Walls and Remembrance

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts in Creative Writing

Of

Rhodes University

By

Andile M-Afrika

June 2013

This is a story of a quest that begins on a wall of history at a cemetery where Steve Biko was buried. The main character is the writer, who is partly the author, partly a fictionalised everyman. He is on a journey of self-discovery, while at the same time questioning contemporary South Africa.

Chapter One

Only one thing disturbs the silence and tranquillity in this cemetery. It is not the bodies that lie here with stories that remain untold; nor is it my friends who passed away silently, leaving me with the stares of their fatherless children piercing my skin. The silence is stabbed by the memory of gunfire from the shooting range on the other side of the cemetery. Once whites would shoot whatever they wanted to shoot. The sound of their guns hit the wall of that mountain and rebounded into the silence of this home of the dead.

I do not know how many times mourners turned their heads, with knees shaking, thinking that the heavily armed police had run out of patience again. Gunfire, like death, is never an easy acquaintance. What is worse, the shooters at the range seemed to wait for the time when the priest was fiddling with his little booklets trying to find the right recitation to read; the gun would go off, the priest would find his verse with haste and mourners would murmur “We should get out of this place.”

There is a park outside this cemetery, with four low, cold concrete benches around each of the four rectangular concrete tables. A patch of dried grass surrounds the small garden with its strip of dying flowers. The place is littered, yet the bins stand empty. There are pieces of all kinds of things: a folded paper, a torn greaseproof packet of some snack, cigarette butts, a used condom, a disposable nappy, a shapeless KFC packet lying near a dried chicken rib cage and a gnawed thigh bone. The only attraction that seems to be free of filth is that wall built with beautiful face bricks, standing as both a barrier to and decoration of the cemetery, holding huge metal plates inscribed: STEVE BIKO GARDEN OF REMEMBRANCE.

At the left corner, where the wall begins, stands a building of the same type of bricks, which is amazingly clean. This was once a lavatory but its function has been altered. It now serves a more noble purpose as a change and rest room for the workers of the cemetery. Behind the lavatory-turned-change room and rest room is a small river that brackets the cemetery from the left, while the railway line, steeped up on higher ground to suit the security police who once would flash their cameras when capturing the images of their next targets, brackets the cemetery on the right. The river has come to join the bigger Buffalo River which ends in a mouth on the Indian Ocean further down eastwards where the land ends, and the seas begin.

I am seated on this concrete bench unwillingly trading the heat of my buttocks with the cold surface, a case for a future pain in my lower body. It is the silence and the tranquillity that I am after. It is the unpublished books that are buried in the bosoms of important people in this cemetery that I long to read. The songs that these people composed which none now living ever sing are what I wish to listen to. The paintings painted in hearts, that should have been brushed on canvas before the journey to this place, are what I long to appreciate. I need answers. I need answers from my mother. She is also buried here.

My identity is hidden here. The meaning of my life sits in this place of death. This site of ends holds my beginning, in the silence of the grave and in the warmth of the tomb. It is waiting for me.

*****

As I listen to the silence, half expecting the sound of a gunshot from the shooting range over there, there is a hum and a soft crunching of gravel from behind. A German sedan appears and parks near the wall. After a few minutes one of the tinted windows slides down and a black hand in a white sleeve throws out an empty, dirty disposable dish followed by some plastic cutlery. I walk up to the car, pick up the rubbish without looking at the window but with the express purpose of talking to the conscience of the thrower, a few actions that say "Is it not time you become responsible for your mess, your own rubbish?" I put the litter in the bin, making sure that this is all within the view of the rubbish thrower, and from the chill on my skin just below my left shoulder blade I know his insides have been shaken by the act.

For a minute there is no action from the occupant in the car. I go back to my concrete bench and, on sitting, the door of the driver's side opens. A foot in a sharp pointed shining black shoe steps out and rests on the ground for a time that is enough for me, the intended appreciator, to inspect and admire.

I've seen this habit from a tycoon in Port Elizabeth years ago. That man had even talked openly about it afterwards. It seems to be an in-thing that social-climbers who need to be seen and be acknowledged for their expensive tastes, do not rush the frames for their spectators. They give out a shoe view and pretend to be doing something else inside the car to allow for all kinds of guesses. Then, in a slow move, they come out, twist back into the car, bending to the point that the label on the waist of the designer trousers can face the onlookers. After a reasonable period it is time to face the conquered audience. This rubbish thrower does not miss a bit of the choreography.

As he stands, I see the face of the times: full and chubby cheeks, skin-shaved chin, shining bald head, whiskey-stained eyes and a majestic gold chain around the neck. As I look at him he swells his cheeks into a prosperous smile. Am I a pitiful case in his eyes, I wonder? Or is he imitating white Catholic nuns who always smile at everything they see, for nothing? The man opens his mouth and says, "Cousin, what are you doing here?"

For a moment I do not know what to say. I squeeze my eyes to get a clear look at who this person is. He repeats himself and that is when I recognise his voice. "Mzala, child of my aunt. I should be asking what puts you here," I say. This is my cousin, someone I grew up with. They lived with us at No. 870 before my aunt, his mother, a sister of my mother, got her own place. How could I not recognise him? Well, he has changed a lot.

We hug each other. The fabric of his clothes says 'Hold me longer,' and the perfume on his broad breast, mixed with the smell of leather on his back, throws me between a cosmetic shop and a leather factory. We then greet with hands and he reveals his oversized dentures. I realise that there is a gold insert between the two front teeth of the upper jaw. As if in answer to a flood of wonderings in my head, Mzala says, "It's our time cousin. Siphethe now, we are ruling." This confuses me further. Then he asks, "Why are you seated so lonely here? Is there something wrong?"

"No, not at all, Mzala. I'm just running away from the noise in the township. It's quiet here," I say.

“You never change cousin, hey? Times are going. Look at me,” spreading his arms and looking at himself. “Look at my car,” turning to his car and pushing both his arms and pointing with all his fingers. “You should look at my house,” with his hands on his waist and bending his body towards me with bulging eyes. “My quiet is in my house, not in the graveyard.” What a direct challenge, I think. I have not expected it. “Oh! my wife, my clothes, my helper,” closing his eyes and throwing his head backwards, “my lawn, my dogs and my white neighbours,” with his arms at the sides and bending at the elbows as he counts his possessions. “Cousin, when I come to my house my lights can see me, they welcome me and say “qhaa,” flickering his fingers in front of his face and opening his mouth at the same time. “You must come and see this to believe it. I will give you my address but . . . ,” in a low voice as if about to whisper, “ you have to go through my PA, cousin. You should know these things. They are called protocol, pro ...to ...col.”

He puts his foot on the concrete bench. I stand there, silent. I am completely baffled by Mzala and the kind of things he is saying and the way he speaks. In an attempt to sober myself up I ask, “Mzala, what puts you here? You must have a better reason.”

“You’re right,” he says elated at my flattering words. “I’m planning to dig out the remains of my mother so that she can get a proper burial.” He holds both his thumbs up, “I mean, I am about to make a classy funeral.” Then his open hands shake as if polishing a surface. “You know what I mean? All my colleagues in business, in big places and even in the leadership of the Party, you know, will be there. And, me and my wife will wear what was never worn anywhere. And I will be making my tribute to my mother.” He moves his foot from the bench, pulls his trouser-waist up onto his belly and puts both his hands into his pockets, stretching his right leg to the side. And with his head looking down he says slowly, “I loved her so much.” He pauses for a moment, and says,“ But, I hate the memory of her death because we were so poor at the time. I don’t even want to talk about it. In this time of ours I can allow her to rest in peace.”

My stomach is beginning to turn and I am feeling like I can vomit as this boasting fills me up. But, despite the bragging, Mzala is on a quest. Something must have set him off, I think. For clarity and my sanity, I ask, “What do you mean, Mzala?”

“I mean I will dig her out, get her in a casket, design a two piece suit even if they put it on top of her. And since she was a church lady, I will get a nice uniform from the Methodist church, the one that all ministers like, put it on a stand next to the casket to show it as her credentials.” At that stage I ask disbelievingly, “It has been a long time since auntie was buried. She may not be in a good state to be viewed by the public now. How are you going to handle that?”

“I have a friend who has a funeral parlour. He even wanted to give me a discount on all this. I refused it. I told him my love for my mother must go with the expense it deserves. He will find me a mask and a Brazilian wig to beautify her. All of these things are possible, cousin.”

It is very clear to me that Mzala has made his plans and there is no need for asking any further questions. “I have spoken to this priest guy,” he continues, “Jesus! You must listen when he preaches. He’s the best and he does not ask too much. It’s going to be the funeral that people will talk about for some time. And you, cousin of mine, you have to be there too . . . ” again dropping his tone, “we may have to discuss what you should wear.”

I persist in my inquiry, “Mzala, what have you come to do here now?”

“Right now I’m planning a tombstone,” he said. “I have to see what is here. The thing is, anyone else who comes here again must see that even in death the Vilakazis are the best, you know what I mean?”

He asks for my mobile number and after I give it to him, he spins a 180 degrees turn on his heels saying, “Let me walk in, I’ll talk to you later, cousin,” and as he walks in a 1970s catwalk style he says, as if throwing words over his right shoulder, “It’s up you cousin, if you want to ride on the train.” I look up at the railway line and there is no train coming. What is he talking about, I wonder? I stand there and Mzala disappears into the cemetery.

*****

I decide to leave before Mzala comes out. His appearance has broken the quietness of my questioning of the silent past. I wander into town, and am drawn by my seeking mood to the Edward Street Garden of Remembrance.

This is a military monument on a double plot of land. There are graves of soldiers here who died in the “frontier wars” of the Eastern Cape as history calls them. In front of the grave site is a stone wall that is as high as my waist, beautiful when you stand a distance away, but not as attractive as the one at the Steve Biko Garden of Remembrance. The stones that make up this wall are very rough and have sharp edges.

As I stand here pondering, what comes to mind are the labourers who dug these stones, wherever it was that they dug them from, the human power that packed them on whatever transport brought them here, the hands that lifted and held them in suspense for the steady and meticulous arrangement in building this wall. I see the sweat on the faces and necks of the only cheap labour that this country has ever known, the labour of my people, black labour. And interestingly, these stones are the very type that built the historical British buildings in the rest of this town, King William’s Town. So, I consider, we built this town.

The small gate made out of heavy steel leads into a walkway that ends at the centre of the plot. Here stands a huge, glossy granite block of rectangular stone, about two metres high. On all sides of the stone are the names of British soldiers from various regiments who died between 1835 and 1878 in the Border area. On both sides of the garden, before the fence, are two neat rows of headstones, with inscriptions.

Like a visiting president I inspect the row on the left hand side. Somewhere in the middle I am struck by one stone. It is inscribed: William Handsley, 2nd Batt, 13th Light Infantry, died 19-03-1860, aged 20 years and six months; “Weep not for me my comrades dear, I am not dead, but sleepeth here.”

I think of Zithulele Cindi who for two years and two months in the mid 1970s was imprisoned and was kept in isolation, tortured over the use of the word “comrade” in his letters, one hundred and

sixteen years after this word was written on William's Handsley's stone. My friend Cindi was convicted and he served many years on Robben Island, just for writing the words "Dear Comrade".

In as much as this monument was built in the memory of the British soldiers by their loved ones, I can relate to it. I had never known that in areas such as Pirie, Fort Jackson, Kubusie, Fort Murray, Debe Nek, Mngqesha (the home of my grandfather) there were clashes and the British forces suffered. History books that were pushed on us contained a lot of trash about African people. They drummed into us, as school going children, a sense of low judgement on Africa and her people. Yet, here was evidence cast in stone: our forefathers died while fighting. They may not have monuments in their names but the monuments of the British are the evidence of their heroism.

I go on. I see the grave of a three year old daughter of a soldier, another of Thomas Harris who drowned in the Buffalo River, aged thirty-five.

The Buffalo River. That is where I swam when I was a kid. I was also the number one fan of my uncle during the advanced swimmers competitions. I cheered the divers that entertained us with their styles. I ate fish that came from that river. I relished the vegetation along its banks. But all of that came to a stop when a leather tanning factory decided to dump its waste into our waters. The fish, the vegetation, the swimming activity, our life, perished.

Thomas Harris's life ended there: our life ended there, too.

*****

My mobile rings and I answer. It is Mzala and he wants to know where I have gone to. I tell him that I am at the Edward Street Garden of Remembrance. He says he needs to talk to me and is coming right away. He pleads that I should wait for him.

When he arrives he asks that we should drive to his house. I look at him and I can see he is heavy with something to say. We have driven for about five minutes when he stops the car, parks on the side of the road and says, "Cousin, something has just happened."

"What?" I ask.

"Bad news."

"What is it?"

"It is in the newspapers. It's out there. Everybody is talking about us now."

"What are you talking about, Mzala?"

"As the city council, we made an application to the Provincial authority for the city to be promoted from Grade 5, a metropolitan city that does not enjoy full privileges, to Grade 6 where we shall make use of the privileges of metro status. Now, as procedure demands, the application had to be lodged

with some Provincial office. An unreasonable, or should I say "unpatriotic", official has turned down our application."

"That sounds like an administration matter," I say.

"It is more serious, cousin. Right now, as the men around the Mayor, we earn what we earn, but if we were to be Grade 6 we would earn like other big cities, a pay that we deserve, you see what I mean?"

"I think I read about this in the papers. And I read that you had already started to pay yourselves the Grade 6 salaries."

"Yes, because money is in our hands. No, sorry for that, freedom is in our hands," he says with a sparkle on his face.

"It's a famous song, I know Mzala."

"It is our time, cousin. We have a mandate from the majority to bring better lives for all. So, there has to be a starting point."

"And, this said official is denying you the chance to be the starting point you want to be?"

"That man has to be removed from that office. Sorry, I mean "redeployed." The Party must give him notice that he should explain why he should not be redeployed to some other function, such as refuse collection."

"What?" I am shocked not believing what I am hearing.

"He must either wear an orange or blue overall, I don't care what colour it is. He must be on the back of the refuse truck and collect the rubbish of the town and the townships, or he must resign from that office of our government."

"Why should he resign?"

"We should be seen to be doing justice. It is out of order to dismiss people. You must make them dismiss themselves. That's how democracy works."

"Mmh?" I am left breathless. Weakly I ask whether, at the refuse department, the officer would find a ready post, or would someone else be pushed out as well.

"Well, many of the people there once worked for the apartheid government. So, a suitable reason will be found to delink one of them from the democratic system."

"Do you mean you will dismiss that person?"

"No, he will dismiss himself. This is a democratic country, cousin. Ways and means are available to do that."

"How would you do that?" I ask.

"The easiest thing to do is to deploy your intelligence forces. They must dig out if he was ever involved or suspected of being involved in selling out during the struggle or whether he had ever

lived with a sell-out or if there was any relative of his who was a sell-out. People go by similar surnames. We should be able to get him there."

I am becoming curious. I ask him, "What has all this to do with you, Mzala?"

"As a close person to the Honourable Mayor of the city I was going to hit six digits in my payslip. And since I deserve the increase, I suggested to the Honourable that we should test the waters by paying ourselves the increased rate. I wanted to see how those figures looked on my pay slip and I was not alone in that. The motion was unanimously carried. You see, I can't hide that fact any longer. We are the 'who's who' of the city, the bosses of the town in other words, and our Mr Number One, the Honourable Mayor, feels the same."

"Mmh ... Now, this administrative decision is an impediment to your plans?"

"Let us say technically this is affecting my plans, but these are some of the things we go through in our line of survival. You see, the increase is very urgent, but it needs to be handled with care."

