

This document consists of two (2) parts:

**Part A:** Thesis (Creative Work)

**Part B:** Portfolio

## PART A: THESIS (CREATIVE WORK)

THINTITHA, CELIWE

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by

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## 1.

My alarm goes off at 07:15 and my hand shuts it up quickly before it can wake anyone else. My head's the weight of three bricks – if I move it too quickly I might snap my neck. I lift it from the pillow just enough to see where I am: a commune on Auckland Avenue, concrete Joburg. There is an arm around my waist and at the end of it, nails bitten short as possible, painted in the loudest shade of pink. Noxolo. She's snoring so soundly, I hate to move her arm off me but I need to pee.

In the bathroom, I guide the bristles of my green toothbrush along my tongue, right to the back of my throat. I gag myself until something comes up and scratches the roof of my mouth on its way out. A liquidised version of this morning's drive-thru chicken tinged in blue oozes through the seven little circles at the bottom of the basin. What on earth was I drinking? I splash water on my face and swirl some in my mouth to rinse the last of last night out of me. I want to take a shower but I don't. I go back to my room instead.

As the door squeaks closed behind me, K. raises her head from beneath the blanket and asks me what time it is. It's still too early to be awake, we only went to bed three hours ago. Go back to sleep, but she first wants to know how I feel. Like 46 kilograms of hung over. She says, 'Oh. Would you like some tea?' She leaves the bed to click the kettle on and then goes to the bathroom. I snake my way back into Nox's arms, closing my eyes to recollect the events of the night. Where her arm is resting, a man held me and tried to kiss me on the dance floor. How rude, I said to the girls after pulling myself away, that he tried to kiss me right in the middle of my routine of Justin Bieber's "Sorry". When we got fed up with men trying their luck with us in gross ways, we braved the cold, dead night and walked three blocks to a gay club on 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Eventually, the men would catch on and go to this club too. This is the club, they come to realise, where hetero girls go to escape entitled hetero men with their offensive hetero hands reaching from dark corners, with their invasive groins grinding against our backsides.

I press myself against Nox and she welcomes me in her sleep, coiling her arm tighter around me. I can suddenly feel my thighs, aching and stiff. I want to get up and do some yoga, but I stay still next to her, listening to the kettle bubble violently and then click stop. K. returns to my room but she doesn't make tea. She goes back to sleep.

## 2.

When I met Nox, she was standing in front of me in the registration queue on my third day in Joburg. She turned around to look me in the face and said, 'Jeez, it's so hot here, my freakin' nipples are melting off!' Her face looked as still and pure as a bowl of fresh milk, her lips too narrow to speak so loudly. Everything I heard her say from that moment always sounded like it didn't come from her mouth, like it came from some place else. Like she didn't speak it but it was spoken through her. We exhausted 15 minutes of small-talk before we reached the front of the line and parted ways. The next time I saw her, she was buying a pack of tampons at Pick 'n Pay. She gave me three minutes' worth of instructions in the middle of aisle eight after I told her that I've always been too scared to use them. There were four men and two elderly women getting toiletries in the same aisle, inadvertently learning how to coax a clotty, crimson tampon out of your vagina when it's full. I blushed every time she squatted a little bit to demonstrate. This is how we became best friends. Rapidly, naturally: it happened, as all ordinary friendships do. She attached herself to the skin along my wrists, left bits of herself in every corner of my room, and I made more and more room for her in my wardrobe with every passing week.

She began telling me things that she wouldn't tell anyone else because she trusted that I did the same. She told me about everything she exceedingly hated about herself, like the small gap between her two front teeth and her body that was thin and brittle like an ice-cream cone; too thin to hold the fierceness of her heart in one piece. Whenever she would shout or cry or laugh, the veins on her neck would bulge and swell and it would really seem like, at any moment, her skin might rip apart from the tension and she might splatter across my walls. She also told me that she hated her name, always offered it to everyone in one syllable. More palatable this way, she said, than the whole thing. When I asked her why she hated it so much, she said: It's a long story, don't ask me again. Even though she wouldn't tell me why, I could tell that she wore the name like someone would wear an unattractively big forehead, so I used it against her the same way that my grandmother used peri-peri to punish us for swearing. One time, I shouted it over loud music at a club to get her off the table and into our waiting cab. Whenever I said it to her, which wasn't at all often, she would say 'V'tsek!' and then do whatever I was calling her attention to. This is how I knew that she was undeniably fond of me.

In our first semester of varsity, I smoked weed for the very first time on a night that Nox and K. slept over. My house mate invited us to his room and rolled three joints with flavoured rolling

paper. I watched his fingers and tip of his tongue work together to make the flammable art. This is high-grade, he said, and put the plastic bankie to our faces. On it was a red rose and the words "Thank You" printed in cursive. Nox asked him where he bought it from. Some guy from UJ, he said and that's all he shared. She passed one of the joints to me and it sizzled when I inhaled. Tiny bits of the crushed bud tickled the back of my throat. Puff, puff – hold it in! – pass. My lungs burned. The coughing means you're doing it right, she said to me; tapping her hand on my back. 'Then why does it feel like I'm dying!' I laughed and she laughed with me. We all laughed, but it wasn't that funny. I sat close to her the whole time so that I wouldn't wander off. In this way, she was always with me and I was always with her. She was at my place more than she was at home with her grandmother and baby brother. Unless she had a new boyfriend, then she'd be at his place more than she was with me. Still, she kept all her things in my room because he would always do something stupid and she would always come back.

When the herbs kicked in, everything looked like it was stuck on the horizon. Everyone's words sounded like they were coming from a tunnel. Or my ears were blocked because I had air in my eyes, I don't know. I whispered to K. and said 'They're coming!'

Who?

'The spies of the government!'

The police?

They all laughed at me and so I went into my house mate's wardrobe to hide. From my hiding place, I would open the door enough for my one eye to see them, those apparitions stacked on the single bed in a foggy room, and then close it again to listen quietly for the sound of sirens. When the topic of kissing eased itself into the conversation, Nox swung the door open and said to me, 'You've never had your first kiss before?' I shook my head no. 'Okay,' she said; 'I'm going to put my tongue in your mouth.' Behind my closed eyelids, little stars were blinking against an eternal black and I could still see her face. She wrote her name on the roof of my mouth with her tongue. I followed her lead, careful not to disappoint. Careful not to drool into her mouth or draw blood from her lips. They tasted like glossy cherries and I was ready to eat them. Swallow the bottom one first and tuck the top one under my tongue to savour whenever I wanted to. She stood above me and I lifted my head skyward. Runaway strands of her thin twisted braids tickled my face. The apparitions on the bed were laughing, asking her: what the

hell are you doing? My house mate, who thought he would get laid by at least one of us that night, complained and said what we were doing wasn't fair! I wished that they would all disappear and leave us alone in our wardrobe universe. But as quickly as she opened a portal to me, she closed it again and disappeared back into the fog.

