

**This document consists of two (2) parts:**

Part A: Thesis (Creative Work)

Part B: Portfolio (Coursework)

**Part A: Thesis**

**faces, disappearing.**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

degree of

**Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

of

Rhodes University

by

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December 2022

## Table of Contents

<b>Part A: Thesis</b> .....	1
Abstract .....	
faces,	
dissapearing.....	
.....	
<b>Part B: Portfolio</b> .....	
.....	

**with kukhanya**

this work would not have been possible without support from my mother, sisters and my family that tolerated my madness; siphamandla shabangu, vuyani pambo, hahangwivhawe liphadze, boitumelo maboitshego, mcebo dlamini, mzoXolo vimba, sive mqikela, sandile ngweya, thabo pitja, mbali kgame, jackie shandu, vusi nkosi, inam kula, masixole mlandu, pulane mafatshe, skhumbuzo makhandula, khululwa mthi, thembinkosi goniwe, bhekithemba mbatha, mxolisi ndlovu, JR, lifang zhang, cloudwalker, xolani mahe, molaodi wa sekake, andile mngxitama, zanele lwana and all my comrades who encouraged me.

my supervisor for being patient with me.

ngiyabonga angiphezi ngokungiseka kwenu.

## ABSTRACT

My thesis explores township life through the eyes of a young boy, Sengwayo, whose life changes when a strange man arrives unexpectedly to stay with his family. The man is introduced as his uncle but nothing further is said about him. Sengwayo soon begins to experience visions and decides to find out who this man really is. His search for truth soon becomes obsessive and culminates in tragedy. As we follow Sengwayo in his quest of uncovering the truth it becomes difficult to differentiate between Sengwayo's imagination and reality. This thesis collapses the distance between what is and what could be. It does this by alternating short sentences mostly used in the poetry of maskanda lyrics, and in the stream of consciousness found in jazz improvisation. In literary terms, the thesis draws influence from the rants and rhyme schemes of Lesego Rampolokeng, the tone and pace of Sony Labou Tansi and the surrealism in Mangaliso Buzani's work.

## **faces, disappearing**

**Mbe Mbhele**

**one**

He was alive but something was dead, the jerking of his hands, the rasp in his voice and the rigidity of his head movements. His pupils were grey as morning smog and his lips hard, fat and cracked as heels. He could have very well been dead and there would be no difference. Something was strange about the way he looked at us, the way he looked at emptiness as if he saw something. During dinner he held the spoon in his hand and stared directly at the wall as if confident that his gaze would pierce through it. We all saw it but no one wanted to confront it or confront him. No one gave any explanation. We just sat and pretended like nothing had changed. But with each dinner swallowing became difficult. I wanted to ask my mother but the look on her face had already given me the answer. Respect old people and do not ask too many questions it said. How could I not respect him? The man carried something heavy on his shoulders, we felt it. Even in our sleep we could all feel something was in the house, something that had not been there before. Uncle was in the house.

The sun was square the day he arrived. The rays seemed to have darted off and left the orange cube bare and regretful. The air was lazy and uncertain of its intentions. I was in the house rummaging the pots, looking for something to eat. I had just returned from school and could smell the sun on my skin as I opened the lids of the pots. Flies came out triumphantly, as if finally escaping from years of imprisonment inside a metal prison. The green mold floating on water made me nauseous, I immediately lost my appetite. Quickly closed the pots but the putrid smell had also escaped, climbing carelessly up my school shirt, chin and into my nostrils. I almost spat on the floor when I heard a knock on the door. Saliva thickened in my mouth. I swallowed my spit and opened.

On the door was a man wearing an ANC T-shirt. There was something arresting about the figure in front of me. Before he could utter any word I knew that he had spoken. I did not know how to look at him. For some strange reason these eyes that I have seemed inadequate to look at him. It seemed that I needed something else, not eyes, to see him. I slowly looked up to get a glimpse of the man's face. But before seeing it I noticed that there was something unusual about his neck, his Adam's apple paced up and down his throat. So sharp and determined as if attempting to break free from the skin. But the skin, despite its wrinkles and

tired look, proved to be inviolable. ‘*Kunjani*’ a voice disturbed my observation. I looked up and I saw his face properly, I almost collapsed. It was not like anything I have seen before. Not beastly yet there was something about it that refused to be human.

He was dark as the night without stars, a daunting darkness devoid of any hope of light. No emotion could be read from his face. No sign of fear, curiosity or pride. He just was, the tip of his teeth peeping from his lips. I could not look at his eyes, perhaps because of his imposing height but also because they hid deep within their sockets. His ears hung from the sides of his head as if about to fall. They were large, too large to be ignored and with each breath he took they flapped. His frayed yellow t-shirt contrasted with his skin, as if he was a figure from a colouring book. The image was not repugnant, somehow all of these things combined made some sense. To say the man was beautiful would be untrue but also to say he was ugly would be unjustified. ‘*Ngiyaphila*’ I responded a bit embarrassed, not quite sure how long I took to return the stranger’s greeting.

‘Are there any elders I can speak to?’ he asked, opening his mouth and exposing his tongue covered by thick white fur. ‘Mother and aunt have not come back from work. I am the only one at home’. There was a brief silence and only then I realized that perhaps I should not have said this. *What if this man is a criminal, he could easily strangle me with his long fingers or worse bite my nose off.* My imagination ran riot with all the things he could do to me. I began recalling all the stories about old men who abducted young boys and turned them into tortoises. *What if this man abducts me? Is he one of the men that kill boys and sells their body parts? There is no way of saying; his calmness does not give anything away. But he does not sound like one.* He coughed interruptedly, almost as if he could sense my suspicions. ‘I will wait for them to come back’ he said picking up his bag and placing it next to the door. He sat on top of it; I stood there confused.

The mind wonders. It always wants to go beyond. It is constantly curious, wanting to know more and at times more than it should. In as much as it is a beautiful thing it can also be dangerous; this I knew because the stranger sitting outside the door occupied every province in my mind. I could not think of anything besides, I thought of everything that made his presence here, at this moment, a possibility. Perhaps it was fear, but why was I so afraid of him in particular. I tried thinking of food, lost appetite. Taking off my school clothes, too much of a task. Going back outside to see what the man is doing, fear like a fist in my throat. In that brief encounter with a man who appeared at the front door I knew that things would no longer be the same. *Where did he come from? Should I ask him to come inside? Is he still there? Was he there in the first place or was I imagining things?* I did not have answers.

Mother returned home. I heard the clank of the gate and peered from the window. There she was; stout, files in hand and walking with her usual gaiety. Her appearance eased my restless mind. Surely she will have some answers. I moved towards the kitchen to listen to their conversation but I was interrupted by an unusual sound. Something like a restrained scream. The sound of files falling followed, fear almost struck me to the floor, my pounding heart deafened me for a moment. There was a brief but thorny silence, I recollected myself and rushed outside. ‘Mother what’s wrong?’ I asked, forcing words out of my mouth. They stuck on my throat like a bone, suddenly I wanted to cry but for what I was unsure.

‘Haaaaayii, what are you doing here?’ my mother blurted out placing her hand on her mouth. The man stood up slowly and attempted to smile but his face seemed uncertain of how to do it. His lips crescent and ashamed, he responded ‘can I please have some water’. A new guilt held me. *Why do I not offer him water? Surely he could have asked or could he have seen that I was afraid and suspicious? So what if I was suspicious? Is that not the way to approach all things strange and unusual? My whole life this is what I have been taught, to not be open and welcoming to things unknown, do not give in to the seduction of curiosity.* My mother bent to pick up the sheets of papers that were on the floor and gestured with her hand, the stranger followed her inside the house. ‘Sengwayo, change your uniform and go play with your friends’ my mother let out; something was missing in her voice as she made the command.

## **two**

Uncle spent his days sitting on an empty crate of beers under the tree and playing incessantly with his thumbs. I watched him from the window while he gazed at the sky as if he had seen it a million times before. His gaze suggested that nothing of this world was unfamiliar to him. He always seemed calm under the shadeless tree and when he walked it was like his feet had a certain respect for the soil. Gracious but also intimidating in a way. If I stared at him for long he would move only his eyes in a manner that suggested he could see that I was watching him. This he did for days and nothing in him changed, he was just like the day he arrived. I am unsure if he took baths but even after days of staying with us his demeanor remained the same. His skin was still dry and his eyes harboring a strange innocence.

But maybe it is not that the man was strange. It could be that what he saw around him was different from where he came from. He looked at everything with a sense of oddness and concern. His heaviness became my source of wonder, his sharp eyes called for intrigue and on other days fear. I knew then that I was going to go against mother and ask him who he is. His

presence made me forget about the importance of obedience. Not only that. I stopped finding any pleasure in the conversations and games I played with my friends. All I wanted was to observe this man, this man whom I was told is my uncle. I knew that the kind of surveillance I was doing was wrong but I did not fully understand why. I did not understand why I was not supposed to talk to him and why he had stirred up emotions that I never knew existed. I was overcome by curiosity and I was soon to surrender wholly to it.

There are many things that I did not fully understand about uncle's presence. *Why do I have to call him uncle? Is it because we are blood related or is it because of the same reason I call the caretaker in our school uncle? Why does everyone ignore me whenever I inquire about who he is? Is it because I do not ask the correct questions or is it because his identity is being deliberately concealed from me?* Either way, I knew then that I had to figure out for myself who is this ethereal figure who had come out of nowhere and completely disturbed the rhythm of my life. I had to find a way to understand why I was fascinated almost to a point of obsession by him. Many people have come to visit us but none of them have ever made me feel so rattled in my home. An attraction that I could not explain hovered over uncle. I wanted to observe his every move, his every blink and his every gesture. I wondered what he thought, what water tastes like on his tongue and what things had he seen with his eyes. Was I losing my mind?

Days became longer, my disdain for school intensified. Every moment spent there became nothing but a waste of time. The history, math, geography and English became nothing but devious devices to keep me from knowing the truth. The teachers became obstacles keeping me from knowing what really mattered. I saw the lessons as dry pieces of worthless information that would not in any way benefit me. I became reclusive, unable to find any meaning in chats and jests with my friends. I began to even question the basis of my acquaintance with them. How useful are they when they are unable to see that there is a fire kindling in my spirit, let alone help me understand it? I wanted nothing to do with anything except figuring who uncle is.

Surely someone noticed the change. My loss of interest in television and the unusual silence was something that my family should have picked up. But no one asked me anything, they all pretended as if everything was normal. Mother came back from work and cooked, my aunt washed the dishes and Mfe was always on his phone, the routine always the same. To them it was as if uncle did not exist. *Does he really exist or am I making things up from my imagination. But here he is every night having dinner with us. Gulping the glass of water, chewing and even sprinkling some salt over his food. Why do they not speak to him? Why does*

*he not speak to us?* My curiosity turned into worry; worry into angst and angst into depression. I was going to confront him.

### **three**

Our house is small. Four rooms in the main house, two backrooms and a small toilet outside. At the back is a sinister tree that never provides shade. There were four of us before uncle arrived. My mother, cousin and I stay in the main house and my aunt occupies one of the backrooms. Another one of the backrooms is used for storage, it was cleaned and prepared for uncle. This became a signal that he was here to stay; guests often occupy Mfe's room. There is no bed inside, just a mattress and a small crate at the corner of the room with a candle on top of it. The oil paint inside the room is peeling off and it always smells like mud. Uncle does not spend much time in the room; he always sits under the tree at the back, the sun glaring on his face. Sometimes his head takes a shapeless form, as if a shadow is mounted on a body. He sits there unmoved by the shine of the sun or the sharp afternoon wind. It was autumn when he arrived. That year many things arrived: outdoor big screens, thatched roof houses on the main road, food stalls, even Bonsai's sister who had gone to stay overseas when I was 6 years old returned. It was the soccer World Cup in our country.

I do not really like my aunt. She always wears the same face that makes me feel uneasy. I cannot not tell when she was angry, happy or irritated. It does not matter what the occasion is - birthdays, Christmas, stokvel, she always has her mouth tilted to the side as if she has a mild stroke. I avoid her as much as I can; we are forced to face each other during dinner because we eat together as a family. This is not really much of a problem because the presence of other people neutralizes the situation. My aunt is aware of the tension between us but neither of us know how to address it. It thickens when we are alone in a room, our eyes dart all over just to avoid contact. Sometimes it is so severe that even pots, spoons fall whenever we bump into each other in the kitchen. Our interactions, all happening in silence, tires me and I want to tell my mom about it but I did not have words to tell her, no decorum befits this kind of story.

A couple of years ago mother forced me to go to church as usual. Insisting that if I do not go then this and that would not be bought for me. She was not going that day because she had to visit a sick family member in a place I cannot recall right now, so, I did the drudging work of bathing and reluctantly I went to church. White shirt, creased black pants and my

Toughees school shoes that didn't fit anymore. Bible clutched under my armpit, the sun shining directly on my forehead and my balls squeezed by my Sunday pants, I pushed myself to the house of the lord. Solely because of a game console that I had been promised two years ago, hopeful that this year, if I attended all the Sunday services, might just be the year I get it. When I arrived in church, no one was there. The doors were tightly locked; no cars were in the yard. There was nothing there, never had I ever been so happy to find nothing.

The walk back home was more purposeful, a tinge of relief from not having to endure the monotone voice of our pastor and the endless sitting down and standing up. I did not care why the church service was cancelled. I wanted to get home change into my shorts and go join Bonsai in a game of zwipi. On my way home I greeted a couple of old people from our streets in church uniform, smugly, and thought about the agony they still had to go through. I entered the yard and went straight to the bedroom. I must have been really in hurry because as I passed the kitchen table I knocked a mug and it fell. Looked for a broom behind the door and found nothing, it must be in my aunt's room I thought to myself. I went inside, opened the door and the broom was there leaning on the wardrobe. Took the broom but the strange noises in the room stopped me as I was exiting. I looked around and my aunt was there, on top of her bed. Naked and looking up at the ceiling. Something was on top of her; a human figure big and dark. Sweat. Movement. I stood there for a short while, watching, in shock. I knew there was something wrong about what I saw. I knew about intercourse but did not think elders in my family did it, I knew that there was something wrong with thinking about it, let alone seeing it. I gripped the broom firmly and exited the room.

My cousin and I always quarreled. He insisted that because he was older I must always refer to him as Mzala and not use his full name, Mfengwayo. I noticed that it was not because he was older that I was not supposed to use the name but because he hated his name. He introduced himself to people as Sizzler. This name never stuck and people continued to call him Mfengwayo, and his friends Mfe when mocking him. He had a lazy eye and was as black as soot in complexion. He had hairy arms and legs, wore long pants and a long sleeve shirt no matter the heat. He grew a full beard at the age of twelve. If you bumped into him at night you would either not see him or run for your life, unless he was smiling. His teeth were large and white, when he spoke it seemed as if he is swallowing cotton wool. His nose was very imposing, stealing attention from everything on his face so much that when his mouth was closed his face seemed like it had nothing but a nose.

Mfe did not speak a lot, he also avoided crowds. He had friends at school but he never spent protracted periods of time with them. He came back early from school even though his

school was far away and I always found him at home eating. I suspect that he was always teased a lot because he hardly smiled. Something had to be really funny for him to flaunt those teeth of his that looked like they were fighting to break out of his mouth. He mostly spoke to his mom or sat under the shadeless tree alone, whistling. No one whistled like Mfe, his whistling could be heard from the gate. He composed beautiful melodies. If there were any whistling competitions I have no doubt that he could have easily become a world champion. He could whistle every song; hit the correct notes and all the syncopations. I was always happy when it was his turn to wash dishes because I knew he was going to whistle. I sat in mother's bedroom and listened to his beautiful compositions.

Mfe slept in one of the two bedrooms inside the house and I slept with my mother. I had no problem with this because I have always had a fear of being alone. So I was glad when my mother allowed Mfe to sleep in the other bedroom because it meant that I would continue sleeping in the same room with my mother. She did not enjoy sharing the bedroom with me, firstly because I peed in the bed until I was really grown but we negotiated this and I slept on the floor. But she later had a problem with my snoring which I had no control over and even when she attempted to get me medicine the snoring did not abate. She would always say 'you snore like you ate stolen goats and now they are bleating inside you'. When I was younger I felt safe around mother, almost as if her presence created a protective wall around me. I always wanted her around.

#### **four**

The days are the same in the township. Time moves but the houses, cars and characters remain the same. Ta Tsakes stands at the corner every morning with a bulk of newspapers, always jovial and greeting every one that passes. Older boys gather in front of Mam Phindi's shop and smoke until the school bell rings. Sometimes they ask for money, sometimes they take it by force. Not from me of course because I am Mfe's laaitie. Though Mfe is quiet I have noticed that he commands some level of respect among the older boys. And then there is Gogo Simphe who is our neighbor. She is always standing outside her gate in the morning, the furrows on her forehead make her look older than she actually is. She wears a silk gown and never responds when people greet her. Wears a serious face all the time and only smiles when she wants you to do something for her. I try to avoid her but at times it is impossible because she always catches me when I least expect.

I leave the house at six thirty in the morning every day. I have to because it is the same time mother leaves for work. She teaches at Toppers High School in Lenasia. She refuses to leave me in the house because she thinks that I might not go to school. She has good reason to think this. I don't particularly rejoice at the idea of waking up in the morning and going to school. In the winter the classrooms are too cold. My ears freeze and I do not hear anything that the teacher says. I was even moved from sitting at the back of the classroom because every time I was asked a question I would always respond with 'sorry sir I did not hear you'. Sitting in front does not help either. It just invites more ass whipping that I have become numb to. This is not because I do not feel the pain anymore but because I realized that whatever I did the teacher would find something to punish me for.

Those who arrived late get a whipping. Those who do not wear the school uniform the way the teacher wants to get a whipping. You do not do the homework you get a whipping and the most punishable sin of them all is being a girl. Girls got whippings for being seen with a boy, for wearing short skirts, for sitting inappropriately and for being found talking in class. Sometime girls get in trouble for not polishing and sweeping the classrooms on Fridays. So I eventually accepted that either way I am going to be punished and I might as well not cooperate the way they expect me to. I tried telling mother about this and she did not seem to have a problem with it. In fact she seemed to support it despite the fact that the government has said school children should not be beaten. It could be that she also beats the learners that she teaches.

In summer the classrooms are too hot. They smell of dead flies, not too pungent but also impossible to miss. Maybe it is just feet and sweaty armpits but I imagine a swarm of dead flies to smell like our classroom did. I hate my class teacher, Mr Kubheka. I hate his front teeth which are shorter than the other teeth. His eyes see where they were not looking and his voice makes me want to sleep, at times I fail to stop myself and fall asleep. He hates people who fall asleep while he is teaching. We hate each other but we are both prohibited by an unspoken social code from fighting physically. If he finds me sleeping he calls me to the front and makes me put my hands on the board while he whips my ass with a piece of wood. I do not cry, it is painful but I want to deny him the satisfaction. In fact when he is done I look at him in the eye and smile.

This makes him so angry that he begins to sweat but he cannot go beyond the line and hit me with a fist which I know he wants to do. I want to fight back and he always sees it in my eyes. I imagine taking his stick, Napoleon he called it, and putting it inside his mouth and forcing him to swallow it. On some days I just wish that he would die in a brutal accident and never come back. Everyday my imagination of his death becomes wilder. I want to poison his

food; I told Bonsai about this but he did not take me seriously. I often wonder if Mr Kubheka has children and how he treats them. Maybe it is not me that he hates so much, I have just become a symbol he uses to take out the immense hate that he has for his family. But why me? Why did I have to bear this duty? Still, I wanted Kubheka to die the most horrid death.

What annoys me the most about Mr Kubheka, besides his face, is the fact that he brings attention to me. Something that I work tirelessly to avoid. Since the beginning of the first grade I knew that I did not want to be seen. I wanted to be invisible, there is something invasive about having people looking at you. It takes away something, the freedom to live life as you will. Being seen means that you always have to consider the other, their feelings, opinions and appeal to their sensibilities. I realized when I was very young that I did not want to participate in that part of life. A part of life that takes away. I succeeded in wearing my invisibility cloak without any disturbance until I reached grade eight, high school. Until I met Mr Kubheka who stripped me naked on the first day he saw me, without my consent. Who perhaps stripped everyone naked and did it with so much pride and confidence.

First day of the eight grade he came into class, brown pants that were beginning to assume a beige color and white shirt that was a tad tattered at the back. His tie was a beautiful color that I do not know. He stood next to the desk and looked at all of us from the back of the class to the front. He scanned us as if he were counting us, his confidence suggested that he had done this a couple of times before. He then proceeded to the board to write his name in big bold letters. As he moved his hand, his pants went deeper in his butt crack making his buttock look like a pumpkin. We giggled under our armpits. He looked back and we stopped. He put the chalk down, wiped his hands with a cloth on top and said, 'we have the whole year to spend together, let us not get excited too soon'. He said it in such a threatening way. There was a brief but heavy silence. We all looked at each other, then at our desks.

In less than a month we all feared him, second month we hated him and on the third month he became a sort of god in the community. A god sent to the township to fix youths that were getting out of hand. The parents adored him for he seemed to be doing well in handling the degenerating township. The mention of his name became a threat 'I will tell Kubheka' or 'If Kubheka finds you'. He became a metaphor of some sort 'As hard as Kubheka's stick'. The girls did everything to avoid getting in Kubheka's wrong books. In the morning his desk was always clean and if he wanted water he would just wiggle his empty water bottle and all the girls would shuffle past each other to get water for him. He seemed to relish this reverence that he extracted through the command of fear. And often after school he would remain with at least

one of the girls in his class. Smiling and sitting on top of the table, we would fearfully peep. We never saw them do anything except exchange smiles and giggles.

## five

But this year things are not the same. There is a sadness that is concealed by a manufactured happiness. It is almost as if everyone is trying to forget something, a fight against memory. Perhaps it is just me but the noise, the busyness, and the construction in every street seems forced. There is something unnatural about all of it. I participated in it because of my friends, especially Bonsai who is convinced that he will finally see all his favourite soccer players. Bonsai loves soccer so much that when he heard that Brazil and Spain soccer teams are going to be playing in our township he cried. I do not understand what the fascination is about, soccer I loathed and noise irritated me. Because of the World Cup both are bound to be a daily occurrence. But I pretend to be happy just so that I do not disappoint Bonsai. I love seeing him happy.

There is something infectious in his smile. A reassurance that I am not alone and that someone understands me. He has a large head, making it easy to identify him in a crowd. His nose looks lazy as if it will fall off if it is grabbed too hard. It has a life of its own, turns green whenever he lies. He stutters and sometimes girls tease him for it just to get his attention. I love his stuttering, hearing him repeat the first syllables of my name makes me smile. I hate his chin though, without reason. I have to hate something about his face. My mother knows that I am very fond of my friend but for some strange reason she always wanted to restrict our interactions when we were younger. I did not understand why she never allowed me sleep over at his home or play with him after school. But this was not a problem because I always found a way to be with him.

Before the arrival of uncle Bonsai was the only person I would be excited to see. I looked forward to our daily walks to school. His tired walk, the beads of sweat on his nose in the mornings and his brief laughs all meant something to me. I did not understand why I yearned to be around him, to be in his presence. But uncle arrived and managed to occupy every province in my mind, relegating Bonsai to an afterthought. I hate this, it makes me feel uncomfortable. It is as if I am doing something wrong. There is a guilt that I carry around, as if I am somehow betraying an unwritten covenant. But it seems that I am the only one carrying

this guilt. There is no strange behavior from Bonsai, his life is continuing normally. He goes running in the morning, plays zwippi after school and goes to soccer practice. I have no interest in following him around anymore. I prefer staying at home thinking about uncle and observing him. He has never asked why? He has not noticed any change and perhaps he has never really noticed me.

Besides walking together to school Bonsai and I have a lot in common. We are both track and field champions at school. Well, Bonsai is the fastest and then me. We were both kicked out of the school choir in first grade. That is how our friendship began, a consequence of exclusion. Such is the nature of beautiful things, always born out of unpleasant circumstances. In school they call us Tom and Jerry. Bonsai is smarter and more composed. Quickly catches trends and everything looks good on him. I admire him and the way he does things. I am always under his shadow, following him wherever he goes and agreeing to all his suggestions. This arrangement works well for us because our friendship has lasted longer than most. I guess it is true that strong relationships are built on servitude. I am willing to serve Bonsai and he does not have a problem with being served.

Bonsai was the first person to touch my penis in a certain way. We were in school. He told me that he was going to teach me how to ejaculate. I knew what ejaculating was but I had never done it. He told me that it was easy and he would show me during break time. In class I kept on thinking what it would feel like, I wondered whether it was painful or if it was just like spitting through the front teeth. That day I did not get sleepy in class. My penis swelled and throbbed. I wanted to experience what I had always seen in magazines and videos. I wanted to experience what I knew was forbidden but no doubt pleasurable. Perhaps Kubheka noticed. I was convinced he could read minds. The bell rang, I looked behind me to see if Bonsai was as eager as me. He was not. He was seated, having a conversation with someone behind me.

I took the initiative, stood up from the chair and got out of the classroom. I waited for him outside. He did not appear for a while; I peeped through the window and I saw him approaching the door. A brick of fear sat right at the centre of my throat? He came out and we walked slowly, not towards the toilet but towards the mothers who sold fatcakes and snacks. 'Bonsai let's go'. He coolly responded, 'not now, when the break ends'. Of course we couldn't do it while the older kids were smoking in the toilets. We ate, the bell rang, kids dispersed and we walked to the toilet. 'Take it out' he said. Nervous, I unzipped my pants and I took it out. Shriveled and reluctant there was my penis. He chuckled and touched it, it shrunk further back, his hands were cold but gentle, he rubbed it, it swelled, he rubbed faster, it contracted, I couldn't

look at him, I looked at the roof, couldn't look at it also, closed my eyes, vigorously he continued to rub, up, down, choked it and choked it and choked it.