"Looks like you are in control, Mzala."

"Always! You have to be flexible when you do these things, cousin. You have to be able to pull the right strings at the right time. And if the strings are not right and the times are not getting right too, open up a single malt, you'll see your way through."

His mobile rings and he looks at the phone to identify the caller. He shoots up, accidently knocking his head against the roof of the car. "This is the Mayor calling," he says opening the door nervously and starting to pace next to the car while talking.

After the conversation we drive on and the strain has disappeared from his face.

We come to his house, and this is a house I know so well, No. 2 Raglan Street. This is the same house I lived in when my grandmother worked for Mr Leurs, her 'master'. I slept in a room that was given to my grandmother in the basement. The other door next to that room was a store where my grandmother's 'master' kept all sorts of things. You could learn about that man's life just from looking at what he kept there.

The lavatory we used was a small separate building standing across from the room on the edge of the yard. We used that lavatory during the day. At night there was a bucket that functioned as an "en suite." Next to the lavatory was a space where grass and old branches of trees were thrown. It was called the compost tip since, after decomposing, the organic soil would be used as a fertilizer for the gardens. There was a wall that secured the swimming pool. I swam there with Graeme and Gary, sons of my grandmother's 'master'. Their grandfather, Mr Horak, who would visit from Johannesburg, loved to swim with us. He was a friendly and conversational man. He always wanted to know what I would be when I grew up. He had this interest in me.

But, what would I be? What did I know? That kind of conversation had never taken place between me and my only parent, my grandmother. She was too busy making a living for all of us, her children. Her only mental journey into a child's future and about similar issues came through her loud prayers in the evenings. We would be required to kneel down as she begged in her prayers that the Lord help so and so, calling our names, in such and such a thing, citing some truancy. Of course, she did not know much about the world of educated people, that is, if my future was to be through education.

My memories are interrupted by the arrival of the members of the household. I am introduced to Mzala's wife. She appears to be a collected person and she has observing eyes. She is different from what I have seen in Mzala. She welcomes me and leads us to the dining room. It is clear that she is expecting me. They may already have spoken about me – what can one do in a world of mobile phones!

They have a helper who is wearing the same sort of overall, apron and doek that my grandmother's generation of kitchen girls wore. She brings in huge dishes of food. Everything is in huge volumes; I mean the food is too much for the three of us. There are no children in this house and I am scared to ask about that. The helper is a young woman though, very young. At the end of the meal I insist on helping her with taking out the dishes. Mzala doesn't want that but I go ahead anyhow. I want to talk to the helper just to know her age.

Jesus! You will not believe this. This child helper was born in the same year as my daughter, my first born child. I freeze on hearing this. What has happened to us?

*****

Before I can process what I have just heard, Mzala comes into the kitchen with his wife and they invite me to see the rest of the house. We start in the room where we dined. I realise that this dining room used to be a lounge when Leurs lived here. Mzala is bragging that he is planning to move to a new suburb that is about to be built, where only the new rulers will stay. We move out of the dining

room into the passage. I see quite clearly that Leurs's house has not changed at all. The passage and the doors of the rooms stand where they had when my grandmother was their cleaner. And, during my turn to 'stay in' with the little boys when relieving my grandmother, I would pick the boys up from the couch in the TV room one by one when they had slept, take them to their beds in those rooms through that passage. I would go back to the TV room and watch until the broadcast ended. At times I would go to their pantry, pour a drop of everything in their liquor bottles into a glass, come back to the TV room and seat myself on my grandmother's 'master's chair.

As Mzala shows me the rooms, he takes me to what he calls a guest room, saying, "One day when you visit us, cousin, you will sleep here." It has a huge bed with a lot of pillows and when I ask how one slept with so many pillows, Mzala looks at his wife and they smile at each other as if approving my backwardness.

I know that room. It was Mr Leurs's study. There used to be a desk that stood in the middle and there were books on the shelves over there, old portraits of the schools where Leurs had taught. Whenever I stood in for my grandmother, baby-sitting Graeme and Gary when their parents had gone out for the night, in other words 'staying in', I would come to this room. I would sit on his desk and imagine myself as a clerk at home affairs with a long queue of those who came from the rural areas to look for work in town, checking their dompas, as the IDs were known at the time. I would look at Leurs's books and wonder what strange things white people read.

They loved birds, wild animals, dogs and cats, not for their meat because they had plenty in the fridge. They kept those animals in their books. And I would long to free the birds.

*****

Mzala takes me to the garden. By now his wife is not walking and smiling along with us. She obviously is not an outside person. In the garden, Mzala has chairs and we sit there to look at the flowers and the trees. I ask him, "Do you have children, Mzala?" The man looks down at the grass and for a moment does not say anything. He starts to move his knees nervously, in and out. I am about to say something in an attempt to ease what I see as an undesirable intrusion when he raises his hand to stop me, with his head still bowed, and says, "Cousin, son of my aunt, I have tried and tried but nothing has helped." He pauses. There is a sudden discolouring of the grass and the vegetation around me, at least in my eyes. I see the futility of life written on the man's face. I imagine his situation and the toll it must take on his shoulders. I put myself there. To have the material things that everyone else longs for and yet to be without that which everyone else has, it must be painful.

He raises his head and looks at a fig tree that is hanging with fruit, he stretches his legs, puts the left one on top of the other. His chest rises with an intake of the oxygen that the plants around us provide and he says, "Someone once said that I need to acknowledge my father; that I need to do a ritual to show that I am aware of my roots."

"Who is your father, Mzala?" I ask. He looks away, depriving me of the expression on his face as I ask the question. The fatty tissue at the back of his head that folds in short lines throws a hint to me that

says ‘even a man can cry’. “My mother used to work on a farm,” he starts. “She was already married by then, with the man that I had known as my father. Apparently her employer used to do certain things with her while her husband worked on the plantation fields. I am a product of those moments with the German man.”

Mzala is not obviously light in complexion as one would expect from children of mixed descent. He has clearly taken after his mother in terms of his colour, if we take the story of his biology seriously. I think back to the times when we were growing as young children and the soldier-like figure that he was comes sharply back to my mind. Whenever we talked about movies, the pictures we saw and others we imagined for our entertainment, he was always bent on warlike characters. And what we knew about Germans had been that they were the most militant. In a voice of empathy I say, “I hear you, Mzala. How did you discover all this?”

“I was approached by the man’s children,” he says. “In the first place, I was not aware that the man was paying for my education when he was still in the country. From the letters of one of his daughters, I guess I should say from the letters of one of my sisters, I gathered that they moved from South Africa back to Germany and a few years after emigrating, the man passed away, having spoken about a child with a black maid in South Africa. The daughters followed the traces and things came to the connection that is now between us. ”

“And what did you do after getting to know that?”

“This was a shock to me. I mean, I had known this man who was my mother’s husband as my father and nothing else had been said to me. I showed the letter to my mother. She was sickly at the time and she was always on her bed.”

“What did she say?” I ask.

“She started off by crying, hiding her face in her hands. I felt guilty because I did not know what memories I had evoked. I waited until she could compose herself again because it was important for me to find the answers. She started this story of her secret love with her boss behind the backs of her husband and that of the boss’s wife, her madam. And, as I was listening to the fond story of stolen moments, she began to tell the tale of being abused by her husband.”

“Was he aware of what was happening between his wife and the farmer?”

“It seems he was not aware and he was not abusing her for that,” he responds. “You know the ways of our parents, she was not keen with details. But, when it came to the treatment she got from her husband she was clear, telling about the man’s high-handedness. The man had two faces, very obedient to his employer but very aggressive to his family, that is, to my mother and my elder sisters. So the affair was a sort of sanctuary for my mother, a sort of breather. I do not know what it may have been for the German boss, especially with their unequal relationship, but anyone can make a guess.”

“But from what I hear you are a child of love. You should be grateful for that.”

“Yes, but what is my identity, cousin?”

“I do not have an answer for you on that one, but have you ever thought of those people who are the descendants of children born out of such mixed relations? You should read Peter Abrahams on the origin of people who are classified as coloureds. Labels like these sound to me as meaningless as their makers. ”

“The thing is, in our meetings the language that is used or that everyone is used to, does not speak kindly of people who are not pure Africans. Our language is rude towards the so-called coloured people. It seems that people have to have clan names in the African sense and be associated with some royalty down some clan lineage, so that you are spoken of highly.”

“I think it’s about time you rose up to right the wrongs.”

“That will be the end of me. I will be purged from government business. No tenders will come my way and these guys will eject me out of the system. I can never do that, sorry.”

“I’m also sorry to have challenged you to speak out. I respect the fact that one can live within a system for its benefit, even if the system itself is a direct attack on one’s person.”

“Cousin, I have no alternative,” he says sternly.

“You have just said that you know who your father is. And, that he took care of you. He paid for your education at least, and your sisters are writing you letters.”

“Let us leave this subject, my dear cousin, please.” His tone shows that Mzala is not at all keen to discuss this with one who has pushed him to act.

He rises and walks around the garden. I sit there wondering what is happening in his head. The sun is returning to its place of abode and the air is becoming moist. I roll down the sleeves of my shirt, relax myself deep into the chair and look up through the leaves of the palm tree into the clear sky. Three birds have settled on a branch that is in the line of my sight. They interchange positions. The one on the left jumps to the centre of the two, and the one on the right hand side jumps to the left, so that the one in the centre remains there. Resting my eyes on the bird in the centre I realise that it is plump and beautiful and must have been the desire of the two contenders. Yes, the two are not in a fight but they are competing for the attention of the one in the centre.

At about this time I see a face of someone, giant enough to cover the whole area behind the bird in the centre. As the face becomes more visible the two jumping birds and the one at the centre slowly disappear. I see a smiling figure coming to view in a slow and gentle way, with cheeks well placed in position and lips revealing a shine and a light from the bright front teeth. There comes a voice from my right hand side and I turn to see who is there. There is no one. There is only a shady patch on the ground. I look at the shade without putting much thought on it because, rightly so, it is sunny and there would be shade. But as I look at the shade I see the same figure and face that I have just been seeing behind the bird in the centre. I look up to compare the images and there is no face in the tree. I look down again, the face is in the shade. Am I dreaming, I wonder? I close my eyes, rub them in circular movements, feeling the nerves and the strain on my fingers.

The voice comes back again, this time more audible. It says, “I see you need answers. It is time you ask your questions because your answers are within you.” I keep my eyes closed. It is as if the whole

experience will be shattered if I open them. Something in me says I must remain still and attentive. As my thirst to hear more increases, there is no sound coming. I look at the same position on the ground. There is no shade. There is no smiling face. I look up in the tree. There are no birds either.

Back at home I have a guest who is waiting for me in the Room-of-my-Birth. It is Bulelwa, one of our neighbours. “Andile, I need your help here,” she says as soon as I come in. “You know that I am taking care of this child of my sister.”

I have not expected that one. Immediately, an image of what has happened to the child’s mother flashes snappily in front of my eyes.

Thiga, Bulelwa’s sister, the mother of the child, had been butchered in a way that none could have imagined, murdered by her boyfriend, Nceba. She had given birth, just a few months previously, to a beautiful bundle of fair complexioned baby boy. And the boyfriend, a smooth talker and the one who held in his heart things we will never know, would occasionally come to see his son, that bundle of love. They would be standing on the veranda holding the baby, inspecting it under the limited light of the paraffin lamp, a couple possessed with love, unperturbed by any possible onlooker in the dark.

Who would have known what was in Nceba’s heart? He surprised everybody when he did what he did to Thiga. Worse, when we learnt that after killing her he then pushed the blade into his own heart, not once, not twice, but to a point that ensured his own death. The two families of the love pair, who were locked in difficult negotiations over the pregnancy and the resultant birth, had to undo whatever stiff feelings they had for each other. The whole tragedy resigned them into pain and uncertainty. A child had been conceived and delivered. A father had ended its parenthood.

Bulelwa is not mincing her words; “Andile, I need to know how to grow this child. I have come to you because you have no parents. You have grown to this extent and you must then advise me what to do with this child.”

I sit in front of this woman who is demanding and who is impatient. Thoughts run through my head. Well, one thing is clear; Bulelwa has come for my counsel. It is early in the evening, a time of important matters. Definitely, this matter may have burdened her on previous nights, and in her mind this one evening has to resolve the crossroad. So, I cannot disappoint her. I have to make an effort to help her.

It’s a stinging reminder she has made, that I too was an orphan child, born on hard concrete yet held by the soft hands of a loving nurse, entered into a cruel world and made heir to its upheavals. Parentless, and without the privilege of knowing precisely who I looked like between my father and mother, and from whom I inherited the voice that rattles the ears of my listeners who, with ease, can register how I look even when I am saying hello over the telephone line. All of these, and the emotion and confusion they carry, are not Bulelwa’s concern. She wants advice from someone who has grown without a set of parents.

I look up at the ceilingless roof, at the asbestos that has been blackened by our paraffin stove. There are no tears in my eyes because the care and the protection I received never showed the void. Even if tears volunteered themselves, they would never come down my cheeks. They would be held by my looking at the ceilingless roof. I grew up as a child who was thrown in a circumstance that had never demanded my attention, how can I be expected to counsel and guide someone who has to take care of a child in a related circumstance. I do not know.

Is she not supposed to ask my grandmother, the one who bred this parentless child that is me? What impression have I been making to attract this sort of thing on me? The questions pile in my head and the woman in front of me is waiting for the advice she hopes for.

I fiddle onto words. I act with forced, imitated emotion. She is listening with all her attention. Slowly, her head bows in acknowledgement, and her face is opening up, pushing the strain aside. If she goes away convinced by what I say, I do not know. But, what I do know is that she leaves me thinking.

*****

Lying on the bed in another room is my grandmother. With her eyes closed she says, "Hey, things are coming to you, Msotho." She has heard the conversation with Bulelwa.

My grandmother was the last daughter, the ninth child in a family of eleven children. Of all the children she was the only one who was allowed to remain in school for long enough to reach and pass standard four. She was the only one of all the daughters who was allowed to marry a man of her choice. When she had first met my grandfather and he had proposed to her, my great grandfather came down to King William's Town to see for himself the young man who was requesting the hand of his favourite daughter.

As a very young girl, my grandmother was the keeper of the key of the safe box of her uncle. Ntsebeza kept his money in a tin. He took along the daughter of his sister when he went to hide the tin in a safe place in the bush. So, whenever he wanted to make his transactions, he would simply call the daughter of his sister to guide him to the safe place. He trusted her with his treasure.

If there has been a book of life that I can claim to have been granted by the gods of Amampondomise, it is the life of my grandmother. For me, she is a story of triumph. A young beauty who arrived by train in a town where she knew no one, a hard worker who proved herself in the kitchens of white people, a brave woman who shouldered us all: that is my grandmother.

My grandfather was a poet of the 1930's generation of Lovedale College students, a teacher at a high school, a newspaper reporter and a businessman. Eric Soka had learnt to stand on his own early in his life. He grew in his mother's arms with a prize, a voice from his father. A voice that arrived as a treasured piece of breath, speaking the truth of living ancestors, invading his memory and connecting it with the memories of the womb of his mother. So the writers and poets at Lovedale College, the educationists of the time and the journalists of Imvo Zabantsundu were a stage that charged his body to rise with purpose.

He was the first love of my grandmother. They met and married and saw the birth of their only child. Wendy, was her name: that was my mother.

Despite his illustrious life, my grandfather died a homeless man.