Later in our friendship, her tongue found its way to my labia and give me a first kiss there too. At a boy's house where we were hanging out, the alcohol set my blood alight. We were the only two girls there. We went to the bathroom together and I told her how I felt. She was squatting above the toilet seat to pee. I waited for her to finish, waiting in the dark because the light bulb wasn't working. When she was done, she said to me: relax. Lay on the floor, pull down your jeans. I settled down on the cold tiles and made myself comfortable as possible, nervous like a patient on a doctor's examination table, contending with an unyielding toilet for space. She hadn't touched me yet when three hard bangs on the door asked us what we were doing. 'You guys are not fair for locking yourselves in there,' the bang said. 'Just give us a fucking minute!' Nox barked back. Turning to me, she looked straight down between my legs and planted one kiss. So gently, I almost didn't feel it – until I did. My back made a small bridge, my chest reached for the ceiling. My hands stayed planted by my sides, unsure of what to hold onto. She kissed until she saw the white cotton of my pantyliner. 'You're on your period, what the fuck!' She stormed out, leaving me on the floor. I found her in the next room, gargling water at the bathroom sink. 'I'm not on my period', I said to her. 'I promise you.' She didn't respond, brushing past me to the kitchen where the boys were. None of the alcohol that had boiled inside me was left when we abandoned our toilet universe prematurely. All that remained in me was a nervous shiver from seeing her head between my legs, to seeing the glint of furious embarrassment in her eyes. I was standing at the counter pouring myself a drink, when she came to me without a word and coiled her arms around my neck, pressing her face against my shoulder. I tied my arms around her waist and let her forgiveness melt into me like an ice cube into a bruise.

After we broke up some months later, I learned how to stop missing her as a significant part in my life, which really means that I learned how to stop talking about her. Only sometimes when I really can't help myself, I'll say her name whenever I talk about the things that make me happy or sad. We met on campus and we grew close. Then one night, we got drunk and had a silly fight about a silly boy and things never went back to what they were. The last time I saw her,

she was fuming, stuffing everything she owned into a yellow Shoprite plastic bag and telling me that I know nothing about what it means to be a fucking good friend. The veins on her neck and forehead were so violently swollen that for a moment, she really did splatter across the walls, right before my eyes, covering everything with her rage and heartache. As soon as she slammed the door shut, I dropped to the floor and cried, not thinking to call out her whole name.

In her absence, I became wary of girls who were quick to call me their friend. I avoided them as often as I could, but to no use. No one grows well in isolation and so eventually, I would find myself in the company of other girls but they would be nothing like her. Nox taught me things that I could hold in my memory forever. Things I would never think to forget. Things like how to use a tampon, how to smoke weed, and how to love someone freely without ever feeling like you're giving something away and losing it forever.

**initiation** (*n.*): 1. the action of admitting someone into a secret or obscure society or group, typically with a ritual. 2. the action of beginning something.

### 3.

When you still have your hymen in varsity, everyone wants to talk to you about sex. The question mark on your face when a handful of boys tell you what a woman's body is capable of doing makes them volunteer to show you what your particular body could do in their hands. When you still have your hymen, girls will volunteer to teach you something too, with the same unsolicited enthusiasm of older women showing a new bride how to be a good wife.

On the bright green lawn on campus, two girls from my Linguistics 1B class call me over to bask in the sun with them. I listen to their stories about their boyfriends and I have nothing to say. The one girl with hoop earrings as big as the circumference of my thigh bobs her head over a bottle of Coke and says, 'You have to hold your breath, that way you won't gag.' The other girl makes her own demonstration too with her bottle of Sprite. She says, '*This* is what all guys actually like.' They laugh in between and I laugh with them. After they talk about the sex, they talk about the love. The girl with the Coke wants to marry him, she's sure of it. Sure of it because of what he says to her every time he's with her. He always says something romantic and it makes her feel unconditionally loved. As soon as he graduates, she'll go off the pill and let him put a baby inside her. The girl with the Sprite knows that her relationship will end eventually. She doesn't trust him at all but she stays because she likes how he handles her. He's not a softie like her exes. I remember everything they say and everything they don't say. I learn from the both of them that how long a boy will stay in your life depends on how little you know when he meets you. These boys, who are good teachers, won't leave you until you've reached your full potential. Every single one of them wants to know that you're a better woman because they made you that way and so however long that takes, they will stay. This is what all boys are like. 'By the way,' Sprite says, 'once you don't have your hymen anymore, there is no longer anything special about *you* and ultimately, nothing *that* special about sex.'

#### 4.

Days before my first time, I sit on the lawn with the girls from my class in an area of campus referred to as Panty-Ville. This is where someone supposedly found a pair of panties left behind by a horny couple. This is where they tell me that my very first boyfriend wouldn't come all the way to see me if sex wasn't on his mind. 'I mean, how do you not know these things?' Coke asks me. 'What were you doing in high school when everyone was getting "acquainted"?' I was playing hockey.

By the time I meet with my first lover, I have already decided that he will be the Christopher Columbus to my unchartered American shore. We know each other from Twitter and started dating on a whim. It's only been four months since his first DM. When he is adamant about his affection and admiration for me, he makes his way from the North West to Johannesburg Park Station. I see how much taller than me he is for the first time on this morning. During the whole cab ride back to my place, we stare at the moving pictures through our framed windows on either side and say nothing to each other. It's still too early in the morning for small talk. I'm holding my breath wondering if he regrets coming; wondering if I should have ignored his DM four months ago. Without looking, he takes my hand from my thigh and laces my fingers into his. We both smile and the awkwardness subsides. When I left my place in the morning, the sky was a dull blue, but when we get to my room, grey clouds are gathering above to the sound of thunder. It starts pouring when he lays down his flag on America.

I believe him when he says the condom is too small. I believe him when he shows care in asking me if it hurts. I believe him when he says he doesn't usually cum this quickly. After he's finished, we need a morning-after pill. When I've swallowed the little thing with lukewarm tap water, I take my phone to the bathroom and call K., telling her that I feel empty. I'm made of cardboard and there is nothing inside. She wants to take a bus from Wits to come see me but I insist against it. Over the phone, she speaks to me in a loving voice: everything will be alright, it's probably because it was your first time. You don't have to do it again if you don't want to, just trust your instinct. When I hang up, I feel different – I've transformed. This must be a good thing. In my room, he makes a playlist for us and I love all his music. I watch him tell me stories about his life at res like I've known him all my life, like there was never a time when he wasn't mine. We talk about our favourite things and he tells me that I make him nervous. But in a good way. He's never met a woman like me, he says. I like how he says "woman" when he looks

right at me. A song by Chet Baker is playing when I ask him if we can do it again. I hold onto him and say, 'Please go deeper.' He is less gentle than he was at first, but he still holds me like I might soon dissolve. Inside of me, his latex shaft makes a river that flows onto my light blue sheets. I don't think of anything but how his hips were created to make rivers out of me. I make him smile when I convulse and deflate. I like how I make him smile.

When we're finished, he moves himself to the edge of the bed and lights a joint. The smoke rises in ribbons and odd circles above his head. In the dark with his back turned to me like that, he looks like a deeply troubled detective in an old noir film. Like he has an important decision to make but doesn't know how to go about making it. The sound of the rain outside is as persistent as our silence. I can't find anything else to say so I whisper 'I love you' into the small space between us but he doesn't turn around. I capture this scene in my mind's eye and remember it forever. In the morning, he leaves to catch a bus home.

## 5.

My first lover and I break up three times after we first meet, and all three are my doing. For the final break-up, I tell him that I slept with someone else in the space that we were apart. This way, he'll believe what I've been trying to prove to him since the first time we broke up: I am not the woman he thought me to be; I'm not *that* special. He doesn't say anything back. He blocks me from his life and we don't speak again for months. The first person I call to break the news to is K. and she asks me if this is really what I want. Of course it is. I would function better alone, this is what I believe. She sighs and says, 'You don't need me to come over with sad movies and wine, then. This is the third time we're having this conversation and like in the first two, you sound oddly okay.'