## six

When we hear noise from the primary next to our school we know the school bell is about to ring and we can finally go home. We wait for it in anticipation. The teachers walk around endlessly in corridors and they start packing their bags. The bell rings and we all walk out. The pockets of learners in black pants and maroon jerseys overwhelm the landscape. From afar they look like figures floating on air, feet completely covered by the red dust caused by the small stampede. Often the rush is motivated by hunger, for others to go to soccer practice and others just the mere excitement of getting out of the school gates. I do not have to worry about hunger. Mother buys everything, oranges, yoghurt even the sweet peanut butter she only buys in December. But today I also join in the stampede. I want to speak to uncle before mother returns from work.

Not once do I think of what Bonsai will say. I have no interest in the small talk we usually engage in after school. I do not even wait for Bonsai. Today something else dominates me. My thoughts are elsewhere. Uncle. I have made up my mind that I am going to confront him. I make up scenarios in my mind about how I will approach him and what might happen. My mind cooperates, bending to every direction that I point it to. I grip firmly the belts of my school bag. Palms begin to sweat. My protruding forehead feels heavier than most days. The short distance between school and home feels further than usual. I am impatient. I walk down the school corridor and but the gate moves away from me. I pick up my pace, walk faster but the gate also moves back. I look up and the autumn sun hits directly inside my eyes. The back of my skull heats up. The pain is excruciating. I begin to run but my pace remains the same. Before I exit the gate Gogo Simphe sees me and calls me. I dread meeting her because I know very well what she wants. She wants me to help her pick up all the plastic wraps and juice bottles in the school yard. She does this almost every day after school and because we are neighbours she makes sure that she waits for me to come out of class. I told my mother about this and she spoke to her but Gogo Simphe still calls me to help her whenever she sees me. She has no regard for what people say about her and what they think. I am scared of her. She is ugly, mosquitoes come out her nose but she does not seem to care much about it. She might not even be aware of it. She walks around the township as if she is trying to flaunt her rotting

face. So patient and delicate in her work of collecting rubbish that you might even think that you might think she is collecting... I do not know what.

I believed it when she was accused of witchcraft. She never smiles at anyone and she stays alone. She always wears an unfriendly face regardless of where she is. She also speaks with a demanding voice, a sense of entitlement oozes around her. She could have very well said 'I own this township' and it would be hard not to believe her. She is always up early and appears when you least expect it. At night she walks without fear, her hunch bent like a question mark, and always nodding her head. The rumour is that she collects rubbish for all her tortoises that she rides at night to bewitch people. Everyone has a different story about where her family is. Some say they ran away when she started her sorcery and others say that she sacrificed all of them to feed her animals. My mother told me that some died of Aids and others died during the violence in the 90's.

Gogo Simphe sees me and I pretend not to hear her call my name, I look at the ground and walk more determinedly. She shouts again 'Sengwayo'. I am the only one with that name, I slow down my pace and with a bit of annoyance I look at her. Her hands are on her hips and her countenance is clearly saying 'yey wena nja why are you ignoring me'. I go to her with my hands in my pockets, pouting my mouth so that she sees that I am extremely annoyed. She pushes me on my forehead with her finger, her purple stinking finger without a fingernail. She does not say anything, I know exactly what to do. I start picking up sweet wraps, snack wraps and juice bottles and put them in a big black plastic bag. My hands are cold and the grass is dry. After a few rounds around the school she puts me under her arm and smiles. She smells like smoke but the smell is not from the clothes she is wearing, it as if it comes from within her, from something beneath her skin. She hands me a coin and I leave.

The school children have scattered, only those in relationships stroll slowly on the side of the street holding hands. I pay no attention to them. Time does not matter but the sound does. Down the street a group of people are gathered at the corner. Not unusual. The people here are always gathering to complain about power cuts, burst pipes, drinking, killing a witch and sometimes for no reason. After all there is not much to do here but wake up, bath, gossip, bath, sleep and the routine continues. Hunger eats a man here; you see it in the contours of their faces. You see it in the weak of their smiles, the fatigue on their shoulders. Slumpy, a day is a month and a month promises nothing. Nothing but social grants that they ravage in a single Friday, empty beer bottles in the morning, the smell of cigarette, the scent of sweat lingering in the windowless shacks, and condom wraps scattered everywhere.

Down the street, voices can be heard. Shouting, shrieking and indistinct. Something draws me. Incoherence can be seductive. Move closer, the voices grow louder. I can feel them but struggle to see from whom they emerge. Move closer and hear a loud sound next to me, barks once, eyes meet and the dog sinks its teeth in my jeans. I jump, kick, scream and it eventually let's go. The sickly-looking dog walks away with pride as if it was trying to teach me some lesson. As if it was trying to mark its territory. Heart pumps so hard it almost escapes from the rib cage that imprisons it. Down the street the people are still gathered.

Shuffle through the crowd to try and see what is happening. Get there and a man is dead. An axe still attached to his head. It slants and for some reason it looks like it belongs there. Peace on the countenance of a dead man, almost as if he wanted to die this way. His teeth peep through his now rock-solid lips. 'What happened' a voice from behind asks. 'He had it coming', 'But they should have not killed him this way, there are more respectable ways to kill a man.' Responses battle with each other but the air never lies, no one cares about the death of this man. I am also unmoved. Younger children fight for their turn to see the body. They giggle and point at the dead man, no one says anything to them. Something putrid emerges, sits on my moustache and my body begins to heat up. I find my way out of the crowd; I need to go home and speak to uncle. The dog that attempted to bite me is still sniffing through the heap of diapers dumped next to the street. It assumes a certain innocence, but I know better so I use a different route.

Take the other street, the one that sings when it rains. The one where a wedding quickly turned sordid when the husband found his friends hand up his wife's dress behind the mobile fridge on the night of their wedding. The wife fled with the friend; the husband has never recovered from the embarrassment but the concoctions from Pinky's tavern make his miserable life a little more bearable. This is the same street where Willy composed the famous jazz song *Izinkani*, the great jazz record that became the soundtrack of the township in the 60's. I was not there but when the old timers are drunk they narrate the power of the record. How it became the soul of a place barren, where hope was consumed by an unending darkness. They say the record was the only thing they held on to when child was without mother, and mother was without lover. Sometimes when you walk at night you can still hear Willy's record, the echo of his trumpet hitting against the tarmac and the dysfunctional streets lights. Bra Willy lost his mind, shits his pants and collects empty beer bottles full of anguish. Down the street you might see him if you wait long enough.

I continue to walk down. On the side of the road, the grandmother who sells vegetables is stationed there. Years of trying and trying are written on her face. Her stall neatly organized,

bananas here, oranges here, mangos here but happiness never there. Still, she continues, morning after morning she comes and in the evening staggers back to her house – worn out and tired. Next to her, Panga sells cigarettes and sweets, ganja if you ask him nicely but we all know that what he is really selling is a reality check. A quick reminder that once in, there is no escaping, that dreams are for those born with a silver spoon. He is a painful reminder that the township is a bottomless abyss and that in this place give no love because you will receive none. But Panga is a hypocrite because his dog Okapi is always with him. Licks his feet and growls at his enemies, and just like the white people’s dog sleeps with him in his house. In this dog-eat-dog place Panga eats with his dog.

The time does not matter, only the number of breaths taken. Nothing changes in this place, temporality always unbothered. The taxi’s hoot, government loots and Sis Zandi still sells fake sneakers from the boot of her Toyota Corolla. I jump a couple of potholes like I am playing hopscotch. A car, out of nowhere, speeds in my direction. I almost fall trying to get away from it, pain in my left leg, sprained ankle and there right there a puppy is slamming its head against the concrete pavement. Blood spurting out, broken pieces of teeth on the pavement. It begins to make meaningless sounds, not agony induced but as if delivering a sacred message. The whole face now red with blood. I am transfixed, have never seen anything like this before. Sure people kill each other by rope, poison, guns and razors but this is new. A dog committing suicide? For what? Is this place so bad that even dogs would rather die than exist in this hole? Continue walking down the street, a cloud covers the sun. It becomes dark immediately a sharp stinging breeze stabs my skin. I look up and realize that time does matter, so does the weather. I still have to see uncle before my mother returns from work, before it rains. Rush to the house, kids play on the street, uncles in vests drinking Glenfiddich whisky on the stoep, mothers at the fence dissecting current kasi affairs, lovers stroll to the shops and at the corner people are still gathered. Uninterested in the occasion. I enter the house, in the kitchen is a coal stove, a corroding ceiling and walls painted in orange. Open the fridge and grab a bottle of cold water. Just as I am about to drink, I hear a gentle tap on my shoulder. I look back and it is uncle looking down at me. I open my mouth to scream but something in his eyes says, ‘be at ease’. I take a deep breath and he smiles at me. Almost as if he knows that today I had resolved to confront him. He takes the bottle from my hand with his usual grace and calmness. “Go change your clothes and come have your food with me” he says with a voice, not intimidating, but with enough authority to make sure that I obey it. I go to mother’s room and change my school clothes, go to the kitchen, pull out the plate from the microwave and exit the house. Of course I am nervous, a torrent of thoughts and emotions overcome me and the spoon falls. Uncle

knows I am scared. There is no turning back now, I pick up the spoon and go sit on top of a beer crate next to him.

## **seven**

I am not quite sure of who I am and what I am supposed to do. I wake up in the morning and follow a routine that will make mother happy. I go to school, bath, read, run and go to church all because mother expects me to do so. The other things I do are also nothing but painstaking imitations of what my friends do, of what I see on TV and what the teacher tells me. All of these things do not come naturally, it is almost as if they are meant to drain my energy. But I do them anyway, what else is there to do? What else is there in this township besides laborious routines that no one ever thanks me for? Besides pain, sleep and hunger there are very few things that really matter. These are the only things I need to respond to, to take action to avert or satisfy. This worries my mother because she always accuses me of being lazy but what do I need to work hard for? She says I do not speak but what is there to speak about? Who is there to listen?

Soccer, I attempted to play soccer but my career was cut short when the coach told me that I was too soft and needed to become more aggressive. It was a Sunday match, sun blazing hot and for the first time after being on the bench for almost two months the coach decided that I should go in and play. I was excited. I took the kit which smelled like a thousand armpits and wore it. There were no shorts that could fit me, coach shouted 'wear anything, we are losing here'. I obeyed the command, found one almost twice my size tightened it but it was still loose. We waited for a foul and the coach said, 'go in'. I ran onto the field. Not sure why everyone was laughing when I went in, perhaps it was the baggy shorts or everyone could see that I was nervous. Ran around the field and began to sweat. Did not touch the ball for some time. After the zeal of being a substitute fizzled someone passed me the ball.

I saw the ball coming. My first impulse was to run but the speed at which that brown round thing was approaching me did not give me enough time to make up my mind. I tried to move my legs but realized that I had become immobile. A statue, a streetlight or a tree, I did not move. I knew that everyone was watching me. The whistles and the noise suddenly felt hypnotic, it was black all around me. I had fallen into a hole. I heard a sound; it was not the ball. Something cracked or broke. No, something had torn, suddenly it was wet. I got out of the hole. I was lying on my back and all I saw were perspiring faces, noses, tongues, teeth and eyes

staring at me. Someone helped me stand up, wash the blood from my face and I realized that I no longer had my front teeth.

‘Sengwayo, which Sengwayo?’ ‘The one without teeth’. That is how people refer to me. This does not bother me at all. My life is much easier now that I do not have teeth. People do not insist on talking to me, they feel guilty as if talking to me exposes something that would rather be concealed. It has become easier to observe and not have to participate in every conversation, my misfortune has weirdly given me some command that I would not have had. When I speak people listen because I hardly speak. When I make a joke it becomes funnier because of how I pronounce words. Mother wants me to go fix the teeth but I refuse. Not everything that is broken needs to be fixed; sometimes broken things give substantial value to other things. ‘They will grow back eventually mother; I am not in a hurry’ is my response to her every time she mentions them. I am quite content without those teeth.

Ever since I lost my teeth I do not have explain to anyone why I do not want to play soccer. I sometimes go to the field, pretend to be watching so that I find an excuse to come back home at night. On Saturdays when the boys play away games I accompany them just so that I can get to experience the sun disappearing behind the corrugated iron roofs in solitude. Something draws me to the silence of the night. I envy the respect it commands, how birds chirp away and hide in their nests and how the dogs seem to be urged and pressed to communicate something. The night and its ambivalence, tranquil and yet stirring chaos. Harboring fear yet summoning peace. Give me the night and I will make meaning of it; this is the secret I am unable to communicate to anyone including Bonsai.

## **eight**

‘Who are you?’ I ask, but the words refuse to leave my lips.

‘Who do you think I am?’

‘Mother told me that you are uncle and I must respect you’

‘What do you see?’

Words do not come out but he still responds to my questions, as if he has found a way to hear me without speaking. A breeze of cold air sinks inside my pores, my flesh swells up and small bumps appear all over my skin. Hair tightens and digs deep into my skull; face contracts and I cough. ‘Do not be afraid’ he says but this time I do not hear his voice, I do not hear a sound except my heart beating inside my chest. For the first time in our conversation, I summon enough courage to look up and stare at him.

Hard to describe what he looks like. He seems different. His eyes are kind and their white the same texture as the clouds. Inside them something is moving, I see it but cannot describe it. It draws me inside and I begin to see teeth, teeth grinding against each other - slowly the image of the teeth withdraws and I begin to see gums, bleeding gums – then a wide mouth with chapped lips, fat lips - then a face, dark and pressed against a wall, scratching against the wall - blood drips - the face is familiar - it is my cousin's face.

I feel a warm touch and see uncle's eyes again. I am confused and embarrassed, scared and tired. How long have I been staring at him? Was I dreaming inside his eyes and was it really my cousin that I just saw in them? I heave, uncle does not say anything. He caresses my arm and the warm tips of his fingers comfort me, as if saying he knows what I just saw and I should not be afraid. Fear escapes me completely and I look at his eyes again. This time there is nothing in them, just hollow sockets.

His face is soft and wrinkled, not because of old age but like a finger too long underwater. I want to touch it and feel if it is the same as mine, if there is blood running through its creases. But I would never do it; his large hands would break my small arms. I do not like his face but I envy it. It carries no fear, you can see that it has gone through things but it can still go further. His chin is covered by a beard that goes around his mouth and right inside his nose. He knows that I am looking at him and yet he is unbothered, unbotherable, unfathomable.

[I sit next to him with a plate on my lap. The plate stares at me, confused whether or not I am going to eat. I am trembling. He touches my shoulder and tells me to eat before the food becomes cold. There is something in the manner he speaks that compels me to do as he suggests. It is not because of the harshness of his tone or the loudness of his voice but the way words come out of his mouth. Almost as if measured, the pauses have enough intervals and his F's and B's not too soft but also not too emphasized. I obey and start eating and all the while he fiddles with his fingers. I cannot finish the food. Grey blotches begin to appear on it, small plants begin to grow but they immediately turn black, then worms, pus, then blood, then I drop the plate and start screaming.

## **nine**

Mother came back home later than usual. I waited for her at the bus stop, something I have never done before. I have never been concerned with when she comes back from work. In fact the later she comes back the more relieved I am. It means less time being given instruction, being looked at with eyes that speak and being reprimanded. Perhaps I can even say there is a

sense of freedom when she is not around. The sentiment is shared by almost all of my friends. There is something we do not appreciate about authority, even though we cannot explain the reason. We use every opportunity we find to rebel against adults. If they say no alcohol we hide nips of Smirnoff in our bags, no smoking and we turn our mouths into chimneys. It is like an impulse, whatever the adult thinks is wrong seduces us. Others among us take it to the extreme, they have sex, they steal, fight, and some of my friends have even run away from their homes. Others have no reason to run away, their homes have no mothers or fathers; child is child and also adult at the same time. We envy these kids and how they have full control of their lives. They are cooler, never frustrated, even the teachers do not care much about them. They attend class when they feel like it, do homework when they want to, and they can curse without restraint.

Things are coming and going, moving and stopping. People with their bad shoes and cars with their ugly sounds. I struggle to concentrate on a single thing. I see a boy across the street, he looks lost and wondering. No one seems to notice him and all his sadness. The stop sign is tilted to the left, strangely, as if it is also experiencing some kind of pain. It is clear it had been in that position for a very long time. I try to empathise with it, but I am quickly disturbed by a sudden eruption of dust, whirls around my feet then moves towards the mother who sells fruits next to the bus shelter, the same mother who sells snacks at our school. The dust tries to do something around her stall, but it does not succeed, it dies on top of an apple. A taxi hoots and a sister wearing yellow tights exits, something else exits with her and follows her until she turns the corner. She does not see it, nobody sees it. I try to stand up from the bench at the bus stop but the boy across the street stares directly at me. I stare back and I want to cry. I want to cry because I no longer remember why I wanted to stand up and to where I was going. I continue sitting down without any idea of what is going on. A bus stops and people come out of it. My mother appears and I recognize her face but not the legs. It is not her legs. They are big and wiggle with every step she takes. They seem heavy and painful; she drags them until she reaches me. My eyes fixed on her legs, she lifts up my chin with her hand and says 'Sengwayo'.

It worries me that I have not noticed my mother's legs. Something she has always had and always uses. Is it because I am always looking up and never down? It cannot be that; I have seen the grass and its green, the pointy toe that protrudes out of Gogo Simphe's sandals and when I walk, I am always looking down trying to fit my feet in shoe prints bigger than mine. Or are there many other things I have not been noticing? Yes, the ground is not as solid as I thought it was. It draws me in; day by day it has been doing this. Threatening to swallow me,

slowly, but the sky always fights back. It pulls me tautly, threatening to stretch me and break me apart. I have never noticed that a war is fought over my body; both sky and ground trying to claim me. I have also not noticed the noise made by people, how from afar it sounds so black. How the sound of a taxi tyre screeching-barefoot child laughing-mother shouting- hands clapping-TV lady singing all sound so sad, yet beautiful. Like a song. I have not noticed how ridiculous people look with their heads on their shoulders, heads with moustaches, mouths, noses, eyes and hair. Heads with so many things, many accessories.

‘Sengwayo, what are you doing here?’ my mother asks and the question curves, almost as if it wants to begin elsewhere before it reaches my ears. I respond softly, ‘waiting for you’. I smell the stink of my breath, quickly close my mouth in embarrassment. ‘Why are you walking on your socks?’ Mother is agitated; I hear it in the tone of her voice. I do not have to look at her face to confirm. She pulls my hand, ‘let’s go’. I resist. ‘Are you mad? Let’s go home now’. Around me are eyes laughing and questioning. I look down but I still do not cooperate’. Mother puts down her bag on the bench where I am seated. People start gathering around. Those who know her ask ‘what is wrong with him’, those who do not know her wait in anticipation for a response. ‘I also don’t know’ she responds in a voice drenched in shame. Only now do I notice that I am in my maroon school socks, and I am not wearing any shoes. Something about them makes me want to laugh. I try to conceal the laughter, but it squeezes out of my lips and I burst. The more I look at them the more hysterical I become. I hold my belly with both hands and go on my knees. I laugh until no sounds come out, just tears. People around murmur and I just continue laughing uncontrollably.

People move closer and they try to pick me up from the ground. I see Bonsai and his mother running in my direction. I stop laughing and look around. There are so many people that when I look up I can hardly see the sky. I am enclosed under an umbrella of heads looking down at me. I can no longer see my mother’s face. Only unfamiliar faces, mouths showing teeth, tongues wiggling and eyes blinking. I see their hands reaching out to me, as if to grab me and pull me apart or tear me or poke me. I am afraid. I scream ‘mama, mama’. The hands touch me all over my body and all over my face. Then I see Bonsai shuffling, trying to get through the crowd but all the openings close. There is no room. The circle of people tightens and becomes smaller. Breathing becomes difficult and light diminishes. Day quickly turns dark. ‘Mama, mama’ but there is no response. My voice bounces on the bodies around me and it is consumed by the noise of the crowd. I remember this feeling from when I lost my teeth in a soccer match. I start crying out loud, cry turns into a wail, but the people keep on touching and poking me.

**ten**

Things have changed. Mother has stopped going to work and is always looking after me. Well that is what she tells her friends, that 'I have not been well lately'. A lot of them come to visit her, she makes them tea, they discuss the weather and then their voices go low. That is when I know that they are talking about me. About the incident at the bus stop. Some of the visitors ask to see me. Mother does not like it but some of the visitors insist and she cannot refuse. I know that many do not care, they want to confirm if I am really sick and the extent of my sickness. Where she cannot say no my mother calls me from the bedroom. She introduces me and then the visitor says something like 'Boy, how are you doing? Are you ok? Then they look at my mother and say, 'he does not seem sick at all'. My mother looks at me and I know that the show is over. I walk back to my room.

This arrangement is not frustrating at all. I do not have to go to school, and I am given most of what I want. The problem is that I am not allowed to go outside. I have not seen Bonsai and I have also not seen uncle. Mfe has not come back home in three days. His mother is worried but does not speak about it much. Maybe it is because I am currently the focus of all attention. I am worried about Mfe, fearful in fact. The last time I saw Mfe was when I was with uncle, inside uncle's eyes. No one mentions uncle, not once does he come to see me, not once do I hear his voice, not once do I see the door of his room opened. I try to make out where he could be and why he has not come but I cannot figure it out. I decide to ask mother, with hope that I will get a response since it is my season of getting most of what I want. 'Mother, where is uncle?' Mother does not respond to me, continues washing the dishes. 'Mother where is uncle?' I ask louder. She puts down the dishwashing cloth and she turns to look at me. 'Sengwayo, which uncle?'

I do not know how to answer mother. She knows too well which uncle I am talking about. The one who sits with us during dinner and under the shadeless tree during the day. The one who is always wearing his ANC t-shirt, who sleeps in the room outside. What kind of answer does she expect from me? *Even with this sensitivity and affection that she has towards me she still refuses to tell me who uncle is. Maybe I should not be asking, perhaps I should go knock on his door and look for him myself.* I do not respond to mother, and I immediately stand up and head for the door. 'Sengwayo, where are you going?' I ignore her and exit the house. I almost fall but quickly regain balance. I knock on his door and shout 'vula. uncle open'. There is no response, only my mother's approaching footsteps. 'Where are you going, what do you want?' mother shouts while grabbing me. 'Where is uncle, I want uncle.' Mother starts crying

and grabbing me violently. 'Leave me alone' I continue knocking while trying to break free from mother's grip. She pulls me and we both fall. I break free, she pulls my leg. I shout louder, 'uncle, uncle'. Who is uncle she asks, who is uncle I respond. We wrestle, her trying to pull me back into the house and me trying to open uncle's room. Gogo Simphe appears and holds me. She and my mother pull me back to the house. They overpower me and there is no point fighting it. So I remain calm and oblige.

This is strange because Gogo Simphe never comes to our house but today she is here helping my mother contain me when she never helps anyone. If anything, it annoys me because she should be helping me, not deterring me. I am the one who helps her pick up her rubbish at school, not my mother. They sit me at the edge of the bed. Gogo Simphe kneels and asks me 'what is wrong?' Her teeth show, green mould at their base. I look at her and do not respond. The question should be directed at my mother, she knows what the problem is. I would not have tried to open uncle's door if she had just answered me. The problem is not that I was at the bus stop without shoes but that it brought shame to mother. It is not that I was laughing uncontrollably but that people did not know what I was laughing at. This whole thing can be solved with just a simple response. Who is uncle and where is uncle. I decide to keep quiet. Mother and Gogo Simphe withdraw from the room, close the door and go outside the house. I cannot hear what they are talking about but their conversation is lengthy. Mother returns to the bedroom and tells me to wear my shoes.

'Where are we going' I ask mother.

'To see someone, you need help, Gogo Simphe knows someone who can help you'

'Mama, I am fine'

'No Sengwayo, you have been acting strange. You do not speak to anyone and when I went to your school yesterday Kubheka told me a lot of things about you. Even your friend Bonsai says that you have been behaving strangely lately. What you did yesterday at the bus stop was embarrassing, embarrassing'

'But mama...

'No, wear your shoes we are leaving.'

I oblige. I do not want Gogo Simphe to come into the house and drag me out.

## **eleven**

There is no clean air in this place. Everything is contaminated. The rubbish bin is full, and the streets are full of people with vuvuzelas, empty beer bottles, telephone containers, grilled

chicken stalls, a drunk here and another one there. We drive out of our township and into the next one and nothing changes. Tired people appear, similar noises, a drunk here and another one there, houses built the same, asbestos roof - rusty chimneys protruding. The lawns are neatly trimmed, the faces of the people are tired, but the haircuts are fresh. Their smiles are genuine but how is this possible. *How do they seem so happy when everything is melting? Or maybe it is just me? I am sure it is not just me; uncle is in it to. He is the one who began all of this and then disappeared. Or could I have chased him away when I screamed? But what was I to do when everything was rotting in front of me?*

The encounter with uncle was not what I expected it to be. I was convinced that after the conversation with him things were going to be better, but it seems that it has created more problems for me. It is because of my encounter with him that I am here. It is because of what I saw that I ran to the bus stop without socks. It is because of him that I am seeing and thinking too much about things. Things would be different if mother just told me the full story about uncle. Or perhaps if Gogo Simphe did not come to mother's aid mother would have eventually told me something. I look for excuses, but none are good enough. Could it be that I am beginning to lose my mind? I highly doubt it, in fact my mind has never been so clear and alert. I can feel much more intensely, discern and judge. My mind does not wonder; it is focused. The only way out of this situation is to keep quiet and not resist, when I do not mother becomes convinced that there is something wrong with me. It is as if it is criminal to ask, so much that one can even be accused of madness. My own mother is convinced that there is something wrong with me all because I asked a question.