He was a son of yet another man of note, my great grandfather, Anderson Soka. Anderson was martyred in a struggle, screaming, calling out for the protective arms of his own father while on a

sinking boat in the deep seas of Europe. There was no one to hear and sympathise with his cries as everyone on board was equally panicking. There would never be anyone to close his eyes. Like others he had come forward when a new 'join', a contract job in other words, was announced in 1917. How could he not respond when they promised to pay for every month away in Europe? How could he, when men of reputation, sons and grandsons of blue blood were enlisting to fight in the defence of Her Majesty, Her Heirs and Her Successors. How could he, when poverty stared him in the eye waiting to devour a child who was becoming, a child in his wife's womb?

There was no doubt in the mind of my great grand-father when he enlisted. Granted, he feared the sea. He had no idea of where he was going. The Germans were said to be a brutal lot. He did fear for his life. Of course, this war had nothing to do with Africa and her people, but Chief Zibi used very persuasive language when recruiting volunteers. As he stood there listening to the Chief, conscience reminded him of his young pregnant wife. In his thoughts he was interrupted by the voice of the recruiter that called, "Hey, you! Come forward." He enlisted.

There was no looking back because men of education were there too. The son of Dyobha, the one who had a cloth around his neck, Rev Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, a man who came from Lovedale, a teacher, an interpreter for white magistrates. Men from the other side of the Kei River, men from the interior lands of Basotho and Batswana were all there. He had no more doubts in his mind.

He and the other thousands of men were known thereafter as the international labourers of the Great War. They were sorted out like draughts, since paper work had to be done, in that military camp in Cape Town. He lent his thumb to every paper they brought. He was a Native Labourer of the Imperial Government. For twelve months he would be paid 3 pounds per month and this would only see the inside of his pocket when he had returned. His right hand had been raised to vow to obey the orders of Her Majesty, Her Heirs and Her Successors, as well as the Generals and Officers, whoever they were.

But there was something else in his life path, something huge that even his gods feared to hint to him. The SS Mendi sailed out of Cape Town for the northern waters of Europe. She was destined for France. In our isiXhosa tongue, uMendi refers to one whose hand will be given in marriage, thus connecting the two families in blood bondage. This trip, however, had nothing to do with creating relationships. This was a war.

Mendi sailed to England and on she went into the passages of the English Channel. My great grandfather and the native army, the labourers of the Imperial government, had acclimatised to the foreign seas. They had never really known their own seas. They had always worshipped their rivers, valleys and mountains. Here, they were in the cold of Europe and in the ice of her seas, warming themselves with Christian hymns and the comfort of new friendships created on board.

On the night of the 20th and the morning of the 21st of February 1917, the men were negotiating a switch of the time-shift. A dark fog stood in the Channel and held to itself all light. Hopes were held back and dreams were hung in suspense. Then, a crunching jolt shook the ship. It was not the sound of gunfire against a mountain with hearts suspecting an end of patience in the armed police. No! It was a hard knock on the side of the ship, a blow that created a huge opening and allowed the aggressive cold water to cascade in, sinking the Mendi and sending panic to all on board.

Even without any experience of sailing, these men believed in the sincerity of their mission. They were convinced about the sacrifices they were making. There was dignity, and bravery. Reverend Isaac Wauchope called all who heard to "quiet and calm." But the sight of death and the plunging into the bowels of the dark, grey-green waters, the sudden and violent termination of deserved screams, all of these had to send fear and pain to the young wives back home. My great grandfather screamed and was silenced immediately by the invading sea water. He kicked only twice and it was over.

At home, his wife, my great-grandmother, felt the shock and the pain of the separation of the soul from the body of her husband, the father of the child in her womb.

Our township is built on a hill. Its small homes receive the first rays of the sun and a sizeable share of the breeze from the Indian Ocean. I rise early to catch the morning air, open the door of the Room-of-my-Birth, walk to the edge of the yard and inspect my home and the other homes in our street.

I was delivered in this first room of the two rooms. I was born in the presence of the owner of the house, my grandmother, who blessed me with a name, a name that stands on papers and faces the readers who do not struggle to figure out who I am. My deliverance happened in the care of Mrs Kopo, one of the three nurses of the township, in whose hands I landed.

I was pushed through the birth passage of a young woman whose face was pained and who was sweating. My hands were clenched in fists, refusing to reveal the prize.

The young woman, my mother, was born in a missionary hospital on white linen, with respected nurses around. She landed in the hands of a white doctor. It was a special birth for my grandmother, the first in her life and the only one in such conditions. All the other children – like me, her first grandchild – were born on the hard concrete of municipal homes.

I never knew my mother much. I have vague memories of her. I was once shown a photograph she'd had taken at some studio. But the photo never outweighed the picture of her I still have in my mind. I know her from the back. Her shoulders and the back of her neck; me being on her back wherever she went. I used to stroke her back with my eyes, etching the image on the walls of my memory.

*****

Our homes were very small, small but huge in the richness they brought to our relations. We never knew the concept of a distant relative. With us there were no cousins. We were brothers and sisters. The proximity and closeness caused by the small enclosures, a life in the pipeline where our bodies rubbed against each other, heightened the embrace and love. We all moved together through the pipeline to an undefined destiny.

Our homes were always overflowing with occupants. The smaller they were, the warmer. Any space under the roof was a sleeping place when that time arrived, on the walkway as you opened the door, behind the door, under the table whether it stood in the centre of the room or against the wall, against the wardrobe or cupboard, next to the coal stove, a special place during cold seasons.

My home, No. 870, was almost in the middle of the row of houses. It was a four-roomed house divided into two sections for two families and as the numbers progressed further up the street, the houses looked the same as No. 870.

Everybody knew everybody in that street. At No. 871, in the same building as ours, there was an old man who worked for Pep stores. He stayed in one room and leased the other room to a teacher who used to fry onions every time he cooked his meals, sending a mouth-watering aroma across to our side.

Nos. 872 and 873 belonged to one family. How they got the two sides, I have no idea. Their mother Maradebe used to cook meat bones. The butcheries in town sold bones for 20c a packet. They cut meat from the bones and still made money out of the clean bones. Maradebe had a plot of lilies in her garden and we would sell these to white madams in town. With the money we would buy ourselves some meat bones.

Bones made good meals in those days, and bone soup was my favourite. The marrow from inside the bone was the best delicacy. A bone had to be knocked against a rock for the marrow to come out. It was the practice that after we had thoroughly cleaned all the meat from the bone, we would collect as many bones as we could and sell them at the bone place.

I enjoyed watching Maradebe during super time. She would have a lot of dishes on her table. The table was the same colour as her cupboard, what was then called a "kitchen scheme". Everyone would have his dish in that house, even I who never stayed there. When it came to sleeping, everybody slept everywhere. It would be bodies everywhere. Blankets would cover the floor of the kitchen. That was where the children slept.

House No. 874 belonged to deaf people. They were all men. You would never see a woman there. At 875 was Sis' Khol's shebeen. The place was called Drive Inn. Sis' Khol used to play good music. The first time I heard Jimmy Cliff sing "Mama, look at the mountain. Papa, look at the sea. I'm going up there!" was from Sis' Khol's turntable. Important people drank at the Drive Inn.

No. 876 was Bra Zet's house, that slim-waisted, always-with-a-gun policeman in a cowboy hat.

I can't remember who stayed at No. 877 but at 878 it was Mr Thomas. He drank in some shebeen on the back streets and whenever he came home drunk and staggering on the road, he would stand in front of the Drive Inn and dance to Sis' Khol's music.

At 879 there was a small-built man who was very dangerous. He was rumoured to have a black belt in judo. He once beat up a popular township bully, a man who had never before been beaten. He took the man with some kind of a throw, threw him into a rubbish bin and rolled the bin down the street. It was so embarrassing for the bully that from that day he never troubled the small man again.

At No. 880 there was the smart Brother Jack. Brother Jack worked at OK Bazaars. He never wore his work uniform on the street; he was always in a suit. To listen to his English you would really think he was African American. He rolled the words.

The last house at the corner was that of Serious, a man who earned his name from his use of the word "serious" in every sentence of his speech.

Many of us were born between those four walls. And all of us were healthy babies. The three nurses of the community, with Sister Majola who was the senior nurse, enjoyed their work as there were no other jobs waiting for them. They were very creative in entertaining themselves over the cases they had to deal with. One mother who came to the clinic for some antenatal attention with her daughter who was equally pregnant, became a source of entertainment as one of the nurses went about the passage of the clinic, saying; "Yhu my friend! It's terrible! Mother and daughter!"

The toilet facilities were a sore point, part of the state-sanctioned humiliation of the people. One section of the township had the most humiliating facility. You could always find naked people there, because there were no doors. The toilets were forever messy since they could not handle the numbers. My people are a majority, even in the toilets.

They were two small rectangular buildings with eight pit holes and two water sprinklers that acted as shower units and a thin wall in the centre that separated men from women. We foolishly looked down at the children of that section yet the toilets were not of their own making.

In another section people had to relieve themselves in a square one-metre-by-one-metre structure built between four households with four separate doors diagonally facing the houses. This injected a false sense of superiority, with those residents seeing themselves as better than others.

Despite all these things, the people were wonderful. They loved one another. They had very little to fight over. Their poverty kept them together. They built stokvels to fight hunger. They would all contribute each month, and then on a rotating basis they would buy one another presents such as linen, bedding, cutlery, garden tools and such things.

There were 'kitchen girls' and 'kitchen boys' - the domestic servants of white people. Those who worked in bigger kitchens in the town hospital and in the school hostels shared their leftovers with those who worked for tight-fisted whites.

There was jazz music, as well as choir music, dance clubs, rugby, martial arts. People moved in and out of churches wearing different uniforms. There were the blaring trumpets of the Salvation Army and the beating African drums of the Zion worshippers. Some worked in the community gardens with bended backs, adding to what there was in the gardens in their yards. Sounds of ululations would be heard from happy voices of women in some ceremony while, at the same time, a child would be heard crying in some corner. That is the township of my memory.

*****

To the left of No. 870 was Oom Tami's house, a bigger house with two bedrooms, a large lounge, a dining room, a kitchen and a toilet. Oom Tami used to dress very neatly every time I saw him. He was always clean-shaven. He used to move about on his long legs. He was taller than anyone else, yet he had a soft voice. His words would come from those lazy lips.

Oom Tami owned a church. Services took place in his house with him leading. Whenever I attended his church I would position myself in such a way that I could see every movement he made there because, for me, he was everything. As the people in the church were singing, I would look at his mouth. I would marvel at the way he swerved his lips to the side in such a stylish manner while singing along, though I never got to hear his voice. He would, along with the rhythm, jerk his body up, raise his ankles, suspend these in the air, and come down still within the beat of the song.

Next door to Oom Tami was a very short Mr Ngaka who had a strong voice. He was a skilled translator and was able to create his own lines while translating for the priest in my grandmother's Roman Catholic Church, the only church in the township that had a white priest.

Next door to his house was Auntie Anna's house. She was a coloured woman who baked and sold vetkoek. Her eldest son, Matthew, used to play a guitar on the veranda and was such a good singer. He sang the lyrics just like the way they came from the radio.

There were other coloured families that lived next door to Auntie Anna's house and I don't remember a day seeing those people sober.

Then there was Gogo's house, our day care centre. Gogo looked after all children of the street. She had a lot of grandchildren herself and we would run around her house playing and making such a noise.

One particular morning Gogo was mysteriously quiet. She had not been shouting at anyone all morning. At about noon we saw Bra Steve's car stopping in front of Gogo's house. Bra Steve came in with a woman who was wearing a white overcoat. It was said that Gogo was sick and that the person with Bra Steve was a doctor. That doctor did not stay long. She must have come to stab Gogo in those huge buttocks with her needle.

Gogo's veranda was a bedroom in the evenings. If you walked past the house late at night or very early in the morning, there were bodies hidden under blankets, lying next to each other with heads cushioned against the concrete wall. It was a beautiful scene, with semi-dead people who, sometimes, would be talking from under their blankets, obviously increasing warmth with breath.

Next door to Gogo's house was another coloured family, headed by Auntie Maggie. One of her sons was a fisherman and we would play close by, waiting for Auntie Maggie to offer us some fried fish. She loved children.

Next door to Auntie Maggie was the principal of the secondary school, Mr PV Maneli. He drove a Cortina GT, ice-white in colour with a black strip. I loved that car.

Going further along, there was a small narrow valley, a spot where shit from the lavatories of the two sections of the township met and fought, because the joint of the sewage pipes would burst and spill over all the time, greening the turf. We called this place "green grass". Boys and girls would be lured by the deep green colour, the very green that compels you to release your urine in your childhood dreams, to come and play there.

We lived with shit stench. We learnt to live with shit early in our lives. The shit station had always been on our side of the township, the eastern side. All the homes knew the shit perfume. People only screamed about it in times when the stench was very strong, that is, after the Sunday meals or after overeating at some social event.

At "green grass" we played our rugby, calling ourselves after the names of the rugby stars that we knew. Our rugby balls were made from sorghum beer cartons that were filled with waste paper, with corners. The hard, pointed corners of the cartons hurt our bare feet whenever we had to kick penalties. That was where we planned and mapped the stealing of peaches or figs in the houses

around the township. And for us it was a place of stories about ghosts and witches. “Green grass” was our place of story making, too.

*****

We had a regular visitor at “green grass”, Steve Biko. He would drive by in his small VW Beetle. I saw no point in hoping for a ride in that small thing. But later when he came in that green VW Passat and stopped to chat, saying things I did not understand, I wanted to put my buttocks on the seat of that one. I was in love with his car. I never paid much attention to what he said. Yes, just like Serious and Brother Jack, Biko had earned his own names too, all because he used them so often in his speech. He was Amandl’ Amnyama, Black Power, Saso, Azania.

Then it would be Sis’ Nola’s house. She was a nurse at the local hospital. Sis’ Nola used to complain that her daughter was being made pregnant by the bed she was sleeping on. The daughter had never slept out of the house but she used to give Sis’ Nola one grandchild after another.

Next door to Sis’ Nola’s house was the community parliament. There was something special about that house. It had a telephone line. Those days we could count where the lines went. There was one at the clinic, at the shop, at the principal’s office, at the secondary school, at the office of the white superintendent right there as you entered the township and at the house of Sister Majola, the senior nurse. You sort of wanted to know how the man of the parliament got his telephone.

There were a lot of comings and goings at the parliament. Different cars would be parked there. Invariably there would be men standing at the front. They would be wearing dashiki shirts, gold and black in colour, with black pants and black high-soled sandals. I loved those sandals.

These men never combed their afros. Hair stood in neat rows like African plantations. Almost always I found them in a jolly mood, smiling and laughing their hearts out. They were not the usual ‘what-you-call’ types or the ‘excuse mes’ of this world. They were different and they looked dignified. The rumour about them was that they were the people of the freedom struggle.

*****

There were also bad things that I learnt from the people of my street and my township. There were times when people would be chasing a person who was said to be unknown. That person could be beaten up and be seriously injured simply because of not being known by locals. As a young boy I ran along with stones in my hands, tightening my lower lip under the grip of my upper jaw, furious at the fact that an unknown person had come to our place. It was like a camp mentality. We expressed scorn towards, and rejection of, others who were of our skin and had not offended anyone, but were simply visiting the township.

Sometimes in the absence of visitors who had to be hated and stoned and chased out, hate would be directed internally within the community. The people of my section, the latest to be built, would be forced to defend themselves in street fights with those of other sections. The charge was that we were not 'township people' enough. Those who stayed in the older sections believed they were the legitimate residents of the place. I had made friends in other sections of the township since we attended the same schools, yet I had to fight to find acceptance in those areas.