He doesn't wait more than three months before he calls me. He wants us to try again if that's what I want too, if I'm not too afraid. I see him holding his arms open and waiting for me to run into them. I see us decaying in the places where love is supposed to be permanent, all because of my restlessness. Something changed the day we met, something we could not see or taste or touch. Something I couldn't tell him about even if I had the words to. All it is, this thing, is a deepening hollow in my navel. Just for him, I see myself lifting my shirt and showing him my belly button: 'I'm not the girl you could build a home with. I might leave before we get to fit the windows in; before the flowers you planted for me begin to bloom.' I believe myself when I decide for him that he would be better off elsewhere. Yet sometimes when I dream about him, we're still holding hands in the backseat of a cab to Auckland Avenue, and he is the only boy I will ever love.

## 6.

The first thing I pray for when I go home for the long weekend is that my mother doesn't see how I'm no longer the same. When you've had sex, the innocence in your eyes evaporates and for some unscientific reason, your body adopts a posture that gives itself away, especially to someone who is your mother. During my visit, she watches me closely and asks me more questions than I can answer. I avoid her conversation by staying in my room with the door closed, pretending to be busy with school stuff. The first time she sees me, she remarks only that I have gained weight; that I must be eating well. The dark circles under my eyes, she says, must be a sign that I'm spending too many nights studying and not getting enough sleep. I don't tell her that I've actually been crying myself to sleep for several nights since I broke the heart of the man who named me "woman". I don't tell her that I've been mourning the quick death of a friendship at the same time.

At home, I spend as much time as I can in the garden with my dad. We talk about everything else but my personal life and this is what we both prefer. He tells me about planting root vegetables and about knowing when they're ready. With potatoes, you'll know when the green plant above blossoms and when those blossoms disappear. With carrots and beets, you measure the green above ground and trust your instinct. He tells me about my grandmother and how she loved the garden just like I do now. I wish I had known her so that she could teach me more than what my dad presumes to know. But my love for plants and gardening goes beyond the technical aspect of it. I admire them enough to want to become them, and digging my fingers into the dark soil feels like the holiest kind of therapy. Snapping his fingers together as he suddenly remembers, my dad announces that he bought seeds from a man in a van in town and he was waiting for the right time to plant them. They are carrot seeds, he says and puts his hands on his round waist to think for a moment. 'Tomorrow we'll scatter the seeds on the soil. But then we'll need to stack branches over the sown seeds so the birds won't get to them. Yes, we'll do it tomorrow.' We weed the soil before the sun disappears completely from the sky and I wonder how long it will take the seeds to sprout. I think about the seeds sinking into the soft weight of the soil only to come up again, each one a soft green phoenix coaxed out of the earth by warm rays of light. My heart swells with anticipation when I think of how something will come to life from a decaying thing. *On the third day, God commanded, Let the earth produce all kinds of plants, those that bear grain and those that bear fruit. So the earth*

*produced all kinds of plants and God was pleased with what He saw. I was there, I was pleased too.*

After eating my dinner with my parents in front of the TV, I kiss them good night and go to my room. I Google “dangerous plants” and discover the venus fly trap. I watch a gif of a small six-legged bug walking up the stem, moving its antennae along the way. The plant is wide open, kind of blooming, waiting for the right moment. When the insect walks into its mouth, it is unaware that the fly trap’s vulnerability is veiled as a weapon. It snaps shut and locks its thorns around the tiny thing, breaking its trust and its little heart. The gif starts over and I watch it again before falling asleep.

7.

**To:** mpumi221@nomail.com

**From:** celiwemkoneni@nomail.com

**Date:** 23 September 2015, 22:12

It must've been my so-called baby face. Its unyielding innocence and naivety. It must've been this odd look of not knowing as much as many girls already know by my age. It must've been that he would be the very first one to teach me everything he knew and everything he would want me to know. That he would be there to closely watch my body grow into its potential and he alone would be the one to witness it all. It must've been that he thought I would knit my pelvis to his, never to crave another man for as long as I was with him, which, he probably hoped, would be forever and always...

I don't really know what it was that made him come all the way from the North West to meet me. I don't know why it was that he made me his girlfriend when he'd never seen me in person. Every time he told me that he had always known – had always felt – that I was the girl he wanted for himself, I believed him. I believed everything he said with the gullibility of a girl who's never before been looked at twice. Until he had me, then I couldn't decide what it was that he could possibly stay for when he had gotten the first taste and everything thereafter was doomed to be bland. Familiar.

I've since met a few other guys just like him, guys who are quick to say that they've never met a girl like me before. I've become a venus fly trap. I've taught my hands eyes lips legs to be fluent in the love languages of my little insects. With all my body, I penetrate through the walls that they've built against women who are not their mothers. I suppose I can smell their insecurities on them like the stench of morning urine in winter. I can taste their desire to be unique, to be significant, to believe in love again. To them, I am a kind of hope. I look like food, I look like home. I look like a resting place after a long trip from heartache. They crawl closer and closer, shoving the syllables in my name into their mouths like a last supper. I find my nourishment in their affection and from the glint in their eyes when I can tell that I mean something special to them. Then: while they're sleeping in my arms, the aftermath of my sex

coating their limp shafts and trickling down between their thighs; just then when that hollowing feeling in my navel grows, I leave.

From this pattern, I have gained nothing and I feel nothing. At the price of using my body as bait, and then as a home, and then as a wooden cross, I've lost myself and this is more valuable to me than the carcasses of little insects. I thought I had *some* power but I still feel as weak as I was before. I don't remember what it's like to believe someone when they tell me they love me. Not anymore. I won't deny that there's this delicious thrill I get when I make a boy want to knit strands of my pubic hair into his beard, when I make him want to stay. But that night my first lover opened me up, I felt hollow and hollowing. Something changed and it seems I cannot close up again.

## 8.

Sometimes after she baths, my mother will walk into my room and shamelessly get dressed in front of me. As a woman with way more style than I could muster in my left pinkie, many of her clothes are kept in my wardrobe because she runs out of space in hers. This doesn't bother me too much since I live out of my suitcase in whichever place I decide to call home. But, the way she wiggles her body out of her towel or gown and into one of the dresses and skirts hanging in my wardrobe makes me wish my clothes could evict hers. In the morning while I'm typing an assignment on my laptop, she walks in and greets me with affection. She drops the pink towel that she wrapped around her soft body and squeezes some of my lotion into her palm. Whenever she begins this routine, she wants to have a conversation with me about the things I've missed out on while I was away. I keep my eyes fixed on the screen before me but this is not enough to ignore her nudity and the sound of her hands rubbing lotion onto her aging skin. 'What are you ashamed of?' she asks me. I blush. 'I thought you might like some privacy. I'm being respectful, Ma.'

'Well,' she says, 'I didn't ask for privacy. This is nothing you don't already have anyway; nothing you've never seen before.' She slips into a grey maxi skirt with white patterns on it and reminds me of how I used to bathe with her when I was a little girl. She reminds me that she taught me how to wash myself and to anticipate the fateful day when my body would change and I would need to hide these changes from boys. She tells me this to make just one point. She says, 'You never felt the need to hide from me even after you got your first period. Now, this body that you also have is something you want to look away from. There's a difference between respect and shame.' My fingers stop typing but I don't look up from my screen, even though she's now dressed. 'Right now, you actually remind me of Adam and Eve after they ate the fruit. It seems to me like your eyes have opened.' When I don't say anything in response, she leaves the room quietly.

