father's teeth would bring any luck at all. It really, really did not make sense to me, or perhaps I simply just lacked the wisdom of the spiritual realm.

If my memory is not deceiving me, I remember my father labeling me *ihlazo* to the Sengwayo family. A whole disgrace. I also recall how he had gone on an hour-long rampage about how he didn't understand how I even had the boldness to bring myself to his house knowing I had conceived outside of wedlock. My father, if anything, had been two things: very traditional and very irrational. Soon after knowing about my pregnancy, he demanded to know who the father was. When I told him, I am not sure what enraged him more; whether it was the fact that we had broken up or because he had always had a disliking towards the Mpanzas, our neighbours.. I suspect it was both, but it was beside the point. I needed his support. Now more than ever.

After having calmed down from his rampage, he calmly asked me to pack all that was mine and leave his house. And now that I think of it, I believe that is when I became almost completely emotionally dead. Something in me had died much, much earlier. I was numb to a lot of things after my father kicked me out without a bone of remorse. My relatives all turned a blind eye so I had learned to leech off people to the point that they would ask me to leave. And in those nine months, unemployed and desperate, I would seek for my next host until the labour ward was ready to receive me. I am sure of one thing: if my mother knew what had become of my life, she would turn in her grave.

A body is only but a host for our unborn; after that it goes back to normal. If we are lucky enough to survive and if we do; when the soul departs from the flesh that too hosted it, the flesh wastes no time to rot away with what belongs to it. It's ironic how life goes though, I have never really shared with anyone, not that I have anyone for that matter, what caused my stillbirth. The same umbilical cord that is supposed to be a line of life support to one's unborn child, served as a noose to mine. And my father? He killed himself because he couldn't bear the news of losing his first grandchild. He had been so consumed with guilt for how he had treated me and was too much of a coward to face me after that, so of course I only hoped for that bleksem to burn in hell.

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This is my entry, my stance on life, I've noted what the rest of you have all gone through but I'm just not as strong...

THE COLOUR RED

Act I

The Red Pen

Nonkululeko is a disruptive learner in class and she distracts her classmates, much to the dismay of her teachers. She shows no interest in her schoolwork and continues to speak to teachers rudely. This is highly concerning and an intervention is needed if she wishes to progress to Grade 11.

Term Result: F-

*

Thenjiwe: I'm worried about Nonkululeko. Indaba yakhe isingaphez'kwami manje. Kunini kubizwa amafamily meeting?

Vusi: Lengane ayizwa, ngisamile ek'theni udinga ibhande nje qha.

Nhlakanipho: That girl is bitching around if you ask me. I mean the signs are all there.

Thenjiwe: Hhayi Nhlakanipho!

Nhlakanipho: Mama umjolo uyam'qeda. That's clearly the only thing on her mind. Y'all went to high school mos? I'm telling you right now that's what it is and until she stops obsessing over boys, this will never end.

Nhlakanipho casually bites into his apple before heading out of the lounge

Mr Gwala: Yazi Nonku, you really don't have to make things any harder for yourself. It's simple: *let a nigga smash*. Angithi that's how you teens talk nowadays. Or you aren't prepared to progress to Grade 11? I've heard many of your teachers complain about you and your results, so if I were you, I wouldn't hesitate to give it up to a real nigga.

Nonkululeko holding her assignment with tears building up in her eyes

Nonkululeko: Sir, I really don't want trouble. Please just tell me where I can improve my assignment.

Mr Gwala rips out a page from Nonkululeko's assignment and with his red pen draws a picture of a hairy cunt

Mr Gwala: Right here my baby.

**He bellows in laughter before ripping the page out of the assignment. The expression on his face turns stonecold as he draws red diagonal lines across the pages of the assignment.*

He scribbles at the top of the front page

"Question not answered"

Nonkululeko after packing her bag leaves the classroom in a haste

Thenjiwe: How was school, mntanami?

Nonkuleko: Fine mama. School was fine.

Thenjiwe: I'm glad you are staying behind after school. I have been concerned about your grades. Uqhubeke uzimisela ngane yami.

Nonkululeko looks at the crosses in red ink on her school books before crying herself to sleep

FAIL. FAIL. NOT GOOD ENOUGH. NO EFFORT MADE. SEE ME AFTER CLASS. NEEDS IMPROVEMENT. FAIL. Nonkululeko has not met the minimum requirements needed to complete Grade 10 and as a result, she will need to repeat the grade. Regards S Gwala DID YOU EVEN TRY? PROBLEM CHILD. YOU CAN DO BETTER. FAIL. QUESTION NO ANSWERED.

Act II

The Red Marks

The belt latched onto Nonkululeko's bare skin, leaving two, red parallel lines. This continued for another four minutes

Vusi: Usiphoxile Nonkululeko. Your mother and I spent a lot of money on your school fees.

[Vusi was calm now]

Vusi: I expect better results in future

Matilda: Everything okay back home?

Nonkululeko: Yeah, why wouldn't they be?

Matilda: I'm only asking because...well, um...

Matilda looks at the red marks on Nonkululeko's arms and legs

Nonkululeko: Oh that's nothing. You know me, always clumsy. Let me run along to class. See you around.

Mr Gwala: It's always a pleasure to see you Nonku. To what do I owe this pleasant visit?

Nonkululeko: I'll do it. I'll give you what you want.

Mr Gwala: Ahh that's a good girl and I believe it's what we both want. Not so?

Mr Gwala slips his hand in between Nonku's thighs. Slowly he reaches for her panties.

Thenjiwe: Did you have a productive day sweetheart?

Nonkululeko: I did ma. I must rest though. Excuse me.

Now in her room, Nonkululeko pulls down her panties. She stares at the red blood stains on them

With a razor in her hand she carves a deep cut into her inner thigh and lets it bleed

*

Nonkululeko walks in the room with a tired and forced smile on her face

Nonkululeko: I have my report, I hope I have made you proud.

Act III

The Red Stain

Nhlakanipho: Heard you're doing better in school. You finally got over that heartbreak of yours, huh?

Nonkululeko: Ukhuluma ngani, Nhlaka?

Nhlakanipho: You mean to tell me, your grades weren't affected by you chasing after boys in school?

Nonkululeko. Phuma k'mina. You don't know a damn thing about my life.

Principal Radebe: Educators and learners, it is with a heavy heart that I inform you of the passing of our beloved HOD, Mr Gwala. Mr Gwala was popular amongst all staff members as well as the learners and will be dearly missed. May I ask that the entire school stands as we take a moment of silence in honour of Mr Gwala.

Matilda: It's sad what happened to Mr Gwala, he was a great teacher.

Nonkululeko: Yeah? What makes you say so, Matilda?

Matilda: Are you kidding? He stayed with you and those other girls from Miss Khumalo's class as often as he could after school to ensure you get through the grade. Considering he doesn't get paid overtime, I rate he was a hero.

Nonkululeko: Other girls? He stayed after school with other girls?

Matilda: Yeah, he really did go out of his way.

Nonkululeko:

Thenjiwe: I heard about your teacher, mntan'ani. Nkosi yami, you must be devastated. We will forever be grateful that he helped you.

Nonkululeko:

Matilda: Nonku, did you notice anything strange in Mr Gwala's classroom today?

Nonkululeko: Uhhm, not that I recall. Why do you ask?

Matilda yanks Nonkululeko's arm and pulls her aside

Matilda: Okay so get this, I get to school early and before most learners started coming in, there were policemen here. Here's the tea: Mr Gwala was apparently killed in his classroom. There's a whole investigation going on. Insane right? Like, which twisted human being would want Mr Gwala dead? People are sick.

Nonkululeko: Mhhm

Matilda: And did you notice the red stain on his carpet? I reckon it was pretty ugly. Sheesh!

Nonkululeko: Nah, I must have missed it. Let's... uh... talk about something less depressing shall we?

in finding healing

I

the zong

♪*swing low, sweet chariot*♪

human waste. wooden floors polished with stench flavoured urine. a humid and thick atmosphere with gases that could no longer be kept in. faeces, some green with disease, some fluid like water from the consumption of food that had gone bad. slime, vomit and the smell of decaying corpses soon to be thrown overboard.

splash, negro one, nigger two, splash. negro lost count of how many negros thrown over. slip and slide. splash. a slap across the face by still winds. a lash on the back of a carcass that should have known better than to die. sea salts seasoning the wasted yet to be feasted upon by the vultures of the sea. human remains. bones displayed through hanging skin. a place like no other. shackles and shambles.