Whenever coloured people came to visit their relatives or to attend whatever event in the community hall, while returning home they would be mugged and stoned when crossing the bridge over the Buffalo River. Sometimes their lady partners would be captured and bad things would be done to them.

There were community councillors that had been appointed by the office that looked after townships called the Cape Administration Board in the case of the Cape. These would be members of the community who were trusted by the Superintendent who was always white and whose office stood at the entrance to the township. These people were a law unto themselves. They did whatever bad thing they wanted to do with the people and would not be held responsible because the law was on their side. One of them, who later became a mayor, used to visit my home. I would be asked to make tea for this man, a usual thing for any visitor at our home. My grandmother was a beautiful lady during her time and this man wanted to make her his mistress. He tried to use his power to force himself on her.

He kept checks on my grandmother's rental account. He would threaten that unless she allowed him in her bed, the municipality would throw us out on the street. I did not know about this at the time. My grandmother was very smart. You would never have picked up that she was being harassed.

*****

As I stand here I realise that our street is no longer what it was. A lot of people have moved out and new ones have come in. The old man who worked at Pep Stores and who lived next door to my grandmother's house, has died. His body was sent to the Transkei, his ancestral home, for burial.

Oom Tami got promoted. He became a high-ranking officer in the Bantustan of Ciskei. He left his house.

The short translator and mischievous preacher was moved by the church to another station and a new preacher came in, Bulelwa's father.

All coloured families were weeded out and were dumped in a coloured township.

The principal of the secondary school left for another school and his house was taken by a frog-eyed police detective who never greets anyone.

Gogo died and the day care was closed.

Auntie Maggie’s house was taken by a very cruel man who works for the Superintendent.

In Auntie Anna’s house, a stooge mayor came in, the one who used to harass my grandmother.

Our “green grass” became the haunt of a different breed of guests. Two white evangelists used to come there with their families to educate us and make us sing Christian hymns that suggested we were guests on earth, our home was in heaven, our bodies belonged to earth and our souls would enter heaven.

This memory is a thin film of teaching that melts on the hot surface of rebel ground.

I recall how, at the base of my hair, the skin of my skull choked as if touched by cold water. My short hair felt a pulling hand with gripping fingers. I walked back into my home, climbing the stairs that led to the door of the Room-of-my-Birth. A convoy of about six cars emerged from a side street and stopped in front of our gate. I turned my head to look. These were security police cars. I continued to climb the stairs. The doors of their cars started to bang one after another. I could not count the bangs because they were all coming down like the hands of a possessed drummer. I had just stepped through the door when I felt under my foot that the foundation of our house was shaking as a result of the stomping of the feet of the security police into our yard.

These security people had raided my home before, not only once or twice. At some stage they were coming for one of my uncles. When he fled the country they started to come for me, a humble scribe who sometimes would be thought of as hiding guns when only wielding a pen. They were fools who were fooled by foolish informants, and they paid for false information. But they were clever too since it all began with a word, in a leaflet, a page, a pamphlet, a plan, poem, prose, propaganda, thoughts: all being tools of revolution.

The habits of the security police were easy to read. They had had a tough time in the 1970s. They had vowed that in the 1980s they would tighten their grip: but they would be careful of exerting too much pressure, because too much action could result in unacceptable situations and cast them in a bad light again. So they imposed an imaginary iron curtain around our township. According to them, all 'undesirable' influence came from people who were not residing in the township.

In the Room-of-my-Birth, when they came in, there was a table that stood in the centre with three chairs, a bed along the wall that separated our two rooms from the other two that belonged to our neighbour, a dressing table that stood next to the bed. On the dressing table there was a vase and a red rose, fresh from my grandmother's garden.

On the table were my papers in my own hand writing. With haste, I raked them all together, threw them under the bed. There was no time. But I had to make sure that for all the things that would be in their eyes, I would have answers for them. Even a single word on a piece of paper could easily land me in front of a team of white judges, I knew. Black people did not keep diaries or journals because those were tickets to Robben Island prison. A poem picked up could be deemed as having been published.

As they stepped inside, a hot steam filled the Room-of-my-Birth. The walls and the whole interior were boiling. An older uncle was lying on the bed. I saw that his eyes had bulged, assuming prominence in a face that looked around and suddenly fixed itself in space. He was not looking at me. He was not looking at the police either. He had pulled the blankets and covered himself up to eye level. He may have believed that he would be killed that day, and was curious to see how it would happen. Or was he thinking about his dompas? Did he have one, or had he left it behind? What would he say when asked?

He was not really my uncle. He was the older brother of my grandmother, in other words, my grandfather too. He lived on the rural side. His meat came from wild animals around there, and his veggies had never seen refrigeration at the back of trucks. He was nature.

A few nights previously, while sleeping on that same bed together, he had made up a story about a train, a train that came to a station, not to rest, just to pick up its cargo. He had rustled up the sounds of the coal powered goods train and painted with words the landscape of its tracks. But, I had not wanted his stories. I had felt I was no longer the child he still saw me as, and I had managed to sleep in the midst of his sounds.

My cousin, Mzala, had been sleeping on the floor. It was clear the police were making him nervous. Mzala was now standing in his underwear which was torn in the front, perhaps due to the magnificence of his genital set, which seemed to want to protrude and find freedom. As he stood in his shivering skin I realised that he was unaware that he was exposing himself.

My grandmother of the Catholic church was standing in the doorway leading to the second room. She was ready with her kitchen-girl English.

I turned and attended to the guests. They greeted and called me by my name. I greeted back because I knew I was the reason of their visit. “Andile, we have been reliably informed that you have weapons here. We have come to search, therefore,” said one who looked like a team leader. I asked for a warrant authorising a search for weapons. There was no answer and it was clear that they did not have a warrant.

This was supposed to be my victory in that the whole act should have ended there. Save for a concluding line on my part saying, “You do not have a warrant gentlemen, and this is not my house. Here is the owner,” pointing at my grandmother, “please go back and organise yourselves.” My grandmother of the Catholic church, she was not following my act. She responded to the police by giving them the permission to search. I looked at her. She ignored me.

What was wrong in trimming their arrogance and cutting their wings? What was wrong in putting a stop to their thirst to impose themselves on our house? I had a voice and I knew our rights and I did not want to stand back, what was wrong with that?

I made no impression on my grandmother of the Catholic church. To her, I was nothing. In her house she saw white policemen and she did not want to give them a hard time. She knew what white police were capable of.

How could I have expected a seasoned toiler under white oppression to behave according to my sense of justice?

Well, they found my papers. They found my private sources of power, my hidden well of hope and vision, my thoughts and memories. At once all of them sprang with excitement. Or was it fear, since without this evidence their ability to control would suffer?

In grand style I was escorted to one of the cars, the one driven by the leader of the team. The whole convoy drove off to the security police offices in the centre of the town.

*****

Now the kettle had boiled and all the water in it had evaporated. My documents, in my handwriting, that was the situation for me. It meant that I had to steel my insides in the truth that the struggle was not a matter of underground. The struggle was above board and was legitimate. There was very little to deny.

In their interrogation room, I was made to sit on a chair with Sgt Williams to my right going through my documents, documents that were in my own undeniable handwriting. Facing me and inspecting every emotion in my eyes and body was Major Nel. He hardly ever spoke, but he was the one who decided the fate of every detainee.

Standing on the left, blocking the sunlight from the single sun-starved window of an office that stank of death, was Lt Fouche, my driver, the one who worked hard for his promotion.

Behind me, in whatever order, or rather in the order of their inferiority, were the insignificant non-white policemen who, most of the time, were tea makers and watchmen over me, whenever the white team assembled somewhere to decide my fate. They never earned any respect from me.

It was a gruelling interrogation over many hours, but finally, after deciding amongst themselves that they would not charge me, I was to be driven back home. They were always careful about laying charges, not because they did not trust their magistrates and judges, but because of the irritation caused by the consequences of such actions. The media, for instance, could make a detainee famous and might, ironically, serve to reproduce by imitation the very types the police wanted to silence.

When looking back over these events that caused so much pain at the time when I went through them, and when they went through me, I am amazed at the manner in which they have transformed themselves into amusement and entertainment for me. Their gripping and grinding violence which once earned them a place in the room of the never forgotten and never forgiven in my heart, has now been released and lessened by time. I can relate to these experiences, using thoughts and words that hold no colour, even when cars and guns, handcuffs and leg-irons, interrogation walls and concrete roofs, steel doors and blood, once forced their colour into my eye.

*****

On the road, in one of those perfectly conditioned cars, cars that were always filled up with gas and fitted with all the kinds of things they needed for their dirty job, I was seated at the back, sandwiched between two cops. I felt like a king because the car that I was in was being driven by the one who worked hard for his promotion. We were at the front of the convoy, right there where the rules of the road were broken. In a bid to create a civilian mood and to forget that I was still in their dangerous hands, I asked the driver what the final score had been in their rugby match the previous weekend. He had played prop, right there in the scrum.

He brought the car to a dead stop in the middle of the road, jerking our bodies forward and backward except for himself. He turned swiftly his broad upper body to face me. His eyes were pale

and blue. The two policemen, sandwiching me on the rear seat, appeared confused. This one may not have been discussed before: every act of intimidation was usually rehearsed.

In his eyes I read a realisation about his vulnerability; his playing rugby in the middle of an open field, wearing sport shorts, without his guns and bullet-filled magazines, without his bullet-proof vests and helmets, without his protective and speeding vehicles. He squeezed his eyes as if he had been dragged from a dark cell and forced to face a scorching sun. He realised that he was being watched. He was seeing his end.

That was a turning point in my interactions with the feared security police. People feared them for what they were capable of doing. But they too feared the people.

They were hiding the truth.

Something in me says if Oom Tami was still living with us, this would be the time to ask him questions, to make certain enquiries. He had a promising frame, though I did not know much about his inside. If Steve Biko was still alive, I would ask him questions too. So, I walk down our street in search of answers.

After a few paces, I feel that someone is walking behind me. I look back. There is no one. I walk again. Suddenly, I feel warm air on my back. I stop and look behind again. What I see is the inside of the Room-of-my-Birth with its table at the centre, the bed along the wall that separates us from the neighbours and the dressing table with its vase and the red rose. I am still on the street. I cannot understand this. Something in me says I must go. So, I walk on.

The mayor who took Auntie Anna's house is sitting on the veranda at Mathew's place. He has no guitar with him. He does not appear to be in any serious thinking mode, too. He is a puppet mayor, anyway, who does not know even the importance of the chair he sits on.

As he notices me, he bends forward and hides his face behind the wall of the veranda. He gets onto his legs, and all I see are buttocks that are stuck on a chair, then a chair that is flying in the air, moving into the door of Auntie Anna's house.

I walk on. Gogo's son is outside, of course. He lifts his arm and shoots his clenched fist in the air. He is greeting me, a child in the long line of the children who grew in the hands of his mother. I smile and walk on. The frog-eyed policeman is not outside his house. He is hiding behind the curtain, I am sure.

I pass "green grass" with its shit smell reminding me that it is Monday again.

*****

The Parliament has always been there. It is where activists meet. The owner, the man of the people, is always eager to talk to anyone. The man has seen many moons. He has travelled many places, too. The man is an excellent story teller, stories that have food for clear ears. He will have answers, I reason.

As I walk through the gates of his house, the community parliament, I cannot hear the loud voices in debate about this or that issue. A strange silence fills the space between the gate and the door. I knock. There is no answer. I turn the handle. The door opens.

I find the man seated and reading a newspaper at the round table that stands in the left corner further down the hall. Even with his reading glasses on his face is held close to the paper. When I come in he turns to look at me. I greet. He does not respond. He looks back at the newspaper. I sit down.

There is a wheelchair next to the man. It stands there empty, as if it is requesting acceptance from the other chairs of the round table.

The man's television set is off. His radio, also, has not been turned on. These companions of the man stand here as lifeless decorations. Whenever I had come to the man before, he was seldom alone. If there were no people in the parliament, the discussion programmes on the radio and the news channels on the TV created an open world for the man. And, for anyone who came through his door, all these were an immediate invitation to be involved.

In the few minutes I am inside the parliament, the man does not move. As I sit there and wait, he puts his paper down, then rises from the chair with what appears to be a painful effort. With his left arm he reaches for the wheelchair. He pulls a string that is tied to the arms of the wheelchair and this brings the armrests together. Using the same left arm the man lifts his body up. His right arm is held against his stomach. It creates a ninety degrees angle with its shining brown hand and a thumb that is hidden behind the other fingers, making a tiny, shiny brown fist.

His right leg moves with the body as if it is lifeless. He then pulls the string forcefully again, causing the armrests of the wheelchair to hit each other. He places his left hand on them and grips tightly.

He takes his first step towards me with his left leg, pulling the non-bending right leg along. He is partially paralysed; the right side of his body is dead. He takes three steps and he stops. He looks at me. I think of standing up to help him but I am held back by the distress of what I am seeing, and by the feeling that he may not want me to show sympathy. He was a tough man in his youth. He practised martial arts and was the master of a karate school. With his own hands he produced outstanding black belts.

As he sits on the chair across from me, he looks at me in the eye and smiles appreciatively. He has not said a word. Is he speechless, as well, I ask myself? Is this the end of the parliament? There being no other people in his house may be a sign of what life has become. Has it become so dark?

The man begins to engage me using sign language. He is moving his hands, trying to communicate with me but I am lost in my own thoughts, not following what he is trying to say. Nonetheless, he goes on and uses his voiceless mouth, moving his lips and tongue, indicating the alphabets in his soundless words.

In his travels the man had once settled in Cape Town as a migrant worker. He worked there as a messenger boy, riding a bicycle around town. He would be sent to other companies to fetch this or that item. He would carry letters of gossip and food parcels from one madam of the company to the other. Though he was paid a low wage he was happy with his job.

At the place where he stayed he saw himself as part of a significant class, the elite of the township. During weekends he attended concerts with teachers and clerks who were always with the most beautiful girls of the township. They wore suits and polished shoes. They walked as if they were dancing.

When he came back to his hometown, to his sick and ageing mother, the man felt very lonely. At the time, his parents were old and needed his care. He had to forget about Cape Town's concerts, township pubs and beautiful girls. Back home he found a job as a freelance journalist for a local newspaper. His editor wanted him to report on anything that was happening in the areas where blacks lived. So he would write about people who had a fight and who had injured themselves or about a man who had been struck by lightning and had fallen off his horse or some woman who was

caught naked in the early hours of the morning because she had missed a 'flying machine' of witches.

Once, while moving about in search of stories, the man heard about 'a black man who had an office in town'. For him, Cape Town had been the place where everything was. But, for all the time he was there, there was never a black man who had an office in a white man's town. As a newsman he then went to find the office of the black man.

"I found a young man who was very smart, in speech and in clothing," the man had once told me, "a man who wanted to know about me and who wanted to help me with anything I needed. I enjoyed hearing him speak." In that conversation I had asked the man if he knew the name of the 'man with an office in town'.

"I did not know his name. I was just happy and satisfied that he was a black man who had an office in town and who was helping other black people. I later heard that the police killed the black man, a very good man, a father of the children," he said.

As I sit here with the man, in the absence of his voice, a vital possession for a person of influence like him, I allow my body to give him the company he so needs. I begin to understand the man's idea of the community parliament. People need to come together and dialogue. I am also imagining whether the man is approaching his end or whether this is a beginning of things. Sometimes the end and the beginning stand far apart from each other and look distinct from each other, yet in essence, both are identical. They are one. Where the beginning occurs, the end occurs there too. And, the process repeats itself again and again.