## 9.

In Bronkhorstspuit, our Pick 'n Pay is the furthest store that I could walk to. To walk from home to the part of the town where the Shoprite is right across the street from the Spar would take me 15 minutes at least, but to walk to the other side of town where the Pick 'n Pay is takes me 25 minutes. Naturally, it doesn't make sense to walk all that way for a jar of mayonnaise, a tub of Vaseline, and two litres of milk, but walking to that side of town means walking along Cornelis Street where I'll crane my neck to look at the trees and feel their shadows watching me closely. Taller than the street lights and arching inward, almost covering the sky, they run from the beginning of the street right to the end in single file on either side. When you're in Bronks, taking the long route means getting to savour something in a small town that a big city can't give to you. As soon as I turn into Cornelis from De La Rey Street, I'm in high school again, walking with Mpumi from hockey practice. She looks up at the trees and says 'This is my favourite street in all of Bronks.' In every day of every new month for five years, without fail, she would say this. Those trees have seen the comings and goings of many things and people. Shape-shifting from their electrifying greens in the summer to their sad yellows in the autumn. Even in their barrenness in the winters with their earth-toned skeletons resembling the fingers of a ghoul, they are beautiful and uncannily timeless.

It doesn't usually rain here in the winter but it was raining, I remember, on the afternoon that I walked home alone from a friend's place. Before the last bell of the day rang at school, she pulled me aside in the corridor to tell me that her boyfriend would be coming over to make out with her. She said, 'Will you come with me later? I'm going to buy a new bra.' She was going to show it to him if he happened to take her top off. She picked a blue one because blue was his favourite colour. I sat with her in her room and watched her put it on. Her A-cupped chest looked to me like the best thing a woman could ever have on her body and against my still-flat chest, hers were certainly the best boobs I had ever seen. When her boyfriend arrived, they walked me out and down the street. He held her hand the whole way and I held onto the tissues and a folded piece of paper with my timetable on it in the pockets of my school trousers. It started to drizzle when I walked the rest of the way alone. The next day at school, she told me that she let him touch her boobs – without the bra on. I giggled. She would always tell me everything in detail whenever he came over to make out. Until she bought a matching set of

blue lingerie, then she stopped telling me about what they did. You wouldn't understand, she said. But I wished to.

**intimacy** (*n.*): 1. something that is done or said only by people who have a close relationship with each other. 2. the state of having a close personal, sexual, or romantic relationship with someone.

## 10.

On the night that a man rapes me, I do not know that it is rape. I move in and out of consciousness, too drunk to recognise that my house is only one block away from where he is visiting a friend. My body, limp as wilted spinach, is hanging over his shoulder as he walks. My face bump-bumps against his back and my hands swing like broken windshield wipers. The mustard tinge of Auckland Avenue's street lights hovers above us then disappears, then hovers again. The darkness never lasts long until we're in his friend's room where he sleeps. Then I see shadows; silhouettes I don't recognise. I don't look back at him when he inserts himself inside of me. I'm ready to pass out again. I think I do. And then it is morning. I'm in a panic because I don't believe he used a condom. He raises his voice at me and promises that he did. He also says, 'We didn't need one anyway 'cause I was too high to cum.' He takes a heated plate from the microwave and sprinkles a white powder onto it. I watch him sniff two lines into his nostrils. He reminds me of my aunts and their snuif. On this morning, when daylight shows me exactly where I am, I'm ready to leave and he insists on walking me home. At my gate, he says 'What are you doing later?' When I say, 'Nothing', he says he'd like to see me again. His eyes sparkle like New Year's Eve.

In the shower, I'm crying. I scrub myself with an empty sack of oranges until my skin gets swallowed by the drain. *The man who is guilty of sexual immorality sins against his own body. Don't you know that your body is a temple?* When my skin starts to look like blood, I press my palm against my labia and wish to sew it closed. I part my lips to the water and wish that they had opened at just the right time last night to defend me. Only one syllable, but my body was entirely mute and stupefied, and in its silence, ignored and decided for. I needed only to push air out of my throat, touch my tongue to the roof and let it fall behind lips closing around a vowel. But would he have listened to me if I had said it? Would not the futility of this one syllable be harder to scrub off now than my hazy memory? Nothing else haunts me because I don't remember. My mind doesn't remember. The water comes down on me in needles, cold. *The man who is guilty of sexual immorality sins against his own body. Don't you know that your body is the Temple?* Please, I beg You, let me burn it to the ground.

Weeks later at four in the morning, he shouts a part of my name at my gate. I hear him first in my dream before I realise that he's right outside. I open the window and ask him what he wants. He needs a place to crash. The people he was with left him behind and his friend down

the street isn't home. He says, 'I'm desperate.' He says he has nowhere else to go. I let him in, give him a blanket and point him to the floor. In the morning, he leaves with my phone. When I use my house mate's phone to call it, it is off. I know he probably sold it for some white powder or for a taxi fare back to wherever he's from. He took something of mine that I did not give to him, again, and this time, it really was my fault.

## 11.

It takes Coke and Sprite four days to realise that I'm avoiding them. When they intercept me at the door after class, I make up something important that I urgently need to do at the library. 'Since when do you go to the library?' Coke says. 'Did we do something wrong, friend?' Sprite asks me, her hand resting on my arm. 'It's either we did something wrong or you have a boyfriend that you're hiding from us.' There's no one, I say, and so they insist that I join them on the lawn. I go with them. The fountain at UJ is never on when you need it the most and on this particularly hot afternoon, I miss the sprays of water to cool me down. I'm sitting in the middle with Coke and Sprite on either side of me and they're talking to each other. My head turns side to side to look at their doll-like faces. For once, they're talking about Linguistics and nothing else, so I say some things too. Twenty minutes go by and I feel tired of sitting outside like this. A young man walks past us with his friend, and then they turn back and greet us with a pamphlet. 'We're hosting my boy's birthday party at Stones this Thursday. Y'all gonna be there?'

'Maybe,' Coke responds first, glancing at the paper. 'Depends on if we're not busy.'

'You know we're not busy on Thursday, friend. We'll be there!' Their heads turned to me and I nodded twice. Yes, I'm sure we can make it. The boy who gave us the paper has dreadlocks that fall over his shoulders and a lollipop stick poking out between his thick lips. 'My name's Josh', he says and looks at me. 'Are you guys in first year?'

'What, is it obvious?' Coke tilts her head to the side. Josh laughs a little and says yes, he can tell. But it's not a bad thing. Josh's friend sits down and beckons Josh to follow. Sitting in the middle, I feel like a fifth wheel until Josh's friend, whose name is forgettable, reaches a hand to pull me into the conversation. I can see a gold cap on his tooth in the shape of a backwards "L" when he speaks and his eyes are big and dark. He looks rugged and beautiful in the sun; a subtle and addictive kind of attractive. He asks me if I'll come with my boyfriend. 'I don't have a boyfriend.'

'You've been here for several months now, how do you not have a boyfriend?' Josh asks me.

'Because I broke my last boyfriend's heart.'

The boys laugh. They don't believe me. Josh's friend says, 'You look like you wouldn't hurt a fly.' I shrug and don't say anything else. After some time, they stand to leave us. Too many pamphlets to hand out, too little time. 'We hope to see you ladies on Thursday,' Josh says and puts his purple lollipop back into his mouth. His friend looks at me like he has something to say but he laughs and turns to go. When he thinks I cannot hear him, he speaks to Josh and tells him that there's no way he would ever let a girl break his heart. I'm staring at his back as he walks away and I'm looking forward to Thursday.