♪*comin' for to carry me home*♪

a place where dancing and music substituted the boredom of restless captors. compensation; none. confinement; plenty. children cried until their cheeks ran dry. a place where women lay in lost hopes taking entitled penetrators into their womanhood. blood coated walls and floors. some menstrual, some from lashes collected for having not known better than to take an attempt at making the ultimate sacrifice. stuck in a place without the slightest clue of what tasted more bitter on the tongue. the present or what was to come. two months pass. s t i l l, w e w a i t. remembering not to dare rock the boat by dying.

II

cotton candy

the sun licked the wounds off their backs until they were concealed in archives for stories to be told years from now. the fields clothed in green uniform and white hats swayed rhythmically as song erupted. hollering at nature for help the igbos sung. *keep picking nigger*. a slave tear falling onto foreign soil. cries falling on deaf ears. yet another brother fallen. *where is nigger four?* nigger four is found and takes two kicks to the chest. *nigger, get up!* the sweat on his back clings onto him, like his soul fighting, clinging desperately to his flesh. to no avail. another nigger dead. just another number.

niggers in this place did not pass on. they died. if not the flesh, the soul. a moment of silence. a bow from the uniformed fields and a continuation of the swaying, taking their hats off. mini clouds two meters off the ground. a screeching sun cracking open the wounds it once concealed. a black skin drunk on melanin and vitamin d. insects stampeding towards the direction of rotting flesh. not to mourn a trauma but to do what insects do. to engage in a human sized feast. the faint hearted being lashed back into consciousness. misery.

an open cut exposed to infection. continue picking. pick the cotton. pick yourself up. but don't pick a struggle. it's taken care of. own the struggle. drink some water or keep yourself hydrated with the phlegm that hangs at the back of your throat. play dead. death will make sure to find you. pick faster. allow the heat wave to slap you awake. are you dead yet?

♪ *I looked over jordan and what did i see* ♪

'cause we are free now. a new law passed. a captor with no intentions of informing us. a sudden realization that if he keeps us here, dancing with the uniformed fields, there will be trouble. free

to go. to live on. to finally allow space for grief, for scars to tell of our ptsd. not to confront those who sold us out but for a spell to break generational curses. tarnishing souvenir nooses sewn by our dear friends dressed in green.

♪ *a band of angels coming after me* ♪

Growing apart

Maybe we should call it quits.

Maybe we should.

Why was that so easy for you to agree on?

Why was it so easy for you to propose it?

I asked you first.

That is irrelevant

Are we going to finish having this conversation or what?

What?

I said –

I know what you said, hear it loud and clear.

Why are we going around in circles with this?

Because maybe that is what ought to happen.

You reckon?

Possibly, yeah.

You drain the life out of me.

It's the circle of life

Do you see what I mean?

Kinda.

I am tired of this.

Good, now we reconnect.

I curse the day I met you.

Under a maple tree.

I'm pretty sure that's not how it went.

How about our first kiss?

You loved every second of it didn't you?

Don't act like you didn't.

It didn't take long for me to fall in love with you?

Me neither.

I never stopped loving you.

I know.

How?

Well, we're still having this conversation.

You and I.

We will always find our way back to each other.

Torn

Look me in the eye when I speak

Yes ma'am

Answer when spoken to

Yes ma'am

Praat vir my Afrikaans

Jammer mevrou

That's my boy

Don't look me in the eye ,wena mfana

Yebo mama

Don't dare backchat me, uzokhala!

Yes mother

Ungazongikhulumela is'lungu la

Ngiyaxolisa mama

Nazoke – usungahamba,

What is one to do ma'am?

Nifunani kimi mama?

Torn, or should I say ngidabukile?

*

Well then miss mevrou, nawe mama

With all due respect

Regardless of the disrespect I have received

I can no longer conform to your preferences

Be yourself one says

Be like other kids says the other

A hybrid born out of a confused society

What in the actual fuck is one to do?

Well – I choose to be the truest self I have been conditioned to be
Do with that what you will

My Bucket List

Dear Reader

You and I are not friends, never will be. Call me fucked up, a sociopath and tell me how I need deliverance but do not call me your confidante. I propose only one reason for penning the narrative that is to follow. When my luck does run out, which it will, you will know better than to bury me with dignity. Dignity is dead.

Sam Junaid Keller:

I killed him for looking at me at the grocery store. Followed him home, he drove a fancy Audi and lived in a remote area, so of course that was convenient for me but heck, I would have stopped at nothing to have him dead nonetheless.

Bow and arrow. Your best friend when you don't want to bring any attention to yourself. Don't get me wrong. I loved the attention, the cat and mouse games with the police (which I will get to), but bringing attention to myself isn't always necessary.

Let's get back to Sam, I had a pretty mean aim, probably rusty now but it's no matter I trailed him until I was sure it was his yard that he was pulling into, that's when I struck at his exposed shoulder through his rolled down window. You should have seen his reaction. Jumping out the car and protesting. I could have killed him there and then but I needed him to suffer. It's always sweeter when you see your victim suffer. Yes, I said victim. His last words:

Son of a bitch! What the hell!?

With one of the grocery bags he had returned with, I orchestrated his slow and painful death. You know how a fish jumps and fusses when pulled out of water? Boy was it fun to watch. When he finally stopped breathing and the fussing stopped, it was a bitter sweet moment. Victory at long last, but I could no longer watch him squirm.

Natalie van Staden

Some of them fell prey to me wanting to send a message. Cat and mouse games as you may recall. I found honour in seeing posters with my face on with a "wanted" title. So you see, I wasn't crazy for killing Sam Keller for having looked at me. And the prize money was quite generous. I took a visit to the police station once, well disguised. Miss Natalie walked in. Did I mention how enthusiastic she was?

"The man you're looking for. I think I might have seen him at the gas station down the road. I managed to sneak a picture, and this is the registration number." They thanked her for her work and promised they would be in touch. Of course they knew little of what was to come.

As per the norm, I trailed her. It helps when you are, like me, also skilled to steal cars. You don't even have to put in as much effort in trying not to be seen, by the time they are looking for the car reported, you're already on the next.

Pretty girls like Natalie really should be more vigilant, especially with people like me roaming around. They found her dead on her porch with several gun wounds and a note:

I'd take the posters off if I were you, unless of course you want to be reading more of these notes. Your choice.

Long story short. They should have taken the damn posters off.

Tammy Smith

Really dedicated and a nuisance of a cop this one was. I must give it to her though. She was by far smartest. Always trusted her instincts and had a way of finding me. Although maybe I wanted to be found. Cat and mouse style. Of course she wasn't smart enough to call for back up or maybe she wanted all the glory for finally having taken a killer such as me down. She should not have been so greedy. That's how you wound up dead.

"Put your hands where I can see them." She had pulled me over for speeding or not stopping at a stop sign or some petty shit. I could have just chosen to continue to drive but by now we know why I chose to pull over.

"License and registration plea- wait a minute! You're-"

"In the flesh."

"Step out of the vehicle."

She honestly should have been faster with the handcuffing, I always kept a taser on me. Now I would go into detail of how Tammy Smith died but this one was too gruesome, even for me.

I was kicked out of school on the account that I was a threat to those around me. I have lived up to their expectations thus far. And like I have stated, until my luck runs out, I will continue to be exactly just that.

Lui Xin Rui

Okay but this particular oke asked for it. If you are smart enough. It doesn't take long to find out who your blackmailer is. Everything has to be carefully calculated. The phone calls. The pick-up points. Everything.

The fun part of this one is that you make him believe that he has won. You depict fear, answer yes sir and have him salivating at increasing his price. Then the waiting game begins.

Waiting for a location, an arrival and then an explosion... in that order. By the time the police get there, you're long gone. They would definitely know I was behind it but that didn't matter. Lui Xin Rui, you chose the wrong one to mess with.

The murders got boring after a while and I needed a new method to feel alive. So lingering outside high schools became my new thing. Patiently I did my research, analysing each skirt that crossed my eyes.

Why we should normalize checking up on each other

Passports would be collected and excitement would be the order of the day. An escape from everyone and their bullshit.