In the car no one speaks except the lady on the radio. She speaks of job opportunities and the need for South Africans to start their own businesses. 'The time is now, our country is at the world stage and the World Cup being hosted in our backyards shows that indeed South Africa is alive with possibilities', she says. She sounds like she is reading and has a blocked nose. She drags when she pronounces words, she is annoying and impossible to ignore. I look outside the window and from afar I see a theme park, Gold Reef City. Going to gold reef city is a luxury, only children with parents who have money go there. Only the children of teachers, nurses and councillors tell tales about their time spent in Gold Reef City. I am fortunate that I am a teacher's child, so when they boast of their experience in Gold Reef I am not completely lost. Most of the accounts are usually exaggerated. It is not as nice as they make. The place is full of staring kids with colourful outfits, couples holding hands, the smell of KFC, rides with sticky arm rests, screams, announcements of items lost and found and insisting photographers.

Too much happens all at once then the sun sets, then the whole time you are reminded how lucky you are to have been to Gold Reef City.

The news reporter comes in after a song I have forgotten. He speaks of many things; guns, courts, death and something about the economy. I have no interest in listening. I keep on wondering where we are going and what we are going to do there. I suspect that we are going to a doctor. With Gogo Simphe in the car I suspect that we might be going to a Sangoma or Inyanga. I have never been to one, as far as I know mother does not believe in such things. People in the township do not take traditional healers seriously. They think they are scams or are trying to hide that they sick with AIDS by going to initiation. So when I think of a Sangoma I am not convinced. I think of the skinny ones from the township, dirty, faces covered in clay and always barefooted. 'Turn left' at the next street, says Gogo Simphe in a low voice. The driver indicates and turns left, drives straight and is stopped by a red robot. Right there three boys my age wearing bucket hats and similar shirts rush in front of the car and start dancing. They do their routine, and I am amazed at how in sync they are. They do it so effortless and it is obvious that they have rehearsed these many times. As if they also know when the robot is going to turn green, they take off their hats and knock on the window and ask for money. They don't use their voices; their body language tells you exactly what they want. They shrink their bodies, slant one shoulder, quick eye contact then direct their eyes to the upside down bucket hat held gracefully by hands that are used to begging. But it seems that our driver is also good in the art of saying 'no'. Not once does he look at them and when he does he looks at them with eyes that say 'move away from my car'.

'This building, this building'. The driver stops next to a building Gogo Simphe is pointing at. She gets out of the car, my mother follows, and she looks at me. I try to maintain a friendly face and follow both of them. Before closing her door Gogo Simphe tells the driver that she will call when we are done. The car veers off and we stand in front of a tall building. Just above its entrance are bronze letters CRESTA HOUSE, the A on CRESTA looks like it might fall anytime. Two people stand by the door, one is smoking. They can see that we are not regulars here. Gogo Simphe tries to remain cool and leads the way. We enter and the smell changes instantly, it smells like vinegar. The reception has two chairs that do not look like they are meant to be sat on; dirty and cracked. We go to the security and Gogo Simphe says 'we are here to see Mboma'. '5<sup>th</sup> floor' says the security who is pointing at a lift that looks too quiet. We move towards the lift, Gogo Simphe presses the button and the lift relents its silence. Just when Gogo Simphe is about to press it again the doors open. Inside the floor is wooden; there

is a bubble gum wrap and above are flickering lights. Gogo Simphe presses the button that directs us to the fifth floor.

The lift opens, we go down a narrow hallway and knock on door 534. The smell of incense welcomes us, door opens, and a man stands in front of us. His shoes are the first thing I see, look up and almost collapse when I see his face. I swallow saliva and look at him again. The face is unmistakably uncle's face. The shoulders too. I want to scream but I know that it will only confirm that I am indeed sick. I remain composed yet my knees are weak and trembling. My heart beats faster and my palms immediately sweat. Time is suspended for a while. I look at my mother and she does not look bothered at all. It is like she is seeing someone she does not know, a stranger. Gogo Simphe greets. The man replies and makes way for us to come in. I want to protest and ask him what he is doing here. I want to ask mother why she is behaving as if she does not know this man. He closes the door and directs us to what looks like a shrine. 'You can sit here' he says, pointing at a grass mat. He sits opposite us.

I know it is the shrine; the many bottles, the candles, animal skins and bones. The mess seems organized, somehow.

'How can I help you today' the man says.

'We called earlier regarding the boy that we are with here' Gogo Simphe says pointing at me.

'Oh the boy, tell me what happened'?

Gogo Simphe narrates the whole story from the bus stop to me trying to open uncle's door and it shocks me how she knows every detail. Why would mother tell all these things to Gogo Simphe? I feel a surge of hate, towards mother and Gogo Simphe. Why are they conspiring against me?

'Mother of the boy. Is there anything you want to add?' asks the man in a strange accent. He lacks the energy that makes uncle enigmatic. I am no longer sure if this is uncle. The body is his but the contents are not, the aura is not. 'He keeps on asking about uncle' says my mother. *Something is wrong here. How could mother say this? This is the highest form of betrayal. Is she not the one who opened our door for uncle? She is the one who told me that it is uncle and that I must respect him. Today she pretends as if she does not know anything. In this world there is clearly no room for trust. If my mother, the one who is my solace, can betray me in front of two strangers to whom should I run?* I want to speak but if I say anything, even slightly off, it will be taken as confirmation of these allegations. 'Boy, who is uncle?' he looks directly at me while asking the question. He does not know that this is the very question that bothers me, that has given me sleepless nights, that has changed everything. There is no response, only the question. I am not afraid of this Sangoma, nothing about him moves me. His energy is not

strong enough to intimidate me. He is not like uncle. No one I have ever met is. I look back at him and respond with his question ‘who is uncle?’ I then look at my mother then Gogo Simphe. I know I have rattled something; there is a discomfort.

The Sangoma is unsure what to make of the question. He takes time to respond to it. Then he says ‘your mother says you have been asking about uncle. Who is this uncle you are asking about?’

‘I was also asking mother the same question. I also want to know who uncle is,’ I respond without looking at him. Not because I am intimidated but because I do not want my response to be interpreted as disrespect. The man looks at my mother with questioning and confused eyes. There is a brief silence in the room. The man stands up and goes to what looks like a pile of things next to him. He comes back with what looks like a small container, snuff I think because he takes a pinch of its contents and inhales it through his nostrils. He sneezes then wipes his nose with a handkerchief that looks like an old rag. The man has beads on his wrists and ankles. He is wearing a checkered shirt and long pants, but the pants are covered with a kanga. The one Sangomas wear; red and black with an image of a lion or is it a tiger? After wiping his nose he looks at all of us and then says ‘the boy is in grave danger. He is a danger to himself and others. It seems as if he has been possessed. In his body and mind it is no longer him alone. I do not promise to help him, but I can try.’

There is silence in the room. ‘For me to help him I will need two cows. That is R8000 and I need him to stay with me for two weeks while I treat him’. I breathe heavily, my mother too. I do not look at Gogo Simphe, I cannot bare to look at her. She is the one who put my mother up to this scheme. I know that I will have to find a way to kill her. I also know that I have to find a way to escape and find uncle. The Sangoma is saying all of this nonchalantly so much so that even if one wants to believe him, it would be difficult. My mother nudges Gogo Simphe but she does not respond. ‘I don’t think that we will have that kind of money. How can I leave my child here for two weeks? I don’t even know you, what guarantee is there that it is safe?’ I am not relieved to hear these words from my mother. They hurt. It means that she would leave me under different circumstances; if the conditions were different, she would consider leaving me. ‘But the boy is dangerous and in danger’ the man says calmly. ‘We will find another way.’ My mother says as she stands up. Just before she can, the man pushes a plate in front of her, ‘consultation will be R100’. Annoyed, she takes out a R100 note, places it on the plate and we all stand up to leave.

## twelve

*Things are no longer the same anymore. My interaction with uncle has changed me. I am no longer consumed by naivety. It is as if there has been a revelation, a better way of seeing and understanding. Although I was terrified at what I saw when I was with him I am sure that was not his intention. He wanted me to see more but perhaps I was not ready. I am not sure if I am ready now but it seems that my only way out of this is to find uncle.* Mother and Gogo Simphe are quarrelling, but I am not interested in what they are saying. My mind is elsewhere, not on the shapes of their disagreements. We drive through factories, grey and lifeless, then under a bridge. The township begins to appear. It is like I am seeing it for the first time. When I think about it, since the arrival of uncle there are many things that I am seeing for the first time, even those I thought I had seen before. It is as if a cloak of familiarity has been removed and everything has a throbbing newness infused into it.

When we enter the township, I realize that this place has neither colour nor taste. What taste would it have? What does a place with men who have seen too much too young taste like? What does a place that harbours men, beaten, dead and dying from broken hearts, taste like? Does our township really have colour or we do not see it because we have been blinded by the sun that never sets; even when the rays of the sun shine the brightest this place remains dark. Maybe this place is covered black with blood. The blood of people killing each other. Blood of boys stabbing each other and sacrificed trying to chase away this forever present hunger, gnawing hunger. Maybe the tar is what is holding us down because we cannot walk fast here, our shoes are heavy, we never arrive anywhere. A car here and a car there, wheelbarrows, taxis, hearses, a donkey cart; we see these often, but still nothing moves.

Our house sits at the bottom of the township. When you move up the hill as you enter the township you can see it. It looks small and insignificant just like the other houses next to it. When you squint you can see that the asbestos roof was once painted a happy blue, but it has grown sad and melancholic blue. From the hill when the sun sets our house looks like it is on fire, as if built at the centre of a matured fire. Now that I think about it is always felt like the house is burning, that one day everything will turn to ashes, that there is no permanence. As we approach our street, we begin to notice that there is something happening at our gate. There is some activity and neighbouring houses are not wearing their usual weariness. They have come alive in the same way they do when there are fights, arguments or gossip about things that happened the previous night. Our house seems taller than usual as if threatened by the

group of people at the gate. The car approaches the gate, and the group moves to make way for it. We park and exit.

I see familiar faces and nervous faces. Kids I go to school with, but I realize that there are no schools in this place, only a place where children go to learn how to smoke, masturbate and wait for Mr Kubheka to shame them. I will have to do something about Kubheka. Why are they even called schools if no learning happens? Windows broken, 60 of us in a single classroom, teachers touching the skirts of girls in the staffroom and that Kubheka demanding girls to stay behind after school. Complete sickness but which clinic can these people go to? That place where the sick go to die? Shops? All owned by the Pakistani, young girls selling themselves for a packet of maize meal and maybe a packet of chicken on a good day. But every day the people here breathe. In this township of ours the stereotypes are as true as the sound of baboons at night jumping roof to roof. How do you explain the mother who sells frogs at school, but people do not see them or Gogo Simphe's medicine that she hides in her finger nails? The children are also mothers; mothers are often widowed. Take a walk down the meandering foot path to the clinic and you see them, the mothers, garbed in black, their shoulders slumping and without any hope.

Some people in this place do not see this. Mother too. They only see the neatly cut lawns. The stretch tents and get-togethers on weekends. They think happiness is their stokvels and Monday blues jazz parties. They think it is all the competitions, the sales, buy one get one free, they think it is the World Cup, the Brazilians in our back yard. They are satisfied with the rain and the sun. Waking up every morning to go to work, to go to school, church, malls, stadiums and funerals. No one has ever been reported dead because of hunger so they eat what they get and survive. For them that is enough. For some when they are up the hill, they do not see a township on fire but the sunset rubbing beautifully against the corrugated iron roofs. They see temporary relief from the 9 to 5, a chance to pretend to spend time with their friends and families. Some are fine with this arrangement. 'We found this world like this and who are we to change it?' they say, beer in hand. But I see things now, I feel things. All the rays of the sun will never make this place warm. Cold this place. The air of disappointment never dissipates, always there lurking around. Between young lovers standing at a corner. When mother leaves the house every morning. In Bonsai, in his failure to see me the way I see him. Mfe's face, rage chiselled into it. In the incomparable emptiness of my aunt's heart. In the streetlight and its sadness. In Gogo Simphe and her secrets. In the night and how it has lost its might. The sun, the reporter with the annoying voice and the group of people gathered at our gate.

I do not care what time it is. We shuffle quickly past a group of people whispering and murmuring. The sun is obscured by the house, only shade. Mother goes in first then Gogo Simphe. I am still puzzled by why Gogo Simphe is now deep in our affairs when just a few days ago she avoided us like a debt collector. When I enter the gate, I can already smell a foul odour. Death. I know that there is a dead body inside the house. I know too that uncle has returned. Somehow, I know that I am not supposed to be shocked. It is as if I should have known. I have not been listening closely enough to my body, it has been trying to tell me things. We enter the house and Mfe's mother is sitting on the floor sobbing. A couple of other mothers are next her, saying many things at once. 'Drink some water, give her some space, let me speak to her, sorry sisi, what happened.' Only questions and no answers. My mother removes the group and kneels next to her. 'What happened Sisi? Talk to me, what's wrong?' she asks her in a stern tone. 'It's Mfe, he is no more.' My mother lets out a wail and hugs my aunt. I just stand there quiet, I know this, I should have known this. My mother and aunt are both crying on the floor, trembling. The other mothers are standing and unsure of what to do. The look of fear in their faces. They move around aimlessly and are whispering in puzzlement.

### **thirteen**

When I looked into uncle's eyes on the day of our interaction, I saw Mfe. It was as if Mfe was inside them, there was blood, his face was being forcefully dragged against a wall and his skin was peeling off. It looked like Mfe was in a lot of pain, but his eyes were opened and he was looking directly at me. It was as if I was dreaming with eyes wide open but clearly I was not. Clearly my interaction with uncle is connected with Mfe's death. I am not really pained about Mfe's death, but curious. A part of me feels guilty that my cousin has passed and there is no emotion in me. That my cousin just died, and I am not shocked but feel as I knew about the death even before it happened. People are crying, morose and trying to comfort each other and all I am thinking about is going to look for uncle in his room. Mfe's mother is much calmer now and has narrated what happened.

She was called by the hospital and asked if she is Mfengwayo's mother. They told her that there had been an accident and that she needs to come to the hospital and identify if the person there is her son. She then went to the hospital and on arrival the nurses did not direct her to the wards of sick or injured people but to the morgue. She says it is in that moment that she started to panic and began thinking about the possibility of finding Mfe dead. 'But even then, I

immediately brushed it off as perhaps a case of mistaken identity.’ Those were her words and she began wailing again. She regained her calm and then said ‘what I saw there is inexpressible; I could barely recognize my own son’s face. He died a painful death; he was in pain’.

Mother sees me listening intently and then sends me to the shops to buy her airtime. What she is really doing is sending me away. I do not protest; I take the money and glance at my aunt. Even with her crying over the death her son I still cannot remove the image of seeing her naked and having sex. There are still people in the yard; uncle is also there. So I take the opportunity to go look for him in his room. His room is locked, and I proceed towards the shadeless tree. And there he is sitting in his usual position, on top of a crate, composed and knowing everything. He looks at me as I appear and sends my way what seems like a smile. I do not know if I should smile back, people are crying inside the house. Why would I smile? I am relieved that I am with him again. The situation in the house does not allow me to fetch mother and tell her that I have found uncle. I want to engage with him again and know more. He has more to share, I know. I move closer to him and before I can say anything he violently grabs my arm and draws me towards him. I want to scream but my voice disappears. It is only my mouth moving but where the voice stays there is nothing. I try to fight back but all my limbs are in paralysis. This time he gently covers my eyes with his hand.

It turns black but from the distance I can see a red light approaching me. It is as if a big traffic light is coming towards me, the red of the light grows bigger until it is right in front of my face. The red is not too harsh, it poses no threat or at least it does not seem dangerous. The red swallows whatever black was left. It is only red, then the red turns liquidish. It drips slowly, like paint from a wall. Then the red breaks in half as if a curtain is opening and I see Gogo Simphe. She is naked and squatting, something drips between her legs, she is urinating. She looks in my direction, our eyes lock and she stands up and charges at me. Her breasts, hair, wrinkles and thighs, all running towards me. Her speed not that of people her age as she approaches the red curtain widens as if giving her space to reach me. She is so close now and her hands are already stretched. I scream and fight off the thing that is holding me down, uncle, with all the strength in me. The red disappears. It turns black again.

I open my eyes and see the group of people around me. *The same thing that happened at the bus stop is happening again. There is a death in the family, now there is also me. I should not have screamed. But what was I to do when Gogo Simphe was charging towards me? Had I just lay there I might have also be dead. Why was Gogo Simphe on top of Mfe’s dead body? Uncle continues to confuse me.* I stand up and run. My mother tries to stop me, but I push one of the people to the side with so much force they almost fall. They shout at me, but I continue to

sprint. There are people standing at the gate, but they do not stop me. They make way; perhaps they think the running is still part of the mourning. Only when I have passed them do I realize that there are people chasing me. They whistle, signalling to others on the street that I must be stopped. I dodge and duck. First corner, I take left. The street is empty, but it is too long and without corners. If I continue, they will eventually catch up with me. I enter a house on my left, no time to use the gate. I jump the not-so-high-wall and young kids are playing in the yard. They do not have to be told that they must move out of the way, they can see how fast I am approaching. They move, I stumble over whatever they were playing with and fall. I hear a dog bark from a distance and a group of shouting people. I try to stand up, but my knees deny. A man wearing a green vest arrives first. He picks me up like a prize and drags me back to the crowd. The street is full of people standing at their gates, watching, and speaking from under their armpits. The man in the vest is proud. He wants everyone to see that he is the who caught me. I limp and he does not care. I suspect he does not even know why he was chasing me. That he was chasing me only because I screamed and ran.

#### **fourteen**

*There is a strong possibility that I am the only one who sees uncle or even maybe I imagine him. Otherwise there is no way that he also disappeared in the crowd. Where is he in the many people that are now escorting me back home like they have caught a township criminal? If indeed I was imagining him then how did he drag me with his arm, cover my eyes with his hand. I know I felt it. Or is it possible to feel things that others do not see? To see things others do not see. But what do we call that? Madness? Hyper sense? Or perhaps witchcraft? In all the instances that I have tried to interact with uncle it always ends with terror. With a scream. But what puzzles me is that despite all of this I am still drawn to him. I still want to find him and perhaps get to really understand what is happening. Even now as I stagger back home, I am thinking about uncle, not the death of my cousin. I do not care about the many eyes looking and wondering what might be happening. I am not worried that I may have shamed my mother or even my aunt.*

We arrive home and the mood is sombre. All the mothers are wearing black, and they walk delicately as if their footsteps might make noise. They speak in whispers as if their loudness will anger Mfe. Mfe was always angry, he couldn't care less. As we try to enter the house, the man in the green vest insisting on taking me to my mother, they stop him. They whisper that he is not family and since there is a death he cannot enter without a jersey or

jacket. A sign of respect they say. I look at him and smirk mischievously, making sure that only he sees it. I can see the anger in his red eyes, quite certain that he expected a reward. My mother stands up, and walks towards me with her head bowed down. They have removed the furniture in the house to create space for the mourners. Mothers are seated on grass mats and speak softly. My mother leads me to her bedroom. 'What do you think you are doing Sengwayo' she says, almost inaudible. I look down and do not respond. 'Do you not see that your cousin has passed away and you are doing all these things because you want attention? Sit down and stay here because if you do not, I will take you to the Sangoma.' She exits the room, looks at me with a threatening look then closes the door softly.

From the whispers of the mourners in the next room I managed to find that there is still uncertainty around Mfe's death. They are not sure if he was murdered but the wounds suggest that he might have been. It also appears that he has fatal bite wounds. He was found on the side of the road in the morning, and he was already dead. There are many speculations; such is the way of the township. Everyone has their own interpretation of what happened and what is supposed to happen. I sit at the edge of the bed trying to think what I am going to do about this situation when suddenly I hear a loud cry coming from inside the house. I am curious about what has happened now. There are mumbles and the cry turns into a snuffle. I recognize the voice as Gogo Simphe's. I am frustrated by many things, her making me pick up rubbish at school, her eyes, nails, face, making my mother take us to a Sangoma and seeing her pissing on Mfe's body. I jump from the bed, budge out the door and see her sitting down. I jump at her; the other mothers do not know what to do. I strangle her, they try to remove me, but I do not move. I am also shocked where I get so much strength. I strangle her until her mouth starts foaming. I am so enraged I do not hear anything anymore. They try to speak to me, but I resist. Her eyes turn white. I hear a banging sound, then darkness then I do not remember.

## **fifteen**

I feel that I am moving but my eyelids are too heavy to lift. I cannot see. There is suddenly a certain weight over me, over everything. My mind is not cooperating; it refuses to do what it does; to think. I hear but I cannot listen. There are sounds but they are also dying. Slowly and slowly. I wake up in a hospital bed, white light glaring directly in my eyes. It smells like how I do not want it to smell, like medicine, like doctors, like captivity. I try to move but my legs cannot move, tied down. I open my eyes and next to me is my mother, Bonsai's mother and Gogo Simphe. They are all staring at me, but their stares are blunt. I do not show them that

I am unmoved by their stares. I am disappointed that Gogo Simphe did not die. Perhaps my face sells me out, but I hope it does not. If it does, they will be convinced that I am evil, they will not see that the true problem here is Gogo Simphe. It confuses me why my own mother does not see this.

A nurse appears and stands behind mother. The nurse looks at me and smiles like she has smiled at too many people in a single day. A defeated smile, I sympathize and smile back at her.

‘How are you feeling boy? How is your head?’ the nurse asks me

‘I am feeling fine’

‘Any dizziness or pain?’

‘No, not at all’

‘Now tell us why did you attack Gogo?’

*I knew this is the question they really wanted me to answer. If I do continue telling them about uncle and that I suspect Gogo Simphe of killing Mfe then they will surely keep me here. But why is it that we have to lie to be free. This seems so unfair to me, but many things are unfair. Mfe’s passing, his mother’s grief, my mother’s oblivion, Gogo Simphe’s face and how she has managed to remove herself from the death of Mfe...*

‘Speak Sengwayo. We do not have all day; we should be attending to Mfe but we are here because you like attention. Apologize to Gogo Simphe at once.’ My mother disturbs the silence, she is angry. I have not seen her this angry in a long time.

‘I am sorry Gogo Simphe’, I say looking down.

‘Thanks doctor, we will come tomorrow to see that he is fit to be discharged,.’ my mother says softly, as if she was not shouting at me just now.

‘Get well boy.’ Bonsai’s mother says, for formality’s sake.

They exit. I remain. Not alone but with thoughts, many thoughts on how so many things could happen in a single day.

The following day mother did not return to fetch me. The doctors ran their tests in the morning and gave us breakfast that tasted like nothing. The smell was pungent, the smell of urine but sick urine or maybe medicated urine. I want to go but not back home. I do not want to witness the preparations for the funeral, the forced politeness, the many questions on whether I am better or not, Gogo Simphe and my aunt. There is no place that I desire to go to. I do not want to see uncle because he is the reason for many of the things that are happening. He is the reason I am even questioning myself, my mother and almost everything around me.

No one comes to visit me on the second day. I am beginning to feel physically sick. There is a lump in my throat and my mind is beginning to see things. I am beginning to feel the weight of death around this place. I see the faces of doctors who have killed patients. I begin to see patients who came here to die. People who are already dead, some of them work this place. I see the secrets of people hidden deep in the furrows of their foreheads. All of this is making me nauseous, making me want to vomit on the food. I see the limping man whose foot is black and swollen. I see and feel his pain with him. I see through his cracked and peeling skin maggots digging deep into his foot. I feel that he will also die soon, that ants are waiting for his pitiful arrival, that even after his death he will not find peace. I begin to sob. The nurse comes and asks me what is wrong. 'Everything is wrong, I want my mother' I respond to her. She tells me a man is not supposed to cry and that I am too old for what I am doing. 'Don't behave like a mama's boy'. I fail to contain my tears; they burn as they go down my cheeks.

I want to tell the nurse the truth. I want to tell her that I am not crying because I want my mother but because I do not know what I need. I want to tell her that she also does not know; this place too. I want to tell her all about uncle. About the day things changed and that I know that they will never be the same. I want to tell her that I feel guilty, but I do not know for what. I want to tell her about Kubheka and the immense hate I have for him. I want to tell her things. Things about my friend Bonsai, how he makes me feel wrong and right at the same time. How I hate him, only because I have to. I want to tell her that if I love him that too will make me want to cry. I do not say all these things to her. I wipe my tears and force a smile. 'When will I be discharged?' I ask her that instead. 'You are as good as discharged and your mother said she will come in anytime to fetch you' she says. I want to tell her that I do not need my mother or her. I want to tell her how much I know. The things I have seen. I want to tell her how she is so blind, that is why she believes that I need my mother. 'You need to be eighteen years old for us to discharge you.' She does not know that these years she counts mean nothing, only experience and feeling does. But I just nod. She walks away and the only thing I feel for her is pity.

## **sixteen**

Today is the day of the funeral. Mother fetches me from the hospital garbed in black. She is alone and without a smile, an expression that strangely suits her. I do not pretend to be relieved. The nurse, sad nurse, had already told me that she is coming. She greets and asks if I am fine. I mumble, a sign of my annoyance. I know she is not really interested. The only thing people

care about are processions, procedures and routines. So I know that the only thing that really matters to her is going to the funeral, and to do the things that are done there. She hands me some black clothes and tells me to go to change. I do as she says, that is what she expects of me. Maybe not just her but the world. If deviation was accepted, I do not think I would have ended up in hospital. If I was given the chance to explain why I had strangled Gogo Simphe maybe, they would have understood. Maybe they would not have but they should have at least given me a chance to say what I think. I wear the clothes and we leave the hospital, but we take its smell and its sadness with us.