## 12.

**To:** mpumi221@nomail.com

**From:** celiwemkoneni@nomail.com

**Date:** 21 October 2015, 14:03

Something happened to me some weeks ago that I don't think I'm ready to talk about here like this or with you. With anyone, really. But don't be concerned though, it's nothing that I can't find ways to get over. Ways like Thursday and Saturday nights, going to clubs with the girls from my class. To be honest with you, I'm not entirely fond of them but they're fun to be around when we're all drinking together. When I drink, I understand them better than when I'm sober. Otherwise, I'm constantly thinking about how it's because of them that I've become the woman that I am. They taught me things I wasn't yet prepared to learn. Things I can now never forget. On Thursday, I did one of those things for the first time. I was sitting on the balcony with a guy I met on campus. His name doesn't matter (I doubt I'll ever need to learn how to pronounce it) but he has a gold tooth and big eyes that look very familiar. When I told him everything about me, he didn't believe half the things I said I'd done, so I showed him something he wouldn't have expected from me. Something that the girls taught me at school. Afterwards, he believed me, and I liked how he smiled when he looked at me like I was a woman and no longer a girl. In his most recent text message to me, he said 'I think I really like you. If you'll just give me a chance, I can show you exactly how much.' At this point, whether he likes me or not doesn't concern me. I've outlived the thrill that I had on Thursday night and I hope to never bump into him again.

### 13.

In Joburg, everything feels too close. Just standing on any corner on Empire Road or walking along any street in Braam could make you severely claustrophobic. Everyone is always talking and moving at the same time. Here, everything is in excess, and the buildings are built high enough to make you believe that all your dreams could be reached with a single elevator. The place is a beautiful thing until you can't breathe in it anymore. Until you carry the city's phlegm in your lungs and you want to go home for cleaner air, simpler words, and no crowds.

Walking from Campus Square on a Sunday afternoon, I take my black flats off and feel the tarred stones poking the soft soles of my feet. With my shoes in one hand and a Pick 'n Pay plastic bag in the other, I turn into Auckland Avenue and there is no one in sight. The sun rests on my bare shoulders and I try not to let my feet linger too long on the hot pavement. Taking careful strides on the open ground like this, with nothing between my feet and the concrete earth, I'm summoning home. I'm breathing through my soles, calling on the stillness of Bronkhorstspuit. For a moment, everything is far away and I'm the only one who lives on this street, in spite of the many houses I pass to get to the yellow one I call home. Suddenly, a thought comes to mind: if a car were to come speeding down this street and I were to stand in its way... I hold my breath and wait for nothing until I am finally at my gate.

In the morning before I left, I cleaned the room from wall to wall, dusting in places no one ever sees or touches, and moving things around to create more space for the breeze to kiss everything. As I walk into my room, the smell of lavender Handy-Andy is still evaporating from the wooden floors. I get a glass for the bottle in my plastic bag. I put everything else where it belongs and decide that I will make myself some spaghetti and mince with grated cheese on top for supper a bit later.

I'm on my fourth glass when it falls accidentally from the desk beside me, breaking into big pieces against the floor's wood. I pick up the biggest piece and press it against the skin on my wrist. It's not the right kind of sharp but I don't give up, though: I keep dragging it along the skin in short lines. It doesn't open me the way I think it's supposed to. Instead, tiny spots of red force their way to the surface as if I've woken them from a deep sleep. The lines swell and look purple, and I continue to scratch with the piece of glass to make the red spots bigger. But nothing else happens. I lick the droplets off my wrist and I taste the hollowing. I finish the rest

of the bottle with my fingers wrapped tight around its neck. If I go to the bathroom to rinse my face with cold water, I might feel better. I'll stop crying and my head will hurt less. I'll come back to my room feeling whole and I'll make myself a nice supper to prove that I am. My body isn't moved by this, though. It's lying in foetus position, the knees bent and the fists tucked under the chin. I imagine Nox's arm around my waist. And on the edge of the other side of the bed, my first lover is smoking a joint, staring at my back, waiting for me to turn around and face him.

## 14.

On a Saturday night in June, K. and I are on the balcony at a block of student flats in Braam, talking about the books she's reading. I'm standing with her while she smokes her blue Camel. 'There's this one I'm reading now, my brother gave it to me. It's called *Sex God*, can't remember who wrote it. Rob-somebody, I think. Anyway, there's a line there in it that I can never forget. "How you treat the creation reflects how you feel about the creator." That line has changed things for me in the strangest way. You see at first read, you'll think about other people and how you treat them. That's cool and all, but you know what I missed? I'm created too. It's also about how I treat me.' She twists her mouth to the side to let out some smoke and then she pulls her cheeks in to take another drag. 'Of course, it's not easy to wake up one day and decide that you're going to be kinder to yourself. I mean, you could, but you'll soon be at a dead-end if you don't realise something fundamentally important about yourself first.' I wait for her to say what that is, but she just inhales more smoke and stares at me like she's done talking and wants me to say something back. Someone comes to the balcony and tells us that we're being anti-social and that we should join the party. She rolls her eyes and goes inside to fix us both a drink. I follow her.

Inside where the guys are gathered, they're playing KAASI on someone's Bluetooth speaker, refilling drinks from the shared litre of flavoured Russian Bear and passing around two black hubbly pipes. A tall young man comes to stand next to me. His name is Ntandoyenkosi. He got it from his mother's older sister, who was trying to make lemonade out of his father's leaving his mom while she was in her second trimester. They found out that he has another family in Upington and that's where he supposedly lives now. He's only met the old man twice: once at a funeral when he was eight and then again when he came to their house a day before his high school matric dance just to wish him well and offer to pay for his suit. This was enough for Ntando to see for himself that they look very alike: the liquorice skin, the broad shoulders, and the slanted, mischievous smile. Once in a while, no more than six times in a year, the old man calls and asks him if he and his mother are okay. He often sends him money and hopes that it will help fix whatever's broken between them. Sometimes, Ntando doesn't answer his calls or spend his money. He believes his life has been better off without the old man in it. He's not a good role model, the timer – he doesn't keep his word. But his mother loved him once so that has to count for something at least, right? Maybe he's not all bad, but he never gets a chance

to find out. He clenches his carelessly-bearded jaw when he says this. I want to reach out and hold his hand, but there's a can of Black Label in it, and the other is tucked into the pocket of his beige chinos. On a lighter note, he's studying economics. Second year, just like me. He's a Liverpool fan and to his surprise, I'm the coolest Man United fan he's ever met, and he swears he's seen me on campus before.

Now, he wants to hear about me. I don't want to tell him the things I've told other boys. I want to tell him something that only he will know, but I can't find any words. Respecting my silence, he opts for making me laugh aloud and every time I do, I lean against his impressive bicep for support. His eyes are dim when he says to me 'I need to go get a sweater in my room, please come with me.' I trust him and go. When we get to his room upstairs, he switches the heater on and we decide not to leave his place. I fall asleep listening to him tell me about his favourite nephew and how he's growing up way too fast, he can't keep up. 'You're so easy to talk to,' he says to me, and it's the last thing I hear before I pass out in his bed. He falls asleep holding my hand and nothing else happens.

## 15.

In a taxi to Braam, where Ntando lives, I pass time and read *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Usually, because it's a rather short trip, I would amuse myself with staring out the window, but I've seen the buildings running from Campus Square into Empire Road. I know how many turns there are before we get to the Wits Art Museum, before we turn on the corner after that, and stop just before the taxi drives over the bridge to Newtown. On this afternoon, I don't care much about staring outside the window and besides, there is a big woman dressed in blue overalls sitting on my right, and a girl with bright green box braids on my left – I am nowhere near the window frame. After handing exactly R8 in silver and brown coins to the girl next to me for her to send to the front, I reach for my phone and scroll to where I last read.