There is a slight breeze from the east. On the skin behind my left ear, just below my hairline, I feel as if there is something moving, a bug perhaps. With my left hand I reach out to rub off whatever is there. My fingers do not touch anything foreign. Again I feel the irritation in the same area. This time I do not move. I close my eyes and try to sit still.

As I think about this now, something in me says, "Find a place to listen to yourself."

*****

So I am standing on Grey Street, named after a former colonial governor of what was then the Cape Colony, Sir George Grey. Before the British government sent Sir George Grey here, he had been posted to New Zealand to govern the aboriginals of that country, ruling the ruled on behalf of the Queen.

That street on the left is Cambridge Street. The street on the right is Alice Street and the one at the end there is Wodehouse Street. We are in King William's Town, in the southern regions of Africa, and all the names here are the imitation of Britain, except for the Criterion Cafe, which is still owned by the same Greek family that started it.

There used to be a park here. There was a fence around this piece of land. Inside there were different kinds of swings and toys, a bicycle track and a little house for the maintenance keeper of the facility. All of these things were for white people only. When I was a child I used to walk past here on my way to where my grandmother worked. I would stand exactly here and watch white children enjoying themselves on the swings. Like any other child I would be envious. And I was not the only one who felt that way. It was the year Steve Biko's Black People's Convention (BPC) held its conference in our township. The conference had been brought here because Steve Biko could not travel out of town. He was restricted, and the organisers of the conference were determined to find ways that he could participate.

As kids in the township we were always around the church building where the conference was taking place, looking for the food of the delegates. Oh yes, those delegates were generous. Biko could not enter the church hall where the conference was taking place, so he stood with us behind the fence. Delegates would come and consult with him and then go back into the conference. We would look at him with enquiring eyes just to find out if he had spoken about us, and their food. He would smile and wink one eye and soon there would be food parcels coming out of the hall.

*****

So, as young boys we decided to have our own conference about this park, me and my tjommies. One of us suggested that we did not need to recognise the law that said we were not allowed into the parks of white children because, if there was such a law in the first place, it must have been made without the consent of our parents who obviously would have kicked it in the teeth. This comment was an eye-opener that went directly to the issue. That principle decided, the next step was when and how we would get into the park.

Someone raised a hand to say we would need pliers to open a hole in the fence at the corner. At that stage, the conference was reminded by a skinny chap about a traffic cop called Riboh, who always kicked down the fruit and vegetable stands of our mothers at the market. At that point the meeting was silent.

The Riboh thing was a danger to our plans. Riboh was full of himself. He never sought other whites to help him do what he wanted to do to black people. Judging from his uniform he should have been checking traffic. Maybe he was in charge of enforcing the Whites Only laws too, and had a right to kick away all that he thought was making his town dirty.

Many black people feared Riboh, or were just too careful about themselves. Of course, it was the case that if a black raised his hand to a white person, even if less important than Riboh himself, the next thing that was sure to happen was that the hangman in Pretoria would have a job to do. Despite all that, there was a story doing the rounds in the township that one black mother at the market, who saw that her vegetable stand was going to be kicked by Riboh, decided to use her tomatoes as stones. Her first two tomato-stones hit Riboh's face, then a rain of tomatoes came down on him. Reboh was red and filthy and a song was composed in the township about Riboh, who was defeated by tomatoes.

It was clear that the vegetable mothers at the market had held a quiet conference about their situation, just like we were doing. But, now, the market of fighting mothers was too far from where we were meeting, and the question was about how we would handle the Riboh factor. Okay, all of us would watch for Riboh, and whoever saw him first would raise the alarm. And then? We would run. And then after that we would compose a song about how we had outrun Riboh.

On that afternoon we gathered outside the park. Eyes were moved in all directions. The coast was found to be clear. Our striker, armed with his pliers, took seconds to create the opening in the fence. We went in, one by one. As I walked towards the swings, I was wondering what it would be like to swing in the air.

We had been there for ten lovely minutes and we had completely forgotten about Riboh. We were pure, pure ghetto boys doing what we loved most, playing. Suddenly, somebody shouted, "Riboh! Riboh!" And in no time everybody was running for the hole in the fence.

I was swinging in the air. I looked around. I saw Riboh's marked traffic cop car coming around the corner of Cambridge Street. I sprang with fright. This white man would put me in his jail. I ran to the hole.

There were two others who were running behind me. They came in full flight past me, into the hole, one after the other, one sliding on his back with his legs suspended from the ground, and the other sliding on his chest with arms stretched and head tilted to the side. I stood there amazed and amused at what I was seeing. By the time I went through, Riboh was almost on me.

I was on the outside of the fence. Riboh drove onto the pavement to block me against the fence. As he opened his door, someone shouted, "Baleka! Baleka! Run! Run!" I ran across the street, round the corner. He was back in his car. He came speeding, turned the corner, onto the pavement again trying to squeeze me against the wall. I turned and ran back.

You know, I did an up and down on that street with Riboh hot on my tail. I was panting. I was crying. Everybody else had escaped. The animal, Riboh, was going to catch me.

But, little by little, I was getting to the edge of the town. I knew Reboh wouldn't chase me on his feet. He was limping and he had too many guns on his body and these were heavy. The voice never stopped, "Baleka! Baleka!" And it was a woman's voice.

Finally, Riboh gave up. By then I had crossed over the railway line, which was the border line between the town and the township.

My life changed that day. Today, when government people speak about blacks as a previously disadvantaged people, they are not talking about me. I was empowered by the battle of this playground. I had put my black buttocks on the forbidden swings. I saw the face of organised white violence and never gave up like a sheep.

Riboh in his full uniform, chasing me with his marked traffic cop car, protecting the facility of his race, the toys of his children, most likely reasoning, 'No filthy buttocks on the white man's swing, they are not our children, that's it'.

As it happened, no song was composed after that incident; but things would never be the same again.

*****

Here am I standing at this park, telling my story, a story that has outlived Riboh, a story that guides me.

As I stand at this park my body is becoming heavy for my legs. I need a place to relax. I look around. I cannot find anything to sit on. I look behind. I see the inside of the Room-of-my-Birth with its table and three chairs standing in the centre, the bed standing along the wall that separates us from the neighbours and our dresser with the vase and the red rose. I sit on one of the chairs and rest my arms on the table. It is comfortable. It feels real.

My eyes are tired. When I close them, I feel more relaxed. With my arms on the table of the inside of the Room-of-my-Birth that has been travelling with me, and my body balanced against the chair, I fall into sleep. As I am sleeping I have a dream. In the dream there is a man of my age who is being taken to a train by people who look like his relatives. Two sisters, a brother and somebody who appears like their mother. The siblings are carrying a huge trunk, holding the side handles, the mother is carrying a blanket. The man is walking like a king in front. He is talking.

He is telling them about things of the university, about students who are coloured and Indian who live with him. He is telling them about mosquitoes that are biting them, and that their friendships are started by mosquito bites. In his story there is something about two other schools that are separated by a fence, one for Indians and the other for Africans; that there are school boys who are playing on both sides of the fence, a ball getting on the Indian side and being given back, and a ball getting to the African side and not being given back; about them coming forward to resolve the bullying by African boys.

At the station the man is still talking and his family is still listening attentively.

Suddenly, the scene in the dream switches. The man is sitting with me at the table inside the Room-of-my-Birth. He is talking to me. He is telling me about his father who loved his newspaper, about a day he was beaten on his face while standing behind his father, reading the newspaper from over the shoulder, that his father was angry because it was not news he was reading; he was a gambler and his horse betting had not gone well.

Since the man is close to me, there is a smell of fresh bananas and fresh veggies, a smell of a watered orchard.

The man is telling me that it was his father who introduced him to reading. Whenever his father was done with his horse betting, he would give him the newspaper to read. His father then took him to a friend of his who was a political person. That man had a lot of books. So, the man would go to his father's friend to read books. He would be allowed to sit in the book corner, a study space of sorts, and would read for hours. He was not allowed to take the books away.

He talks about how he wrote his first poem. That he was in a shebeen, sitting and having a good time with four other people. That these people were the Nzimandes and every time they toasted they bragged that they were "the children of Nonti." That as he walked home, the words of those men "the children of Nonti" kept ringing in his head. As he opened the door of his place and relaxed on his bed, he could not sleep. The lines kept talking in his head, "The children of Nonti. Nonti who died long, long ago. The children of Nonti will rise and speak. They will speak of the times when Nonti lived. Times when age did not count above experience. We are the children of Nonti".

Then the man is quiet. I wait. In a soft voice, he says, "The answers are within you".

I rouse myself, and slowly leave the park. I come to the Room-of-my-Birth.

*****

My eyes were once small and could not deliver the images that would make the judgements I do today. The truth that stood in the bodies and in the houses and in every article that had value to me, still cannot escape the glue of my mind. Even with the floods of rot and the speed with which filth seeks to take over my life, the taste of hope refuses to go.

I wake up the next day and set out to find Oom Tami for the answers of unpronounced questions.

I find him in a village, in a house that has not been completely built. There are no people working on it. It could be one of those cases when unscrupulous builders leave their work halfway and run away with your money. I am certain it could not have been a shortage of funds, not with Oom Tami who used to live in a bigger house next door, the one that had a veranda, a pantry, a strong concrete bath tub and a permanent toilet seat.

I approach the door. The house is locked. A thick silver chain goes through a hole on the door and around the frame, through a specially made passage between the frame and the wall. The chain is tied with a shining padlock that hangs for everyone to see. In village life, neighbours always know about each other because they keep an eye on each other and each other's property. I ask one of them, "The mama has gone that way. She is probably visiting her friends that side of the village," a woman says. I come closer to her so that I can ask about the man of the house, Oom Tami. This time things happen.

"No, he is still alive. He is there in the house," the neighbour assures me.

"But the house is locked. Can you see that huge padlock that is hanging on the door there?" I ask.

"He is there. He is always locked inside," she maintains.

Oom Tami, my uncle, locked? I am thinking I am in a wrong place. "I am looking for Brigadier Tamsanqa. His wife is Notshokovu and his daughters are Tumi and Thembisa." The woman is not moved at all by my details. She smiles as if she is enjoying the confusion that lurks at the back of my eyes and ears.

“Old man Tamsanqa is there. I know what I am saying,” she says and there is nothing I can do.

Who would lock up a senior policeman? Even Chief Sebe, the one who thought he owned people and a Xhosa homeland, would never lock up Oom Tami. His brave brother, General Charles Sebe, always stood to attention when saluting Oom Tami. And even the cowboy and gun toting Detective Zolile Baleni would control the wings that were his arms and would stand to attention whenever Oom Tami appeared. And, now?

The neighbour sends a child to find Notshokovu and in no time she comes, striding, kicking her skirt. Perhaps she thinks I am important. “Aaw! It’s you, the son of Dabawo,” she says. That is how she calls my grandmother. We greet and she spreads her arms and thrusts her tea-bag chest against me. I hug reluctantly. I need to see if indeed my uncle has been locked in that house.

Very energetic, and still the same Notshokovu I know, she opens the lock. We come inside the house and she directs me to a chair. We exchange pleasantries despite my suppressed impatience. She talks about my grandmother, I ask about her daughters and if there are grandchildren. Notshokovu is the second wife of Oom Tami, and she used to hate the children of the first wife. In fact she could not hide that she hated them. She brings that again into the conversation, asking if I do ever see “those things” in the streets of the town.

She asks about my grandmother’s garden, about my other uncle who looked after it. I ask about her husband, my uncle, and she invites me to a room further inside the house. The kitchen and the front room where we sit and talk is one area, then there is a passage to the rooms. We pass one door and she opens the next one. There is a stench that comes out and takes my mind to a filthy hospital ward. Obviously my uncle is not well. But to be locked up, even when you are sick, is not on.

As I follow Notshokovu into that room, my eyes see a small figure that is lying in the middle of an oversized, collapsing mattress. The frame of the figure has a childish presence from what I see of the blankets. I stop at the door. Notshokovu, points, “Here’s your uncle”.

There is a human head on the pillow with hair that stands like a dense forest. It has a small section of skin in the front and that looks like a forehead. His set of eyes and his nose sit in a tiny hairless area below the forehead. The rest, what is supposed to be a face I know, is hidden behind a mask of big dense beard. My uncle, the man who is related to me, the tall, clean-shaven, well-dressed, immaculate Brigadier I know, is now lying in a dark room like a captured Saddam Hussein.

Struggling and straddling between two worlds of emotion in the glare of Notshokovu, of all people, is unbearable. I see the woolly beard on the sides of his face moving and the lips making an appearance from behind the mask. Uncle is smiling and I can see he is alive. He lifts his body in a very slow movement, thrusting his empty elbows on the thin mattress. The blanket that covers him falls and folds itself in front of his little body at the same slow pace as he is rising, exposing to me a pair of bloodless heads of bones that sit on the sides, with a covering of a flesh-starved light brown skin. Uncle is clothes-less, I can see.

From the right, a hand pushes the blanket from underneath, revealing a thick plastic sheet that covers the area of his lower body. I know there and then that he has lost control over his vital organs. That hand is a flat, thin item that stands out as if it is to be examined. I stretch mine and hold my uncle’s hand in greeting. His hand is cold and feels fragile. I am praying to my gods that his hand will

not collapse in my hand because if it does, I will be known forever as the one who broke the hand of the Brigadier.

I help my uncle to get out of his bed. It is cold in this semi-dark room, and his naked body is shivering. Notshokovu throws me a pair of trousers and an ironed shirt. She stands there and watches. There is a wheelchair next to the bed. I briefly think he will be too heavy to carry onto the wheelchair, but he weighs so little that it is not such an effort. I push the wheelchair to the room in front where there is sunlight.

I have brought a roasted chicken and a few snacks. I give these to Notshokovu to prepare for us. We sit there, Oom Tami on the wheelchair that stands exposed to sunlight, warming the entire front of his body, and me on a sofa to his right adjusting to the new image that my uncle has become. As a fatherless child I adored this man. In my eyes he was an achieving father, a man of stature.

I look at the clothes I have just helped him to wear, at his helpless legs, at his cold feet. There are few words that are exchanged with huge silences in between. At least, he still has his soft voice. Our bodies are here in this space of a silent dialogue with Notshokovu, the only one who is doing the talking, all about herself, about the agricultural projects she is involved in, how other women are so jealous about what she is capable of doing, that she will no longer sit around lazy people, that it is time that government understood that she is better than the rest and she deserves a bigger grant of her own.

Notshokovu seems to have found some importance in herself. Or she is flooding me with words so that I should not notice that she is hiding my provisions, my fried chicken and my snacks, keeping these for some other person who is important to her, and to her alone.

I remember Joep who used to live in Oom Tami's house. Joep was this budding story teller. His stories came in the evenings when we sat under the few electric lights in our street. We would spend hours under the light for storytelling, one story coming after another, others being created and recreated; having been heard from someone who also heard from someone else who may have seen some bioscope. You could never be sure. And the words used in the narrative could have been spiced up as the story moved from one teller to the other, accompanied by some improvised background music.

Joep came from Johannesburg, the big city. Almost always he told stories of his own creation with himself as the main actor. He had a story of how he ate Notshokovu's fish one day. Notshokovu had given him a cake tin full of baked fish to sell around the township. Before she gave Joep the cake tin, she had given her two daughters a piece of fish each to enjoy, but not Joep. His was to sell, to bring money, but not to eat.