We get home and the buses and cars are lined on the side of the street. You can barely see which house is which. People are standing next to their cars; others are having conversations and for some strange reason it does not really feel like a funeral. How is a funeral supposed to feel in any case? We enter the house; I can see that some people recognize me and they have no doubt heard about my incident. I am not paranoid, I see it. We go to my mother's bedroom which is the biggest in the house. We enter and the coffin is there in a corner. They make space for us to sit while we wait for other family members. I stare at the coffin, hopeful that my gaze might pierce through it. I want to see behind that glossy wood with a blanket on top. Next to the coffin is Mfe's mother, tears digging in her cheeks. I study the movement of the mouths from which slow hymns emerge. I realize that death has been a part of us for a long time. Have we always cried, has there always been a ritual?

The room is filled with the smell of incense. A white candle on a saucer is lit and it gives a weird ambiance, as if this sadness is solicited. I recognize the hymn that they are singing. It plays almost every Sunday on radio, only now that I realize that I know all its lyrics. Funny, there are many things we know without being aware. Today these women are singing it for Mfe. My cousin could be whistling along right now but we do not know how to listen. I want to see through the coffin and see if Mfe still has big ears and what colour his skin has turned after being dead for so many days. I want to see if he is snug inside the coffin. I wonder whether Mfe has moved to the heavens where he will rejoice or to hell where he will burn eternally. I think about his sins, and I cannot find any besides his ugly face, the only thing that would guarantee him a place there. Heaven? He has nothing worth being remembered for except, again, his ugly face. A man who is wearing the pastor's collar walks in and the mothers make way for him. He wastes no time. He has surely done this many times. He stands next to the coffin and opens the bible, reads from it briefly and gestures with a head bow that he is finished. The mothers begin singing and Mfe's mother begins crying again.

The family is among the first people to arrive at the cemetery. We exit the car and walk to Mfe's grave. There are many graves, some empty holes and others heaps of soil. Others already dead and others definitely going to die, that is the arrangement. There are three or four other funerals that we pass before we arrive at Mfe's grave. Soon after we arrive the bus arrives with others. We sit under the tent as the family and the others stand around the grave. I do not want to be buried like this, with all these people looking down on me. There is nothing dignified or even moving about this funeral. It is windy and we can barely hear what the preacher is saying. There are two funerals happening at the same time, next to each other. It is unclear for whom the cries are for, for whom the song is for. But maybe for those who are being buried it does not matter. Maybe these rituals, all these rituals are for the satisfaction of the living, the insatiable living.

The family is called forward. We stand in a queue and one by one we throw soil inside the grave. We pay our last respects; it is a thing of culture. Bonsai's mother then makes an announcement that people must go back to our home so that they can have something to eat. This is custom with funerals in the township, for others the only reason they attend them is to quiet their grumbling stomachs. There is a bit of commotion as everyone is trying to leave. There are many of our school mates wearing uniform and I am reminded that when all this is done, I still have to go back to school. Mother still has to go back to work and for some strange reason this depresses me. I think I was beginning to enjoy the uncertainty, a life of genuine surprises and of turmoil. But that is not how things work, things work because there is order and certainty. I do not want things to work. They have been working for too long that I did not even see that they were no longer working. If it was not for the arrival of uncle, I would still be swimming in a pool of oblivion. In a pool of the world.

We get home, people eat, drink and they leave. Slowly, with each person and each car leaving, we become bare. It is clear that soon we are going to be alone with all the weight of what has happened. The busyness, the preparations have come to an end and now we are going to face each other. Grief is a solitary pursuit, solidarity is limited. The tent is uninstalled, the chairs are packed, the pots are washed, the relatives say their goodbyes, the cleaning is complete and then the sun sets. It is just me, my aunt and mother. Uncle? I will never raise that name again, especially not to my mother. I also hope she does not bring it up because she will not be ready for the answers I will give her, the only answers I have. But it would be untrue if I said I do not think of him, where he is and when he might appear. I want my mother to acknowledge that she knows him. I want my aunt to confirm that we have shared our dinner

table with him. Even though he never spoke but he was always there. We saw him and we felt him. This is the thing that will ease me, that will bring an end to this vertigo.

## **seventeen**

The death of Mfe is still a mystery to me. Who killed him and is there going to be an investigation? Mother did not go to church today. She and my aunt are washing the pots outside. The radio plays soft gospel music but mother does not sing along to it as usual. There is a silence that begs to be broken, the gnawing kind of silence.

‘Mother, are you going back to work tomorrow?’ I ask, the intention is to initiate conversation. ‘Yes. I have to, because of you I had to take a week off. You must not repeat that madness of yours.’

‘What madness are you talking about? You never even gave me a chance to explain anything. How do you say it is madness?’

She says nothing for a while. My aunt glimpses at me once. Her eyes empty and her face without expression. Not necessarily sad, but a deep melancholy that does not seem like it can be cured.

‘Sengwayo, I do not have time for you today. Can you just stop always seeking attention? Can you not go to see Bonsai? Your friends have not seen you since you started making yourself crazy.’

I want to respond but fear that if I do mother will get even more agitated and my aunt will have to intervene. This will do nothing but confirm that I am an attention seeker. I am not an attention seeker. But before I leave, I ask mother ‘where is Gogo Simphe, I did not see her at the funeral?’ Mother takes a bar of soap next to her and throws it at me. ‘Futsek, you are disrespectful. Who do you even think you are to speak to me like that?’ I can see that I have angered her. Going back to the house will not help me. I walk away, slowly.

I look for Bonsai at his house and do not find him. The door is locked, I shout a couple of times and decide to go look for him at the shops. Reluctant, there are many questions, stares, and things that people want to speak to me about. But I cannot stay in the house forever. That will also feed into the township gossip. ‘He is sick. He has gone mad. His cousin was killed. He tried to kill an old lady. He has epilepsy.’ I know they have started whispering some of these statements if not all of them. Luckily, I am no longer moved by them. Losing my teeth made me accept that whenever I turn my back things will be spoken about me. Jokes will be made about me and how I speak. I guess that was training for moments like this. But besides

that, meeting uncle has made me impervious to things meaningless and fleeting. Although I cannot say exactly what is meaningful, I know when something is meaningless.

I decide to go look for him at the shops. I get there and it is the same drill. Boy courts girl, another drags a cigarette and blows the smoke out as if it is not the only thing he is getting off his chest; and of course what would Mam' Phindi's corner shop be without the older boys playing dice. On the other side of the street is debate about soccer, who should have passed the ball to who, the weakest defence and which soccer kit is more beautiful. There is no sign of Bonsai. I greet a couple of my school mates and ask them where he is. 'He was just here not so long ago. 'He walked down the street, check him that side' one of the boys directs me with his hand. It is strange that I did not get stares or questions. I am disappointed but I do not know for what exactly. Maybe the fact that it seems that people do not care that Mfe is dead, that I was said to be mad and even the fact that I almost killed an old woman. Other people's lives seem to be undisturbed at all by incidents that have no doubt changed my life. I am unsure how this makes me feel.

*I wonder why mother was so frustrated when I asked whether Gogo Simphe was at the funeral. I really did not see her, and this was shocking considering that she and my mother have developed some sort of friendship. I am not complaining though, Gogo Simphe not being in sight is a huge relief for me. Mfe, do I miss Mfe? I do not feel his absence, not yet at least. We only buried him yesterday and besides Mfe was always reserved even when he was around, he had a way of making people forget that he was there. A car screeches, hits my arm with the rear-view mirror and I almost fall. I am in shock, 'watch where you are going you ugly thing, this is not your mother's road.' the driver says hanging out the window. I am still in shock and right there at the corner I can see Bonsai. He sees me too. They see me, him and the girl holding his hand. I am in shock. They approach me and I just stand there. 'What is that taxi driver doing, he is crazy' Bonsai says while laughing. I do not respond, I just shrug.*

## **eighteen**

Last night we did not speak much during dinner. My aunt did not speak at all. My mother did not know what to say to her. I had nothing to say to her. I never have had. It is said that when someone dies their spirit lingers and we can feel their presence. I do not feel Mfe's presence, and I also do not feel his absence. Maybe my mother does or my aunt but, in my case, nothing. I do not know what that says about me. After dinner I wash the dishes. Mother shouts from the dining room 'tomorrow you are going to school, make sure you wake up early and iron your

uniform before you sleep'. I did not think that I would have to go to school so soon. Owing to my sickness and my 'loss' I expected her to give me at least a week before she sends me back to that place. She did not but I guess it is fine, sooner or later I would have to go back. In life certain things, although unnecessary, are quite unavoidable. It feels good to sleep on a bed, alone. Mfe's bed is comfortable and without even a scent to remind me that he once slept on it. It is my bed. Mfe is no more, not once did I dream.

The school is still the same, the grass is burnt by the winter cold, and it has taken a khakhi colour. The bricks are rust red and there is a mural of Simphiwe Tshabalala on one of the walls. The mural is badly painted. What is supposed to be a mural of a soccer player kicking a ball is a shapeless thing wearing a South African soccer team jersey. I want to avoid Bonsai, our interaction yesterday was awkward. I am pretty sure he was confused why I decided to walk away while he was speaking to me. Mondays are assembly days. The bell rings and we gather in front of the staffroom. The girls do not wait to be told to start a song. They sometimes even start three songs simultaneously; it is some sort of contest among them. All of them fighting for their chance to be seen, to be visible. But to what end? Because once you are seen you want it to stop. When you are seen you give people access to you, to speak to you and speak about you.

The deputy principal steps forward and the song gradually comes to an end. The principal is a small man with a bald head. His stomach does not suit him, too big for a man his size. There is something cartoonish about him. This is before you hear his voice, a squeaky making one question how he commands authority. How he gets away with it. 'Thank you, girls, for the lovely chorus. This is a sad time for our school. As a community we have lost one of our own. Last week the school lost a very diligent and respectful student who had a bright and promising future.' says the deputy principal with so much conviction. I know that Mfe did not have a promising future, he was lazy and struggled to communicate with people. He was angry all the time and had he not died he was going to no doubt kill someone himself. The principal struggles to pronounce Mfe's full name and has to consult the other teachers behind him about the surname. So much for 'diligent and respectful' student. He then orders a moment of silence then continues to make other announcements. We are dismissed into our classes.

It is while attending the different classes that I realize how agonizing the monotony of school is. I want to stand up and leave but I cannot. Perhaps I can but the consequences will outweigh this inconvenience. *It is only a year before I finish school. Is a year a long time? When you are in pain and uncomfortable it probably is. Is there a place that is more bearable than this because home is also not pleasant? If I decide to run, where do I run to? Or is that*

*what life is about? Running from others, from the self and the world. What happens when my knees are no longer able to carry me, and I can no longer run? Will I not have to face the very thing that I spent my whole life trying to evade? But if I stay, I will die, what then is existence without life.* ‘Sengwayo, do you want to be in this class or not?’ Mr Kubheka shouts at me. Impulsively I stick my tongue out through my toothless gums and point it at the teacher. The whole class laughs. I do not know whether they are laughing at me or at Kubheka. I begin to sweat, I am embarrassed. Mr Kubheka joins in the laughter.

The school bell rings and finally I can go home. Not that it is any better there but at least I will not have to be subjected to all this stupidity. By the time bell rang I had already packed my books. I am not interested in any petty after school conversations. I stand up and put my bag on my shoulders and as I exit Bonsai asks me to wait for him. I want to say no but it will seem as if I am angry that the class laughed at me. So I wait reluctantly. Bonsai is popular so I know it is not just going to be us; there is always a group around him. We walk down the corridor and even before we reach the gate there are five of us walking. I am annoyed. They are talking about this and that, soccer of course, girls here and there and the only thing I can think is that I do not want to be here. ‘Sengwayo why are you so quiet? or you want to stick your tongue out again’ says Bonsai randomly. There is a brief silence, they all look at each other and they laugh. Bonsai is next to me; I look at him in the eye and punch him on his throat with every strength in me. He immediately collapses and there is complete silence.

Everyone is in shock. It takes a while to register what just happened. The echo from the blow still reverberates. Bonsai is flat on the ground; he is not moving and he is not breathing. Or at least does not seem to be breathing at all. I look at him on the floor and I feel a certain pleasure. There is something fulfilling in seeing him unable to do anything. Unable to smile, to make people laugh, to speak, and all of these things give me some sort of power. That I too can do things to you, the way you have always been doing things to me. I do not attempt to help him. I wait for someone to rouse him but everyone seems immobilized. The blow was unexpected especially from me to Bonsai. One of the boys eventually get enough courage to wake him up. Bonsai shakes but he does not move. The other boys also join in. Other students begin to gather around to see what happened. I decide to go home. I leave Bonsai lying there unconscious, a group of students around him. He always enjoyed attention anyway.

When I get home, I remember uncle and the shadeless tree. I want to go confirm if he is there even though I can feel that he is not. My body tells me that he is gone forever, that he was only here for a short time and in that short time we rejected him. Mother denied him. I was afraid of him. Aunt never spoke of him and Mfe never even looked at him. How could he have

stayed? Why would he have stayed? I check the shadeless tree and there is nothing, even the crate that he sat on is not there. It is as if he never existed. I go into the house and enter my bedroom, the one that used to belong to Mfe. Even in that room nothing reminds me of him. His toothbrush is still there but it denies all ties to him. His school bag claims not to have ever belonged to him and the bed says it knows nothing of his body and its weight. It is also as if he has never existed. It makes me sad, sad that I too will wither away in people's memory. The little that I own will deny all allegiance to me, it will be as if I have never lived. I lie on my back on the bed and for a long time see nothing, look at nothing and hear nothing.

'Sengwayo, Sengwayo' my mother shouts and I wake up from a dream. I do not remember the dream; it was shapeless and formless. One of those dreams where you know that you are dreaming but you do not know what about. Similar to life, where you know you are living but unsure why. Just like my life. The door opens violently, and she finds me lying on the bed. 'Why are you doing this to me? Why do you abuse me so much? Every day I get complaints about you. Last week I did not go to work because of you. Why don't you kill me here now because that is what you want to do? Kill me now Sengwayo. Kill me now' and then she starts crying. I do not know what to do. Whether to comfort her or to let her cry it out? I feel bad because I am the reason she is crying but it is not like I do all these things intentionally. Contrary to what she believes I am not seeking any attention. All these situations are just a ripple effect of the single question she refused to answer: 'who is uncle?' If I tell her that she will not understand, this she has shown.

Strangely there is something satisfying about seeing her cry. There is no guilt, and this worries me. *Could it be that I have lost my ability to feel? Why is it that my mother's tears mean so little to me? Do I even have emotions anymore? Maybe uncle drained everything in me. I must stop speaking about this non-existent uncle. Where is he now? It might be true I might have truly lost my mind.* 'They called me in to your school. They say you insulted the teacher. As if that is not enough Bonsai's mother told me that you almost killed her son. That you struck him unprovoked, in front of other people. Are you a fighter now? Why are you like this? I did not raise you like this at all. What has gotten to into you Sengwayo? What has gotten to you?' my mother shouts at me. I do not respond but just keep on looking down. She slaps me and I can immediately taste blood on my gums. She leaves the room. I have no way of making her feel better; I too am in extreme rage.

## nineteen

In the morning we do not speak to each other. We both bath and I wear my school uniform. We leave and on the way, we see Bonsai walking ahead of us. His timing is the worst. I drag my feet; my mother does not see why I have decided to walk slower. She walks ahead of me and then looks back ‘what is your problem? I do not have the whole day. Let’s go.’ I pick up my pace. Mother realizes that Bonsai is in front of us. ‘You are even a coward, why did you hit him in the face in the first place if you are not going to stand for it?’ I do not respond to her neither do I increase my pace. The bell rings and I sigh. Bonsai runs. I catch up to my mother’s pace. She looks at me with something between disgust and shame but does not say anything. We head straight for the staffroom. We are ushered into the cartoonish deputy principal’s office. He is the head of disciplinary. My mother and I sit next to each other and the deputy across from us. He removes phlegm from his throat and then begins ‘We understand that Sengwayo, and indeed your whole family, has been experiencing some difficulties. Despite this reality we are seeing a continuation in the unbecoming behaviour of your son.’ He goes on to explain what happened in Kubheka’s class. Then goes on to speak about ‘the fight’ between me and Bonsai. He then speaks about values, the best interest of other children and recommends that I stay at home for a couple of weeks and ‘get some professional assistance.’ My mother pleads but her plea is unsuccessful. The man is as resolute in his decision as his bald head.

We leave the school. Mother does not utter a single word to me. The streets are empty, all the children are at school. Adults are at work except those whom the township has swallowed whole. Those who form part of the landscape, any time of the day you find them. The [blowing autumn wind make it seem as if the township is just a liminal space. As if there is another place where people stay, not this one. ‘There is no way that I will stay at home because of you. I must go to work’ says mother in a much more conversational tone. ‘I have no choice but to take you to the Sangoma we went to with Gogo Simphe.’ Before I could say anything, she continues ‘I am not doing this because I want to but the circumstances are forcing me. You have left me with no choice Sengwayo.’ I realize that mother is sincere about this. For the first time in a while I feel something. Fear. ‘The Sangoma was clearly correct you are a danger to yourself and others. Why would you hit Bonsai? He is your best friend. You almost killed Gogo Simphe. I love you my son, but you need help.’ I realize that this fear I am feeling is not mine alone. It is also my mother’s fear. It is the township’s fear. It dominates this place and everything in it. It presses it down and chokes it.

‘Mother, I cannot go to that man; I do not know what he will do to me. You also don’t know what he will do to me’

‘But what can I do at this point Sengwayo? I gave you a chance, but you keep on proving that there is something wrong. You were never like this. You have never been disrespectful. You have never been violent; all of this behaviour is new.’

‘I will go apologize to Bonsai and Gogo Simphe’

‘None of that will make things right anymore. You need help. Two weeks is not a lot of time. In any case you have been suspended from school.’

‘But mother.’

‘We will not debate this anymore. We are leaving tonight.’

‘We must go ask Gogo Simphe to accompany us. You also need to apologize to her and Bonsai before you leave, end of story.’

There is no point in trying to convince her. She has already made up her mind. She made up her mind long before my suspension. My suspension served as an excuse to get rid of me. I see it in the contours of her face. How she struggles to look at me as she says this. I can see that she is feeling guilty. Not because she is sending me away but because it is not out of love that she is doing it. It is because I have somehow become an inconvenience to her and have disturbed the rhythm of her life. So she looks this way and that way. She is unable to tell me, her own son, the truth. The truth is that she can no longer bear my presence. My being, behaviour included, is no longer compatible with the life she is accustomed to. The life she worked her entire life to live. I get in the way of her going to work every day. I ask her questions and that remind her that she has not had answers for almost all her life. I fight back; she also wishes that she could, but strength is gone with all the years of timidity. She does not want me around because I remind her of things she would much rather forget.

We get to the house and for the first time I can feel uncle’s presence, but I dismiss it as just something caused by the fact that I am not used to coming back home in the morning. Or maybe because the township is quiet. Or maybe that I am in desperate need of an intervention. I cannot allow mother to take me to that man. I take off my school uniform and contemplate running away. *I do not know where I will go, all the relatives that I have would just return me back home. I could run to the streets but how would I survive there?* Mother enters the room and tells me that I must go call Gogo Simphe and tell her that I would like to speak to her. Confirmation; mother long ago took the decision to take me to the Sangoma. She long ago took the decision to send me to him. I go and look for Gogo Simphe, I struggle to open her gate but eventually succeed. Her yard is so clean, there are no weeds, no litter and there is nothing that

seems out of place even though the air has a strange smell. Everything looks like it is where it is supposed to be. Fascinating because Gogo Simphe is not clean at all.

I knock on the door and no one answers. I look at the keyhole and I can see that the key is still inside. I knock harder and shout 'Gogo Simphe, Gogo Simphe'. The more I try to shout louder the more my voice goes lower. The harder I knock, the softer my knock becomes. Suddenly all my movements are slow, something touches on my shoulder. I turn to look but my head turns in slow motion. It is as if everything is slowed down except the beat of my heart. Uncle's hand is on my shoulder. No doubt it is him. I am shocked because I thought he had long left. It has been many days and many times needing him, but he was not there, not even traces of his presence. Today he appears and slows down everything. I look into his eyes; I am no longer afraid. I have learnt that fear does not serve me, it only complicates things. He also stares back at me. 'Who are you?' I attempt to say but my voice is warped. I try again 'who are you?' but my voice bends out of shape, changing my words into mumbling sounds. He continues to stare at me with his hand still on my shoulder. I stop trying to speak and look back at him. He grips my shoulder harder. I cannot move, nothing moves. Everything is still. Uncle looks like a statue in front of me. He too does not move.

I am not quite sure how long we stand there facing each other. It is like we exist outside of time. He communicates nothing and I also do not say anything to him. Just two people staring at each other. I then begin to feel my blood moving, my pores swell up and I feel a distinct coldness. A coldness that I have not felt before. A coldness that requires neither blanket nor jacket. A coldness that reaches the marrow of the bone. Uncle gradually let's go of my shoulders and it is as if a heavy load has been lifted off my shoulders. He walks away and exits the gate. I follow him and shout 'who are you?' He does not look back but continues to walk. I follow him and as I exit the gate I bump into my mother. 'Where is Gogo Simphe?' she asks, and I just stand there wide eyed and a bit dazed.

'Did you find Gogo Simphe? I am talking to you' asks my mother again.

'No mother, I did not find her. It's locked and no one is opening.'

'But who were you talking to? Because I heard you talking to someone.'

I swallow my saliva. My eyes dart, trying to avoid mother's gaze but she follows them. The only answer I have would ruffle her up. The other option is to say I was talking alone but that would have the same outcome as me telling her that I was speaking to uncle. Both these answers will legitimize why it is necessary to take me to the Sangoma. Mother's guilt would be eased, that's if she has any. 'I was not speaking; I was calling Gogo Simphe because her key is inside

the door but she is not responding.’ I do not know where I conjured up that answer but mother seems to believe it. She enters ‘let’s go and find her’. I follow her.

## twenty

*I am relieved that I managed to handle the situation this time. Had I reacted mother was surely going to believe that I am not well. But what is the meaning of all of this? Why did uncle suddenly appear? Why did I not have any visions like all the other times? Why did he stop time? Where could he have vanished to? I am convinced now more than ever that I am the only one who sees him, if that was not the case then mother would have seen him exiting the gate. It means that mother has been honest the whole time about not knowing who uncle is. I have been unfairly judging her, thinking that she is betraying me. If mother does not know and has never met uncle, then it means my aunt and Mfe have also never met him. I would say that uncle is in my imagination, but I cannot because I strongly feel the warmth and cold of his touch. I strongly feel his presence and so vivid are the things I see when I am with him that I cannot believe that I am mad; I cannot believe that uncle is not real.*

Immediately when we enter the yard the stench is much stronger. I had smelled it but not like this. The smell is familiar. It is the smell that hovers around the township looking for a nest to hatch. It is a relentless smell; from birth I have always smelled it. Mother knocks at the door but there is no answer. ‘Mother look at the hole, the key is inside.’ Mother looks at the keyhole and the key are there. She knocks, shouts, knocks but there is no answer. ‘Let us go look for someone who might help. Maybe there is something wrong. Maybe something happened.’ mother says, concern written all over her face. ‘I will go call abo Tsakes, I am sure I will find them by the shops. Mother knocks again and we leave. We exit the gate and she says ‘please for once do what you have to do and come back. I really do not need any more stress because of you Sengwayo.’ She says these words slowly, in a pleading tone. I run towards the shops.

There is the same feeling I felt when we found out that Mfe is dead. My body tells me that. There is no way of explaining it. It is just a knowing that one would have to experience to understand. But even besides that what was the reason for the appearance of uncle? In all the instances he has appeared there has been death. But what is strange is that this time he did not say anything or show me anything. I reach the shops and there is no one outside. I enter on the TV are highlights of a soccer match. The street fighter arcade game is next to the door and on the screen characters are on auto-control fighting. I watch them for a little while and there is

something natural about them, they do what they want. I smile, how could I think of something so ridiculous. The shelves are full behind the Somalian or is it a Pakistani who is waiting for me to buy. 'My friend did you see Tsakes?' He starts pressing, fidgeting with the phone in his hand as if he did not hear me. 'My friend, where is Tsakes?' I shout. 'Me I don't know Tsakes, I don't know.' He responds casually.

I get out of the shop and go down the street and no one appears. Mother will be frustrated if I come back and say I cannot find Tsakes. She will think it is a strategy to avoid finding Gogo Simphe so that I do not have to go to the Sangoma. On the corner I bump into the man with a green vest, the one who caught me when I was running. He recognizes me from afar, I can tell by the bitter look on his face. Might I add, an ugly face. I can see his bloodshot eyes from a distance. It is the alcohol or the pain. Too many tears or too many years trying to stop the tears that has made this man's eyes like this. He is my only hope if I do not want mother to go crazy. I stop him, 'grootman, askies.' He stops, looks at me from head to toe then say 'What do you want boy.' His nose has beads of sweat and he smells awful. 'We need your help. You see, we went to Gogo Simphe's house to look for and when we got there the door is locked, no one is answering but the key is inside. So we are worried that something might have happened to her. Can you please help us open the door.'

'Who are you with there?' he asks.

'My mother, I am with my mother.'