And hence, as I think, it came about that Edward Hyde was so much smaller, slighter, and younger than Henry Jekyll. Even as good shone upon the countenance of one, evil was written broadly and plainly on the face of the other. Evil (which I must still believe to be the lethal side of man) had left on that body an imprint of deformity and decay. And yet when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself.

I can't remember how I came to find this book or how, more accurately, it found me. Still, I've had it on my phone for two years and reading it is much like looking into a warped mirror and seeing a silhouette of myself on the other side. It asserts for me a truth that I need to imagine now more than I ever did when I first read the thing. At this point in my own life, I'm conducting an experiment of my own, though I'm not sure what it is that I'm trying to prove or understand. I only know that, as with Jekyll, I'm allowing the thing that was born from the cavity inside of me to awaken and move as it pleases. Perhaps, if I could see how deep the hollowing goes then I might have the answers to why it is there in the first place, or better yet, how I could make it go away.

The taxi makes a turn into Jorrisen Street and soon it will be time for me to announce the end of my trip to the driver. Just as I put my phone away, another book – *Frankenstein*, with a story much like *The Strange Case* – comes to mind. It's in this book too that I'm drawn to the monster: its reasoning, its thoughts, its actions, and its heart. I'm rooting for Frankenstein's monster more than I am for Frankenstein, its creator. I empathise with its intense responses

to novelties, and its innocence, and its hollowness. As the taxi nears my stop, I clear my throat and bellow, *Aftah robot!*

Brisk-walking a few blocks down to Student Hill, I momentarily feel lost as I'm used to feeling despite the few times that I've come here over the past month. Before I left my place, Ntando called me and, knowing my natural disposition for losing my way, he asked if he should meet me where my taxi would stop. 'No,' I said, feigning pride. 'I know the way.' I always believe that I know the way. It's either this, or the actual thing I believe in most is that no matter how much I get lost, I will *always* find my way back. Keeping my head down to hide my wondering expression, I walk between buildings with my hands deep in my pockets until I find the right street. In Ntando's room on the third floor of the building, I think about my favourite line in *The Strange Case* when Jekyll says to one unsuspecting character, 'Your sight shall be blasted by a prodigy to stagger the unbelief of Satan!' Then, he drinks the potion and morphs into his evil alter ego, Hyde.

'Your sight shall be blasted by a prodigy to stagger the unbelief of Satan!' I say to my first lover and snap my thorny green jaws shut around his heart.

'Your sight' – I whisper to Ntando as I creep behind him with a blade in my raised hand – 'shall be blasted by a prodigy to stagger—'

'The women I've loved before have never loved me the way that I loved them,' he says, making me a toasted cheese and tomato sandwich. 'One of them even said to me that I loved her *too much*. I don't even know what that means.' He forces out a short laugh. The weapon disappears behind my back when he spins around to face me. I turn into Frankenstein's monster before it went on a murderous rampage, when it still had hope in humankind. All I've ever wanted was to be loved too much. To be stripped bare, bare of even my own skin, and to be seen completely – belly button, and all – and held tightly, regardless. I melt when he hands me my sandwich and asks me about my past relationships. I tell him that Nox was the first girl I ever referred to as my best friend. I tell him that we really loved each other but we somehow managed to hurt each other only with words, over something that wasn't even that important. And then I tell him about my first lover. I don't say why we broke up more than once. I say, 'Sometimes he calls or he emails me questions in the form of lamenting poems, one of the questions being "Why on earth did you give up on us?" My answers are never enough for him.

Or for me. Every time he reaches out to me, though, I feel forgiven, and at the same time, I feel heartless.'

We sit on the floor after he makes us some hot chocolate with pink and white marshmallows bobbing on the surface. 'Were you in love with him?' he asks me, sounding fearful of the answer he assumes I'll give to him. I shake my head no. 'I care about him, that's all. If we'd remained friends from the beginning it would've been the same thing to me, I guess. Even better, actually.'

'Have you ever been in love?'

I shake my head no. When his room gets dark, we move onto the bed and he pulls me close to his chest. I listen to his breathing and it's so steady, I suddenly feel nervous. Nervous like I was at the back of a cab almost a year ago, holding my first lover's hand. He inhales deeply and says, 'I think I'm addicted to your company.' I lift my head and kiss him, and then go back to lying on his chest. My hand is itching for the weapon that disappeared, so I coil all my fingers around his thumb and we fall asleep this way.

## 16.

When Ntando comes over to my place for the first time, I keep my legs closed while we kiss, brush his hand away from my area, but he keeps trying to get in. At this point, I have not yet learned how to say no with my mouth so I make my knees say no for me. But it's no use fighting it: I'm his girlfriend. This is what girlfriends do. I disappear from my body until he is done, and then I wish I'd never met him. When he tries to hold me, his body feels like a cold muddy blanket against my skin. I get up to shower, take my empty sack of oranges with me, and wish to find him gone by the time I get back. But he doesn't leave. For a year he stays and loves me, cooks for me, pulls me to his warm chest when I'm cold, puts a plaster on my cuts when I've hurt myself deliberately. For a year, I feel like a dead thing whenever we have sex. Like my body and a plastic vibrator have too much in common. His face is always serene when he rests and regains his strength. I, on the other end of the bed, hate myself in three different ways. I want to burn my skin alive with a hot iron, but he holds me and I remember that I don't entirely hate him. I hate that he couldn't tell that my face was wet with salt the whole time that he was inside of me. Without meaning to, I teach myself how to become used to the kind of sex where my absence isn't noticed. This must be all there is to it. After hating myself for not opening my mouth to say stop, to say 'I don't ever want to have sex again', I turn around to face him and ask, 'Would you like some tea?'

17.

To: mpumi221@nomail.com

From: celiwemkoneni@nomail.com

Date: 28 July 2016, 23:45

Hey baby girl,

I know that we Skyped for hours yesterday but I've really missed you and hope you're alright that side. When are you going to be on Whatsapp again? In any case, it's no biggy, I like that we email each other this way.

Last week, Ntando took me book-store window-shopping. It's not a thing but I asked him if we could pop into a book store after we watched a movie at the mall. I was browsing between the shelves and he was following me around at a distance, bored and uninterested. That's one thing we don't have in common – he hates to read. 'Is there a movie version of it?' is what he kept asking me when I told him about my favourite books. Anyway, while I was browsing and ignoring his patient boredom, I saw this book called *The Meat and Spirit Plan* by Selah Saterstrom. I paged through it to read from a random page and after I read only a small part, I begged Ntando to buy it for me. I didn't have enough money on me so he bought it and said I could "repay" him by reading to him when we got back to his place. He was watching me when I was reading it between the shelves and he saw how my face changed, so he was curious about why this book had such an effect on me. This is what I'd read when I told him that it wouldn't feel right to go home without it:

There was a thought but I did not have it. It was had. I was the thought and was had. The thought was, *this is how it has always been*. This ancient position, a pattern. All at once my body was every woman that had ever been on her back until I felt into the body of the first woman. On the cool floor of the garden. And she thought: How one of the first things was this. Being on your back, being fucked.

I stood there in the middle of two shelves and thought: here is a woman who knows exactly what this is. A woman who knows me personally. When I read to him, I could only say, 'She writes beautifully, that's all that moves me.' I'm half-way through the book now and I had to wait for Ntando to fall asleep so I could read it without his eyes glaring at me and his questions

interrupting my thoughts. As soon as I'm done with it, I'll pass it to you when you get back. I have a feeling you'll enjoy it too.