Words would be exchanged a thousand miles away from everyone and their bullshit when things did not go according to plan.

One would be labeled as useless, the other labeled as ungrateful.

A punch would be thrown, then another

Screams would go unheard.

The midnight breeze would, with its piercing coldness, serve as a reminder that the body would need to be discarded of quicker

And when dawn finally arrived after the longest night

nobody came to help because everyone was a thousand miles away,

continuing with their bullshit.

The Deepest Regret

An angry silence, an ultimatum, a threat to run the car into the bridge, eventually a forced response, sobbing, reassurance of a love that still exists, disbelief, resurfaced anger, a crippling accident under the influence, sirens, final tributes, a trial and a sentencing.

How are you (*really*)?

Are you happy?

This question is a rather complex one. We tell people we're fine when prompted with a "how are you?" Sometimes we add an "and you?" out of politeness, but by the time you finish speaking, they are already doing something else. So you see, people no longer care about how you are, it is just a formality and then you're left talking to yourself.

"Fine" means I have a roof over my head, I woke up today and I laughed at something I saw online earlier. "Fine" means I still get a payslip at the end of every month. I can still put food on the table and I still have friends I can call to complain about climate change and politics with.

But "Fine" also conceals a much darker side, the one we choose not to speak of because the same person that asked how you were, was already halfway out the room when you were ready to tell them how you really feel.

"Fine" means crying your eyes out at two in the morning, with your hand over your mouth so you don't wake the kids up. "Fine" means at least I'm still alive. It means I may have friends to call to complain about climate change and politics, but as soon as I start opening up about things that still haunt me, the network starts acting up, batteries become low or something comes up.

So the next time you ask someone how they are, please have the courtesy to pay attention or rather not ask at all.

Yes, they may lie and say they're fine, but do you blame them?

What happens in Vegas

"I don't understand why it's such a big deal to you. What did you expect to happen?"

Through choked sobs: "It's the lack of remorse for me. I have never in my life felt so disrespected."

"You weren't supposed to find out."

"Not the point!"

"You're ruining our honeymoon."

"Honeymoon!? You ruined this marriage before it even started."

"It-was-a-ONE-TIME-THING!"

Madness can be perceived in two ways or more but never one

I am convinced the girl next door is mad because:

5. she drinks herself to sleep every night.
6. she stays even though she is dead inside.
7. her arm is wrapped in a cast.
8. he will not change.
9. she knows how to take a beating.
10. she tried overdosing once.
11. she refuses to get help.
12. she loves him.
13. she understands.
14. she will protect him no matter what.

The girl next door is also mad

1. she cannot stick her nose out of my business
2. she does not know him like I do.
3. he has changed.
4. change isn't always good.
5. it wasn't.
6. if I stay here, I get to live.
7. if I leave, I don't.
8. I am coming out of this in a casket.
9. she's forward.
10. so what would she rather have me be?
Mad or dead?

Leave her for me

You promise yourself that it will only get better. You even see it in his actions. The small gestures turn into bigger ones. First a jewelry set then he arrives with car keys, and tells you to go outside, where you are greeted by a new luxury car. "It's yours," he says. You realize that you have hit gold when he presents you with a promise ring that comes with divorce papers. You finally get the courage to tell your friends and family about him. And now you find yourself seven years down the line with a man that's run out of excuses as to why finalizing the divorce is taking so long. After taking matters into your own hands, you find out that the divorce papers were fraudulent and he never intended to leave his wife. Instead you leave him, carrying rage and bitterness.

"This time I will leave her for real," he promises, begging you to stay.

The streets are cold but home is colder

My mom and I were best friends before he came into our lives. She knew me better than I knew myself and I promised myself to give her the world when I grew up. I would often hear stories of girls labeled as having daddy issues due to the absent fathers they grew up without but perhaps it was the love that my mom gave me that filled that gap of an absent father. I didn't even feel the gap, that's how good she was.

Then that Sakhile came into our lives and my own mother betrayed me. I remember how she promised that it would always be just us. Mom had been alone for so long when she met Sakhile, so I understood her even though I harbored mixed feelings. I understood how she loved him so much and how she went the extra mile to keep him happy.

Was I selfish to still want her attention? Her love and warmth? I reminded myself that mom deserved to be happy after all the hurt she endured in her life. I guess a deeper part of me was happy for her.

I never intended to break her happiness but when Sakhile started looking at me with very lustful eyes, I had to tell her. It pained me, but what pained me even more was her response. She refused to believe me and accused me of wanting to break them up. She sat me down to tell me that she still loved me and that I did not need to pull such stunts in order to get her attention. Sakhile didn't stop. Mom didn't stop dismissing me, instead she started beating me for being a liar. I needed to get away and so I ran, taking nothing with me but her jersey. It was the only form of warmth I would ever receive from her again.

Living in the streets wasn't easy. Begging for change at the robots, having to find a place of safety and surviving the winter nights was hard as hell. The fact that she never even tried to look for me broke me. I was at my weakest, but I stayed and pleaded with survival knowing that the streets were cold but home was colder.

The streets are cold but home is colder; the sequel

Mom, that colorful pedestal you have placed him on has wrecked a happy home. I read in the news of your brutal murder and I resented myself for having not been able to convince you. I needed you to see that he was bad news. Why did you turn on me, ma?

When a child that was close to my age when I ran from home, joined the streets telling me her story, I believed her. I believed her because I knew what it was like not to be believed when you were being truthful.

Things I should have said to save my mother's life

I was barely getting through this thing called life when upon telling my mother that I was drowning in depression, she simply asked me to translate “depression” into isiZulu. When I told her that I couldn’t, she replied with “Nazoke! Us Zulus can never get depressed.” She told me not to let western influences dictate my feelings to me. I nodded and took her word. I then took my baggage of emotional turmoil and packed it away in a box that I had labelled “Things to Repress”. I found comfort in razor blades slicing through my skin. I stayed sedated by her soothing lies and anti-depressants, which she’d kill me for, had she come to know about them.

I asked once or maybe seventy-seven times what had happened to dad. I don’t why I didn’t learn the first time she slammed her palm against my cheek demanding me to be quiet, that that question was not to be uttered, not in her house, not anywhere for that matter.

You are your father’s child. I grew up with those words thrown at me and like the obedient daughter that she had groomed me to be, I wore them like a medal. Proud. I didn’t know what that meant, all I knew was that she spat those words at me almost every time she announced how much of a disappointment I was.

I dreamed of him once; my father. His eyes had been ripped out of their sockets, his skin rotting into a greying mustard colour and around his neck, a bow tie made out of his tongue. I hovered over his body laughing wickedly and when the sun rays gently brushed against my bedroom window, I remember waking up still smiling. I’m sick, I thought. I’m really sick.

I dreamt of my mother too, her more often than him. She poured me a glass of whiskey and it was all too nice – until it wasn’t. I came to know that she too had a box she had neatly packed away deep in her memories. She just needed to be drunk enough. Drunk enough to tell me that I would never be successful. Drunk enough to tell me how her abandonment issues were the reason she poured poison in my ears and how I was the closest thing to my father that would ever pay for his mistakes. Except those insults, they weren’t just a dream, but that was my reality.

I should have never taken her word. I should have punched them right back down her throat. Have her choke on them like she made me drown in my non-existent depression. I’m bitter. I’m a mess. I’m a hazard to myself. I’ve come to learn that I am not my father’s daughter, but my mother’s.

I have adopted anger as my first language. Resentment is my religion. Maybe my anger is misplaced because in her cussing at his name, sometimes at me for merely looking like him, she evoked anger in me, not towards him, but to her. How could you not stand the sight of your own daughter and if asked why, the answer would be *because she’s a spitting image of him?*

After years of searching for my father and finally finding him, I got it. Really, I did. I got why she was mad. It’s too late now because she died before ever deserving my forgiveness. My pent up daddy issues bleed on these pages I write. I found not my father, but a sperm donor that would post me on his social media, professing his love for me, professing how glad he was he had found me. He boasted about me to his friends, not because he was proud of me

but because he had a point to prove. He had to prove to himself and others that he was not a deadbeat father. He had victories he had to claim. Victories that weren't his to claim.