It was raining that particular afternoon and there were no people on the streets, and besides, who needed a soaked seller of baked fish on his door? Those were Joep's words. He then found for himself a shelter from the pouring rain. In his shelter he opened Notshokovu's cake tin and ate all the fish, one piece after another. When telling this part of the story he would demonstrate the act by closing his eyes and moving his jaws as if he was chewing, in such a rhythmic way that you could see how he enjoyed it.

When it came to the last two pieces, he dipped them in the muddy water and smeared some mud onto the side of the cake tin and on its lid. Then he put the two mud-laden pieces of fish back into

the cake tin and did not tighten the lid. He then slid on a slope like a football player so that he was wet and full of mud on the side. ”That was it. Easy!” He closed his story with those words, coming from his wonderful mouth that knew everything. When Notshokovu saw how he looked, she was convinced without even hearing the story about what had happened.

But the Notshokovu I now see is running a show. She may have been fooled by Joep that afternoon, if we go by Joep’s story. Today, she is the keeper of my uncle.

She must be running short of issues of her importance, unless it is part her act, because she steps outside and I quickly steal the moment, “Oom Tami, I am a student at university,” I say. He looks at me with an approving smile. “I am doing some research.” I pause a moment. He looks patient enough to listen. “Can you assist me? I have come to you to ask about a matter that I believe you will know, since you were in the security police.”

He turns his head away and looks at the door. He is still silent. I begin to sense tension rising in his frail body. He then fixes his eyes down on his feet. I sit there feeling like I should not have asked what I have just asked. His eyebrows fold towards each other. He is deep in thinking. Well, I think to myself, Oom Tami was never an ordinary policeman. He drove a Land Rover. He was quiet about his operations and, yes, there was always a smell behind him. It may have been a smell of that notorious partner of his, whom people whispered a lot about or it was his own smell.

After a long pause he raises his head and looks at me, and he says, “I hope you know that I did not go to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I was trained to hide the truth.”

That is it. A wall I cannot not go through. A wall of un-remembrance. I retire to the Room-of-my-Birth.

“Msotho, the work that is following you is huge,” my grandmother says after hearing of my day with Oom Tami. “I am scared.”

My grandmother had lived with Sotho speakers in our motherland. She had been taught by a Sotho schoolmistress. All Sotho men shaved their heads. And so, they may as well give birth to hairless children. When I was born I had no hair on my head. That was when she suspected that my father must have been Msotho. In her words, “My child Wendy may not have told the truth. She must have met a Sotho man. Anyway, whatever it is, you are my Msotho.”

I had never met my father in the flesh. He existed in the suspicions of my grandmother. However, I once visited Sebokeng, accompanying a friend who was attending the unveiling of a tombstone for a relative of his in-laws. I had taken the opportunity to travel because something had told me that my roots lay there. The unveiling was an early morning affair, and by nine that morning we were back from the cemetery. There was something special about that cemetery. I could not meditate on it at the time as there were crowds burying their people and Christian hymns being sung all over the place. This created an altogether chaotic and noisy environment.

At the township house of the in-laws, lunch was served. And, since my friend was part of that important category of guests, that is, “the men who are married to our daughters,” we were ushered into a special room. As per tradition, home brew was served after lunch as a signature for the farewell of the deceased. And because the tradition had incorporated the demands of the times, soft drinks as well as spirits supplemented the brew.

With a happy sense of the occasion, I took my cell phone and called some of my friends in the Xhosa land of the Eastern Cape to brag that as mourners in the Sotho land, our thirst had not been suspended for some late night ‘after tears’ on some designated day in a distant week, which takes its own time to warm up. The brew and the drinks had been served right there and on time, I boasted.

We were sitting in a lounge. As I was talking on the phone two gentlemen who sat on a couch directly opposite me were talking and pointing at me. When I had concluded my call, one of them approached and in a respectful way asked if I was not the son of Monnakgotla. On moving my eyes to the second gentleman I realised that he was attentively waiting for my answer.

I sat there. For a moment I couldn’t move. The man walked back to where he had been seated. He appeared to be done with me.

*****

Pursuing enquiries on my own I found that the people of Monnakgotla lived in Residentia, an area in Sebokeng. Acting on this lead, I took an early morning taxi to Sebokeng and jumped off at a set of traffic lights in Residentia. Two younger men were selling cigarettes on the pavement. I approached and, without looking at me, one of them stretched out his hand. I handed over a coin. I was buying attention, not a lousy cigarette. When I asked if he knew someone in the Monnakgotla family, he

immediately directed me to go through a passage and out to a street on the other side. I could ask anyone there, the people of Monnakgotla were well-known, he said.

I followed the directions, and again found two fellows. This pair was standing and talking to each other over a fence, one inside the yard. On hearing my inquiries, the man on the sidewalk offered to accompany me to the Monnakgotla house. After a short walk, past a number of run-down township dwellings, we came to the house we sought. He left me at a gate.

As I touched the gate it creaked and moved with my hand, opening only wide enough for my frame. The sound, the creaking of the gate, resembled the heavy metal of the gate at the Edward Street Garden of Remembrance, and it was accompanied by a breeze of the falling water over the wall of history. Its sound became distinct. It entered my body and found within a place of its own.

As I closed the gate behind me, my feet stood on a point that whispered welcoming words; "a child has come."

*****

There was a kraal in the Monnakgotla yard, built around a tall tree. It was fresh and full of life in its leafing stems that stood neatly next to each other, and the thick layer of umgquba, the dried cow dung that carpeted its floor area. The warmth of the kraal formed a circle of natural perfume around itself. Its presence as a home to the elderly and the house of ancestors brought a sense of life in the middle of urban deadness.

On coming closer I noticed a brownish reddish African bull standing erect, facing me at the gate. There had been no kraals in the other houses that I passed.

As I stood there I saw the faces of people I thought I had seen before, seated in a circle outside the kraal, having a quiet conversation. This is how it would be when something major is about to happen. It is planned in the soft conversations and its imminence is in the standing African animal.

The pores in my body suddenly opened and sought to suck in the conversation. The air was warm, as if the space were protected. I raised my eyes to look at the apple tree that stood in the kraal. I found, in the same order, the three birds sitting and yet again interchanging their positions. I knew there and then that I was not alone. I was in company, and so, part of company.

As in a daze, I walked past the kraal. At the main door of the house I was met by a cat that approached my leg and rubbed itself, from head to tail, taking with her the dust off my feet. I felt a sense of relaxation entering into my ankles and invading the muscles of my legs. Behaving as someone in control, she led me into the lounge.

The conversations I had there, and the people I met, absorbed me completely. I gave them my full attention. They were eager to help in any way they could. Finally, a child was asked to guide me to Zone 7 where I would meet an elderly person who would have answers to my inquiries. We took a taxi.

At Zone 7 we went to a cluster of small shops. The person I was to meet ran a fruit and vegetable shop. When we arrived she was not there. I had to wait outside and the child, my guide, left me there.

It was not very long before a bakkie arrived and came to park right in front of the shop. A woman alighted from the passenger side, greeted me and opened the shop. The driver of the bakkie started to offload the vegetables. I offered to help. He agreed. As we were offloading, with me receiving from the man bags of potatoes, tomatoes, butternuts and boxes of varying kinds of fruit, the child who had led me there reappeared and spoke to the woman in Sesotho.

When we had finished offloading all the bags and boxes, and had stacked them away, the woman of the shop offered me a chair to sit on. The shop was a small room with shelves all around the walls. Its smell was pure and natural. It had the feeling of an orchard that has just been watered, with cool banana trees dominating the scene. The atmosphere in that room was completely cut off from the dust of the township outside. Instead, it reminded me of the man in my dream, sitting with me inside the Room-of-my-Birth that had travelled with me to the park.

*****

We started to talk in bits and pieces, between interruptions from customers who were asking for this and that. She had introduced herself as Nana. When Nana heard my name, she immediately stopped. She looked at me in a very intrusive way. She then turned around and faced the wall and rested her hands on the shelf. She nervously opened a box of bananas and started to pack them into a tray. Nana was working very slowly. It was obvious that the weight of thoughts in her head was too heavy.

Without warning, she stopped packing, leaving the tray half full. She looked at me again and a tear began to fall from her left eye. Nana was crying, but there was no sound. I didn’t know what to do at that moment. I thought of reaching out to her, but I was held back by the nervousness of being pushed away.

“You cannot be Oupa’s child. You are the son of Lazarus. You are Monnakgotla,” Nana said softly. Those words shocked me. Whatever control I thought I had, it vanished immediately.

After saying these words, Nana walked out. I sat in that semi-dark orchard with all the fruit and the vegetables that the earth could provide, yet there were no birds around. I was plunged into a well of uncertainty. I didn’t know whether to move further or simply to retreat from all this enquiry. And Nana had gone, having left me to the mercy of my own doubts.

The clocks seemed to have stopped ticking because there was no recording of the time of Nana’s disappearance. But finally she reappeared and with a reassuring face. I managed to get a glimpse of her shaking hands. She brought a chair and sat next to me and started to talk about herself, about her brother Oupa, saying that he was the one who would handle this matter better. She talked about her father who had left them that shop, about a sister who took no interest in family matters.

She talked about Lazarus, a name I knew only from bible stories, how he took care of her in the absence of their father. She spoke about the occasion of her marriage, how Lazarus walked her to a man who became her husband. Nana was evocative with her words. I was beginning to see and feel a sense of purpose creeping into me. She was revealing a task at hand.

At about that time someone came into the shop with a tray carrying food, the traditional dish, *pap and vleis*. It dawned on me that when Nana had disappeared earlier she must have gone to arrange that meal for me. There was no table in the shop. She handed me the tray and suggested that I use the counter for a table.

Before I could start eating, a man of almost my age came in. Because of where I sat, I could not be seen by anyone entering the shop until that person was right inside. In walked this guy. He came straight to where I was and stood in front of me. It was as if he had known I was there. I had the sense that there were otherworldly things happening in the shadows about me: there were people I didn't know who knew me, the small innocent child-guide, who seemed so knowledgeable, the ancestors around the kraal, this man who could know where I was without looking.

The man was not tall but he was imposing. He wore a sports shirt, yellow in colour, and an old pair of blue jeans and he had no shoes on his feet. I stood up in acknowledgement of his sudden arrival. His eyes were not ordinary. He looked through me as if I were a page with words. He stretched his arm out to greet me. I held his tightly gripping hand. Not a word came out of his mouth. He turned quietly, and walked out of the shop.

"Please pardon him. He was born without speech," Nana said. I asked if she knew him and she told me that he was a regular customer. She too wondered why he did not greet her, at least, or make a sign of recognition.

"How did he see me, wherever he came from?" I asked. "How did he know I was here?"

"I am confused as well. He normally greets whenever he comes or passes here."

First it was a brown bull that stood speechless in a kraal, then the faces in conversation outside the kraal, then my three birds in their order and now here was a man with no voice. There was indeed company.

Before we separated, Nana told me about an older woman who was a sangoma. She felt I should see her. The sangoma was operating from the adjacent township of Sharpeville. She gave me directions to the sangoma's house.

*****

I had read so much about Sharpeville. Before they were removed with force, the people of Sharpeville lived on a hill called Top Location. They lived in peace. They knew one another. After the removal from Top Location, which became a white area, they were never the same again. Sharpeville was built on guilt. People lived with tears that never dried.

Approaching Sharpeville in a taxi, I could smell the blood of those who were killed while resisting the forced removal and those who still carried the injuries. I saw the dust that had never settled since. As I followed the directions to the healer, there was a sense of blocked throats holding back sounds of suspended pain.

Finally I found the healer. Nana had said the woman would be able to perceive my problem, and that there would be no need to explain myself. However, that was not to be, as the sangoma started by saying, “Mntan’am (my child), forget that I am a sangoma. Look at me as your parent. What is your problem?”

She had asked me to take off my shoes. As a result, I rubbed the inside of my feet against each other, looking at the old woman who was dressed like any other ordinary woman, seeing the lines on her face that told of her age and sincerity. I wondered how to put my case. I decided to tell it straight.

I had a fair experience of sangomas. My grandmother’s brother was a sangoma, and he used to bring fellow sangomas to our house. However, this old woman didn’t even start those sangoma habits that I knew. She just listened to my story. She looked directly at me, narrowing her eyes from time to time, fully attending to what I was saying.

When I was done, she said: “Mntan’am! When I was being called to serve my people, it started with being very ill. I got so very sick and my husband took me to many doctors here in Vereeniging. I never got better. The doctors talked about cancer and that I had a short time to live. It was my brother who suspected that I might have been chosen for this kind of work.

“Our father came from the villages around Butterworth. He lived with us here. We never got to know his home, but he would tell us the names of his father and those of his brothers. My brother then advised me to go and find our father’s roots. My brother was very old by then and could not travel with me.

“I took a bus to Mthatha with two other people. From there we travelled to Butterworth. We had just arrived in that town when I felt very sick again. I sat down on the side of the road. One of those people travelling with me started to be irritated. She wanted us to continue with the journey, but I was not even able to walk.

“I sat there for some time in that busy town until a middle-aged man walked over from across the street. He came straight to me and said, ‘Even when lies can be told, you are the daughter of Sogonis.’ Immediately I gained strength and I explained to the man that we needed help. We were looking for the home of Sogonis. The man was one of the taxi people. He spoke to one of his colleagues and we were driven in the back of a van that headed towards the eastern coast near where land ends, and the sea begins.

“After travelling for almost twenty minutes, the van left the tar and went along a dirt road. The driver was speeding on the uneven surface and it was extremely uncomfortable. When we came to this village, there was a sense of acquaintance that I felt with this place. It was like I had lived there before. The air was fresh and moist, and the soil was reddish and sandy. There was a smell of fish. This was my father’s home.

“We were directed to a rondavel with an old kraal where there was a man who was going about his chores. It transpired that that man knew my father by name from stories of his parents; he knew him as some older cousin who went to work and never returned. A few people were gathered from the village. Amongst them, before we could talk any further, an old woman screamed and clapped her hands, saying, ‘This is my brother’s child’. She kissed me all over my face, holding me with her hands all over my body. A goat was slaughtered and I tell you, I never got sick again despite the doctors who predicted that I had a short time to live.

“There is nothing wrong with you, my son. You don’t need a sangoma. You are a son of Monnakgotla. An angel has led you to your ancestral home,” she concluded and stopped right there with her story.

Sangomas are not story tellers. They are healers. They only open up to the ancestors who then reveal their dreams. Was I a point of confirmation for her own discovery? I could not immediately make sense of what was happening. She had spoken clearly about every detail of her journey to her ancestral land. She knew that it was her story that I needed to hear. Her words, “There is nothing wrong with you, my son,” affirmed me, however, and cleared my doubts.

One of her daughters served us with tea. We sat there and there were no words spoken. I was held in my thoughts; she was listening to her silences.

After a while she nodded her head and she looked at me. I nodded in approval. We stood up and she walked me out, on her bare feet and in silence. As I was walking out of her yard, I felt her silence communicating with me.

*****

On my second visit to the vegetable shop, Nana had gathered the Monnakgotla family. I was formally told that my father, Lazarus Monnakgotla, the son of Elias Monnakgotla, was lying in his grave at Avalon Cemetery. I was shown photographs of him, and some of his father, my grandfather. I looked at the images of the old man. I looked at his son. I saw the silent faces and the lines that were carved down the sides of their noses and bracketed around their mouths. I saw their protruding sets of eyes with hanging flesh below each pair. I saw myself in those photos.

And I began to wish that the photos could speak. But they kept voiceless like the voiceless man. But the deeper meaning in silence was being revealed. The voice I kept hearing and the voicelessness spoke the same tongue.