## 18.

One of the things that I love the most about Ntando is when I get to see him socialise with other people. When we host braais at his place or when his friends throw house parties and he takes me with him, I love to watch his interactions with other people and admire his pleasantness. With his broad shoulders carrying the rest of his lean body up high, he glides across the space, laughing and hand-shaking and chatting with everyone. Sometimes he looks so at home in whatever space he's in that I forget I'm his girlfriend and I crush on him all over again. Over a couple of semesters, I've learned how to leave my anxiety at the door whenever his hand settles on the low of my back and he introduces me to everyone as the SpongeBob to his Patrick, planting a teasing kiss on my cheek. His confidence is contagious, but it's also the way that he claims me as his that adds length to my neck and introduces a graceful stride to my legs.

At his one friend's party, he braais the meat and makes the pap. He leaves me in the company of a young woman with two deep dimples on either side of her face that inject a kaleidoscope of colours to everything she says. She asks me how long Ntando and I have been dating and she tells me about her boyfriend too. When he arrives, they disappear into the house and I'm forced to make new friends in Ntando's absence. In the backyard of this commune in Westdene, there are at least thirty other strangers and friends standing around a bonfire, talking and laughing over the loud blasts of an old-school house mix through a shabby sound system. I awkwardly join two boys standing around the braai area several steps away from the bonfire. They are huddling close to embers that are slowly dying. I greet them and a conversation kicks off with small talk. 'Who are you here with?' one of them asks me. 'Ntando. He's friends with the birthday boy.'

'Oh, snap, Ntando!' the second boy says. 'Yeah, we know him. So, are you and him like, together-together?'

I laugh, 'Yes, together-together. Just like that.'

When Ntando finds me, he asks if I'm still alright, if I'm having a good time, if I need another drink. His arms coil around my waist like a secret and he hands me a full glass. He thanks the guys for keeping me company and promises that he's all mine for the rest of the night. When he kisses me, I start to feel warm. Right down to my icy toes.

At midnight, we say our goodbyes and thank the guys for a great party. We stumble into the Uber waiting for us outside the gate and drive to my place. Ntando pays for the trip while I fumble with my key at the gate. I hear him laughing at my clumsiness. When he takes the key from my hand gently, I turn around to kiss him, pulling him close until the palisades of the gate press into my back. My hands stay glued to the sides of his face, and the bristles of his moustache are needles above my lip. I want to wrap my leg around the back of his thigh, but my toes stay planted on the ground. I don't stop kissing him until he smiles and whispers, 'I just wanted to give the lock a try.'

In the dark of my room, his pants cuff his ankles and he pins my knees against my shoulders. The bed is kinder to my back than the gate. He grunts and soft words slither into my ear from between his teeth. I can feel all of him inside of me. It's all spiritual and still tangible. In this moment it's no longer him and me, but us knitted together. My mouth gapes at the ceiling and he follows my climax with his. Resting his head against my heaving chest, we're breathing in syllables and waiting for words to come. My only suitable response is to cry. They're happy tears, I say to him with his face in my hands. I love you Ntando. His kiss is charged with emotion and though he doesn't say 'I love you' back, I know that he means it with all his heart.

**unworthy** (*adj.*): 1. not deserving respect, honour or attention. 2. lacking in excellence or value.

I want to leave.

This is the first thing I say to Ntandoyenkosi when he shows up at my place one evening. He takes both my hands into his and sees the scarring on my right wrist. This time, when I failed to tear my skin apart, I turned to the hot iron to inflict a stinging pain and to leave me with the scarring to remind me of it. 'Did you do this?' He puffs out hot air from his nostrils and his voice comes out forced below its natural pitch. 'Why did you do this to yourself?' He doesn't wait for my answer before rummaging through the top shelf of my wardrobe to find ointment for the blistering. 'It is finished,' I say and his face takes on more frustration, but he doesn't say anything. He is keeping everything locked in a clenched jaw. He walks over to me and sits down, holding my wrist to his lap and drawing the tip of his thumb around the four short lines. He puffs once before bringing his voice to a level I strain to hear. 'Why did you do this to yourself?' 'It's not as bad as it looks here Ntando, I promise.' His eyes are the colour of fear and worry. He loves me too deeply and it makes me nervous that I can see it. I purse my lips to keep them from trembling and say again, 'I want to leave.'

My belly button starts to itch. What I meant to say was, I want to leave *you*. He doesn't answer me. When he has nothing to say, he only holds me. I drop my head into the hollow at the base of his neck and stare in silence at the several ants on the floor that are carrying away dry breadcrumbs piece by piece. I wonder if they know that I live here too. I wonder if they think I'm a god. And if so, do they believe that I could deny them food when they don't behave in the way I want them to? The ants in my room look different from the ants in our backyard at home. Those are black and much bigger. Big enough to march along on the soil and invade the scraps of vegetable and fruit peels and cracked egg shells that my mother throws over the garden as organic compost. Thinking about our garden makes me think about my mother, and then about God. Neither would be happy to know what I've done to my body. What I've done *with* my body. She taught me from a young age (my mother, not God) to treat my body like a temple. Temples don't burn themselves down with hot irons or sever themselves with broken wine glasses.

Expelling the silence between us, Ntando asks me not to hurt myself again, he asks me to call him whenever I feel upset. 'It's okay to fall apart. But don't hurt yourself like this, please.' Then

he tells me he loves me. But he doesn't use those exact words. He says 'I'm going to make you some tea and I'll listen to you when you're ready to tell me what's really bothering you.'

## 20.

For a year and a few months, Ntandoyenkosi stays and loves me. In this year, he takes me to meet his mother's sister and her husband, and his favourite nephew who's growing up so fast, he can't keep up. His aunt gives me a warning and says that her son is a good man. If I ever broke his heart, she would find me and do what's necessary. When she says this, he pulls me closer to his side and says to her, 'You'd have to go through me first, Ma.' They laugh together; I only smile. After she leaves us to attend to her biological son who's growing up so fast, no one can keep up, he squeezes my hand and tells me not to worry. 'That's just her way of saying she likes you.'

For a year, he waters me carefully and nurtures me. He secures his rest beneath my shade, forever in my presence. Whenever I fall apart in his company, his eyes take on such a sad shape, I stop crying just to bring him comfort, but he holds me in silence and lets me cry some more. He always says, 'Your tears will water you and you will feel better afterwards'. Sometimes, because of the way he loves me, I can't tell if he is a god or if he just treats me like one.

One morning after he made us breakfast, we were watching a bloody horror movie when I, out of nowhere, started to wail. In the movie, a character was stabbing another character to death with a kitchen knife. With a mouth full of half-chewed bread, eggs and bacon, I felt overwhelmed by the violence in the scene so I wept. I think I was hormonal, I don't know, but he switched the movie off and played something different, something light-hearted. I protested and said 'At least let's see if there's a happy ending?' It's a horror movie, he said. I don't think they have the kind of ending you're hoping for.

How a man like him became a cold muddy blanket to me every time we had sex was something that – though I didn't quite understand it – was entirely my fault. Therefore, I must be the one to sever the tie. A year and a few months of being loved just enough and the hollow wouldn't fill or stop. My restlessness was at my throat like a vindictive fairy-tale witch and I had to obey. Over the phone at nine in the morning, I could hear him clench his jaw and punch the wall.

'Is there no way that I could change your mind?' he whispers through locked teeth.

'No.'