You remember my first mistake, ma? How I broke your favourite vase, ma? And how you likened that to my drunkard father breaking homes. And if that wasn't extreme enough. You remember how I managed to stand up to you for the first time, ma? How instead of admitting that you had pushed me all the way too far, you said I had the same abusive tongue as my father. Oh! the fucking irony!

As for you dad, I stan your consistency. You stayed gone. Except, of course, for that one time you showed up at my wedding, yelling *That's my girl*. You remember how, in return, I asked you when my birthday was and how after I asked you that one simple question and the room squirmed in the silence that filled it. You broke my heart before any boy ever could. I suppose I should thank you. So, thank you dad. Thank you for the heads up. Thank you for having fucked ma over so much that she projected all the hurt you caused her on me.

Lastly, if anyone ever mutilates the body of these pages I write, I beg you, please don't believe me. I promise I'm pretending when I say I threw myself at two icy graveyards wishing they were still here. It's all a façade. My parents died a peaceful death, I assure you. But they're dead now. Life. It must go on. I must take on my religion once more and clothe myself in it because it's the only thing I know. So don't feel sorry for me when you see me wrapped in the clothes they left me to mourn their deaths.

Malume's role

I'm a big girl now and I have some news for mommy. I will write her a letter to tell her that I wish to stop bathing with my older sister. I will make it known to them both that it's for the best. With the letter, I will provide two pictures I took myself.

Exhibit A:

When Nonhle has taken her bath, the water is left brown and this no longer serves my interests as I have come to learn in my religious studies class that cleanliness is next to Godliness.

Exhibit B:

Nonhle has left the soap slimy and unrinsed countless times. I will no longer stand for it. I suspect it's her bodily fluids

I will also make it known that we all need to be honest with one another. The bathtub is simply getting too small for us two. Last week when Nonhle left for school earlier than usual, I had not taken a bath with her and Uncle K was kind enough to help me take my bath. I like uncle K because he never got in the bath with me. Uncle K understands that the bathtub is simply too small. I also like that uncle K takes his time in making sure I'm clean. He told me he would help me wash my private parts to help me reach the difficult parts. He said that's what family was for. In fact, he even gave me the courage to bath without my sister but he said mommy doesn't have to know. I will be bathing without Nonhle now and that is final. She also takes up all the water. I don't see how that's fair. Where does all the water go? I suspect it gets sucked in by her private parts and I think that explains why she takes up all the space in the bathtub. The water makes her bloated. Nonhle is fat but mummy says that's a bad word so I will leave it out of my letter. And perhaps in the next letter, I will ask mommy if I can move into my own bedroom too. Uncle K once asked that when I have my own bedroom if I will invite him. I think I will, he's always nice to me.

●

The whole family is in the living room and nobody is saying anything. I want to tell them that Uncle K has been my only friend but I have been asked not to talk. Nonhle is on Twitter. She hashtags her tweets #familyaffairs #ayeye. Uncle K's head is hung into his chest, his hands balled into his pockets.

●

I watch as the police escort Uncle K out the yard. Where are they taking him mama? Did he get a job as a policeman? "No," was her only response. She gripped me by the shoulder and walked me back into the house without a sound

Fairytales

We sit on the car bonnet overlooking the mountains in the distance. She asks me what I tell them when they ask what happened. I tell her that I've become so good at convincing them that I'm just a really clumsy person. Whether it's, "I fell down the stairs," or "I should be more careful with knives," it doesn't matter much. What matters is that they buy into the stories I sell. And for those that look but are too afraid to ask, I tell them anyway. I do it for my dignity, to spare myself the shame. But most of all, I do it because she didn't mean it. She was just angry, loves me and this time around, won't ever do it again. I catch a glimpse of her from the corner of my eye and I can tell that she is remorseful. She is the woman I chose to marry after all.

Stitches

Does it work the same with feelings? Huh? The stitches? How the flesh is brought back together and it eventually heals. Do damaged people have that luxury? If they are willing to. Oh so it's a choice? I believe so, yes.

A dagger and a trail of blood

The sirens have quieted. Police officers flood the crime scene. They find a dagger and a trail of blood but no body. The dagger quickly admits guilt of having participated in some foul activities. But that's all the clues it will give. It teases its audience as they scrutinize it for further clues. Detectives shortly follow, debating on possibilities and searching for answers only known by the dagger that lay on the carpet floor. The dagger's teeth are still bared, as if they still remain in anticipation of slicing open more throats, chests. The dagger reminds its audience of its accomplice, and the attention shifts to the trail of blood, it invites its audience to follow it, and promises to provide more satisfactory answers than the dagger that continues to tease all those that take turns to interrogate it. The trail of blood is long and curvy and just when its audience is convinced they have reached their answer, a bleached floor in the next room silences it and just like that, the bleach prevails.

A still battlefield

My husband no longer tells me he loves me. Neither does he argue with me anymore. The sex is minimal and his eyes don't light up like they once did when he laid eyes on me.

"Be honest with me, you have fallen out of love with me haven't you?"

"You're the mother of my kids." His eyes stay glued to the wall until he can look at me

"My love. It will always be us."

"Thanks to the kids, right?"

He wipes my tears and walks away

Stranded

There's a woman who lies on a dirt road in the middle of this dreadful village. She is still intoxicated from the previous night and still has vomit on her blouse. She is missing a shoe and a panty. I can't tell you more details about how she landed here because then I would be putting myself in danger too but from what I see, she asked for it.

Broken crayons still colour

I grew up in a small village, and my family, which included my mother, father and four younger brothers was very traditional. It was difficult growing up and being the only girl amongst my siblings because it meant that I had to do all the chores on my own and I had a different curfew to my brothers. It didn't matter that they were younger, I was to be home before sunset.

I was particularly close to my youngest brother, with whom I would always play and he would always look forward to seeing me after school. I did not continue with school after Grade 4 because my parents felt it was more necessary that my brothers get educated as they would one day be men; meaning it was more important for them to get schooling. However, I still bonded with my youngest brother when he had homework. Being with him as he wrote his homework was beneficial. Through this, I was also indirectly able to educate myself.

I had to grow up watching my father beat my mother, but that became a norm. I did not want to live in that toxic environment for the rest of my life so I worked hard.

My brother and I made a pact that we would always be there for one another even after our father eventually killed our mother. The pact was a two-way agreement between my brother and I was actually my promise to him.

He was seven years younger than me and I did not expect him to take care of me. Perhaps when he grew older and he became stronger and wiser, he would be able to, but for now, it was my duty to protect him, even from our own parents if I needed to. As for my other brothers, well I guess they had each other.

When my brother eventually finished school, we were meant to celebrate as a family. My brother always looked forward to the day but it was a bittersweet one. Firstly, our mother was in a critical condition with third degree burns in hospital, for obvious reasons. Secondly, we knew he would not be able to move to the city and get the proper university education he deserved. But I was happy for him nonetheless and I wanted to make him feel special. It was just the two of us now, our older brothers had moved out and never bothered to keep in touch. I always wondered if they were okay and how they were making ends meet, but they were responsible for themselves I suppose. And my father, he was somewhere not known to us, drinking away his sorrows. He never, not once, cared to visit our mother in the hospital.

You know how people always say, "You don't just wake up and decide to up and leave?" Well, I did. Our father had not returned from his boozing and mother was still in hospital when I got up and packed both mine and my brother's bags. I woke him up very early in the morning before the rooster even got to crow. *Siyahamba*, I told him. I remember him waking up and looking at me with red eyes. He was my baby that one. He simply asked about our mother and I told him that she would be taken care of.

Honestly speaking, I had no plan and I was blindly leading my brother and I into the city not knowing where we would sleep or where our next meal would come from. Zolani Street.

That was the main road from here to the city. I took one last look at our rondavel and from there on, there would be no turning back.

After walking an extremely long distance in the midday heat lashing against our backs, we stopped. My brother had gotten evidently irritated and I felt like I was already letting him down. I gave him some water to keep him hydrated but of course I knew there was still a lot more I had to do.

Our misfortune finally came to an end when in the distant dusty road we saw two donkeys pulling carts with people coming from the village . When they reached us, they asked us if we were not Dimpho's kids. Upon confirming this to them, they informed us that she had not made it and that we ought to get back home right away.

I explained to them that we had been sent by our father to fetch my other brothers from the city but of course they did not buy it, considering the bags and all. I took on survival of the fittest mode and I really just had to keep it moving.