It was suggested that I be taken to the graves of the men in the photos. We walked out of the township and we came to this huge sign on the wall, Avalon Cemetery. This was the same cemetery where I had been to the unveiling of the tombstone, which had led to the lunch where two men had acknowledged me as Monnakgotla. This time the cemetery was quiet. Our delegation succumbed to its silence as well, and exchanges died immediately. A home of the dead, a house of the remarkable ones, a place of the truth.

Traditional pleasantries were recited as we approached my grandfather's grave. We stood around the tombstone. As one of the cousins was introducing the purpose of the visit, I felt something like a hot steel rod cutting across my diaphragm. I bent down to negotiate the pain. In a flip of a second tears were flowing down my face and I was sobbing uncontrollably. My cousins held me on both sides and caressed my body reassuringly. In minutes I was back into myself, surprised at what had just happened. The pain had gone but the tears were still dripping.

We could not do my father's grave that day, since emotions were twisted in me. I requested that we come back the next day. After such a bodily attack, I needed my cool.

The following day my cousins, filled with confidence, strode in front of me into Avalon. But, to their surprise, they could not find the grave that held my father.

As I stood there, an image appeared on the ground before me, like a shady tombstone, inscribed. It seemed real and solid, but was not real; yet real enough for me to read the inscription. Like me, my father had carried his mother's surname all his life and had traced his roots in the same way as I was doing.

Three rows away, on a silent tombstone, I could see the same words and the same dates as on the shady inscribed tombstone that had come before me. I pointed my doubting finger inquiringly. One cousin raised his arms and mumbled a few words in Setswana. It was my father's grave, seen and found by me who had never seen him, yet hidden from those who lived with him.

My body suddenly became heavy. I was in the company of superior beings.

Back home my grandmother's health is deteriorating. She has been moved from the other room. She is now in the Room-of-my-Birth. The bed has been removed from the wall that separates us from our neighbour. It is placed below the window. Yes, that is where the nurses will reach easily and that is where she will get the healing of the early morning breeze. I cannot help but imagine that where she lies is exactly where my mother's coffin had stood on the day of her passing.

On that morning, carved in my memory, a black car that carries dead people, with Dexter Bros Funeral Parlour written on the side, had arrived at my home to deliver a long shining box of wood. The box had been carefully carried by gloved hands from the Dexter car into our house. My grandmother, the one who is lying sickly here, used to be very active. She would be moving about the house doing whatever chores. That morning, however, she was sitting on a mattress at the far corner there.

In the first place I had not known why they had taken the chairs, the table, the dresser, the wardrobe and the bed out of the house that morning, leaving only a mattress on the floor. Yet there were visiting people. It struck my small mind that something had happened. People were behaving in a very unusual way.

One person who had not been around, for me to ask my questions to, was my mother. She had been out of my sight for some days. I would nag everyone at home about her whereabouts.

The long shining box was obviously important since it took the space of our furniture and since everybody's eyes were on it.

"Mama, uphi usis'Wendy?" I asked my grandmother. Our visitors had been talking in low voices, but when I asked my grandmother where Sis'Wendy was they became silent. Suddenly, it became tense in that room. My grandmother's head remained bowed. Her forehead was covered with a black shiny doek.

With horrible intuition I then said, "I know where Sis'Wendy is. You have hidden her in that box." They were still quiet, my grandmother and those visiting people. I walked out and one of my uncles offered to put me on a wheelbarrow for a ride around the block.

I found I was right. Sis'Wendy had been in that long shining box, lying in the same way as her mother, my grandmother, is lying now, on this bed. When Sis'Wendy met her death she was expecting a baby, a pregnancy she was hiding from my grandmother.

In those times abortion was a thing that was done. But it had to be performed backdoor. Unfortunately for my mother, the procedure caused a bad reaction. She became very sick. She then walked to my grandmother's place of work, Mr Leurs's house, now Mzala's house. When she arrived there, before anyone could notice, she sneaked into the lavatory, the one that stood opposite my grandmother's room. That was the end.

My mother died in a lavatory, alone, hence we would never use that lavatory in the night. Death sought and found her there. Her back, my favourite part of her body, lost its strength. Her face lost the sparkle that many appreciated. Her warm breath turned into cold mist, not unlike the breath of the icy seas. She lay there lifeless.

In the eye of my brain I imagined the hour of my grandmother when my mother died; the winter in her eyes as she saw that she, whom she had borne, was now gone. And, she had to grow the young one, me.

This is memory still unborn in its meaning, a memory still silent.

*****

The memory of the passing of Steve Biko stands out for me with particular distinction. It was a passing that got to be written on the faces of people. In the streets of the township people did not speak loudly to one another. They walked with lumps in their throats. Even those who were generally friendly and known for their ever-present humour, forgot their good ways. I looked in the sky of the township; the air was tense and it was difficult to inhale. I was not hungry though I had been sent to buy bread.

As I walked to the shop, passing the Biko home, a group of high school boys was hard at work. They were cleaning the front part of that house. I wondered to myself whether one of the Biko sons had become a teacher or whether there was a teacher who was a boarder at their house? Those days teachers got everything for free. Their houses were cleaned by schoolgirls and many girls got pregnant as a result but were sworn to silence; their gardens were cleaned by schoolboys who were paid with food. One teacher offered us rotten bananas after having made us clean his yard.

I looked at the students as they were working. I wanted to ask why were they so stupid, allowing themselves to be used by teachers. Did they hate their school work to the extent that an official absence from class, sanctioned by a lazy teacher, was all they wanted? I stood there and watched them. None seemed to take notice of me and my unspoken inquiry. And I knew some of them. These people were dead silent. They were not talking to each other. The sound that dominated that space was that of a spade sliding on the surface of the earth, removing the grass and the weeds and the unwanted stones.

I looked at their faces. They appeared as though possessed by some non-vocal spirit that forbade them to make sound. Their faces were morose, covered with dreariness. Yet they also looked angry.

*****

During the next few days various people went in and out of our school, delivering cool drinks and provisions, locking these in one of our classrooms. Amongst these people were familiar faces, faces that bore the familiar beard and the uncombed hair, the ones who would stand outside the community parliament, talking and laughing loudly. What was different this time around was that they had hidden those familiar bright teeth; they were not laughing at all.

One morning we woke up to be confronted with a small piece of cardboard that was tied onto the main gate of the school. It was very small and it bore the brown colour that matched the rust on the wire of the rusty gate. We all knew it must have been placed there in the dark of the previous night, and its author was not to be asked. It was fixed perfectly in the centre, a little below the top bar. Small pieces of wire had been used to tie all its corners to the gate so that no wind or rain could harm it. Written with a fine ballpoint was the word AKUNGENWA.

When I arrived, there were already pupils who were held hostage by the cardboard. When I asked what was happening, faces moved with their pairs of eyes from me to the cardboard. No one dared to point at it. It drew respect and prestige from all who were there. I came closer and on reading the word I knew that the time had arrived. Our hearts had been waiting for that time to come. They could not kill a man who was so jolly, who had a car, who greeted us at "green-grass" all the time, who helped our Gogo when she was sick, who had friends that were always happy, friends I wanted to be like when I grew old. No!

As we stood there, held hostage, transformed into silent protesters, I saw the satisfaction in the faces of my fellow scholars. We were all in it. Yes, we did not have a speaker about it but our insides understood and spoke in one voice to us all. There was another small gate up the fence that led to the teacher's room, that is, the staff room. It was not always in use. That morning, our teachers went through the small gate with bowed heads, walking softly on the ground, not looking at our silent protest. These teachers, who would beat a child anytime for anything, were looking so scared that morning as we stood in front of our cardboard.

Then the principal, Sister Agatha, arrived, the only one who had a car at the school. She drove straight to the main gate. She wanted to know why everybody was not in the yard? In silent response we moved our faces with our unblinking pairs of eyes from her face to the cardboard on the gate. She stepped out of the car. A fast reader she was. She grabbed the cardboard with one hand, threw it out of the way and opened the gate, and, with a pointed finger of her right hand she directed us into the yard like a flock of sheep. In no time we were in neat rows of boys and girls, reciting the regular morning prayers.

Arms folded, standing in a queue, knowing that Sister Agatha never missed seeing any truancy from where she stood, on the veranda on top there, the wonder that circled in my head was: How could a small piece of cardboard with one word that could not even resist the hand of Sister Agatha, that could not even stand up when it was thrown away, prevent us from entering the gate as it was supposed to do? Or was it the power of Sister Agatha? These thoughts were running in the back of my head while in the front the prayers were being recited with promptness and perfection.

*****

On the 24th of September 1977, twelve days after Biko had been killed and one day before he was buried, I was in a classroom that faced the east in St Patrick's Primary School. It was in the late afternoon. The room was warm enough for the few who had gathered there to start a vigil that would take the whole evening. In my young curious mind the African tongues that were spoken in

that room tickled my ears. I found myself moving my head from one face of the speakers to another. They were all taller and older than me. They were reciting poems. From their faces I could see that there were images running through their heads. The emotion in the Sotho and Tswana words used that afternoon was choking. It was the intensity of the words rather than their meaning, which I barely understood, that overpowered me. A note came from someone who advised that the service should be moved to the assembly area because buses had arrived with more mourners.

St Patrick's was a Catholic school. We prayed eight times a day on that assembly space. We stood in rows, Sub A up to Standard 4, boys on one side and girls on the other side. The teachers would stand on the veranda on an upper level. The Principal, Sister Agatha, would always stand on the left hand side and would read the day's riot act. But now that some buses had arrived, these people who had come to bury Biko suddenly altered the order of our assembly. They did not stand in rows. Their speakers, who took the place of my teachers, did not have a principal who read a riot act. And those speakers were mainly young men and only a few young women, changing completely the all-women old-teacher image of my school.

Trying to make sense of all this disorder during assembly, I was invaded by a clear audible message in the songs that were sung that day. Jimmy Kruger and John Vorster had killed Biko. And they too would have to be killed, so said the songs. As if designed to confirm the meaning of the songs, military helicopters hovered over the venue in an attempt to intimidate us. I raised my fist and vowed to give my life to the cause of freedom.

That vigil continued all night. There were vigils in many other places around the country. In Durban a silent candlelit session took place in a flat with security police on the outside of the door. In a Johannesburg prison courtyard detainees swapped exercise for a prayer session. In the isolation cells it was quiet. On Robben Island tears fell and refused to be absorbed by the Atlantic Ocean.

Many people, blocked from coming into Ginsberg, gathered at the side of the road and sang softly. In the spaces of urban South Africa vigil services were conducted. The spirit coming from the inside of the people was like the spirit once carried over the cold waters in the words of Reverend Isaac Wauchope: "quiet and calm," on the altar of "drilling the death drill," as "sons of Africa" who were made to "leave our assegais in the kraal" and here now "our voices are left with our bodies."

A man who had been travelling with Biko on his last trip on earth, his friend and colleague, Peter Jones, who was also captured and detained and kept separately from Biko, was slapped on the face with the news of his death a few weeks into his own detention. He heard the news from spirited people who had managed to reach Ginsberg and were now detained in the same centre.

There were no cell phones then. The radio was in the hands of the state that had killed him. Yet, the whole country knew and everybody felt the loss and everybody was angry.

I was eleven years of age. I had a denim suit, a jacket and a pair of denim jeans, for going to church. That suit sat in one of the drawers of the dresser that had a vase and a red rose in the Room-of-my-Birth. Ironed and folded, waiting for its moment. It had once belonged to Deon, my grandmother's 'master's' son. In those years we ate leftovers and wore second-hands. I put on my school shoes and headed for the Biko home for the reception of his remains.

I had been dreaming about death during those days. In one remarkable dream there were many people who were in different positions. They were all dead but there were no wounds or injuries on their bodies. They were just motionless objects. I walked between them, hopping and jumping, trying to avoid touching and waking them up. Dead people are quiet. They are peaceful and their sound is in their silence.

Biko's funeral was a special send-off, not an ordinary funeral. Even eleven year olds like me were not chased away. We were there to bury him and absorb some of his strength and Black Consciousness.

The speakers and the leaders of the proceedings ran a dignified occasion. With sober emotion and clear headedness, we resolved to carry on where Biko had left off.

Mzala has made all the arrangements he wants to make for the second funeral of his mother, my auntie. Whereas our family, all my cousins, should have come together all the days of this week, in a house where the occasion is going to take place, and a body would have been seen at the place where it is kept, and arrangements would have been put together in the presence of elders of the family, including my grandmother who is on a bed in the Room-of-my-Birth and Oom Tami who is locked in his unfinished house, and people of the church and members of the community would have come to say prayers and offer their condolences and would have been notified about the funeral arrangements, this is a different occasion. All action seems to be within and around Mzala. He is the bereaved. He is the mourner. He is the organiser and the spokesperson all in one.

He comes to fetch me and I am shocked that none of his siblings and virtually no one is there. The house is just like any other house, a strange thing when it is on the eve of the funeral.

I walk in and am met by his jovial wife. She leads me to their lounge. She asks if I would take coffee or tea and before I can choose, Mzala suggests whisky. I sit there caught in between the two offers, but of course, this is Mzala's house and everything goes his way in his house. At this time his wife disappears into the passage.

In comes the helper, not in the apron, overall and doek of my grandmother's generation this time, but in a tight-fitting skirt that has a price tag hanging on the side with a matching tight-fitting top with opened buttons at the chest area, revealing her adolescence. She must have been interrupted while fitting some new clothes, I think. She is carrying a tray with two glasses, a bottle of mineral water and Irish whiskey.

The domestic girl is in a good mood. Her eyes are full of African respect and acknowledgement. Her forehead is hidden in the falling Indian hair that covers her head and, still, her entire face retains its honesty and sincerity. As she bends to put the tray on the small table that stands in the centre of the room, I catch up the scent of a body that has been soaked in perfume. And, as she turns to walk away without looking at me, she sways her half-grown hips as if letting the price tags fly around.

Mzala comes back from wherever he has been in the house, walking in his socks. He sits on the couch, putting one leg upon the other. He mixes himself a shot of whiskey and fixes one for me. He passes me the glass, then raises his, and says, "To the best funeral ever ...." I hold my glass up, mouth opened, not knowing what to say for this kind of a toast. As if he is prompted by a screenplay, Mzala throws the entire shot down his throat, with his eyes shut. And as he swallows, his face cringes and a bellowing, burping sound comes from his mouth at the same time as his suspended leg is stamped down on the floor.

I sit there with the glass on my lips, allowing the whiskey to touch my upper lip, pretending to be drinking. The whiskey kills the smell that has drifted towards me from his filthy mouth. When I hold the glass down, Mzala has lifted his shoulders and both his hands are stuck in between his thighs. He is looking down.

"I want you to write me a poem, cousin," he says. "A poem that I will read tomorrow at my mother's funeral. Please ..." with his index finger pointing up and wagging, "do not write your name on the poem. The authorship of that poem will be mine. Look at it this way," he raises up and looks at me. His eyes are red and his cheeks hang like a man who is deep in his sixties. "This is my house, this is

my room, that is my couch you are seated on. My helper will bring to you my food. This is my whiskey. So, you are mine too. A powerful poem it should be that will move and shake all my guests and all my powerful friends. It should make me cry, my dear cousin."

"I will think about it Mzala," I say. Mzala stands up and he staggers to the door. He turns and looks at me. His lower lip is hanging and a liquid is coming out of the side of his mouth. He looks horrible. Can he be drunk already, I ask myself. I think of his wife: would she have married him if he looked like that? He opens his mouth and is about to say something but his tongue is tied, and no coherent sound comes out.