'Just the two of you?'

'Yes, we could not find anyone else to help us. I can't find Ta Tsakes also,' I say.

'Ok.' He licks his lips and then smiles smugly.

He must not attempt anything this man. I will fight him with every strength I have. I return his mischievous stare that says I know what you did last time, and I am waiting for an opportunity to revenge myself.

This man is wearing a shirt that is unbuttoned but beneath it is the same green vest. He breathes with difficulty; I wonder how he was able to catch me. A close look at him and I realize that even though he is stout, he is not very healthy. Something about him is sick. Maybe his lungs or maybe his heart is broken, for many in the township have broken hearts. Some struggle to hide it. I lead the way and he follows me. We reach my house and I tell him to wait for me while I go fetch mother. I fetch mother and she does not hesitate; I can tell that she has been waiting for me anxiously. When we reach Gogo Simphe's house the stench is stronger. Even the smelling man with the vest smells it. 'Mh mh, what is that smell?' he asks. I wonder if he ever asks himself that question when he is alone. We knock at the door again, nothing.

We shout, nothing. The man pushes the door forcefully with his shoulder. The door does not move. 'We have to break in.' he says looking at my mother. Mother looks at me. I look down, if it were up to me, we would just leave. Let Gogo Simphe rot inside; if she is really dead as my body is telling me.

The man with the vest struggles for a while and he eventually succeeds in opening the door. I had never imagined what it looks like inside Gogo Simphe's house; an old woman who stays alone and picks up rubbish for a living. When the door opens flies begin to buzz, the smell is louder, and we all cover our noses. 'I think we should not enter here, maybe let us find other people.' The man with the vest says, struggling to conceal the fear in his voice and on his face. Mother is also scared. 'We will not find anyone; people are at work and others are at school. I tried to find Ta Tsakes and I couldn't. We might as well enter. We have already opened the door.' They both look at me and I know they do not agree with what I am saying but their pride will not allow them to let a child be braver than they are. They stand and peep at the door. I confidently walk between them and enter the house. I am no longer afraid. It is quite obvious that inside we will find a corpse. It is just a matter of where in the house.

The kitchen is as neat as the yard. Everything is clean and is placed neatly and deliberately. The kitchen sink has no dishes. On the table is a plate with half-eaten food that is already forming fungus. Three flies wrestle over the plate. The house is quiet except for the buzzing sound of the fridge and the tick of the clock. The walls are painted cream and they do not have any stains on them, as if they are recently painted. One would swear that Gogo Simphe stays with someone. The way she looks and behaves is completely opposite to how her house looks. I walk past the kitchen into another room, the smell grows even louder. The sound of the fridge consistent in its buzzing. I look behind me and it is my mother then the man in a vest. He is afraid, so much for all that bravery when he was chasing me. People are not what they portray themselves to be. People are rarely what they make themselves out to be. The dining area has a wooden table, no cloth on it but so shiny I can see my reflection. There are four chairs, tucked in proportion under the table. I wonder who sits here, who dines with Gogo Simphe. I have never seen anyone come and visit her.

Something barks in another of the rooms, and we all withdraw back to the kitchen. We look at each other to confirm if we all heard it. The man in a vest is sweating and my mother has her eyes opened wide. 'I think we should ask for help. Did you hear that.' my mother whispers. 'There is definitely something in that room' the man in the vest supports this view. I am unafraid and perhaps if I display my bravery, it might dissuade my mother from taking me from the Sangoma. I go back to the dining area and proceed to the door where the sound came

from. My mother follows me. 'Stop it Sengwayo.' The man with the vest runs to stop me, not because he is concerned about my safety but because he fears what might come out when I open the door. I reach the door before either of them is able to stop me and I open it. For a moment I do not see anything, just a wall. The room is big, and the walls are white. Mother pulls me back and signals to the man in the vest to walk in first. I do not know what this gesture means. The man walks in reluctantly. I break free from my mother's grip and follow closely behind. The man walks in, holds his head, and exclaims.

I walk in and on the floor, Gogo Simphe is lying there naked. Her stomach is swollen, and flies sit on her mouth. Her face has shrunk, and her wrinkles are more pronounced. The floor has a puddle of what seems like excrement, it is beginning to dry up and flies have made it their home. I do not wait to see more; I exit the room. The man in the vest still has his hands on his head. I am no longer quite sure whether it is his armpits that smell, or it is the corpse. 'What did you see? What is happening' my mother asks, she is afraid of going to see for herself. 'Gogo Simphe is dead' I say as I walk out. She goes in the bedroom, lets out a scream and comes out running. The man in a vest follows us out. We stand outside; no one says anything to anyone.

## **twenty one**

*The appearance of uncle means death. This uncle that intrigued me so much carries death with him. It was Mfe and now Gogo Simphe, there is no way that this is a coincidence. We still do not know who murdered Mfe so brutally. The police have also not given us anything, no one has been arrested. I thought it was Gogo Simphe but there she is, inside her house rotting. It can only be uncle who is responsible for these things. But why would he do it? Why does he only appear to me?* I thought there was no one in the township but now all of a sudden there is large group of people outside Gogo Simphe's house. I do not know where they come from and how they heard but they are here. Like flies and shit, they want to find themselves there. Those who arrived first tell the story as if they saw it themselves. They describe the position of the body and the smell as if they were inside the house. It is fascinating to watch. One need not to have seen to tell the story, to have heard is enough. After a while the police and an ambulance arrive. The people make way, the man in the vest and I lead them inside the house.

The skin on Gogo Simphe's skin is beginning to rot. There are no wounds or marks on her body. She was wearing a sad face instead of her usual angry one. The hairs in her body are thin and silver, so fickle that a whiff would blow them off. They put her in a black bag, her

body bending as if it is boneless. Then she is not there anymore, just a black bag with mass. I am glad that she no longer exists, that she will not be there to aid my mother take me to the Sangoma. I am glad that I will no longer see her face, her threatening face. The police ask us to leave the house. No one knows what killed her, but people have already started speculating about what could have happened but none of their speculations made any sense. The ambulance tells us that they cannot take care and they have to wait for the morgue to come take her. While waiting something barks inside the house, before anyone could go inside and check a black dog comes out of the house, dashing. It growls then heads straight for the gate. It exits, people chase after it but it is so fast that no one manages to stop it.

‘We have always known that she is a witch. Umthakathi. That thing is not a dog’ are some of the things they were saying after the dog came out. ‘We should have caught that thing. We can still find it, it’s not very far. If it is a dog, why was it inside the house? Only white people keep their dogs in the house. Why have we never seen or heard that dog bark?’ people keep on arguing. I am also quite curious what the dog wanted in the house and why have we never seen Gogo Simphe with the dog? I have always been suspicious of her and I am persuaded by the view that it might not have been a dog that I saw. Maybe another one of the animals that she uses to bewitch people. This also affirms my theory that she had something to do with Mfe’s death. She could have sent that animal to attack Mfe. I look for mother and she is standing alone and looks sad. I go to her, ‘mother, let’s go home.’ ‘We can’t go home, the police said they still need to take statements from us’. I stand next to her waiting for her to say something, but she does not, so we just stand in silence.

The people from the morgue eventually arrive and they take the body in a black bag. The people watch as it is loaded into the van. School children are also back from school, so they gather around asking what happened. Most of them are excited by the story that an animal came out of the house and escaped. I am tired but the police insist on taking statements. We tell them everything we know. The people have left, only a handful who want to suck the marrow out of what happened remain. Mother and I leave to go home. The man with the vest still looks dazed, it seems that he is unsure of where to go from here. Where do people who have seen what we have seen go? Home is no safe place for a mind that already knows, no place is. The streets will devour you whole. Death? So much uncertainty. We get home and I ask mother if we are still going to the Sangoma. She responds with a sigh. I go into the bedroom, lie on my back, and think of nothing. I just stare at the ceiling until I can no longer see it. Until I can no longer hear anything. Until I fall asleep.

The police asked if we know anyone who is related to Gogo Simphe and we answered 'no'. I have never seen anyone visit her. I have never seen anyone visit her or come out of her house. My mother also does not remember her having grandchildren or seeing any of her relatives. Does this mean that Gogo Simphe has no children and therefore no grandchildren. But even if that is the case surely, she is supposed to have some family, even if distant family. What kind of life has no relation? She just had us. Neighbours she never spoke to. Neighbours who hated her and accused her of witchcraft, those are the people who were part of her life. She should have been very lonely and maybe her bitterness emanated from the solitary life that she lived. I wonder if the solitude was imposed or if it was voluntary? I do not feel sorry for her, life took a decision for her, and she clearly did not fight back. Life does have a tendency of taking choices for us but perhaps what matters is if one rejects or accepts the choice. It has done it with uncle; brought him in my life without my consent and now it is up to me to decide what I do about it.

Mfe's mother returns from work and is shocked when we tell her that Gogo Simphe has passed. 'What happened?' she asks. Mother continues to narrate the story and there is something that brightens in her face. Mother serves dinner and for the first time since the death of Mfe we sit together and eat. Aunt is cheerful, somewhat, she even tells us about her day at work and gives us an update on the case of Mfe. She tells us that the police have not found any suspect, but they are quite certain that he was murdered. I do not know why my aunt is opening up to us on this particular day and after hearing the news about Gogo Simphe. Perhaps she finds comfort in the fact that what befell her was not necessarily a curse but nature's work. Maybe she feels now that her son's death was not an attack on her, but like a drop of rain it could fall on any head. We finish eating and I wash the dishes. Mother and aunt are still sitting and speaking. 'Goodnight I am going to sleep now.' I say but mother calls me to sit down.

'A lot has happened in the past couple of weeks, you know this. It is pointless to keep on pretending that you do not realize this. I gave birth to you. For months you were coiled in my womb. For years you suckled on my breast. I know you; I knew you before you knew yourself. There is something wrong. Maybe you think we will not understand or that telling us will embarrass you but that is not the case. We gave birth to you, we know you, mother says, so calmly and as if she had rehearsed this speech many times. Before I could even respond she continues 'you have to take a decision now, whether you will cooperate, and we try to get over this thing together or we force you to get help. You are old enough now and I believe you have the ability to make your own decisions. So here are your choices. You either go to hospital again and tell the doctor everything that is happening to you and that has happened in the past

couple of days, or I take you to the Sangoma. I am silent for a while and as I open my mouth to speak, mother interjects. 'Go to sleep now Sengwayo. We will discuss tomorrow'.

I agree to go to hospital and see a doctor. Anything is better than going to see that Sangoma. I do not see how he could help me, pushed away by how he looked like uncle, how disorganized his place is and the general view that I hold of Sangomas. For me they are just outcasts with weird tendencies. I hold this view even after the Sangoma has told that I might be a danger to myself and others. He was not lying. In a short space of time I have strangled an old woman, tried to run away from home and punched my best friend. How could he have known this? Maybe it was just a hunch but the urgency and seriousness with which he said it suggests that he was certain. But still, perceptions are everything and something seemed very wrong when I went there. The smell was unwelcoming, his demeanour was unassuring and it does not help that he looks exactly like uncle.

## **twenty two**

Mother is glad that I am willing to get help. I still believe that I do not need any help. I still believe that the events of the last couple of days have meaning. I am still without answers; my curiosity is still as strong as it was when I first met uncle. I know that what has happened cannot be undone and that there is no cure for what ails me. There is no way I can unsee all that I have seen. And knowledge? There is no way that I can unknow. There is no way that these feelings, these strong feelings, can be managed. I have no control over when uncle comes to me. I have no idea where he stays. If I did, I would go to him and make demands even if the demand is that he never visits me for he has failed to show me what he desires of me. It is better to bend to what the current situation demands and hope that things will find a way of working themselves out. We reach the hospital and I speak to a psychiatrist who recommends that I be admitted. Mother consents, promises that she will visit me often and then leaves me.

In the psychiatric ward the doctors run some tests on me, they give me medication and counsel me. The nurses are friendly but not committed. The doctors know but do not feel and the patients are almost always in despair. Some try to hide it but it is there, in the way they walk, talk and smile. But they did not find this despair here, it followed them from outside. It is there that sadness is created. It is outside this ward that it is conceived. I have got accustomed to the ways of this place and have learnt to tolerate its irritations. Most of the times I am numbed and slowed down by the medicine that they give us. Sometimes I do not feel my toes, sometimes my head is light and most times I cannot hear my heartbeat. The days are the same,

but the patients have new theatrics every day. Mother visits me every second week. I always look forward to the food. I hate my doctor and his beard, but I force a smile because I want to get out. Not just of this place but I want to get out. After two weeks I hear that I will be discharged soon. This is good news, but I have forgotten how to be happy.

Days I no longer count because what is there to benefit, there is nothing to look forward to. My life has become the life of a drying bone, slowly moving towards its withering. South Africa is out of the World Cup, I am out of my body. It has been many days since mother promised that she would come fetch me soon. I feel forgotten by the world, unnecessary to the world. Bonsai does not visit me even once, his mother too. But I am not sad that I am here alone, I am sad that I no longer believe. I no longer believe in the future, in my mother, in myself; all ambition has been squashed out of me. Some of these thoughts I do not communicate with the doctors. I know what they want to hear so I tell them that. It makes things less complicated for everyone.

Mother arrives but something is missing from her face. The usual happiness and relief to see me is not there. Something makes up from what is missing; there is a strong concern and worry. She is not worried about my health. The doctors told her that I will be fine and I just need to take my medicine. She greets me but not with her eyes, her eyes are hiding. They move around as if trying to avoid mine. 'Sengwayo.' The nurse arrives and tells me to go change. I smile but mother returns my smile with an empty emotion. I get out of the bed. Mother hands me fresh clothes and I go change. I return, mother signs a few documents and we leave. It takes us a while to find a taxi and the wait is torturous. I have nothing to say to mother, I have told her everything about my time in the hospital. She knows everything about the sessions, the patients and the nurses. Mother has much to say but something is stuck in her throat. It stops her from speaking. So we just stand there awkwardly until a red taxi arrives. There is a weight around us and over us. As if the problems of all of yesterday are mounted on our shoulders, on my shoulders. I look at mother's face and very little is written on it. So little that I can barely recognize her.

We enter the taxi and as if in a dream I see a man sitting at the back, a familiar face. I take a closer look and he resembles uncle. This time I refuse to engage with him. I sit next to my mother and do not look back. I look outside the taxi and although the taxi is moving the landscape remains still. It is like I am trapped inside a painting; everything is still. The taxi continues to move slowly and the energy behind me grows, it reaches for my shoulders, wants to suffocate me but I resist. I breathe. Mother does not say anything the whole way and I need her to talk, to say something to me. To distract me but she doesn't. It is as if I am alone in this

taxi, alone in this world. Alone with this thing gnawing at me. We get off the taxi and mother starts crying. I ask her what is wrong, and she does not respond. She just snuffles. Everything is blurry, my mom is crying, handcuffs, and my heart is beating fast. I can see that mother wants to speak, to tell me that everything is going to be fine, but she cannot. I close my eyes and there is nothing in me, no prayer, no thought. Nothing. I hold my face but there is also nothing there, even my face seems to have left me.

## PART B: PORTFOLIO

### PORTFOLIO MA CREATIVE WRITING

#### **Reflective Journals**

##### **1.**

The O-week was definitely a prelude of what was going to be the rhythm of the entire course. During O-week we were given a breakdown of what the course is about, how we should approach it and what to expect. We were introduced to the different people who would facilitate the seminars and to other students. The intensity of the O-week sessions did not abate, in fact there was more to read and write after O-week. I was excited and anxious at the same time. The second week opened with a seminar titled ‘writing simply’; at first the title of the seminar took me aback because I always associated simple writing with boring writing. But upon engaging the material provided by Henali (who was facilitating the seminar) I realized that this is not the case at all. In fact, to write simply is necessary for a cohesive story. In the seminar Henali explained writing simply as using unassuming language, straightforward story line and using short sentences. She spoke about the importance of allowing the story to serve itself and not necessarily being preoccupied with writing for a specific audience. At first I doubted this approach because from primary school we are taught that when we write we must consider who we are writing for. I mean the first piece of serious writing I did was ‘myself’ where I wrote to the class about who I am and then we wrote an informal letter which is always addressed to someone. So I was curious about writing without thinking of an audience.

Henali then recommended pieces of writing that demonstrate how to write simply. In these pieces there is a constant use of devices such as the motif which help contain the story, propel it and sometimes perform an aesthetic function. One particular piece we looked at was titled *The Metal Bowl* by Miranda July. In this story the characters and objects kept on reappearing and in this way the story was able to serve itself. It was able to be in conversation with itself. The story had some finality to it. It started where it began, full circle. This was particularly interesting to me because I often struggle with writing pieces with a straightforward story line. After the seminar Henali gave us an assignment: To write a short story where we use the motif device. When I began writing my story I realized that writing with a motif in mind really does play a huge role in ensuring that a piece of writing is not haphazard or all over the place. What I kept on asking myself though was what if I want to write a story that is all over the place? Our lives, experiences and imaginations are not linear. What this means is that perhaps it is permissible not to write simply. Of course, I could be wrong about this but since it is still early in the year I am hopeful that certain things that are uncertain will be resolved as the year progresses.

The reading group was no different from the one that we had during O-week: we choose a piece of writing from the readers and say what interests us about the piece. After our respective readings we had a conversation about audience and its (un)importance for a writer. What sparked the conversation is not only the seminar we had with Henali but the conversation was also inspired by a piece by Kuzhali titled *Items That Have Gone Missing Inside The Lucy Termerlin Institute For Broken Shapeshifters Containment Room*, we struggled to grasp what the writer was writing about and we concluded that the story is a perfect example of writing that is in conversation with itself. We then discussed what the point of writing would be if we completely ignored the audience. The question left lingering was: how far do we go in writing for ourselves or for the sake of writing itself? For me writing plays a particular function, it has a certain responsibility towards society and I refuse to write as if this responsibility does not exist.

In the library I found the book called *The Antipeople* by Sony Labou Tansi. The book is descriptive, with characters that are so relatable and whose texture you can almost feel. What I noticed while reading the book is that I have become more observant as a reader, it has only been two weeks and it already feels like I have grown so much and I am a better reader. I guess it was true that the experience of being in the library browsing for books is fulfilling in itself. I spent my week there reading and writing, hopefully I will find even more interesting titles.

Our feedback on our assignments was enlightening although at some point I felt as if there were just too many compliments. Two things might be happening. It is either we did really well in our assignments or the teachers struggled to point out where our work was lacking. I personally struggle with giving feedback. Sometimes it because of fear that I might be doing a misreading and also because I do not want to come across as douchebag. What I really liked though about the feedback is that the teachers were able to immediately see the kind of style that I am trying to go for and they both recommended pieces of writing that I should checkout: *Infinite Jest and Discomfort*. Overall the week was a success for me. I learnt a lot of things and was able to complete all my tasks on time.

## 2.

“The relationship that we have with language is complex”, these were the opening lines by Mxolisi Nyezwa who is facilitating the seminar for week 3 (meeting poetry). I was quite excited for this seminar because poetry is a genre that I am slowly gravitating towards. In the past I used to regard poetry as this genre only reserved for a certain caliber of writer. But what I am slowly discovering, which was confirmed in the seminar, is that all writers are capable of writing poetry. In fact poetry is very important in that it gives every form of writing life. Manga described poetry as the base of every form of writing just like running is the basis of every sport. This is true because since I began writing as if there is no distinction between poetry and prose, my work has more feeling. In the seminar Mxolisi took us through his writing process. He assured us that there are no rules in poetry and that the genre is all about naming the world as we experience it. During his “ramblings” as he called them, Mxolisi encouraged us to focus on how poetry makes one feel instead of trying to figure out the meaning of the words. This was particularly helpful because what always frustrated me about poetry is how it is so difficult to understand and make sense of. We read a couple of poems in class and spoke about how they make us feel. We were then given prompts to write an assignment.

In this week’s reading group we looked at pieces that are in the readers we were given during O-week - pieces written by Dambudzo Marechera, Taban Lo Liyong, Maaza Mengiste and Victoria Chang. What I picked up from these readings is that there are really no rules in writing, it is up to the writer to use what is in front of him/her to tell a story and work at it until it is regarded as a success. I am also appreciating the reading groups because they keep the mind agile and force you to think about writing on your feet. This happens because we do not know

which readings our classmates are going to choose so we have to interpret the text on the spot. The reading group is useful and it seems that we are going to have two every week. Manga also invited us to the poetry reading group that takes place weekly every Thursday.

I am not one to have a favourite writer, but when I finished Sony Tansi's novel titled *The Antipeople* I almost did. I had heard about the book and while browsing in the library I stumbled upon it. The book speaks so clearly about the post-colonial condition in Africa and how 'independence' did not change the lives of the ordinary. But the beauty of the book is how the writer is able to make the characters so relatable, as if they are people you have come across. It is something that I want to learn in my writing because most of my writing does not really focus on characters but rather what happens around them. I have also been preoccupied with reading pieces from anthologies that were recommended by Paul. Although it can be distracting to read multiple pieces at the same time I think it is helpful in that it trains my mind to be able to grapple with many projects simultaneously. My approach to reading has always been to focus on one piece and finish it but the course forces me to engage various texts. I am interested in seeing how this will affect my writing going forward.

Manga invited us to a poetry reading group and it was interesting to be in group with people who are so knowledgeable on the genre. It was beautiful to hear people speak so passionately about poetry. It was inspirational and obviously intimidating because it is there that you realize that there is still so much to learn. In the poetry reading group we read South African poets and gave some input on how we feel about the poems. I was particularly struck by the poetry of Ari Sitas titled *Black Mamba Rising*. I like how his poetry is able to cross genres. At certain points the poem reads like a prose piece, the dialogue reminds you of a play and the rhythm and arrangement of words is so musical. The reading list of poems had some interesting titles, some of which I have engaged. I am quite curious of how the other group members are going to interpret the poems.

Feedback session with Bra Mxolisi Nyezwa. I already know that it's going to be a difficult one. To write poetry on demand or request is never easy. When we get to the session bra Mxo allows us to read our poems twice and then classmates give feedback. So we did, and even though bra Mxo said there is no such thing as a bad poem, the fear of writing a disappointing poem is still there. I am still of the view that there are few things as embarrassing as hearing people comment on your work. Although feedback sessions are important, sometimes they feel a little bit invasive. I guess with time I will be more comfortable and confident with being in a room while

others are speaking about my work. What is also difficult for me is always having to say something about the work of others. The fact that our class is small also does not help, we have to be fully present and participate for each other. The session was helpful, I learnt that a short poem can be as powerful as a long one. If one constructs the sentences intelligently then a short poem can have a very strong effect.

### 3

There are few things more important to a writer than having a distinct voice and being able to command that voice. I think voice is what makes us continue reading even though we have been doing so for decades. It is what makes you hear a story you know and still be fascinated by how it is told. It is for this reason that I was looking forward to the seminar on voice. During the seminar we collectively read out the seminar guide titled *On Voice: An Experimental Seminar*. Masande said he wanted the seminar to be collaborative, in the sense that as we attempt to find our voices as students, he would also be finding his voice as a teacher. I liked this idea mainly because it gestures to the fact that as writers, we are constantly journeying towards finding our voices but we can never really arrive. We are constantly trying to find the best ways of telling a story. Although there might be things that define and make the writing of a certain writer distinct, I do not believe that we can ever say we have found it.

I am aware that this can be contradictory because Masande believes that a writer's voice is their own fingerprint and that although we inherit certain techniques from other writers, we all have that thing that makes us distinct. So what confuses me or rather what I cannot shake off is the fact that through different phases of my life I have also had different voices. It is because of this that I am convinced that a writer never truly arrives. The seminar also highlighted that there is no single definition of voice, that ideas around what it truly is are contested. But what seemed to be quite evident is that voice is the personality of a writer. Where I was a bit skeptical was also when we read an interview by Victor LaValle. In the interview he says that 'each of us is born with only one writer's Voice, and no amount of camouflage is ever going to disguise that. I do not know exactly why but the absoluteness of that statement makes me uncomfortable. But perhaps it will become clear as I continue to grow as a writer.

I also read Masande's excerpt from a longer piece titled *Brain Smoke* and was impressed by how he writes with ease about a subject which is so complex: writing about writing. His images

are graphic, and it is beautiful to move with him while he gives you these images that stay with you even after you have long finished reading the piece. Look at this line: “I was drunk and wondering what it was that my education would do for me when I heard about the man who had a knife sticking out of his head like a wooden horn”. So much is happening in that sentence: a questioning of education and what it could do for us, at the same time as a sense of violence that is happening around us. It is these kinds of lines that make me return to a writer. Although I have heard about Masande I have not really engaged his work, and I will surely read more of it.

The poetry readings are quickly becoming my favourite sessions. The poetry is meaningful and to hear how others speak and read these poems just emphasizes the fact that words are indeed powerful. Like how is it even possible that I can be moved by the words of someone who lived thousands of kilometres from me and who lived 100 years before me? It is truly amazing. This week we looked at 20<sup>th</sup> century poets from the Americas. Again Federico Garcia Lorca resurfaced. His name has come up in some of the readings, so I was quite excited to engage more with his work.

I am reading a book by Nathaniel Mackey titled *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing*. I love theory and will not even pretend otherwise. I believe that my creative work becomes much more enriched the more I read theory. There is something beautiful about reading how other thinkers speak about art making, writing in particular. But also, I am reading this book because there is a paper that I am working on that I want to present to a group of friends. There have been many questions that I have been grappling with since moving to Makhanda.