After this, my brother who was my only friend turned against me. He ran off after cussing at me and telling me how I had tricked him into letting our mother die alone with nobody by her side. He said I was the biggest snake of them all. I had been through a lot in life, but losing my brother broke me.

I do not know where he ran off to that day, it all happened so fast. I eventually made my way back home and I had not found him, the neighbors did not know anything either. I had broken my promise to him and I cannot say why that mistake, instead of breaking me, gave me more purpose in life, to find him, hopefully alive and to make things right by him. I was torn by his departure and I was never the same if I am being honest. Even the slightest hope of him being out there or ever coming back home, gave me all the reason to live. He is all I have. I still have him, I know it.

Life Orientation

A hand of yet another curious student shoots up. "Teacher, why are we told to smile when taking pictures?" I look at him, with my head tilted, wondering if this will be yet another topic that I may just again fail at nipping in the bud before it spirals out of control. Snapping out of my gaze, I simply tell him that we just have to look decent, and that it makes the picture look better. Hoping my explanation suffices, I turn to the dusty blackboard escaping the twenty-two pairs of eyes waiting for me to instruct them on how to do this thing called Life. Hell, I didn't have the answers either but as you'll learn, the only way I knew how to be open with anyone was when I was bleeding.

"Well that's just misleading..."

"-- Wouldn't you say? Very pretentious actually."

"That's enough-Amanda!"

"Let her speak, aren't you the one that always encourages freedom of expression in your classes?"

The chalk shakes between my fingers and the classroom lulls into a suffocating silence. Clearing my throat, I walk steadily towards Amanda. "Is there anything you would like to share with the class, Amanda?"

"After class will do"

And when the siren rang and all those that had ran out quick enough to show their lack of concern and the ones that dragged their feet, staying out of inquisitiveness could no longer drag their feet, the class hollowed to two.

Amanda, still at her desk with her arms folded, begins to talk: "It's what you aren't sharing Ma'am. It's how you take what you have buried so deep inside you that allows you to walk into this classroom every single day. You project your demons on us, instead of inspiring us, you depress us. I may be a mere high school kid without half the education you have acquired but I see how you are affected. I don't know what by. The façade that is your smile, we see it. Get help, I learned at a very young age to be there for my mother when she couldn't, my parents; I saved them from themselves.

"You wouldn't understand, Amanda.

"I'm not asking you to make me understand. I'm asking you to get help"

*

“Start at the beginning”

My baggage is infinite layers of complicated, infinite layers of origins.

I could begin by telling my therapist that it began when one of my learners was brave enough to call me out on my bullshit.

But then I'd have to unravel that bullshit and we'd be here all day so I figure we might as well be.

*

My menses started when I was eleven, mama had apparently been meaning to have “the talk” with me but somehow never got to doing it. I had hidden my blood-stained panties between the mattress, out of embarrassment I suppose. I later learned how that led me to wishing I hadn't dared. Watching our normal Sunday night bioskop with my siblings was disturbed by a loud “Ngiyahlolelwa! Not in my house! Thani!!” I ran towards the voice knowing and dreading what was to come.

After the chaos had died down and mama had exhausted her airtime calling every relative in her phonebook to inform them of how much of a disgrace I was, malume called me to my room, assuring mama that he'd talk some sense into me.

*

Insert this way up

As he had promised, it didn't hurt. He had shoved a foreign object inside me and made me understand that it would help cease the bleeding and also assured me that I didn't have to be afraid. With his hand on my thigh, he cupped my chin with the other and told me not to cry anymore. Malume whispered things to me that night. I slept less afraid than before, resting in knowing that I wasn't dying and nothing was going to happen to me.

*

Making plans

Malume lived a good forty-five minutes away from us, but since mama's hysteria over my disgracefulness, his visits became more frequent. Every month, he would come with new foreign objects that he would help me insert and on days he couldn't be there, he would ask me to send him pictures to make sure I had done it correctly. And soon enough, he'd ask me to move to his house. Out of concern that mama already had too much on her plate and seeing he didn't have kids, it only made sense to her that I go.

*

Margret: How about we stop here for today?

- I was a kid, Margret! Do you understand that I was a kid!!

Margret: I know,I know!

*

- So, I went to see a therapist today...

Gontse: mhm

-it was a bit much, talking about my childhood you know...

Gontse: mhm, have you cooked?

-Gontse, It's two a.m, I didn't know if you'd be coming home or not.

Gontse: So this therapist of yours, did you tell them that the only thing you're good for is that thing between your legs.

-how could you-

Gontse:Well? Am I wrong? Gontse: I need some air, don't wait up.

*

Today, my Life Orientation class is disturbed by an urgent announcement from the headmaster, who announced that he is stepping down with immediate effect. Amanda by 'coincidence' finds me shuffling through students in the hallway. "Maybe you should do so too." she says.

*

-I'm here

-Where would you like us to start today?

-You know it really annoys me you never guide me through these sessions. Like I'm just supposed to sit here and have you listen to how life is doing a number on me. Hah!

-Remember, my job is to listen, I need you to be able to open up more.

-You mean like I did to my uncle?

-...No...

-Why don't we take five...

*

The heart of Hillbrow

After I grew up, or to be more accurate, when my body had fully transitioned into womanhood, my uncle took less interest in me. I had fallen behind my peers at school during the years I had to stay home due to a lack of fees to fund my studies. One night, my

uncle returned home drunk and chatty. His usual self, except that this time, he was accompanied by a man who looked like he was in his early sixties.

“As you know, things haven’t been easy,” he took a gulp of his brandy, swallowed, then continued talking. “This kind gentleman here has offered to help us in making all our problems go away.” I looked at them both, trying to figure out what he meant.

The man had a patchy graying beard and a scar on his neck. The entire time, he faced down and had his hands stuffed in the pockets of his trousers.

“I’m not sure I understand,” I pause to give leeway for an explanation. “Don’t worry sweetheart, I put in a good word for you. I told him how fun you are behind closed doors.”

-The rest is history I suppose.

-I need more than that, I know it may not be easy to talk about but how did these events make you feel? How did you manage them?

-How do you think?

*

This one man had khaki overalls and wore leather shoes that, when taken off, blessed the room with an overbearing smell. We didn’t talk much. We both knew what had to be done and it just saved us the hassle when we cooperated with one another. This one, in particular, made it a point to maintain eye contact during his session. He ran his fingers along my body, never breaking eye contact. It’s as if he wanted to see how my body reacted to his and if I did not give him the reaction he expected or wanted, he would go harder and get aggressive. I just wanted him to nut faster and I gave myself to him fully, the best way I knew how. This one was different though. Perhaps I even grew to hate him less than I did the others.

I do not disregard how he insulted me when we first met, how he told me how dirty I was and how he would not sleep with me. “I just want us to play a little, what do you say?”

Like I had a choice.

“You don’t have to do this.” I don’t say anything.

“I can take care of you, give you the life you have always dreamed of, get you back to school and we can do life together.”

“Me? This dirty girl?”

“Come now, I only said that because you deserve one person that will treat you the way you deserve to be treated. It’s all these other men you offer yourself to that make you dirty.”

“Offer myself!?” I scoff.

“Well, don’t you?”

“You think I’d be here if it were up to me, huh?”

“Play nice now.”

“Can we get on with it. Please.”

“Listen to me and listen to me very carefully. I want to help you. But only if you’ll let me.”

“So did my uncle. And here we are.”

He dug into his overalls and pulled out a business card and left it on the side of the mattress before letting himself out.

*

-You mentioned that you have kept his contact details all these years. Why is that?

-For the very same reason I’m here today.

-That being...?

-It’s the life I grew to know, if a teenager half my age can so easily call me out on my bullshit, how long will it be before I am sent packing for being incompetent? I do not belong in a school. It’s clear to see that with the connections Gontse has built, I was able to get this job. I don’t even know half the shit I’m doing half the time. Heck I didn’t even complete twelfth grade.. What could these kids possibly learn from me? They don’t need me.

-But isn’t that why you are here? To move past the life you lived back then and start afresh? What about your husband?

-I can only fool myself for so long. Him too? It’s just a matter of time.

*

My husband is not perfect, actually he is far from it, but he is an escape. What from? I am still trying to figure that out.

“Honey.”

“What?”