In a few minutes, after he has gone through the door, I hear his wife shouting at the top of her voice. Then I hear sounds, as if they are in a fight. I rush down the passage to where the sound is coming from. It is in their bedroom, and Mzala is on the floor.

"Look at him, he fell by himself," the wife says as soon as she sees me. "You will not sleep in my room," she spits at him. I help him up. His face is bruised on the side, and I wonder whether it has been the floor or a blow that has caused the bruise.

*****

On the morning of the funeral a conviction of love, among and between family members, comes down the short Raglan Street, as the sisters in bright purple dresses and cousins in pale jackets walk in, wearing faces of mourning, as does Oom Tami, his wheelchair being pushed by Joep and his wife, Notshokovu, walking softly behind. The air stands still, as if saluting again the passing of auntie. The arriving family members greet in low voices, shaking the hands of each of us with both their hands, and bowing to each person, as if nursing some stomach pain.

A team of hired cooks, that arrived earlier, starts to increase its speed, delivering tea and biscuits to the new arrivals. Dressed in their notable gear, the caterers are a confirmation that the funeral is going to be a real affair. They dominate the passage and the walking space in the lounge that has become the reception area.

As if to take the regal presence away from the caterers, in comes the hired singers, a choir of about thirty young men in black suits and bow ties, alongside women wearing long silk maroon dresses. Almost all the women are full-bodied types, with chests with cleavages stretching their upper dresses at the seams and buttocks that are square shaped, and which flow generously beyond the seat bases. At first I mistake them for Indians because of their hair styles, and then I think they could be mixed up with Brazilians. Only when one of them asks me in a whispering voice, "What is the name of the deceased?" do I realise that they are our people.

When the hearse arrives, the street fills with luxury cars in a swift move. As we off-load the casket, the white neighbours are standing in their yards, some still in pyjamas, watching the show. One elderly man wearing old rumpled shorts and a straw hat that is hanging on his shoulders from a string that is tied around his neck, stops his lawnmower and stands with his strong hairy arms resting

on the handle of the mower. He comes close to the fence and casts an examiner's look on us with his double-lens spectacles covering his sweating face. I raise my hand in a sign of greeting. He does not respond. For him, this is clearly a film he has never seen.

Then comes the mayor and his delegation, the men with big stomachs, shuffling their shirts into their trousers which have to be pulled over the hanging flesh of the abdomen. The priest, with his two assistants in ankle-length black robes, arrives next.

After the short prayers and the announcement that the body will not be viewed as is the custom, it is announced that we should be ready to move to the city hall. The priest, leading, reads a citation about a creature that comes out of a womb, whose days are long and hard on earth, and whose time has come to go to its maker, the Lord; the casket is loaded onto the hearse. There is a lot of hugging and kissing as people acknowledge each other, evidently meeting after a very long time. A few who are not very well-known and who did not know each other as well, stand out distinctly like wet chickens.

We are moved into waiting cars and all owners appear kind enough to help to carry mourners. Someone appoints himself to arrange the order of the cars, the hearse in the front, followed by Mzala's Mercedes Benz, the Mayor's ML – the man seems not to care who follows next. As we move from Raglan Street there are traffic cops at all intersections that lead to the city hall. In front of the city hall, all cars have been cleared and a brass band is performing. By now, the staff of the undertaker has increased in number and all are wearing white gloves, ready to offload the casket.

The city hall is well decorated inside. There are purple hanging cloths, resembling the dresses of Mzala's sisters. Chairs have been arranged and are covered in white cloths. The bereaved members of the family, the eaters of all the day's attention, are led to the far right to be seated facing the casket. Around the stand on which the casket rests are lace cloths, spread out on the floor. On top of the casket is the full uniform of a Methodist Church woman, a red top, a white blouse and a black skirt, all put in order. Behind the casket is a stage that is a metre high from the floor. It has a long table that is covered with a spotless white table cloth. Bottles of mineral water stand in a row, in line with every chair behind.

Chairing the proceedings is a tall man who introduces himself as the Speaker – speaker for what? Maybe a speaker because he will speak more than anyone else today. He opens his mouth and says, "I welcome you all to this august occasion. First of all, I would like to acknowledge the presence of the Honourable Mayor and Honourable Councillors, the leadership of the Party and everyone else who is here today." He takes out a paper and looks very closely at it as if he is seeing a strange word, then he says, "Before we start I want to request the owners of the following vehicles to please remove them, they are blocking the way. We are expecting national leadership of the Party to arrive anytime now," and, reading from a small paper, " a white Range Rover DMN 390 GP, a tomato-red Jaguar with registration 'So What GP', a bottle-green ML. I can't see this but it's number number GP." As he calls out those number plates, the owners are walking out one by one and all of us can make out who drives what.

Before the Speaker speaks again Mzala's wife walks in. I have not noticed that she has not been part of the procession. On that wooden floor of the hall she walks like a well-looked-after cat and heads turn as her high heels tiptoe rhythmically, approaching the first line of family chairs. As if she is

walking herself down the aisle Mzala stands up and takes her hand and helps her to sit. "I acknowledge the Chief Mourner, ladies and gentlemen," the Speaker says.

All those who are called to speak praise a mother who gave birth to a leader, Mzala. They speak like professional parrots who are in fierce competition of parrotology, under the eyes of parrot judges. They push words that are followed by reluctant thoughts through their mouths. Others push only words because their thoughts are tired of following.

When Mzala's turn comes a special hymn is played from a stereo. There is not much light in the hall but Mzala is wearing his immaculate dark sunglasses. I know he is hiding the bruise on his face. As he stands there on the stage, waiting or enjoying his chosen tune, he looks around as if he needs to make sure who is there and who is not there.

Funerals have become passages that lead to graveyards where we hide dead bodies in the earth while eating and drinking the attention they bring to us. Yet graveyards are permanent.

I move about in need of air to cleanse my system.

*****

I walk to a spot at the edge of the cemetery that I know well, sit down on a made-by-nature stool, and look down at the river of my youth. I feel I have to go back into my past to recover myself, to find some stability in the midst of the madness I have just been witnessing. This is the river named after the buffalo, for the beauty of the animal's colour that represents an embrace of many differing elements, the ever-green grass, the willows, the reeds, the shrubs and the trees that hang over her, making her beauty the marvel of this place.

I wonder about the green colour that is evoked in the green pastures of the Catholic catechism. Or is this perhaps the green at the base of the mind of Dr Hendrik Verwoed, who advocated that blacks should be made to see green pastures that they would never reach.

Here are the stilled waters and the flowing waters that twist and turn from the mountainous interior lands, appreciating the names that people confer upon them. The waters are as still and as frightening as the day they devoured the thirty-five year old Thomas Harris, whose tombstone stands at the Edward Street Garden of Remembrance. Here are the same waters that run over the stone weir, stirring a palatable breeze, setting us apart from the dust of the township. Yes, this was the wall of history that refuses to fall even when workers are no longer scrubbing the hard animal skins for the tanning factory in town. For us as children the weir was a diving board. It was also a place on which to bask our naked bodies, opening our legs for a good supply of sun energy.

We used to fight so much here. Each age group had to establish who was the boss in a fist fight. The winner of those fights would become famous and everyone would think twice before starting a fight with him. He would always have a proud place on the weir.

I have come here to revive my memories. This was my favourite haunt when I was a child. Memories are my story. They reside in the deep wells of my body, capped by a heavy stone of silence. My memories have no language, have no idioms of their own. But, since they are my memories and this is their place, I have come to give them a voice.

The first memory that comes into my head is my blackness. I see healthy naked brown bodies that enjoyed the pleasures that this piece of nature provided. Basking in the sun, turning the naked bodies around and around, inspecting the changes on them, and learning and teaching each other about what to expect in the future; diving into the warm waters and practising the styles that we saw other experienced swimmers using, styles that were initially copied from animals such as dogs or snakes and others; spending hours and hours on this river. And since it was an experience of freedom, we refused to go home, even when threatened by hunger, even when our stomachs made their sounds, we never cared. At that time we knew that this was our only space of freedom. We clung onto it, clutched it with our brown hands and gripped it with our brown fingers.

Now, I consider how often the memories of these youthful experiences, remain unclaimed. Somehow we refuse to appropriate the comforts of any experience of being black. Instead, we leave such memories to others, and forever remain as outsiders of ourselves.

I throw a twig into the water. It lingers a while in the still shallows, before getting caught up, spinning slowly and drifting off. How often we refuse to disrupt the established histories about ourselves, and rather sit and hope, waiting for the outside to transform the inside in order to become the yet to be defined.

I flick another twig into the water. I received my blackness from my parents, I reflect. My blood was raised to boiling point by the exploitation of the labour of the children of my great grandfather on the plantation fields of the white farms in exchange for living on conquered land. My system was sensitized by the poet that my grandfather was, whose father, my other great grandfather, was swallowed by cold, dark European seas, in the thick mist of the passages of the English Channel where the warship SS Mendi met her fate, going down with our heroes, with visionaries of the south, extinguishing a dream in a child in the womb, my grandfather.

My heartbeat was donated to me by my great grandmother, the wealth creator and the conqueror of territories. I am a testament to her teenage daughter, my grandmother, when she was brought to a white home to be a servant of everyone there, cleaning and cooking and washing everything including their underwear. And whenever they demanded her compassion, she became the nurse to their sick. My colour was taken from the dark of the night when I was conceived.

As I take and hold onto these memories now.

*****

We arrive at The Steve Biko Garden of Remembrance to lay again the remains of Mzala’s mother. The concrete tables and chairs have never moved from their positions. Their makers have moved away and have never looked back, yet these tables and chairs remain stuck to the marriage. Are they

standing here and waiting for us to come and take our places, cold yet full of hope and longing for our company, just like the stool in Mzala's yard?

The flowers and the lawn at this garden of death and remembrance live on.

The wall and the inscription and the lavatory-turned-change room shine and reflect the looks of their youth.

The face of the mountain that echoed the claps of gun fire from the erstwhile shooting range stands radiant and attractive, yet the railway line on the steeped land wears the look of a widower. There are no more trains. There are no longer any curious binocular lookers.

The filth on the ground has been replaced by newly acquired waste. Just like the past throwers of filth, the present throwers hate the bins with the same measure.

The Edward Street military monument has not had fresh eyes on her either.

The small old houses of the township have seen alterations and extensions. No one can remember how they stood earlier. The new shapes are an entertainment for the outside eye and not an improvement of habitation. They have been taken over by the great grandchildren of the original owners, the loud music lovers, the tyre skidders, the fast car drivers who care little about funeral processions and prayer meetings.

To this day, the remains of those who were on SS Mendi have never been repatriated. My great grandfather's remains lie in an unknown grave in foreign lands, whereas President after President dishes out prestigious awards in the name of SS Mendi.

The raids on homes are now undertaken by television sets and mobile phones, movies and the play stations. It is called a window to the world – what world?

Conferences and home-made parliaments have closed, because greed and lies have taken over peoples' spaces.

Parks will never be revived. City planners have given up their jobs. They are now professional praise-singers of presidential hopefuls. Swings are located in restaurants alongside expensive meal packages and under strict timing and control.

But, since children cannot go back to their mother's bodies, dreams cannot be ended.

*****

At his house, No.2 Raglan Street, Mzala stands up to make a second speech. He has a white handkerchief in his hand and he keeps on wiping his eyes as if there are tears. Maybe, he knows he is going to cry. Or, he is supposed to cry. The handkerchief is on hand, a white one.

Without warning me, he introduces me as his official poet, saying that on his next official trip he will be travelling with me. I am seated, watching this man who is saying all these things. Suddenly, Mzala invites me to stand in front and "say a few verses for the Mayor and his delegation, the leadership of the Party," and all those who know him "to hear." For a minute I remain seated, not knowing what to do. Someone screams, "Give that man a Bells!"

I stand and walk to the front. "Ndiphuphe kamnandi phezolo. I had a dream last night," I start. "Itafile igcwele kukutya kwabelungu. A table was full with the food of mlungu. Zinyama, zitapile, engasa phangi uJohn. There was meat, potatoes and poor John was deep in the food."

As I continue with this popular recitation from our primary school days, the ladies in the room join me in reciting the verses, moving their bodies and flicking their fingers. Mzala and his big stomached friends open up as well and join the mood because they don't want to be left behind.

With my arms crossed in front of my tiny body, I take a deep breath and let the air pass through my mouth in a whistle. All are quiet. "I have been with my partner for over thirty years now," I say.

"Oh! You mean your sex partner," a man seated across asks.

Before I can respond, a large woman in a modern green dress interjects sharply. Shooting her words sternly to the man, she says, "A partner. Is that the cold way you look at us?"

"I am sorry my dear. I didn't mean that."

"I am not your dear. I am a comrade of the movement." The woman in green is affronted. Turning to me, she says, "Go on, we are all ears."

"All of us were children of men and women who conducted themselves with dignity and integrity," I continue.

"Oh yeah! You are right. My mother's bed was this side of the rondavel and our father slept that side," a big stomach says.

"And, somehow your father would 'jump the fire place' when all were in deep sleep," says another.

"You better be quiet because you know that your dogs are no longer barking," the woman in green does not mince her words. They are all silent again.

"I remember our house where we all lived, No.870, the Room-of-my-Birth, my mother's death in a lavatory, a shining coffin that brought her body into the Room-of-my-Birth, where my grandmother sleeps now, waiting for her own death. My partner is complaining that my lack of sleep is affecting her," I say.

"What is bothering you? Why are you not sleeping?" she asks.

"It is the emptiness in my sleep and, yes, the emptiness in the life we live. Poems are stories. And stories are our life. A poet, the one who composes and constructs a poem, must be truthful since he is dealing with our life."

"Yes!"

"And if poetry is story-telling, and the poet is a truthful person, then he must be able to feed his mind with the truth and he must choose which story to tell and how to tell that story."

"Ok, that is fair enough" – big stomach is back in the conversation again.

"The poet must be able to compose verses that will enhance our lives collectively. He must choose words that will express the truth about ourselves. He must resist the temptation to imitate anyone, however gifted they may be in their tongues. We are left with an after-freedom deadness. A sleep we have fallen into. Like the sleep of the Mendi dead. Now that we are parents to the children we bear and to the children of our sisters, whose fathers we do not know, the children of our brothers, whose mothers we will never know, we seem to have forgotten what our parents did for us when we were children who had eyes and ears."

"Oh yes! For once, someone has spoken," interjects the woman who is seated next to the mayor, hitting both her hands on her thighs.

"We were children of committed parents. Our parents took us to school to learn and to have a love of learning. To have memory. To be truthful. They prayed deeply that we could rise to the highest heights in the greatness of spirit, because without such refinement our tomorrow is doomed. Every effort was engaged in many practical experiments to inculcate these virtues within us."

"We have been waiting for this, for a very long time," says the woman in green.

I look at Mzala. He is half-amused, a little concerned and somewhat confused yet apprehensive. Then I look at his wife. And at his young domestic girl. Both are expressionless. Mzala stands up and says, "We are who we are, not by accident. We are the Children of Nonti. Cousin, son of my aunt, our hollowness has to be dealt with now. We need to find ourselves. We must see our obligations."

Outside a lone dove has settled on a gate post, and shakes its body, flicks its feathers and scatters its dampness. An earthy smell rises. I read:

Wall of Remembrance

here lies our end
alongside our beginning
the air above is neat
and guiltless
the life below is
silent
with lessons
for all the restless
walkers