#### 4.

What I am slowly starting to realize is that my work might be extremely polarizing. Which is to say if someone likes it then they truly love it and if they do not, then they really hate it. It is never just lukewarm. This is something that I am picking up from the feedback sessions. This is fine with me. If there is anything I have learnt in the short space of time that I have been here in the MACW is that audience is a very tricky thing and if the writing is inspired by pleasing people, constant displeasure with the self is the most likely outcome. What has helped is the constant reading. Through it I have seen that other writers don't write for me so why should I be constantly bothered by what they think of my writing. This week we are preparing for poetics, Paul Wessels has sent us emails outlining how the seminars are going to work.

In the first email Paul highlighted that the aim of the “Poetics of the Wor(l)ds we Live” is to introduce us to the fact that as writers we belong to a community, and we are part of a long tradition. This I have no problem with because to me it suggests that we are going to be doing a lot of reading. I love reading, it is the only way I know how to work and have a sense of solidarity; the truth that I am not alone in this world. But what was both shocking and interesting is that part of the instructions was that we must not read to understand. This at first seemed anti-logical because what we have been taught since the beginning of our schooling was that we must read to understand things. So what does it mean to try not to understand? But in the second email Paul made clear that what he wants us to get from the seminar is the mood of the essays, ideas or forms of narrative that might emerge. This I totally understand.

I read an essay by Robert Creely titled *A Sense of Some Measure*. The essay does require attention but once you figure out what he is talking about then it becomes easy to follow. In this particular essay Creely is making a case that sometimes no matter how much we attempt to intellectualize a poem or give a universal definition of what a work of art entails, there is a possibility of failure. This is because art is somewhat intuitive, it explains what is deeply personal and not dictated at all times by the frameworks that are dominant.

In the third email sent to us by Paul Wessels it became clear that the way we were taught to read is not necessarily the only way and that there are multiple ways to engage a piece of text. Using the Robert Creely essay, he showed us that to read an essay you do not even have to start from the beginning, and you could just go directly to the end and then work your way up. Well this made sense in a way because the Robert Creely essay makes so much sense at the end. If you grasp it first, then the other parts are easier to understand and digest. I also collected my readings for the Poetics week, and they are so fitting in helping me deal with the questions that I am currently grappling with. For Monday I am reading Dambudzo Marechera’s piece titled *Beneath reality there is always fantasy* and Ann Lauterbach *Use This Word in A Sentence: “Experimental”*.

In the fourth email Paul made it clear that we must not put our ideas in other people’s writing. I suppose this is because all of us have our own unique experiences. In his words, ‘Creely is Creely, and you are you’. I must say there are a lot of new things that seem to be part of the Poetics week and I do not know what to make of all of it. New ideas and their introduction are always uncomfortable and of course in the zone of discomfort that is where we learn. Oh and

Masande finally gave me feedback on the assignment on Voice. I was very happy because the feedback was so affirming, and it made me feel recognized as a writer.

## 5.

The weeks go by much quicker now. The workload is becoming heavier. It is clear to everyone that reading is quite important and we have to read not only work that we relate to but everything recommended. And because the class is so small there is no hiding, or free-loading. Monday is for seminars and every week we have a different person facilitating. This week it was by Kerry Hammerton, the title of the seminar is Fierce Writing. Kerry explained fierce writing as writing that illuminates and expands consciousness. It is writing that often forces one to dig deep inside themselves and write about the personal in creative ways. In the seminar we read different pieces which deal with deeply personal and even traumatic experiences using devices such as metaphors, detachment and objectivity. One piece that we read was by Vangile Gantsho, and the piece was so successful in that it was about an ordinary theme but the way in which Vangile Gantsho used it was so intelligent. In the seminar I learnt that a writer has a responsibility, not only to the reader but also themselves and how they choose to write also has implications on them.

The group readings are always a delight, now that Mangaliso visits us during the sessions it is better. We read a beautiful poem by Miguel de Umaruno titled *Throw it Like a Seed*. This poem moved me because it is so simply and beautifully written, what makes it beautiful is the fact that although it was written in the 1930's it is still relatable and fits perfectly in our current context. The reading continues and I am excited every time to discover more writers and their approach to writing.

This week was so busy that there was no time for me to read work outside of the prescribed material. The book *Deamons of a Thousand Forests* is still in my bookshelf looking at me. I have not been reading for leisure and have decided that my reading schedule cannot be improvised anymore and has to be very deliberate. But throughout the work I have been thinking about my approach to reading and how it is so influenced by all the literary critiques that I have read. I intend on coming into every session like a newborn baby, without any pre-acquired ideas. Or at the very least I will not allow them to cloud my own feelings and views about readings.

The Thursday poetry reading group with Manga was absolutely amazing. I think it goes back to what Paul meant when he said it is always better to walk into a class prepared. That way you are able to contribute more fruitfully, and this makes the sessions much richer. I think I really appreciate poetry even though sometimes I do not feel like it returns the same affection to me. In the session we read a beautiful poem by Ike Muila, the poem was written in tsotsi-taal. I was quite impressed by the bravery of Ike because in most cases tsotsi-taal is geo-specific and time-specific and writing in that manner means that one is committed to expressing themselves regardless of who can understand and who can relate. It is basically the classic idea of who is supposed to hear will hear.

Friday feedback sessions with Kerry. During the seminar she gave us an assignment with four prompts where we supposed to write pieces that are personal, changed our lives, about family or had to do with the community. Although we did not read all of our pieces we were able to read two each. During the feedback Nathan and Mthunzi were there. I have said before, to me the sessions require one to be vulnerable and let their guard down. One has to enter the conversation knowing that there are no malicious intentions, and everyone just wants to see you improve. The feedback I received was hurtful, especially on my poetry, but upon reflection it made me realize that perhaps I should lean more towards prose than poetry. That being said, I also learnt that you do not only listen to feedback directed at others because the problems in another's work can also exist in yours. Let the writing continue, let the reading never stop.

## 6.

The poetics seminar was not like the usual reading sessions where we read and comment on the text. In this seminar we just read and move to the next reading. Of course, while reading we highlight certain things that are interesting in the text. It was only in rare situation where Paul would give brief remarks about the reading. What I also picked up is that reading out loud is not the same as reading for yourself. When reading for yourself, you really do not pay that much attention to how you pronounce words and you do not really take notice of the importance of proper punctuation. So this was not mentioned but I think the seminar will also be helpful in improving our reading skills. As writers I imagine that we are still going to be doing a lot of public readings. It is also interesting to hear the different reading styles from my classmates and how their reading registers can play a huge role in how the text makes one feel.

For the first day of the seminar I read an essay by Ann Lauterbach titled *Use this word in a sentence: 'experimental'*. The essay was a bit tricky to understand and I had to read it twice

but in essence what it spoke about was experimental writing and how to go about it. What particularly caught my interest is how Lauterbach was clear about how experimenting is always a risk, and that should not be a problem. This is mainly because this willingness to risk failure, to make mistakes, is essential to turning promises into facts. I also read Dambudzo Marechera *Beyond reality there is always fantasy* and this essay just cemented that Marechera knew that the act of writing is dependent on community. This is to say all writing is influenced and being a writer necessarily means being a reader. What also resonated with me was Marechera stating that there is no need to be in the service of the state, religion, or ideology but what is important is to be true to the self. I also enjoyed reading Brian Evenson's *The Crazy Party Guy or a Disruption of Smooth Surfaces*, especially where it speaks about how avant-garde writing should feel like it can use any tool at its disposal but that it must use it in a careful and systematic way.

The second day of the reading was easier perhaps because I already knew what to expect. I read Jackie Wang's *Aliens* and Kathy Acker's *The Killers*. *The Killers* piece was interesting because it felt like as the writer was writing it, she was also demonstrating what she was talking about. The essay was disorderly with many things and many stories all at once and that is what the author was trying to say: making literature moves between order and disorder, meaning and meaninglessness. *Aliens* is written in an epistolary format, but I did not find anything interesting and new from it. Wang took long to get to the point and the point was not worth the wait. What was interesting though was a piece by Mxolisi Nyezwa - an extract from *I heard rhythm*. The piece was beautifully read by Yenzo and I was so impressed at the fact that Bra Mxolisi Nywezwa is as clear when writing essays as he is when he is writing his poems.

The readings on Wednesday were very interesting. I read a piece by Lihn Dihn titled *What I usually say to my students*. The piece was short, and it read like some kind of beginners guide to writers. Some of the recommendations from the piece were very useful. Such as the one that says that writers must be as crazy and as perverse as possible, and that they must be inspired to a point of madness. Other pieces we read that were interesting were Njabulo Ndebele's *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* and Taiye Selasi's *Stop Pigeonholing African Writers*. Ndebele in his piece basically argues that the over emphasis on the spectacular in literature tends to make us ignore the power of the mundane. He is arguing that we ought to fight against the hegemony of the spectacle and take into account the subjective, the everyday, and using that to read our weaknesses, failures and limitations. Selasi on the other hand is arguing in defence of African writers living in Africa and in the diaspora. She argues that they have been pigeonholed, told

what to write about and in essence an unnecessary burden has been put on their shoulders. Overall, what she is saying is that all experiences of Africans all over the world are valid, and we need more writers and publishing opportunities such that writers will write their truth and not have to speak for all Africans because in the first instance Africans are not a singular group with similar experiences.

Writers seem to be really moving away from the idea of writing about the spectacle and are moving towards writing about the intimate. Rather, there seems to be a deliberate emphasis on the importance of the personal. I have been picking this up in the essays. On Thursday I read a piece by Adrienne Rich titled *Someone is Writing a Poem*. I really was unmoved by the piece, even after having read it twice, it remained silent to me but of course there were one or two things that stood out. For example, Rich says that what poetry does is to take language, give it colour and give it life such that when one reads the poem it is as if the words are a new invention. Also, while reading a Phillip Zhuwao interview, I remarked that it must be hard to be a writer in Zimbabwe after Marechera. He has become some sort of father of African literature in that country and he is some sort of standard against which Zimbabwean writing is judged. I might be wrong.

The Friday reading session was intense and long and there were a number of interesting readings. Many of them involved the use of multiple languages as a means of expression and the implications involved. I read a Lesego Rampolokeng and Ike Muila interview by Robert Berold. The interview was very powerful and funny mainly because of its unpretentious honesty. Some of the things that stood out are that the oral tradition is as important as the written tradition, that the written tradition can in many ways enrich the ways in which we tell stories. Again in the interview it surfaced that what kills the arts is politics and fighting for a cause because this tends to kill what is inside, the essence of art. Next, we go back to writing.

7

Talent alone is not enough; I think discipline plays a very important role. Especially because there will not always be a supervisor behind you or a teacher reminding you that if you do not apportion your time well, then the workload just piles up. This week taught me that. It also taught me that the very thing which I claim I cannot live without doing could very well be the source of my angst. If sentences are not coming out and the creativity is just not there it gets a

little bit frustrating, but nonetheless we continue trying to weave the words together. Perhaps what I want to really suggest here is that before the writer battles with punctuation, sentences that work and that do not, the real battle takes place within. So to be a writer is to be engaged in a constant struggle with the many selves that live within you. Perhaps I have said this before but each time it becomes more and more apparent.

This week we had a lot of readings to go through for our poetics essay, some of the things I will speak about in the essay. But it felt good to read how different writers approach the craft and how there is no need for them to even agree. The writing community is like a labyrinth, only that to get lost in it is also the most beautiful thing about it. Due to the poetics seminar, I was reading pieces of writing for the second time, and in almost all of them I found something new or something that became clearer. Beyond the prescribed readings that we have, I had also borrowed two books from the library by Greg Tate and Fred Moten. I went back to these books whenever the reading got too much. The books are also a collection of essays but there is a lightness that comes with reading work that is not prescribed. I am also trying to read reviews and get a sense of the many styles because soon we are going to have to submit two book reviews.

That time to choose between poetry and prose has arrived. Not an easy choice because one consumed and wrote a lot of poetry this term and having to choose one is just not as comfortable as I thought it would be. Of course, throughout my life I have been writing a lot of prose, but I was beginning to warm up poetry. But this does not matter, mainly because the distinction, as we were told during many of the seminars, does not matter. But my curiosity is around whether we are allowed to attend some of the poetry seminars? I suppose not, otherwise they would not be separated in the first place. This does not mean much if we have such a rich library with a wealth of books on both poetry and on prose. The reading continues regardless of the stream I choose to take. The experimenting will not stop, and I will borrow everywhere to ensure that I say the things that are inside of me the best way I can.

I spent this week on catching up on some films and it is interesting that since I have begun the course, I am thinking more and more about what would it mean to write for TV? Is it outside the purview of creative writing or does it fall more under the department of film and television? Every time I watch a film, I almost always identify what we learnt during Paul Mason's seminar on narrative. Lately I have also been noticing that writers get their money when their work is adapted from novel form to TV. Here I am thinking of *The Wife*, *Harry Potter* and *Game of*

*Thrones* and I must confess I am really not interested in dying as a broke writer. Many of my family members died like that and there is nothing exotic about it to me. Where there is some money and the possibility of supporting my family without compromising the quality of my work, then I am down for it.

The poetry reading of the week was a selection of poems from *New Coin* of 2020 and it was refreshing to read contemporary work. The poems were in a way different from many of the old ones we have been reading. I am not saying some are better than the others but just that the mood or, for lack of a better word, the feel of the poems was different. Oh, I also had a Friday session with some friends from other departments and it is always a bliss to hear what other university students are thinking or what projects they are working on. The infamous weather of Grahamstown is beginning to kick in. Perhaps it is necessary so that one spends less time outdoors and more time perfecting this forever imperfect craft of writing.

## 8

Although worn out I was really looking forward to the seminar with Carol. Mainly just because place is something that I think we can all write about and each one of us has experienced something sentimental or a feeling of truth about place. Whether one writes a work of fiction or non-fiction but if we speak about place it is going to come from a place of truth. There were so many things that I thought of writing on, and I was happy that when the reading material and assignment were posted. There was nothing limiting, we had the freedom to write about absolutely anything. Of course as long as it had to do with place. In the assignment we had to do a free write first about 'the street where I grew up'. I imagine that this was just an exercise to get us started and get in the mood of things and what was going to be discussed in the seminar.

In the seminar recording it was outlined that writing about place is important in taking a reader in a world, to give the reader a better understanding of where the action in the story takes place. Place offers many potentials to the reader including showing what kind of environment has shaped and constructed the characters. But when all is said and done, just like everything in writing, there is no one way to write about place. So some of the things that one needs to consider when writing about place is location, physical aspects of the place, whether the place is foreign or home, the memory invoked by the place, the significance of the place. All these

things and more can be extremely helpful in enriching the texture of the story. Carol recommended a video of a reading of Chris Abani's *Graceland* read by Alfre Woodard. The reading was funny but what impressed me is how Abani's descriptions were so vivid that I was drawn to the street he was speaking about, almost as if I could see Lagos.

Carol said we must not rely on stale descriptions only (not her words). That we must use devices such as the sensory, how a place appears, feels, smells, and sounds. We must consider how the place makes a character feel and what memories it brings. She said we must use literary devices, metaphor, simile, and others to give depth to what we are trying to convey about the place. A place in itself is capable of having character and meaning. She also attached readings that we ought to read that will give us a sense of how other writers have worked and explored the many ways in which one can speak about place. Among the extracts recommended by Carol was Chris Abani *Graceland*, Biyi Bandele *The Street*, Teju Cole *Every Day is for the Thief*, Sello Duiker *Thirteen Cents*, Alain Mabanckou, *Blue White Red*.

One extract that I found really interesting was Biyi Bandele *The Street*. From that small extract I found that writing about place requires one to tap into memory or perhaps it relies on specific detailing of everything. No detail is insignificant in the proper sense of the word because when weaved with other details makes so much sense. But what was a much more important realisation when I was reading the story is how place engenders a sense of relatability. So for me in a way writing about place fights against itself. It gestures to the fact that geography might very well be insignificant in how we come to understand the world. What I mean here is that I do not know what place Bandele was writing about, but I related so much to it. The world she spoke of looked and felt so familiar. The texture etc. So perhaps the human condition has the subtle similarities that sometimes are not as we think they are.

When I was writing my assignment, I thought that I would not have a problem because I clearly understood what was required of me. What devices are necessary and what makes writing about place work. But when the process began, I stuttered because I had ambivalent feelings and memories about the place I wanted to write about. There were good ones and bad ones, there were traumatic ones and joyful ones. So basically the struggle was to find a way to express all these without necessarily compromising the story. But nonetheless I really enjoyed writing about place, now it is back to the book reviews. They are very frustrating because there is a certain level of delicacy necessary when speaking about another person's work. There is like

an unwritten ‘handle with care’ because you do not want to misread or misrepresent. Either way, when it is all said and done the writing continues.

## 9

There was uncertainty this week. We did not know what seminar we are having, where and with whom. But that wasn't much of a problem because we were assured that there would be class. When we got to the venue, we met up with Chwayita who told us that she would be the one facilitating the seminar. The seminar was on effective dialogue, and I was not very unhappy. Firstly because dialogue is very complex, it is easy to get it wrong. Most of my work relies on narration and I never use dialogue unless it is necessary. I guess there was no running away, after all I am here to learn. We actually had a very productive seminar. We discussed among other things why dialogue is so important and the kinds of things that make dialogue effective. We then moved on to a number of readings where dialogue was used. It was so interesting to see the many ways in which dialogue can help propel the story, make clear the relationship between characters and even give you an insight on the power relations at play.

The reading week was interesting and full of robust debate. We read *That Baby* by Lindsay Hunter. The piece was hilarious, and it is sometimes refreshing to see writers explore humour. We saw the piece as a metaphor, and it opened us to many discussions which were serious. We also read a piece titled *You Are The Daughter* by Aayda Jacobs, a well written, rich and successful piece in every way. It is able to speak about sensitive issues with so much delicacy. There are some pieces we found ineffective. *How to Write and eBook of Poetry* by Oscar Schwartz was fun to read but failed to do anything outside that. For me literature must find a way to move me, stretch my horizon and the way in which I view things. This piece did not do that; it read like stuff a 13-year-old should be reading. Another was *The Poet* by Eileen Myles. The piece tries hard to do nothing. It is one of those pieces that want to inhabit the zone of the avantgarde when as a matter of fact they are just messy. I enjoy reading with my colleagues because it means I do not have to argue with myself. I can test my ideas on others.

This week's assignment was pretty straight forward – to write a 4-page dialogue about anything and also write a 2-page piece about the same thing without dialogue. The assignment although straightforward was possibly one of the most challenging thus far. I struggled to transfer the same emotions that the other piece had to the dialogue piece. It was also a bit problematic to transfer the pace of the other piece to dialogue. But I eventually managed to do it and what helped me was to allow my dialogue to drive itself, to be as natural as possible. But what I

definitely need to do is to write more dialogue and that way I will surely improve. I am confident that if I keep on experimenting with dialogue then overtime, I will find a way to make it work for me.

I hated the feedback session. Maybe it is because overtime I have become used to receiving positive feedback that when it does not happen, I immediately panic and feel like I am being attacked. The facilitator spoke a whole lot of bullshit about my piece, and I felt like she does not know what she was talking about. Firstly the piece was experimental, with normal dialogue you expect two human beings to speak with each other but what I did on the piece is that I made different body parts speak. The difficulty in doing this is that you cannot expect body parts to communicate in the same way that human beings do. This truth was ignored. I could go on and on about the things that I think were overlooked. In any case I really don't care that much because I know that my work came from the heart and so anything that anyone else says is secondary. I doubt that I have a non-teachable spirit, I have been given criticism before and I did not think it was undue. Maybe I am also just overreacting.

## 10

This week my spirits were much better than the other weeks. There was clarity of thought and upon reflection I realized that my anger about the feedback on effective dialogue was most probably misplaced. It is not necessarily a bad thing to be critiqued, in fact it is only through critique that the possibilities of growth emerge. This week's seminar was in a way very relevant to how I have been feeling because it was on soliloquys, rants and monologues. This presented a possibility of expressing my anger and perhaps dissatisfaction. In the seminar we were recommended examples of what rants are and how different writers/artists use them. We looked at very diverse stuff. Films/theatre pieces, live poetry performances and texts. All these worked really well in giving an all-rounded approach to understanding what rants, monologues and soliloquys are.

I was particularly interested in Lesego Rampolokeng's 'Rap Century' and 'Rap Attack'. The use of language is beautiful, its malleability is laid bare, and you immediately see that with the word anything is possible. I also enjoyed reading Paul Mason's 'Occupation', the piece had so much feeling in it, and I think that is one of the most crucial ingredients of a rant. The reader must feel the frustration, the anger or whatever emotion inhabited the writer when he was

writing the piece. I enjoyed reading and listening to the pieces and could not wait to begin writing. I wondered though whether it is possible to sustain a rant or monologue in longer pieces. Could there be a full-length rant novel? It would be interesting to experiment with the rant form and see how far one can go in sustaining it. I must read William Gaddis, *Agape Agape* to see whether he was successful in writing rants in a long form.

I managed to finish the book reviews. What I realized is that a good book is like music, if you have read it once it does not mean that you cannot read it again. Echoing what I said earlier, I found that when I was rereading the books there were things that I discovered. Things that I did not necessarily notice when I read them for the first time. I was rereading *Fixions*, a compilation of short stories by Taban Lo Liyong, a master storyteller. I know that the words experimental are sometimes misused but his work is really innovative. He demonstrates the many things that words can do. He does this beautifully, almost effortlessly. I think with such a rich history of brilliant writers/literary ancestors we have no business writing bad literature. I mean if the creativity was so advanced back then surely fifty years later we ought to have made some improvements. But a look at the state of literature on the continent says something else. Perhaps that is why Lo Liyong called Africa a literary desert.

The poetry session this week was very interesting because we were reading classical Chinese poetry. It is so fascinating that the Chinese are so rich in culture that 1500 years ago they were already writing poetry. We looked at the poetry of Li Po, Tu Fu, Lu Yu and others. Most of the poems make use of nature, or, rather, nature appears consistently. Even though this is the case, they are able to find ways to speak about it creatively. What I also noticed is that some of the existential questions they were grappling with are the same questions we are dealing with right now. Excited after engaging with the poems, I went to my Chinese friend and told her that I've been reading Li Po, she responded 'oh that's nice, we read that in grade 3'. For the Chinese their introduction to poetry is through language. I wonder if this would ever happen in South Africa where arts and culture are regarded as just entertainment.

I have been disillusioned with my writing lately. I do not know if it's good or bad'; it is good enough for me but is that enough for my reader. I know that too much preoccupation with what the reader thinks will paralyze me but sometimes I cannot help it. Anyways, the feedback session was ok. Paul Mason was thorough in his feedback and, unlike last week, my work was apparently brilliant. I do not even know how to feel about feedback sessions anymore. Either

way, the writing must continue and I must begin thinking about the two book reviews. I must also think about which supervisor will be the best for me and why I think so.

## 11.

This week we did not have any seminars or reading groups. We were supposed to use the week as some sort of catching up with the book reviewing. In the beginning a week without any seminars seemed like a long time but it flew by quickly. For my next review I am thinking of exploring Sony Labou Tansi's *The Antipeople*. My concern with books that have cemented themselves as part of the canon are hard to review without being influenced/responding to certain reviews on the work that are already in existence. Maybe concern is the wrong word to use, but what in essence I am attempting to do is write about a book based on how it made me feel rather than how it has affected the literary landscape. So I have been rereading the book slowly. For my second book review I have a number of contesting choices. But it would really be interesting to review something different; from a different geography because most of the stuff that I have reviewed is by black writers often from Africa.

This week we were assigned our supervisors. I am quite happy with my choice. I became interested in Paul Mason as a supervisor after the seminar we had on rants, soliloquys and monologues. During the feedback session I felt like Paul understood what I am trying to do with my writing. I then recalled the seminar he had presented, which included a piece of his own writing that had struck me – a rant titled *Occupation*. I am looking forward to working with him and I have no doubts that we will build a good student-teacher relationship. I am also excited to start thinking around writing my thesis and I imagine that I will find the process exciting and fulfilling. I am currently in the process of writing my abstract and trying to figure out the direction that I want to take when writing the thesis/long paper/story/poem, whatever form that will best serve my story and my characters.

In this week's poetry session, we were continuing with Chinese poetry from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. We looked mainly at the poet Lao Tzu Te Ching. What I noticed from these poems is how they read like some form of aphorisms. Most of them untitled, they sound like words of wisdom. The recurring theme is an emphasis on letting go of worldly possessions and finding fulfilment on the much simpler things. We also looked at the work of Chuang Tzu who wrote around 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. What is quite clear with these poets is a sense of protest. Although these poets were not using words such as struggle and revolution, it is quite clear in their poems that they register a sense of dissatisfaction with their society; how it is run and the way 'man was

leading others'. So again we might be existing years apart from these poets but there are still ties that bind us, conflicts unresolved.

## 12.

This week's seminar was on the politics and poetics of punctuation. Although I had an idea of how important punctuation is in writing, I was not quite aware that its importance goes beyond just making a piece of writing readable. But after the seminar I realized that punctuation holds more power and plays a huge role in what a piece is going to feel like, look like and even sound like. In the seminar we learnt how punctuation has been used, abused, and even manipulated by writers to challenge power systems and to invoke affects in readers. What was much more interesting to me was how focusing on punctuation has the immediate result of forcing the writer to work on the sentence, to pay attention to what each sentence does and how it affects the next sentence. But what the seminar also emphasized is that playing around with punctuation does not necessarily mean that one has to completely ignore or throw away all the rules but rather that one must 'listen with open ears and take risks'. Writers are often satisfied if a sentence is free from obvious faults, but this should not be where it ends because there is so much more that can be done. There are so many techniques that can be explored.