“I –“

“Talk.”

“Does she make you happier?”

“What are you talking about this time?”

“Her.”

“I love you.”

“Do you?”

“I built you from nothing. Does that make sense?”

“Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if you didn’t.”

“Ungrateful bitch.”

*

It’s another day at work, doing a job that does not excite me. It never has. It is just an escape, but I am slowly coming to learn that an escape will serve its person for only a little while. Amanda sees right through me and this surprises me. Then it hits me.

Racing out of my classroom, I trip over the leg of my desk before being able to recompose myself. “Where is she? Amanda! Where is she?” I scream, fumbling over my feet in the corridors. My chest is tight and my palms are sweating. A couple of students peer through the windows and Mr Pillay and Miss Zungu come out of their classrooms trying to find out what the fuss is about.

“Uph? Ndifuna uAmanda!” I am screaming now.

Miss Zungu grabs my arm as a means to calm me down, but it fuels me even more.

“Amanda Teeke?”

“Yes, where is she? I need to see her now!”

*

“I believe you were looking for me.”

“Not here!”

I signal for Amanda to follow me into my classroom and have her sit down. “It all makes sense now, all this time, you knew, you knew because you’re one of us, aren’t you? I know a person from the industry when I see one.” Amanda goes silent. “The tongue ring, that’s the initiation mark, that one to be more specific, come on Amanda.”

Finally breaking her silence, she says “I don’t know what you want me to tell you.”

“How about we start off with a confession?”

“So what? You’ll run off to tell the HOD now? Have one of those little pity meetings of yours?”

“You know very well I won’t and I cannot do that. I’ve been around enough to know that you aren’t doing this by choice. Who is he?”

She bellows in laughter and looks at me for a long time, her head cocked to the side. “So you think you have me all figured out huh? Look, I only told you to get help because you obviously are not able to put other things aside. I’ve known about your past for a while, I didn’t make a fuss about it because – well, quite frankly, I don’t really care. What I do care about is you projecting your baggage on the rest of us. Heck, I live this life, you don’t see me falling into pieces in front of everyone. This better be the last time I find you in my business.”

Without giving me an opportunity to respond, Amanda swings her backpack over her shoulder and walks out. The tears welling up in my eyes start to burn until I can no longer contain them. She was right I think, I cannot keep it together, not for the life of me.

*

-“Well hello there! I – uhm, I don’t believe we have a session scheduled today.”

-“I don’t care. I need to see you.”

-“I would love to help but, I’m afraid I have another booking, they should be here in a moment.”

-“I’ll pay double. I just-need to see you-*please*”

A woman and a man walk hand in hand, with confusion on their faces.

“Are we, uhm, interrupting something here?”

“Actually, as a matter of fact, yes, you are, I need to see Dr Cross as a matter of urgency! You walk in here, holding hands rubbing it in all our faces how perfect your lives are, well we get it. So if you two could please just understand one thing; not all of us live rosy lives like you. So please, just let me have this session!”

My face has heated up and my nostrils are flared. Dr Cross stands there, perplexed, not knowing what to say or do.

“Ma’am please calm down, I’m sure we can come to a resolution, but first I need you to be calm.”

“No, we will just reschedule Dr Cross, she clearly needs the help more than we do.” the lady says.

Upon hearing these words, I felt sick and probably would have thrown hands at her had she not started walking away immediately after speaking.

*

-“Look, I want to help you and seeing you get better is my priority but I can’t have you storming into my office like that. All my clients are equally important to me. I hope we won’t have a similar situation in future, otherwise I hate to say it, but I will not be able to continue seeing you.”

-“Of course, I mean that’s how it always goes right? Everyone gains access to me, and then they toss me aside like I’m nothing. I have feelings dammit!”

-“What happened today?”

-“She psychoanalyzed me. I mean how dare she!? What’s more is that she is just as bad as I was, if not worse. She made me feel so small.”

I struggle to continue talking with the crack in my voice and I sit rocking in my chair across Dr Cross.

-“I think it’s about time I make use of that number I have kept all these years. Yes, that’s exactly what I’m going to do. Thanks for the talk Dr Cross.”

I rush out of her office and fiddle desperately for my car keys until I find them. I’m going to tell him tonight.

*

There is no difference between tonight and the other nights, except for the fact that when my husband finally arrives back home from his usual stop at his mistress’ place, I will finally have the balls to ask him for a divorce.

I pace up and down the kitchen and lounge area playing the exact words I will say to him when he finally walks through that door. Why did the bastard marry me? Why drag me out of the only way of life that I know?

My mind drifts back to the day we met.

* * *

I had gotten into a really messy altercation with one of the men I was sleeping with and I am still so thankful that my uncle had not been present that day. He got off on watching and would sit in a chair in the room pleasuring himself to whoever I was with that day. My memory fails me now but if I remember correctly, that day, he had gone to a business meeting. He hadn’t specified what it would be about, but it promised to bring change into our lives.

In taking full advantage of my uncle’s absence, the man had tried to run off without paying. I knew that upon his return, my uncle would ask me for money and if I failed to provide it, I would be as good as dead.

“You have to pay! That was the agreement!” I said. The man paid no attention to what I was saying and continued buckling his trousers. I started yelling and threatening to tell my uncle if he walked out without paying. But all he did was smirk and shake his head, “You honestly think that he would believe you, girl? Don’t fool yourself.” Of course, I knew this, I was only trying to scare him. “Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said, “you are going to pack all your things, all of them. I am giving you thirty minutes. When you are done with that, you are going to get in that car over there and wait for me.” He pointed at a silver car

parked on the street across the flats. "Don't try anything funny because I will find you and you will really wish you had not met me. Understood? Oh & I need you to hand me your ID."

I nodded with tears in my eyes, I no longer had any fight left in me. I did as I was told and started packing the few clothes that I had. It did not take more than ten minutes.

I walked to the car which he unlocked for me, then locked again immediately after I got in. I watched him walk back into the flats and he did not reappear for at least five minutes.

When he did, he got into the car and we drove off. The ride was silent and I was scared to ask him where he was taking me. "You are South African aren't you?" he asked. "Y-yes," I stammered. "Good," he said. "And how old are you?" "Turning nineteen, sir." "Excellent."

He did not say anything after that and that's when I asked him, "What are you going to do with me?" "I ask the questions around here, your job is to answer and comply where needed." he said. "My uncle is going to find you, you know. He would do anything for me." Without saying a single word further, he shook his head and turned into a dark and unfamiliar road.

*

I woke up in a big bed and a room where I saw the man. He was bent over on a chair, cleaning his shoes. "Where am I?" I asked him puzzled.

He casually glances over at me before continuing to shine his shoes. "The beauty awakes at long last. Heck you gave me quite a hassle last night."

On the side of the bed I see two syringes. "Did you drug me!?" I hiss.

Nothing a little propofol can't fix. Besides, you needed the rest. We have a long day ahead of us."

He dials a number then proceeds to hand me the phone. "It's your uncle, he'll fill you in."

"Malume! This crazy man took me. Please gotta come fetch me!"

"Calm down, you're safe there. Just follow his orders and we will be good. I need your full cooperation. That man is our friend. Just trust me. You trust me right?"

"But-"

"Trust me"

The call drops.

"I stare back at the stranger across the room, frowning. "Who are you anyway?"

He opens the wardrobe and takes out a white dress. "Here's what you will wear today. Freshen up and get ready. We still have plenty of time to get to know each other."

*

Later, we arrive at a Home Affairs where we are met by a man dressed in a black suit and shades. "We've arrived," he tells me, reaching for the inside of his pockets. He has a quick exchange with the man in black before he walks off.

"Now look, my name's Gontse. Why are we here? Well, soon to be wife, we are here because you and I are getting married. I'm not from around, I need papers, I'll spare you all the boring details. Here's what you need to know: One, you and I will get inside this building, we will sign a couple of documents, and I will take care of the rest okay? You help me, I help you."

*

- "So if I understand you correctly, your now husband kidnapped you from your uncle as one of his clients back then, forced you into a marriage in order to gain citizenship and then upon receiving it, offered you a home and a new life through his connections?"

I sigh.

- "Pretty much."

- "Right. Earlier you mentioned that you sometimes have questions around why he needed you to gain citizenship if he already has so many backdoor connections. Have you ever brought this up with him?"

- "Oh God no, I try by all means possible not to rock the boat. And what's more, I don't think I want to question him on it, he gave me a new life. It was scary at first, then I got used to it, like I always do, I grew to love him and I think he loved me too. But now... I'm not so sure."

- "Where do your doubts stem from?"

- "Well, it's no longer just us for one..."

I gaze into the distance before coming back to the present.

- "Weren't we supposed to be talking, I don't know, about the past?"

- "We are. I will elaborate, you may be experiencing doubts in the present, however I believe something in the past must have brought them up. That is what I am trying to get at. Once we establish that, we will be making progress."

*

It took me a very long time to trust and begin to love Gontse. It really was love born out of fear, if that is even a thing. My uncle never found me and I wondered if he was angry that I had left or whether he was actually relieved. Because, if we are being honest, I felt like I was costing him much more than he was making off prostituting me.

Gontse was a businessman and in the first weeks of living with him, I would overhear his conversations with other businessmen on the phone. He would talk about how business

was slow before and how it had picked up after he got his citizenship. Something about people being reluctant to do business with foreigners, I did not understand much of that logic, I mean could they not see or hear that he was not from here? I would also hear him on the phone talking about me and from the things he would say, I got to really understand that he was in actual fact more concerned about making money than ever pursuing a real relationship with me. So, I learned to know my place in his life, and to be appreciate that he was being kind enough to still provide me with food and shelter, even after he had gotten what he wanted from me.

I think it took two years for him to finally establish his own company and for it to generate huge profits. I remember him coming home in a very good mood one night and he called my name repeatedly until I was in sight. When he saw me, he excitedly embraced me for a very long time before leaning in for a long passionate kiss. He had never done that before. When the kiss ended, he gripped me firmly by the shoulders and reminded me of the words he had said to me when we first met: *You help me, I help you.*

“You helped me when I needed you the most, and yes I do understand that I may not have gone about things in a gentle way but I was desperate at the time and I took advantage of the fact that you were too. But look on the bright side, it all paid off now and I want to celebrate this with you. I owe so much of my success to you.” Gontse said.

“Gontse I don’t understand, am I your wife now, I mean in the real sense? I asked him.

He chuckled and then smiled at me, “I would love nothing more than that.”

It was all just so puzzling to me. I have never known myself to be a lovable being, I did not know how to be a girlfriend, let alone someone’s wife. One thing that I did know though was that I would be a fool to refuse the love of someone who had helped me so much.

*

-Right, so let us talk about when you started noticing changes in his behavior or when he started seeing someone else as you mentioned earlier.

-Does it matter at this point?

-Your feelings matter, and this makes you feel something. Let us unpack that.

*

Gontse and I were happy, extremely happy; it became a tradition for us to travel abroad during the festive season. We made so many memories; it was literally just us against the world. He had even started engaging with me on business related matters, valued my opinion and showed me the ins and outs of how he managed to grow his company. He had even mentioned that he would love nothing more than for us to have kids together one day and have them take over our legacy. Dreamy right? Without a doubt, Gontse had given me the confidence to be more involved in his work life and I suggested that he broadens his horizons by taking on clients internationally. Gontse, being the go-getter that he was, managed to do that very quickly.

This meant that he also had to travel a lot between countries, sometimes for weeks on end and although I would sometimes travel with him. I had to sit out other trips because he had entrusted me to take over some of his business operations from home. And I was also being considered as a teacher at a school nearby because Gontse knew the principal there. I honestly did not need the money but I needed to keep busy and for once, I felt like I had a purpose and a place in the world.

Gontse was on one of his business trips in Singapore when I received a call from him. He spoke to me about the usual, letting me know how everything was going and telling me how much he missed me. Then I heard a woman's voice in the background and straight after that, the call dropped. I called him back immediately and he started by apologising and telling me that the service in his hotel room was poor. I never confronted him about it, I was sure of what I had heard but I thought about all that I would be losing if I ended things. But of course, trust between us was never the same after that. Whenever he would go to his trips, he would insist that I stay behind and that gave me even more reason to believe that what I heard over the phone that one time, had become a regular thing. He would come back with gifts and fresh flowers, talking about how he could not wait until he was back home in my arms. This continued for a long time, so long that eventually, he stopped pretending. And that was the end of a short-lived beautiful love story. My Gontse was gone. And soon enough, he started seeing other women even while he was in the country. 'Business meetings' got longer and his appetite got smaller.

As he grew accustomed to his sneaking around, he also became very unapologetic about his actions, so much so that he never even bothered with explanations anymore. If he smelled like another woman, a mere shrug of the shoulders would for him suffice as an adequate 'explanation'.

Getting the teaching job helped me to forget about the stress at home. When I started, he changed his working hours to oppose mine. When I was at home, he had work and when I was teaching, he would be home. Whether or not he had company was something I preferred not to confirm.

Eight years. Eight years of a loveless marriage. I was tired of it all. Having to watch what I said because I would be nowhere without him. I was nowhere and nobody when he met me and I survived just fine. I took my anger to school every day and took it out on those I had authority over and those that could not do anything about it. Until I met Amanda.

*

-Amanda, your student? The one that told you to get help?

-Yes, that one. I suppose I'm thankful to her.

-Why is that?

-I think like I said before, and I mean it this time, I am finally ready to stand up to him.

-Okay, and what do you think this may entail?

- It entails a lot, I may lose my job, my home. Everything but I am ready for all of that.

-Have you thought this through, I need you to be safe, and I mean that in all ways possible.

- He would not dare lay a hand on me.

-Do you have somewhere you can go should he decide to kick you out?

-He can't. He has no right to. Not when I still love him. Otherwise, I would have called that number I have been holding on to for so long.

-Would you say that, if you are being truly honest with yourself, you have not kept that number for a place to fall back to should things not work out with your husband?

- That's ridiculous, he probably does not even remember me.

-Then why keep it if he doesn't?

-...Perhaps a small part of me still hopes that he might. He has to remember me.

*

When I left Dr Cross' office, I was sure of it, this time I really was. Gontse had disrespected me enough and it was high time I put an end to it. Planning on confronting him had to be the most nerve wrecking, most exciting thing I had ever planned to do. For dramatic effect, I got home and boiled water like they do in the bioskops. Whether or not I was going to peel his skin off with boiling water would depend on how much remorse he showed. If he even tried to do anything short of kissing my ass and worshipping the ground I walked on after the confrontation, I would definitely either be sleeping in a jail cell or singing hallelujah at getting away with murder.

As the water came to a boil, I readjusted my apron and placed my hands on my hips. Beef stew or chicken curry? I decided to go with chicken curry, Gontse's favourite. I needed him in a good mood before I fucked up the rest of his night. Hmm, what else? Candle lit dinner, yes!

Once the cooking was done, and the candles were lit, I got to my brand new lingerie. Man, he was going to be drooling. It felt good to be looking forward to a conversation with him where I would be in charge for once. I could not wait to see him down on his knees.

Sexy outfit? check. An irresistible home cooked meal? check. Now we wait. Dammit, I had forgotten that the fucker could get home as late as two o'clock in the morning and it was only ten o'clock. Should I call him? No, probably not, he would just find it as a reason to stay out longer with that mistress of his. I blew out the candles and put something on TV to watch. I would see his car lights as soon as he drove up the driveway.

Two hours passed. I was getting agitated and drowsy, but I refused to allow myself to end another night in misery because of Gontse's nonsense. I was going to wait for him with these red and heavy eyes.

*

I woke up to the sound of the front door opening. How could I have allowed myself to fall asleep. It doesn't matter, it was not too late. I switched off the TV and hurried to the kitchen before he could get there. I reboiled the water and made sure my gown fully covered my lingerie.

"Gontse darling, is that you? Shit! The candles," I hurried to the dinner table and lit them again. I heard him mumble something but there were no footsteps coming towards the kitchen. "Gonste!?" I repeated. Still nothing. Did he want him to fetch him with this boiling water? Argh! I decided to head to the front door to see what the hold up was.

"Babe, It's almost midnight, I prepared us a lovely dinner. And I have a sweet surprise for you for dessert." I came closer to him to grab his hand. He just looked at me over his shoulder and continued looking out the front door not saying anything. Why was he still standing at the door anyway? What was he looking at? "Babe?"