We learnt about consecution from Gordon Lish which is basically a process of writing where one goes forward by looking backwards. Stacy recommended some interesting texts to demonstrate the different ways in which a writer can play with punctuation to achieve different results. We looked at an excerpt from *Zone* by Mathias Enard, an excerpt that has long sentences. We also looked at some pieces with shorter sentences. I was personally moved by a piece of writing by author M. Nouberse Phillips from a book titled *Zong!* There was something haunting about the book, the ways in which the words sat on the page, almost as if trying to emulate the movement of waves. But beyond this there was something unreadable about the piece, as if it was deliberately denying me to read it – perhaps because of how unspeakable the subject matter of this piece was; perhaps the fact that there is no narrative makes it possible to articulate the horrors of the slave trade.

For my readings this week I read from *The Penguin Book of the Prose Poem*. It is a book I have been reading for some time now; a book as easy to love as it is to hate. I found a piece that was particularly interesting to me, titled *Letter Against the Firmament*, by Sean Bonney. The piece was so beautifully written it did not matter that I did not understand the context within which the book was written. It reaffirmed to me that when words are strung beautifully

together, they are completely effective. I am becoming more and more convinced that a truly beautiful piece of writing should and indeed can exist beyond the context of meaning. This is to say, in writing feeling precedes meaning. In a strange but beautiful way I am slowly beginning to appreciate this.

For the poetry reading sessions we read poems from the *New Coin* June Selection 2020. It was quite an exciting seminar, mainly because there were a number of us, and the discussions were extremely robust. I enjoy reading South African poetry so much. We read poems by Lebohang Mojapelo, Teamwh Sbongujesu, Ayanda Billie and Richard Fox. I particularly enjoyed reading Richard Fox's *Instagrammar Police*. The poem was fresh; it did not read like a conventional poem but also there is something brave when a poet takes a risk of writing using contemporary slang. It goes against this idea that for a poet to be good they must use conventional language. There was something extremely daring about the work of Richard Fox that I found really exciting. We looked at the work of Zodwa Mtirara which was brutally criticized for using certain lines that are clichéd and unnecessary. But overall it was a very productive session. The feedback session with Stacy was also good. She was thoroughly impressed with our work, and she thought that we carried out what was expected of us perfectly.

### 13.

This week is the last week of our seminars, and we are about to begin writing our theses. The final seminar is (re)writing children. Quite excited about it because I have always been fascinated by writing from a child's perspective. This is mainly because children have that innocent curiosity. They have this fresh, untainted, unfiltered way of looking and interacting with the world. If done beautifully, I think writing from a child's perspective can help us see the world much more clearly without the obscurities that limit grown-ups. As Jo-Ann who is the facilitator of the seminar says, writing about children, or through the eyes of children gives us the 'ability to untether words and sounds from linear meanings and logic'. The purpose of this seminar was also to have a closer look at editing. How we edit our work and the process that we use when it comes to editing.

We looked at a number of readings from different authors that demonstrated the different ways in which one can write about children or from the perspective of children. We read pieces by Dolla Sapeta, Bessie Head, Henali Kuit, Karen Press, Tariro Ndoro and others. What fascinated

me about these readings is that writing through the perspective of children does not have to be shallow. In fact, most of the pieces that we read were heavy, both in subject matter and in nuance. I found the seminar quite enlightening, and it opened me up to the many styles and devices that writers use when writing from the perspective of children. Interestingly also, the seminar was relevant to me because my thesis is also written from the perspective of a child. What I realized in the seminar is that one cannot only rely only on imagination to write from a child's perspective, but it is quite necessary for one to dig deep into memory.

For the reading group we looked at a couple of interesting readings, including *Violent Seed* by Dolla Sapeta, a dense piece of work that delicately depicts township life without turning it into anthropology. It is beautiful how Dolla can speak about the gruesomeness of the township without necessarily 'porning' it. We also looked at *Sweet Honey Nights* by Gcina Mhlophe. We laughed at how the work is bereft of any startling imagery and metaphors, but we also cut it some slack because Mam Gcina is a legend and has paid her dues. We discussed how sometimes a piece of writing that is meant for stage can fall flat when it is read from a page. A piece we read, and we were really impressed by is one by Neil Geiman titled *When We Went Off to See The End of The World*. What was really cool about this piece is that it was co-written by Dawnie Morningside who is a 11-year-old (fitting considering that the seminar is titled (re)writing children). The piece was carefully constructed, authentically written from a child's perspective, heavy with detail and yet unapologetically gripping.

In the poetry group we had a reading by Teamhw SbonguJesu from his debut collection titled *Bury Me Naked*. The reading was beautiful mainly because the writing is also beautiful. Teamhw's writing is reminiscent, and he writes mainly about stories of where he comes from. His work, although set in his hometown, is not trapped there. It is easy for one to relate to and feel it, perhaps because of the similarity of black townships/suffering but also because his pen is quite clear. He writes in a very straightforward manner and is not afraid to question conventions. He speaks what we all know and see but yet are too afraid or even too busy to write it down. The reaction from many of the people who were in the reading was quite positive and there was some consensus that Teamhw will have 'a permanent place in South Africa's poetry landscape'. I always enjoy reading and discussing poetry; there is some freshness to it, always with beautiful surprises that I hope I can incorporate into my prose.

The feedback session on our seminars was very productive. It seemed that our pieces were successful, and we were all able to do what is required of the assignment. Although my

classmates and the facilitator thought that the piece I submitted works, I do not think that it really did what I wanted it to do. But this is how I feel about most my work; that there is always room for me to improve on it. It is only on those rare occasions when I really feel like my work is complete. Often, I question if there are other ways in which I can make the work better. In the seminar the facilitator suggested that I remove certain lines and words which were unnecessary in the piece, words which the piece would still do well without. In the seminar we also discussed our editing process.

### **Editing Process**

When I write I often conceptualize an idea or the story in my head and begin writing with some skeleton of what I want the story to do. Of course, once the writing begins the characters begin to take a life of their own. From that point I allow the story to lead me but working within the parameters of what I want the story to do. When I feel that I cannot continue I then leave the story for a while and come back to it maybe after a couple of minutes or hours. It is during this stage that I take out sentences that do not work, add more details and work around punctuation. The final stage is to read the story out loud. If the story sounds like music, sounds beautiful, then I consider submitting it. Editing is always the difficult yet most important part of the writing process.

### **14.**

The week began slow, the body in pain but the writing had to continue. The seminar was facilitated by Marike who I have become acquainted with in the poetry reading sessions. The seminar was themed ‘poems from poems.’ As part of the readings recommended for the seminar was a piece by Robert Hirsch titled *How to Read Poetry: A poetry primer for the uninitiated*. It speaks about the importance of poetry and the possibilities that poetry presents. It also speaks about how to read and approach poetry. Although I agree with much of what is said in this piece, I could not help thinking about how useful a poem is in times of face-to-face combat. With all that is happening in Russia, and perhaps throughout Africa, what does writing and reading a poem mean?

I have also been reading poetry by Mangaliso Buzani and it is interesting when you read the work of someone you have access to because it means that you can engage them on their work and their approach to art making. Manga’s poetry is surreal but it does not work too hard to become that. There is a simplicity and sparseness in his work; it breathes and it is something

that I truly find fascinating, mainly because my own work is clustered and many things all at once. I am appreciating poetry, especially reading, it because I can see how it enriches my prose work. I guess it is really true that poetry is the basis of all writing.

I was excited to be back on the Thursday poetry reading group; my body was more receptive. I could eat, which also meant I could start to appreciate poetry. We looked at poetry mainly from Eastern Europe, and the overarching theme of the poems was death. Even poems that were not directly about death were heavy with feelings of sadness and death, quite reflective of the political situation of the region. Most of the poems that we read were written just before, during and immediately after the First World War. One poem that really moved me was by Peter Huchel titled 'Winter Billet'. The poem is beautifully written and loaded with feelings of anticipation of danger, indicating how life in the East was always fraught with danger.

The feedback session of our assignment was highly fulfilling and productive. As a class we are getting to know each other better as writers and the feedback we give one another has much more depth. I also think that we are all improving as writers. The poems I wrote for this session were better than the poems I have written in the other seminars. The reason for this is because I am more confident of my style of writing. I am not attempting to write what is not my truth. I have been having a lot of anxieties about my themes but I am learning to accept that my experiences are valid and deserve to be documented. I was also satisfied with how Marike gave feedback; she did not impose her views but allowed us to speak to each other and then commented on the technicalities. The poems I wrote were inspired by Lorca.

Just when I thought the week was over I got invited to a chill session by a doctoral student in the department of visual arts. In the session we had rigorous debates around the state of art in the world. We engaged about the role of art and how we should approach art making. The discussion was so informative and widened my horizon because I got to hear the perspectives of people who are in different disciplines. Learning does not only happen in the classroom but also through interactions with people we meet on the streets. I want to attend more of these sessions.

### **Poetics Essay**

Reading is as important as writing, that much has been established. What perhaps remains complex is what we should read and what/how we ought to write. This speaks to the question of what is worthy of being read and what is worthy of being written. Of course there are no

correct answers here; each person has to make their choice. It might even be seductive to say 'it does not matter' but this response, however valid it might be, has not stopped writers from thinking and writing about how the wor(l)d should be approached. In fact, these questions remain among the oldest and most debated questions in literature. They are at the centre of the early debates in literature.

These questions do not necessarily demand answers and perhaps it is enough that we keep on invoking them. This is because they force us to think about the different ways in which we can stretch the word and expand our understanding of what writing can do. What is also important to note is that writers respond differently to these questions, based on the conditions and the context from which they are writing. A black writer from Khayelitsha township is much more likely to write differently from a black writer who lives in London. Even though there might be commonalities, the context from which they are writing is different, which means that their work will not be the same. The texture of their work will show that these writers have a different experience of the world.

But wait, even people who have the same experience will write differently. Writers who have the same background and the same education can also write differently. They could be influenced by ideology, their gender, or even mere taste. What I am trying to say here is that there are many factors that determine how a writer writes, and what they decide to write about. Velimir Khlebnikov, in his essay *On Poetry*, disputes the claims that poems about labour can only be written by people who work in factories. He argues that the nature of a poem is mostly to be found in its withdrawal from itself. He states that a poem entails a flight from the *I*.

This kind of view is problematic. In the first instance, how does one write about experiences one does not have without running the risk of misrepresenting? Of course this is possible. But often when this is done it shows in the work. I imagine that a man cannot simply write about women without missing certain important things, in the same way that a white person from Clifton cannot simply write about Khayelitsha without missing crucial elements that form the fabric of what life in Khayelitsha is like.

Related to this question, we can also (ab)use Taiye Selasi *Stop Pigeonholing African Writers*. The article tries to respond to the question of what African writers should be writing about. Or rather, it attempts to critique the tendency of people dictating to African writers what a truly authentic African story looks like. In a way, it is also a defence of Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. Bulawayo was accused by

Helon Habila of 'airing Africa's dirty laundry' while Chimamanda was accused of 'focusing on its finer linens' by Mukoma wa Ngungi.

Selasie's response to these accusations is that an African writer must be able to write as she pleases, if they want to write for the sheer love of the craft, they must be given space to do so. She says that we must not be so suspicious of ourselves that we think that an African artist cannot just be an artist. That she is either a native informant, or an anthropologist. She also asserts that no novelist can bear the burden of representing the whole continent and no one novel should have to. She ends it off by saying that this pigeonholing is a problem we need to attend to collectively, as writers, novelists, publishers, and global readers; we need more writers from more class backgrounds representing the different types of Africans.

Njabulo Ndebele also has something to say about writing – particularly South African writing. In an essay titled *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writing in South Africa*. Ndebele suggests that black South African literature has been the history of the representation of the spectacle. What Ndebele argues for is the focus on the lives of everyday folk, a closer look at the quotidian. He argues against posturing and sloganeering and suggests that to focus on the spectacle frowns upon the subtlety of thought and feeling. He further says the popular ways 'never permit[s] the power of contemplation, of close analysis'. The careful reading and writing of what is mundane is valid; worthy of being spoken about. The intimate is not less than the political.

But here there is something uncomfortable even though I fully understand the position from which Ndebele comes. So, what happens in a situation where all that happens around is a spectacle? I imagine writing during apartheid or, to bring it closer, writing during the current Russia-Ukraine unrest. A person writing within that context is not likely to be thinking about a beautiful blue sky. Even when they are thinking about the beautiful blue sky that blue sky is backdropped by red blood. I am not suggesting that people must not write about flowers, but those flowers must drip blood if that is the reality of the situation. The question is who writes about the spectacle because, necessarily, there has to be someone who writes about it if our lives are to be animated by it.

Let us speak about form; how writers choose the form that they want to work with. Tiff Holand suggests that sometimes the characters or subjects in the story choose the form that they want. She states that she was not the one who chose how to write *Betty Superman*. In the essay, "*Written in Stone: How Subject Dictates Narrative Form*", she narrates how initially she was a

writer of narrative poems and how ending up writing the novella-in-flash was accompanied by a lot of reluctance and discomfort. She explains that besides her comfort in poetry ‘flash was the only way to write Betty Superman because the character was so big, in a novel she would have trampled everything’.

So what Holland did was to let the character choose the form that the writing would take, and I think that is quite important. What we tend to do is to let our comfort-zones and preconceived ideas determine how we should write. I think that there is a compelling freedom with letting your words and characters lead instead of having them on a leash. It is freeing for both the writer and the work. Holland puts it astutely when she says ‘I believe that every subject makes its own form. I just try to pay attention’.

Brian Evenson in his essay *The Crazy Party, or A Disruption of Smooth Surfaces*, speaks about avant-garde writing. This piece advocates for avant-garde writing but specifies that the avant-garde should not be ‘an excuse for having writing be messy’. There is a tendency for using words like avant-garde or experimental to justify writing that is all over the place and without purpose. It seems that we sometimes qualify everything that confuses us, or that we do not yet understand, by categorizing it as experimental. This should not be the case; if we do not understand the work or what it is doing, we should not just simply pass it as avant-garde. What we ought to do is engage the work, instead of just placing it within a category that will shield it from scrutiny. If the work is experimental, we should be able to say why; we should be able to account for why that particular work is avant-garde.

Let us think about jazz music or perhaps even certain painters who did ground-breaking work. They did not just stumble upon their creations, which is to say it is often not just coincidence. There must be deliberate effort and intention to create new forms. But here is another important question around the idea of avant-garde or creation of new forms: who is the arbiter or the judge of what qualifies writing as avant-garde? Does it go back to a question of power relations?

Back to Evenson. He offers an inventive example or analogy of a crazy guy who always does crazy stuff at a party. He puts on a lampshade on his head, empties a bowl of jellybeans into his pants, or does whatever crazy thing comes to mind. This guy is always at a party. He is also problematic because he falls into certain comfortable patterns of disruption that make him part of the establishment. The more you work too hard to be different and unique the more you fall

into the trap of finding yourself in sameness. In the 70's hippies were sort-of-kind-of trying to forge a 'different' path, but did not many of them end up looking exactly the same?

Velimir Khlebnikov also provides interesting insights in his essay *On Poetry* about writing and the need for writing to be (in)comprehensible. His ideas, in a manner that is not obvious, echo the ideas of Evenson, as mentioned above. Khlebnikov says that a poem must not strive to be understood and that it does not have to make sense. He further argues that words, without necessarily working within the confines of what is logical, are able to have meaning, to move people and impact them. Chants, magic spells etc. are examples of things that sometimes are not fully understood but at the same time are able to decide the fate and possibly change the lives of people. This is a fascinating thing to think about because it often happens that one does not understand a piece of poetry but somehow that poem ignites something, does something. But this does not mean words can just be jumbled up together and that anything is permissible. 'Poems may be understandable, or they may not but they must nonetheless make sense'.

Federico Lorca in an essay titled *Theory and Function of the Duende* gives a brief history of what has become known as the duende. He uses examples of when and how duende is known to have been present in a performance or artform. Although there is no single clear-cut definition of the duende, Lorca highlights how we can trace and perhaps even recognize its presence. He says that the 'duende is a force not a labour'. That the duende exists not in intellect neither is it a question of skill. Instead, it *is* a style that is truly alive; it is in the veins and can be said to be the most ancient culture of immediate creation. Lorca writes clearly, and his poetic lyricism stands out. For me it is always alluring when writers known for their mastery of a certain form cross genre. In this essay Lorca displays that poets do not only have to write poems – they can also participate in other genres.

Back to duende. Lorca continues to make it clear that the duende is able to differentiate itself. It does not limit; it unshackles the artist from the bondages of what is considered correct or expected. So, where the struggle really lies is with the duende, because it shows itself by insisting on a radical change to old literary forms and creates the possibility for new ways of making and thinking about art. I must say though that what Lorca is speaking about also exists in black cultural expressions; has always existed, in fact. Think of jazz, think of *Isigqi seNgoma* and the Malawian dance. It is just that black artistic practices for a long time were never treated as forms that demanded serious scrutiny or thought and that problem still exists. But in this essay that is not my focus point; let us move closer to home to an unpublished essay, titled I

heard rhythms, written by bra Mxolisi Nyezwa, a revered poet from the Eastern Cape in South Africa.

In this essay Nyezwa, as eloquent as ever, uses a language that is easy to grasp while dissecting complex issues. His images and careful treatment of reading and interpreting other people's work is necessary. He is working almost like a dung beetle, rolling carefully what others would consider as just horse shit. He has a way of speaking about marginal artistic practices, like an archaeologist who sees more than just bones buried underground but as things that could open us up to a reimagining of our pasts, presents and futures. In the essay Nyezwa discusses maskandi music, its importance and how it should be approached as part of the long-standing tradition of oral literature. He bemoans that when speaking about the genre we should not reduce the power of the lyrics because these generalizations/reductions come across as offensive, considering that maskandi music is at the centre of articulating critical cultural issues in the psycho-sociological reality of most African communities.

Nyezwa also gestures to the idea of the duende and acknowledges that even within the African context we have a similar thing. In isiXhosa it is called Inkeqe. It is a power that lives within a person, a spirit that is reflected through a person's interaction and communication. He acknowledges Lorca's duende as bouts of extreme creative energy. So what emerges from Nyezwa is that it is particularly important to place at the centre creative expressions of marginalized groups. They must be thought of as part of an ecosystem of the arts because they have much to offer us.

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In an in interview with Alan Finlay, Phillip Zhuwao speaks on the question of the audience and who the writer writes for. Phillip is incisive in his responses and unapologetic about who he writes for. He says that he writes for the self and is not interested in the ordinary man on the street. He does admit that some have accused him of being selfish, but he does not care: 'he has to take care of the personal before he goes any broader'. This I understand but maybe not for the same reasons as he does, simply because he himself is the ordinary man and so when he writes about himself what he is in actual fact doing is to indirectly write about the ordinary man.

Another interview which echoes the sentiments of Zhuwao is one of Lesego Rampolokeng and Ike Muila conducted by Robert Berold, referred to earlier. The interview's focus is on the

importance of the oral tradition in literature. Throughout the interview there are unmissable moments of brilliance where it becomes clear that these writers know what they are talking about. Ike Muila speaks of iscamtho (slang) and its genesis – that it is a result of the meeting of different people and how the creation of that language has been able to unite the people but also has been used by the media, which is testimony of the impact it has. Again, the question of who one writes for resurfaces in the interview and Rampolokeng responds to it in this way: ‘[t]here is also this moral point that’s always poked in our faces, that you have to write for the masses. But those masses are not defined, and there is this standard that is just being placed on just how high the word should jump or not for it to be celebrated.’ So it seems that writers across the spectrum suggest that in fact the self is also very important when writing, not just the audience or to please your grandmother type of thing.

Let’s conclude, prematurely or without any certainty, about what these ideas are about, while knowing that not-knowing is also important somehow. It is at that point of not-knowing-and-searching that the ‘duende’ can take over. What we are able to gather from this incoherent essay is that no one can really teach you how to write; that different writers have different ways of doing it. When all is said and done, what I think ought to be done is to just write your heart out.

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## Writing in Community Report

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> September I presented my work to a reading group as part of the MA writing in community assignment. I selected a reading group that is interested in works of arts. The group holds weekly readings, discussions and reviews on different works of art. The main interests of the group are music, literature, visual arts and essays on culture and at times politics. Although this can be beneficial it can also become a limitation. This is mainly because when

we create art we do not only do so for the benefit of those who are 'cultured'. Personally, I am very interested in what my work does to the person walking on the streets, the early riser going to work in a retail shop or even the shoe shiner who is stationed at the corner depending on dirty shoes for supper.

The group has been going on for over a year and has about 10 to 15 regular participants. On the day of my reading the number of participants swelled to 25. I guess it is because I also invited people who are not necessarily part of the group; some friends who have shown interest in my work. The audience was diverse. It had people from different fields and stations, students, lecturers, musicians etc. Although the group gathers weekly it hardly discusses the work of people who form part of the group. This is mainly because whenever this happens the discussions become so robust that things end up being personal. What is meant to be feedback is interpreted as attacks and people become unnecessarily defensive.

Although I have never read my work to the group I was not at all nervous because some of my work is already available in public platforms. I am familiar with people giving feedback and even telling me that my work is useless. The feedback sessions that we have had throughout the year in our MA course have also helped me understand that one need not be uncomfortable with people giving their opinions on my work. My reading sessions were through Zoom; even though live sessions are more intimate, the wake of COVID has made us accustomed to virtual sessions.

I read two chapters of my work from the draft thesis. I was initially ambivalent about how this would work because when one reads a short story it has a context and is more resolved, whereas reading a chapter might seem out of place. I had rehearsed what I was going to read, so my reading was seamless. The Thursday poetry reading sessions have also been quite helpful in improving my reading aloud. I read the two chapters and then opened for questions and comments. It was tense at first but then the people began speaking and everyone eventually participated.

There were different comments, compliments and questions. The comment that kept on coming up was on the rhythmic nature of my work. I expected this comment because a number of people have pointed this out, but also because it is something that I am mindful of. I write with this intention in mind. I am always trying to create some form of musicality because I believe that my work must be carried by both meaning and feeling. Where the meaning of the work

eludes the reader the reader must be salvaged by how the words strung together makes them feel. The audience picked this up quickly and of course I was happy.

The other comments were on technical things such as dialogue and the use of tenses. Most of the people who made these comments were people I sent the chapters to before the reading. I thought this would be better because it would mean that they give an informed critique. Other comments were about my setting and whether the use of multiple languages would not be a problem for readers who are unfamiliar with the slang, the taals and the idiosyncrasies of that place. I also received comments on the alternating paces in the work. How certain parts are so fast paced and other parts completely slowed down as if one is in a rollercoaster.

As is often the case where there is no moderator, the discussion eventually degenerated into discussions not only about my work but other things. What other writers are doing and how their work speaks to what I am trying to do. It is at this point that I realized that perhaps it is time to close the session. I nonetheless found it interesting to see how two chapters from my work can lead to so many different conversations and openings. This affirmed that perhaps I am going in the right direction. I believe that there should be a culture of public readings, they not only help the author grow but also they remind us why books/writing/reading is important.

At the end of the reading I made closing remarks and since there weren't so many questions I just thanked everybody for participating and asked that if people had questions or comments they can send them to my email address and I would try my best to respond to offer substantial responses to them. A few people sent emails thanking me for the reading. One of e-mails read 'the reading was too short, I felt robbed but I hope a book is coming soon.' Another was 'I was afraid to ask during your reading but where do you get your inspiration?'. One stated 'I used to write also; would you look at some of my writing if you have time?' I responded to the questions to the best of my abilities.

## **Book Reviews**

### **1.**

REVIEW BY MBE MBHELE

*Bury Me Naked*

by Teamhw SbonguJesu

Poetry is a way of grappling with the world, of seeing it really, not just merely. Poetry is the turning of things upside down and putting them back in place; it is realizing that things might never again return to their place, sometimes there is no place, it is just “The funerals” or “News about His passing”. Poetry is Teamhw SbonguJesu’s first collection, titled *Bury Me Naked* published in 2022 by TNG.

The poems are not forced, yet very effective. To someone who has grown up in a township the poems are more than just relatable; they facilitate a remembering. A certain kind of memory, one that is different from nostalgia. Not a yearning but a realization: how do we even survive in this place? Readers who have none of this experience are also not lost. This is because of Teamhw’s directness and ability to evoke strong images. Teamhw is not obsessed with the use of poetic devices such as rhyme, metaphor and all that other stuff; where he uses them it is always measured and almost necessary. Things are said as they are, nothing is in excess or overused.

It is possible though that the straightforward dark narratives of Teamhw could also be a limitation. The poems, even though they have strong imagery, have hardly any nuance. Of course, that could very well be what the collection is trying to do. I say this hesitantly, but the book could be read as sad notes from a township dweller disguised as poetry. Sometimes poetry must play around, hide and seek if you want. I also want poetry to rattle my brain, force me to ask questions, seek answers – and sometimes I must not find those answers. Language must be bent, beat down ‘til it is able to express the complexities and inarticulable experience of living/existing/dying/trying/failing/loving while being a black township dweller. Some of Teamhw’s poems do this for me, but others read too linear and simply.

Many of the poems in the collection are about Teamhw’s own experiences growing up in the rural townships around Pietermaritzburg. They are about the things he saw, things others did, and they are about the people (both alive and dead). From the first poem, titled “The beginning”, the mood is set. The poem is about how he was conceived, how the ‘beast’ (his father) kept on demanding. How the father’s demands were finally met. In the poem Teamhw writes:

It happened in October 1995.

Behind in rent

by a month or three;  
my father, the beast, kept demanding  
that mother pays her rent.  
Drunk, in October,  
his imprecise compliments were  
for the first time  
greeted with a smile.  
He demanded to be let in;  
for the first time, she let him in.  
When inside he, again, demanded to be let in.  
She again let him in.  
He slept there.