"Not now" he finally spoke. Where was that damn water? Oh I clearly had it in me, it was confirmed. "You don't get to call the shots anymore Gontse, fuck you, this bullshit ends today." I yelled. "Be quiet!" Gonste ordered me. "No, you don't get to tell me that!" Gonste suddenly snapped and had me pinned against the wall with his hand around my throat. "I am not going to tell you again." he snarled.

Still pinning me against the wall, his gaze remained outside. Footsteps approached but I could not see anything. And I stayed in place, calculating my next move.

"Hello, Nomalanga. It's been far too long, how have you been?"

"Malume?" I looked at Gontse, feeling very puzzled. He let go of me and whispered something in my uncle's ear. All the energy that I had towards calling the shots and telling Gonste shit, quickly turned into fear, I did not know whether to run to my uncle or my husband for safety. I looked at both of them, slowly backing away.

"Aren't you going to come and give your malume a hug nana? For old time's sake. Woza." he said, taking a step towards me.

"Gontse, what is he doing here?" I asked him, I was trying to keep my shit together.

"The real question, my love, is what are *you* still doing here? Mina sengiright ngawe." he said.

"Uthini kumina?" I asked him.

Gontse turned back to the door and looked at the car, which had not been parked inside the garage as usual.

"You're sending me back to him?" I asked. "I don't know what you two have planned here but I am not the kid I was once, I am tired of both of you thinking you own me. I heard the kettle come to the boil in the kitchen. Again I slowly continued backing away from them both. "No need to be sneaky with the walking away sweetheart, you're a pro at that I know, but feel free. This time nobody will try to stop you, pack your things, lala." Gonste said. Malume roared with laughter. "I see what you did there!" Gontse joined in the laughter. All I could do was to just stand there in complete bewilderment not understanding whether or not they had been in contact with each other all these years. Had my uncle sold me to him and everything else as a pretense? Uyayazi ifilimu!? But why would he take me back?

*

My uncle looked at Gontse, "The lovely lady should be here in no time, let's escort the used goods out." They burst into laughter once again. "And then wena? Wathithibala nje? Get the fuck out of here Wait for me in the car!" my uncle lifted his hand, pretending as if he was about to hit me, then put it back down. "What kind of sick shit is this?" I stared at Gontse, waiting for him to answer. "Are you seriously replacing me?" Fuck this! Besides, I was planning on leaving you anyway!" my voice trembled. They scoffed in my face as an indication to me that without them, I would not make it out there on my own.

"Gontse and I have had great business deals over the years and he's been a loyal client. If he wants fresh pussy, that's what he will get. You're ruined. I will have you back with me for a bit, what'd you say? I'm sure we can still gather a few cents with what you have left to offer." Gontse hands Malume a thick envelope looking proud of himself.

"Gontse!" I looked at him with desperation in my eyes hoping he would change his mind.

It was futile. He did not care. I could see it on his face. Malume seemed bored.

Having had enough of their mockery and dismissive behavior, I ran to the bedroom and banged the door shut. I felt my lungs closing up in my chest, and then realized that I needed to compose myself. Breathe! Breathe! Where could I run to? I would figure it out later. I started packing hurriedly, while making sure to damage furniture in the room. Dr Cross! She would know how to advise me! Wait! The business card! Maybe I could still call him, would he still remember me? He needed to remember me. I dug the business card out from under the files I had hidden it in all these years and shoved it in my pocket. I continued with the packing and when I was done, I took off my pants for the grand gesture. Crouching over Gonste's bed, I relieved myself and wiped my ass with his sheets then buckled my pants back up. I then picked up a stool from the bed and threw it against the wall, and smeared what was left on my hand on the wall on my way out.

Before reappearing in front of them, I made sure that I was composed. "I am leaving and you can't stop," I told them. "And what do you reckon you will live off? I will have all your accounts frozen, unless of course you will pay the best way you know how. Problem is, not even a hobo would want you. You are lucky your uncle has power. Take what he has to offer you," Gonste said. "Gontse, you son of a bitch! I worked hard for that money." I shot back at him. "You know fokol about hard work, Miss Charity Case," he said. My uncle stood there enjoying every moment of my exchange with Gontse.

I had so many questions, were they running some kind of operation? Exchanging women amongst their circle for their own sick gain? Was the other woman Gontse's new love or was she also some project. Amadoda will really embarrass you!

I picked up my suitcase and walked out of the house, with the most unlikely hopes that I would wake up from this unnerving nightmare. By the time I got to the gate, I still did not hear any footsteps behind me. This was it. This is how it all ended. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the business card. Sonke was his name. I honestly did not know what to expect. I dialed the number and waited. Busy tone. I tried again, and this time, it rang.

*

Fives years later

"Dr Cross, honestly I don't know how I would have gotten through all of the things I have been through without your help. Navigating through all this resentment, anger and pain caused by ex husband and Malume. You have helped me see the reason why I should allow myself to trust again. Mostly, I have learned that holding on to the past stands in the way of my happiness. Sonke and I are in a very good place."

The stories that have been depicted above in some way or another touch on traumas that may have been experienced by someone close to us or maybe even you. I hope healing finds us all.

Dear survivor

The curtains have been closed-

When the aftermath of the trauma sets in, when your body gives out on you, when the you soul has given your body 'one final warning' about going separate ways, when your tears have gotten too heavy, when suicide has stayed constantly on your mind, when the triggers bang in your unconscious being, when your voice goes unnoticed, when you have gotten tired of answering 'I'm doing just fine,' when you have been to every therapist, when your mental illness has been the subject of gossipers, when you feel like you are worthless, when you cannot go to sleep without reliving that night over and over again, when dying seems easier than being alive, when you have escaped the crime scene but shortly get reminded that the crime scene was your body, when scars of violence refuse to fade, when the insults keep replaying in your head, when silence is better than reaching out, when the ghosts of the past demand to be felt, when rape culture is normalised, when you convince yourself that it was your fault, when you are in desperate need of closure, when you are forced to mourn the lives of those that were brutally murdered, when the perpetrator lives under the same roof as you, when you are ridden by survivor's guilt, when you envy those that took their own lives, when cutting is a form of release, when you have been labeled 'damaged goods,' when your body has eaten away at itself, when you are convinced that had you worn jeans rather than a mini skirt, you would not be in bed crying nonstop, when being sexualised should be taken as a compliment, when the love at home has hardened, when your rock bottom has reached rock bottom, when you have been conditioned that abuse is normal, when you are invalidated, when you have become a hazard to yourself, when reaching out has been deemed attention seeking, when you feel you are no longer capable of loving, when you wear depression on your sleeve on a daily basis, when you have been stripped of your basic human rights

And when that chair sits ready under that noose you have so sober minded sewn together, and the ink on your suicide note is drying up. Stop everything you are doing and do yourself this one thing. There is hope. I have seen people beat the odds and come back stronger. Tell yourself again and this time, believe it, tell yourself that you are made for a special purpose, tell yourself that it will get better, tell yourself that you are not defined by your past hurts, tell yourself that you matter. You Matter! Make sure that you believe it, tell yourself that the thoughts in your head are just thoughts, tell yourself that the unkind thoughts that haunt you are not your reality, tell yourself that you are free from the confinements of toxic thoughts, tell yourself that a permanent solution to a temporary problem is not the way to go, tell yourself that it is okay to feel emotions, believe it, live it and be kinder to yourself.

Survivor's notes

"Not everyone has a chance to write a book, but we need a place to tell our story; A place where the microphone is ours."-Josh

"As a child, my "no" was unheard, today I am a voice of power"-June

"My determination was most helpful. I did not want to be just another statistic. I wanted to heal and become stronger. That's exactly what I did for years following the abuse. I felt like I became the person I was before the abuse. I missed that person. It took time, but finding myself again was one of the happiest feelings."-Blanche

"There is so much power in belief. Just the simple sentence of 'I believe you' can completely change the trajectory of someone's life." - Sarah

Childline South Africa

0800 055 555

Families South Africa (Famsa)

011 975 7106/7

Tears Foundation

010 590 5920

The Trauma Center

021 465 7373

Human Trafficking Helpline

08000 737 283 (08000 rescue) / 082 455 3664

Gender-Based Violence Command Centre

0800 428 428

And finally, if you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here sabrinalethu@gmail.com
(counselor and fellow human)