(“The beginning”, p.10)

The conditions around the way in which he was conceived sets the tone for the whole book. Simply, the situation is bad. There are drunks, drugs, religion is questioned together with God, the gruesomeness of township life (death) is laid bare. The first couple of poems are ominous and you know that you are not going to finish the book smiling. You know that the text is not going to bring any relief.

The black family structure is broken; this appears in Teamhw’s work in ways conjuring despair. The poem titled “They just threw me in there” is about how he was born out of negligence, thrust in a world too unfriendly. The last stanza of the poem reads:

Now all I can do is fold my arms  
And sink.  
and sink.  
Hoping the ground is nearer  
Hoping my case will soon be done,  
like theirs got done.

(“They just threw me in there”, p.12)

There is a lot of hopelessness, nothing in the poems suggests that things might be different; it is a continuum of suffering. The abyss is bottomless, screams and efforts are swallowed by nothingness. In the same poem he writes:

They just threw me here,  
expecting me to see for myself  
like they saw for themselves.  
Now nothing can be taken back  
or undone.

Consider “Bury me naked”, a poem so carefully written that one cannot help but see life as it is: absolute fuckery. The poem narrates the way in which he wants to be buried when he dies. He does not want his coffin and eyes to be closed, he wants dust to be thrown directly in his face and stones to be thrown on his body while lying there, dead. As if that is not enough, he also wants people to pee, shit and spit on him just like they did on his name when he was still alive. After reading the poem you cannot help but think about what kind of life was lived which deserves this kind of burial. The poem makes us think differently about the hypocrisies in our rituals and respectability in general (whether or not this was his intention). In this poem one can almost feel much more intensely the anger whereas in other poems there is some sort of indifference or detachment.

In a poem titled “Death is on his way” we are reminded of our inevitable death. We are reminded of its inescapability.

You will beg,  
weep at his feet, make promises,  
admit your mistakes, ask for forgiveness.  
But soon you will realise you are talking to yourself.

(“Death is on his way”, p.59)

Here Teamhw writes as if he is unaffected. In a way that suggests that he is immune or has perhaps experienced death. He speaks with certainty and perhaps that is where the strength of his work lies. The unambiguous tone that he employs invites a feeling of terror because what

if, in fact, he is correct? He speaks with authority devoid of emotion. The poem ends with these words:

[Death is on his way]

And if you have wasted your time,  
know he won't waste his.

Teamhw huh? A strange name. I was in a reading where someone asked the poet what his name means. His response was that the 'hw' at the end is an acronym for 'hard work'. So the name is basically 'Team hard work', yes, a bit underwhelming for a deceptively enigmatic name. But maybe the hard work of writing is what produces these vivid images of the problems that bind black communities. Without saying it directly, Teamhw shows that the township is an unbearable place for black people. Yet what also interests me is that the poet does not seem to be interested in escaping this 'wretchedness'; he is uninterested in parting with the 'wretched'. This is ironic because we are force-fed the idea that hard work is the only thing that will salvage us.

In the poem "My people" Teamhw is in search of the mentally unstable, drunkards, prostitutes, thieves and murderers. He wants to find them; he says:

Take me there.

Where they are is where I belong,

("My people", p.26)

These lines corroborate my suspicion that there is no desire to get out, or maybe an acceptance that there is no way out, that this thing we are in is beyond repair. The pessimism in *Bury Me Naked* is an antidote to the sickening lie that things have changed since apartheid, that there is a rainbow nation, that there are opportunities. It saves us from believing the promise of a better life for all. In the poem "Election manifesto" he exposes the greedy, insatiable leaders who feed on the vulnerability of the people just so that they remain in power and sustain their devilishly extravagant lifestyles.

On the other hand, pessimism as an analytic and as an ethic through which we read the world, realistic as it is, can at times shadow and obscure. Township life is not homogenous, there are different realities. Much of beauty – culture, aesthetics, language, music, arts, friendships – have been created out of the horrid of conditions of the township; if these things have any value then they should not be erased when we give an account of the township experience.

What the book does very well is to expose us. It exposes what we know but are reluctant to say, it exposes things that are in front of us that we refuse to open our eyes to. Teamhw speaks of things we have witnessed and feelings we deny because numbness is better than confronting the agony and the trauma. The book reminds us how to feel again, to be in shock, and to be disgusted. Almost every sentence demands a sigh or contemplation from the reader, and it does this effortlessly. I recommend you read *Bury Me Naked*. It offers a lot to think about.

2.

**Not nearly a review of Ontological terror: Blackness, nihilism, and emancipation by Calvin L. Warren**

**Mbe Mbhele**

*many ancestors scream inside my head, they are not dead.*

*their wails haunt my dreams, but these dreams of mine are worth nothing for i am dead.*

It has been particularly difficult to think about the question of being, or to theorize it from the position of South Africa. Here things are buried but they do not die, they inhabit rondavels and are summoned through the burning of incense. They return through dreams demanding rituals. A goat is slaughtered and hung on a tree. Beer is brewed and chickens are slaughtered. We smear our faces with blood and bile, a kind of sacrifice. A sacrifice to please the dead who refuse to die, those who insist on living. There in the mountains I can point at the graves of the ancestors, trace the lineage of my surname and I know too well where my umbilical cord was buried. The ground knows me. All the birds, I know them by name: *uncede, impangela, inkonjane nokhozi lwentaba*. I still have access to the womb, even though limited. This is the place from which I want to think about blackness, being and nothingness. This is the place I have to begin theorizing from, at least if the work of thinking is not only to strive to understand the universal but also the importance of the particular.

I want to think alongside a book by Calvin L. Warren titled *Ontological Terror*. This is not necessarily a review but a weird remembering, searching, making sense and assuming. A review is interested in the text (style, content and merit) but here I am interested in much more than that. I am interested in where I can go with the book; the places, spaces and time to which it can accompany me. I am curious of how far we can walk together and whether it can carry me when I am tired. Whether the text can guide me when I can no longer see; translate for me when I can no longer understand. The book had to cross the many bloody (deadly) seas to reach the remote Kwa-Zulu-Natal village called Mndofo from which I am writing . It is written by a professor in American Studies who has interests in Continental Philosophy (particularly post-Heideggerian and nihilistic philosophy), Lacanian psychoanalysis, queer theory, Black Philosophy, Afro-pessimism, and theology. He is a scholar in the black radical tradition, a tradition that I also locate myself in. This is important because it suggests that there is what he is ~~not~~ that I also am ~~not~~. There is a common truth that we know or should know; we are bound by something.

Black.

*Ontological Terror* is an enquiry around the ongoing debate around blackness and being. The text is interested in the positionality of black people in the metaphysical world. The text interrogates what it means to be black ~~being~~ in the world. It is the answer to this question that is most terrifying. This terror for Warren is the ‘terror of inhabiting existence outside of the precincts of humanity and its humanism.’ No doubt that Warren is thinking with the afro-pessimists who have used the work of Orlando Patterson, Frantz Fanon and Saidiya Hartman to create this school of thought. According to afro-pessimists, black people exist in a state of social death. They experience violence (unwarranted), dishonor, and are constantly alienated. This happens as a result of anti-blackness; black people therefore do not inhabit the same zone as other groups which are non-black. They exist in a different paradigm, what Fanon called the zone of non-being. The book is also anchored by the ideas of Martin Heidegger who wrote extensively on Being. It is through working with and against Heidegger that the book explores Being in relation to black people. Warren posits that black thinking must and should in fact return to the question of Being and the relation between this kind of question and the anti-black violence that makes the world.

I leave my village in Kwa-Zulu Natal to go study in university. I find a different kind of knowing and learning. Here I also find that I am black, a painful and trauma-heavy discovery.

I smash my head against the surface and fiercely fight to escape this entrapment. In this place I am forced to swallow aloes, chew stones and breathe in thorny air. I am like a fly against the window; I might die here. I fight, smashing my head against the transparent farce of freedom, a better life and success. I realize that I am in a den of darkness. I look at my hands and see nothing. I stomp my feet and hear worries, open my mouth and it foams, silencing me. My mind tells me to surrender for it knows what I know, there is no fire escape. I will burn 'til I am ash. I was swept by the wind to a place called never go, where history trembles and nothing remembers. Things moving nowhere and everywhere, an interminable fall as Fred Moten would suggest. There is no going back because I know too much. I am black ~~being~~.

The Black Lives Matter movement started in America after George Zimmerman was acquitted after killing Trayvon Martin. The movement gained popularity on social media and became a worldwide movement of solidarity and justice for people who have experienced years of subjection. While this movement seems progressive, Calvin L. Warren questions it. He questions its foundation in a way that wants to suggest or expose it as a reformist movement. He accepts its importance but also highlights its impotence. He questions the ontological grounds which provide for the occasion of such a declaration (Black Lives Matter). The question he poses is whether the black is a human being, whether or not black (ness) has claim to humanness. If black people cannot claim humanness then on what basis do they say their lives matter? Then again, if black people can claim humanness why is it that they always have to repeatedly tell the world that their lives matter? Here something is revealed, it is this revelation that we cannot bear but that we also cannot ignore.

Thick in the middle of Joburg unable to escape, not the place but the thing that I have become. My blood boils, rushes up the throat and hugs my tongue, thick as phlegm. It does not stop there. It heads for the head and threatens the nostrils. I am dazed, no strength in me. I fall, knee first then my shoulder. I lie there, unsure whether it is a passage or an alleyway. I am there like a heap of rubbish, too unimportant to be moved or noticed. My body a perfect fit for the landscape. Around me are beer bottles and cigarette butts. Rats rattle, drunks continue their wild chats. I stagger inside, clothes damp from urine. I am not quite sure whose urine it is, perhaps mine. No one notices that my clothes are damp; fine. I lean against the pool table and scan around for familiar faces. All I need is just one sip of beer then I get my groove back. There at the corner, squeezed between chairs, I see my friend, Mzoxolo. I wave my hand and dart through the crowd. The music is unrelenting. I get to the table, grab the bottle by the neck, strangle it and gulp. I could have not woken up from that alleyway and the rhythm would not

have been disturbed. Another black body would have occupied my position the following night. This points directly at the fungibility of black bodies. Perhaps what Warren means when he says, 'the world needs the negro in as much as it despises it'.

For Warren the question of being is the most fundamental question and that is why he thinks that we cannot avoid Heidegger. For him confronting Heidegger helps us understand 'the relation between black suffering and metaphysics, slavery and objectification, anti-blackness and forgetfulness, thinking and remembering'. One wonders whether we can't understand these questions without going through western philosophical thought. If we cannot then this seems to be some sort of epistemic violence because it means we are incapable of speaking about ourselves without referencing others, regardless of whether we agree or disagree them. For Heidegger the 'world wants to know nothing of nothing'. According to his concept of Dasein, freedom is dependent on avoiding this nothing metaphysically. Calvin Warren posits that this nothing is imposed on blacks such that black people become an embodiment of nothingness (nothing incarnated). What is hated about blacks is this nothingness that gives the world a sort of anxiety. One can say that anti-blackness is anti-nothingness; this in a way responds to the question: why are blacks hated all over the world?

I want to return to that small village but fear that I will never look at those mountains in the same way. Those streams and rivers will represent a perennial blood of black death. I want to return but if I do will my mother still recognize me? I have lost my front teeth and my left eye has become a wound that mothers fleas. My knees have become hard shells for falling, crawling when begging for empty beer bottles and fat from cow heads sold in taxi ranks. My only outfit is a dirty-ANC shirt and a reflector. I am nothing. Just a car guard who has become a pet to the middle class of brunch and sundowners. If nothing dies who is invited to its funeral. I will not return. Should my mother come searching for me tell me to hide. No, tell me to smile for she will not recognize me. If I could I would also hide her, and my sister and my brother, my black brother who does not know yet that to the world he is denied. That to the world he is forgotten and it is that very forgetting that sustains it.

Warren in the book shows how these forms of anti-black violence are produced. He uses the work of Oren Ben-Dor to show what the function of the law is: to protect and enforce. But the question that is often not asked is who is protected and against whom is this enforcement. He uses case studies and some case law to arrive at the answer. Here he reaches the conclusion that the essence of the law is anti-blackness. Which is to say the law needs to be anti-black to

retain its legitimacy in the world. Warren goes on to speak on freedom and emancipation, arguing that the term free black is some sort of an oxymoron. “The term free black explodes into onomastic absurdity and existential cruelty. This presents an ontic distortion, which conceals the ontological terror undergirding this term” Throughout the book Calvin Warren successfully does what he sets out to do which is to weaken philosophy and its rigid foundations. He shows truly the essence of Being and that it cannot be thought of outside of black people, regardless of the incessant need to forget or, rather, to unremember them. The necessary resentment of the black ~~being~~ just so that the world can make sense.

But wait, from what position does Calvin L. Warren theorize? To whom is he saying all these things? I am steadily uncaring about who says what when they sit in swiveling chairs and claim to be philosophers. Sometimes their big meaningless words are drenched in dishonesty. They call it theory, critique, arts, culture, but have never said anything about Vellie Veggie running through the soccer ground. A panga in his hand, get in his way and he stabs you 6 times; twice when he is in a good mood. What about Mama Zimu with a boven of wood on her head and a sickle in hand just so that there’s the smell of onions, bull brand and baked beans at home. I am steadily uncaring about those who attend symposiums. Their eyes always darting, almost as if their friend fraud is burning them.

citing freud to cover their disconnection with ----

but still they continue, explaining

others take notes, applaud follows

lies recorded and rewarded

when ---

Bra Steve with one leg lost in exile still stays in his backroom scraping for his next meal, forgotten. All the while never-beens who’ve never seen scream in lecture halls, claiming to know. Even their idea of epistemology is nothing but readjusted regurgitation of western modernity.

critiquing capital, anti-blackness, colonialism

yet, from their pants to their slang

everything about them stinks ‘white’

their sensibilities

to the font on their doors in their detachments of humanities.

steadily uncaring.

rather sit under a bridge and listen to tales of we once had homes.

### 3.

#### **Book Review: Fixions by Taban Lo Liyong – Mbe Mbhele**

Reading Taban Lo Liyong's *Fixions* is similar to taking a walk in a land unknown but yet laden with feelings of familiarity. It is warm in the same way that it is startling. There is no doubt that Lo Liyong's style draws deeply from the oral tradition. But what is interesting is that it is not locked within this paradigm. The book recognizes that Eurocentric literature is engrained in the ways in which we tell stories, it does not discard it under a preservation of Africanness that does not exist but (ab)uses it to fit the African context.

Lo Liyong knows that in as much as English offers us the possibility of getting our stories across, but that in order to do justice to our stories we necessarily need to find ways to bend the language such that it speaks the things we want it to say. *Fixions* uses the technologies of oral literature but uses them to invent something new. Something not obedient to any genre yet not completely against existing categories.

*Fixions* is a collection of short stories that vary in their themes. Satire is used to speak on different issues facing communities, issues facing individuals. In very creative ways the stories are a critique of the insatiable nature of human beings. *The Old Man of Usumbara and His Misery* is one in the collection where he demonstrates how our greed destroys not only those we take from, but even ourselves.

In the story *He and Him* Lo Liyong comments on the sometimes-unnecessary ways of writing which writers seem to have accepted without question yet are useless in aiding storytelling. He does this while propelling his story, an interesting overlap between criticism and fiction. As noted in the blurb of the book, Lo Liyong 'has a literary gift of always keeping the reader alert with his literary innovations and curiosity.'

The stories in the book carry so much energy inside them. It is easy to tell that Lo Liyong's choice of storytelling is not due to some limitation. These stories are a deliberate attempt (successful) to stretch our imaginations to the fullest in how language can be deployed. The stories are not some cheap imitation of what the 'perfect Euromodern story is.'

In *Stare Decisi Deo* Taban Lo Liyong uses allegory to speak about the ways in which we condemn and judge each other, forgetting how much we really need each other. In most of the

stories he demonstrates how our survival depends on the solidarities we create. He appeals to us to appreciate that what holds together the fabric of our society is the ways in which we are able to see each other, regardless of our differences.

*Fixions* is a powerful compilation of short stories that demonstrates the inventiveness and creativity of African storytelling. Lo Liyong reaffirms that in writing there is enough room for experimentation and if done correctly then literature might begin to do certain things. *Fixions* is a collection about the ‘varieties of human tragedy’.

#### 4.

##### **The Pot Plant: A failed review of Mangaliso Buzani *a naked bone***

next to my bed is a pot plant

but instead of flowers,

fingers of a small hand grow there.

Also next to my bed is Mangaliso Buzani’s book titled *a naked body*. The book sits, as if heavy with worry, on my bedside table, it’s cover grey as cigarette ash and on it a drawing of things that don’t ordinarily belong together. A shadow of a man wearing one boot, carrying a life-size fish and a cross. A strange cover but not as strange as the content inside the book.

But perhaps strange is not enough of a word to describe this 81page collection published by deep south books in 2019. In this pitiful era of ours where feeling is simulated, how does one speak of a book that carries emotion the way a cow carries its horns, naturally, without pretence, without shame?

The book oscillates between what is and what could be, exposing the false categories of the real and unreal. The poems in the collection are laden with surprises and turns, some of them delightful but others with a deep sense of sadness.

*a naked bone* is not interested in making you feel good. It does not fall within the growing tradition of self-help books that are disguised as poetry. It acknowledges that there is a gloom

that hovers over our existence but still manages to find traces of meaning in an otherwise rotten world.

last night they stabbed me many times  
today i wake up bleeding from my ears  
my stomach singing its chorus song

*your dreams are not  
going to put bread  
on your table*

(Buzani, Dreams and Bread pg.17)

*a naked bone* defies the logic of language as we have come to know it. The book does so gracefully, calmly, yet creating a whirlwind in the mind of the reader. The poems are not anti-intellectual, but they rely mostly on intuition. It is almost as if Buzani acknowledges that words possess a life of their own. There is certain relationship that he has created with words, a sort of trust exists.

The ocean is deep  
so is the wound of my soul  
and I'm trapped here  
inside a raindrop  
I cannot swim  
I have lost my legs  
and all this has happened  
in my heart too

(Buzani The drowning heart, pg. 41)

There is an intimacy that exists in *a naked bone*; the book is concerned with issues of love, heartbreak, family, relationships and what those things mean. Buzani has a way of speaking about these subjects in a delicate but fearless manner. He understands the fragility that comes with personal relationships and therefore is able to speak about them in an honest way, but also in a way that does not encroach.

Tonight we are not going to sleep, we are going to jump into bed with our shoes and continue to walk in our dreams. You on the paper writing poems, me behind the paper reading poems. we will do this together, exactly the way lovers make a baby together.

(Buzani, *A naked bone*, 49)

Even though *a naked bone* is overly concerned with the personal, the political is weaved in and you feel it in the texture of the poems. You feel it in the tension between the objects spoken of, the people mentioned, and the desires alluded to.

The book would have to be in your hands, words in your mind, sentences in your body and the poems in your heart for you to understand (for yourself) the many things that is able to do.

I sleep,  
the book next to my bed.  
Struggle,  
the shadow-man on the cover looks at me without flinching.  
the pot plant will appear again in my dreams,  
my body knows it.

### **NOTE ON READER REPORT**

It is always strange to hear what people think about one's work. It invites anxiety because quite honestly I think no matter how much we try to conceal it there is a narcissist in every writer. There is that unshakable desire to have meaningful work, one that moves people or even just one person. Also, when one is reading piece of work there are many possibilities. Many things are involved. The work can be misinterpreted or misread. But is there really a misrepresentation if the very act of reading is a subjective one? Maybe yes, maybe no. What is true though is that once the work is out there it does not belong to the writer anymore. They no longer have a say in how the work functions. Their duty is to best say what they are trying to convey while they are still with the text, when the text has not been given to a reader.

My thoughts are that when the reader is anonymous it becomes even more complicated. Because every reader brings with them their own idiosyncrasies in the interpretation of the work. Having said all of this, one needs to accept that their work will be read, at some point. Whether or not they accept that reading of their work is not going to change much. But perhaps

we should not only focus on a negative reading of this situation. Quite frankly it is important for a writer to know what readers think about their work. Without a reader, a writer is as good as blind man walking alone. Walking but unsure of where they are going, even unsure of where they are coming from. Maybe the analogy is bad or even dull. What I am attempting to say here is that without feedback, critical feedback, a writer is unlikely to grow. So one must very soon in their endeavor as a man of words accept that feedback is often there to build you and not necessarily to destroy you. So I welcome the feedback that I received on my draft thesis and I want to say that it has helped me much in the process of finalizing my thesis.

The reader picked up that some of the names of characters are not coincidental but they have particular meaning and were carefully selected. I have to admit that even though the names have meaning I did not spend too much time thinking about them. The names of the characters, for me, had no deeper meaning. They could change and the narrative would not really be affected. But it is interesting that the reader was able to make links between the names and the plot of the story. As the reader stated "I enjoyed this aspect of Mbhele's story the most, in which the act of naming characters (and pets, objects) has a meta function. The names of these secondary characters are miniature stories unto themselves; their names add a layer of levity to Sengwayo's otherwise dead serious story of "genuine surprises and of turmoil"." This comment is quite interesting because it demonstrates how a reader can find a deeper meaning in the work, one that even the writer was not aware of.

The reader also noted how I emphasize on using the body as a way to give life to characters. Instead of showing how characters are like through their actions I use their body to explain their feelings and what they have been through. One can say that in my writing the body plays a very important function because it is through the body and its movements that we get a glimpse in the lives of the characters that appear. I am happy that the reader was able to identify this and affirmed me that it worked effectively as a device. Perhaps the reason I am interested in doing this is because of the belief that the body speaks much more eloquently than words which can sometimes be manipulated. I hold firm the view that the truth lies with the body, the face and if one listens and reads the body closely then we move a step closer to the truth.

Writing about the township is never easy, mainly because so many people have written about it. Often when the township is narrated or when it narrates itself it is always animated by violence. This is not to say this is wrong but the township is also a complex place. How then does one write the township without denying it all its nuances and all that it is? Not necessarily

that in my writing I was trying to give an accurate account of the place but was rather trying to tell a story of a young man living in the township. I was not trying to debunk stereotypes about the township or humanize it. Something else was much more interesting than doing that. I wanted to get inside the mind of my narrator/protagonist and articulate (without including my biases and prejudices) how he thinks and what is going on inside his mind. This was the primary intention of the story, to get inside the mind of a boy who sees too much, feels too much and thinks too much in a place where all of these things are interdicted.

The reader made some interesting suggestions about how I can make my expression of the township richer. They suggested that I explore further the possibility of the main character's sexuality. It is true; when it comes to township narratives the question of sexuality is often ignored or spoken about at surface level. In my edit I will make sure that I explore further the concept of sexuality and attempt to give it the delicacy and care that it deserves. The reader also suggested that "uncle (as the imaginary being that has taken possession of Sengwayo's psyche) could offer us a more nuanced if differing view of Sengwayo as a child and his relationship to his family, to normalize Sengwayo's deviancy". I agree with this and believe that I can use uncle to give some background about the family of the narrator, also to explain some of the things that are left hanging.

Quite naturally there are things that the reader did not like about my story. They felt that there are some lines that are very Afrophobic. They felt that there are many other interesting ways to differentiate characters other than turning them into freaks, whether through dialogue or other narrative tricks. I was aware that there are some lines that might be misinterpreted as Afrophobic but what I was in fact trying to do is to show how ridiculous the stereotypes we have about other nationals are. This line for example: "What if this man takes me to Zimbabwe? Is he a kwerekwere? His complexion confirms it. But he does not sound like one. Does he smell like one? I sniffled twice to confirm his nationality." What I was trying to do is to expose how illogical some of the things we say about foreigners are. I mean there is obviously no way one can confirm another person's nationality by smelling them. I understand why this would be interpreted as Afrophobic and perhaps I can find another way to make my point.

Another thing that the reader noted was that my use of a Sangoma in the story was a bit reckless in that it was prejudicial, it "echoes the colonial practice of invalidating and ridiculing the spiritual/religious practices of natives/Africans." This comment is similar to the one about Afrophobia. It seems that I have not been "politically correct" in my writing. I was not trying

to be because in fact it is impossible to be always correct. What I wanted to do was to show that African practices are as problematic as Western ways. The kind of disrespect shown towards the Sangoma is the same one showed towards the nurses at the hospital. The intention was to show that there is no one who can help my narrator, the Sangoma is as useless as the hospital. The meta point being the fact that it is not the protagonist that is sick but the whole society. But to do that certain uncomfortable things must be said or portrayed. The reader was unable to pick this up, it therefore means that I must reframe it such that it does not appear as ignorance but a tactic used deliberately.

The reader also noted that using real life figures such as Winston Mankunku Ngozi can potentially destabilize the narrative by forcing the reader to look at the biographical details and comparing with the other details in the story. I missed this and I see how it can cause incoherence. I will attend to it and possibly change the names. I am quite glad that I got a very observant reader who was able to pick up on these very little details that play a huge role in how the story flows. I will incorporate most of the suggestions and see how they affect the overall story. I am quite glad also that there is not much to change but just little details. The reader report in a way affirms that I am on the right path.

The reader also noted that perhaps I should reconsider my ending. They stated that even though the end has that element of surprise it would have been much more effective to leave the narrative open-ended, unresolved, without choosing for the reader what to believe. This is exactly what I am going to do because when I was writing I could also sense that there is something unsatisfactory about the ending. I think the reader report is quite helpful and it was able to illuminate certain things that I could have possibly missed. I am going to take into account all the comments and assess which ones I should include and which ones will not serve the story.