'I don't think I could ever love someone else the way I love you. I don't think I ever want to.'

The witch's hand covers my mouth and I refrain from saying anything that could give him hope.  
After he hangs up, I hide the bloody dagger beneath my pillow and try to go back to sleep.

## 21.

The girls from my class invite me out, so we request an Uber to Braam and I take a few shots of Klipdrift while we wait for it to arrive. I realise too late that this was a mistake. In a confetti of laser lights, the boy I am grinding against shouts his name into my ear and I ignore him, laughing. He gets impatient with me and takes me by the hand to a corner that is less crowded, less noisy. Here, he looks me in the eyes and starts a conversation. Why won't you tell me your name, he asks. I humour him and we speak until the DJ's set changes from hip hop to house music. This is my ex's favourite song, I say. Then he wants to know why we broke up. I change the subject. He asks me what I'm studying, what year I'm doing, what I do for fun, where I stay. He asks me too many things so I kiss him. He keeps his hands around my waist the whole time like we're in high school. We don't kiss for long because he wants to talk some more. You're an interesting girl, he says and takes me to the bar to get me another drink. He drinks a bottle of still water. He doesn't drink alcohol. At all? At all.

When I finished my drink I say, 'Please come with me.' We sneak into the men's bathroom and I unbuckle his belt. When his hands try to stop me, I swallow his index finger and say, 'You're going to want this eventually, why not do it now?' When I finish, I throw up into the dirty toilet bowl and he stays beside me, holding my hair back and apologising.

Three more times within the month, I go out with the girls from my class. Every end of the night, I kneel before a toilet bowl, throwing up brandy and semen. Two out of the three times, no one stands beside me to hold back my hair.

\*

The last time that I make out with a stranger, we're not at a club. We're at a house party at Westside Ridge in Melville. In one of the rooms, a boy and I are talking. I can't remember his name but it would be rude if I stopped mid-conversation to ask. In the dark, I kiss him and unbuckle his belt with one trembling hand. He stops me. He just got out of a relationship, he's not ready to do this with a woman he just met. His voice sounds hard and anxious. I start to fall apart in silence, shivering violently. The others mustn't hear that I'm crying or they might think he's done something wrong, and he's done nothing wrong but call me woman like he believes only decent things about me. He holds my hands together, apologising for hurting my feelings. 'When you feel ready... If you want to talk it out...' But my throat is closed up. I don't stop crying

until he leaves the room to get me a glass of water and some tissues. I'm passed out on his bed by the time he comes back to me.

22.

**To:** mpumi221@nomail.com

**From:** celiwemkoneni@nomail.com

**Date:** 1 November 2017, 14:56

I've mastered the art of separating mind from body and I realise this every time I drink with the girls from my class. Apart from the getting drunk, I've seen how I can split consciousness from flesh when the men I invite into my space ask me where I learned how to do magical things with my tongue. When they ask me, I don't care to answer because it doesn't matter. They don't stick around long enough to ask me other things. This is what I prefer. Now that Ntando and I aren't together anymore, I occasionally take to the bottle to quiet the thoughts that overwhelm me. I don't want to think about him or what he's going through, neither do I want to think about me or what I'm going through, so I'm forever in the company of someone and on weekends. I'm always intoxicated in one way or another.

I woke up to a messy room today because last night I just chucked everything to the floor before I passed out on my bed. It all looks like how I feel inside. It's a mess I cannot stand to look at, a mess I call home. The muscle relaxants, the burning of lungs, the sleeping pill that I call sex – all these are only pacifiers and aren't even close to the remedy for what I've been trying to escape. I keep thinking: the body was meant to be destroyed. Or at least, like you've said once before, I should be allowed to escape it. This is what comes to mind every time I take one shot more than what my tolerance can hold and I'm starting to wonder if I maybe think that the same science of a seed applies to me. When you destroy something completely, it has no other choice but to change form and grow. Basically, things can't get worse from here, right? I wish my hands were strong enough to curl into a fist so that I could fight to do better though.

## 23.

When I was born, I was in breach position and my mother's labour went on for six hours. Twice before me, she had surprisingly easy labours, and so when I came and threatened to kill the both of us, she and my dad knew that it wasn't an ordinary complication. My mother remembers it one way, my father another. I remember nothing but I was there. I was the one it was happening to. Or maybe it was something that was happening to my parents and I was only a catalyst; a prop. Whenever she tells me this story, she mentions that there was an old woman, a neighbour of ours, who didn't want my parents to be happy. My birth was a result of foul play. "Paranormal Blacktivity" is what my older brother calls it. So, because this woman practiced witchcraft with her twisted nature, I made an unexpected U-turn and reached for my mother's beating heart with my tiny hands instead of making my way out of her birth canal. Every time she tells me about my difficult birth, I wonder whether it was a supernatural miracle. Whether I fought death and won, or whether it was a matter of divine chance that we both survived without a Caesarean.

K. once told me that fish and human embryos are exactly the same at some point in their development, apparently, and I remember wishing that I could choose. Imagine if I were a fish – I would probably be dead by now, thank God. A Lucky Star Pilchard, deboned and shredded into mayonnaise and pasta. Served as a salad at a braai. But instead, I chose to be human and my birth was impossible. Every time I share this story with someone else, I relay it with particular emphasis on my belief that, no matter what actually caused or corrected it, it must've been my mother's pleading heartbeat that finally channelled me through.

Now, 23 years later, I keep getting lost on purpose and using other bodies to channel me back. It's my birthday today and I have decided to call my mother and listen to her tell me the story of my birth again. I'm not going out to celebrate and I've asked that no one come to my place to force me to. My sobriety makes the loneliness taste nastier than it usually does, but I tolerate it. Just for today, just for this week, I must tolerate it. After my mother tell me she loves me, I roll out my yoga mat and sit like a lotus in the mud. My eyes close for what feels like half an hour and at the back of my lids, I'm a child again. My innocence is fierce and new. I'm a child reaching for hearts to hold, searching for another body to channel me through...

I found my way out then, but now, I don't really know how this will end.

**lost** (*adj.*): 1. unable to find one's way; not knowing one's whereabouts. 2. that which has been taken away or cannot be recovered.

## 24.

When I make the decision to relocate to Grahamstown for my postgraduate year, the only thing that my father asks me is how much money my bus ticket will cost and whether I've found a safe place to stay. My mother, on the other hand, wants to know if I've discussed my decision with Ntandoyenkosi. She met him once when he drove me home from our visit to his aunt's place in Witbank, and so to her we are betrothed and will eventually be married. When I tell her that we've broken up, she says 'Good men like him are hard to find. Stop being silly and ask him to take you back.' I'm relieved that she doesn't ask me why I would do such a terrible thing, because I wouldn't have any valid reasons to give to her if she were to ask me over again why I would do such a terrible thing. After I've made my decision to register and leave, she makes a sound with her mouth closed and sits by herself in the living room. Repeat episodes of *Isibaya* are playing to ease her anxiety. Everything is finalised: her one and only daughter is leaving to live in the Eastern Cape.

On the day that I leave, everything in Bronks is as it usually is. Except, I inhale the night air like I'll never breathe it in again. My dad decides that it would be a better idea for them to drive me down with all my stuff. My mother is sitting beside him in the passenger seat of our olive-green Corolla, wearing her signature black and white colours in a tight-fitting church dress and shawl. I'm sitting in the backseat, dozing in and out of sleep, holding a teddy bear tightly against my chest. It takes us 11 hours to drive from Bronks to Grahamstown, and when my dad's TomTom tells us that we've arrived, my mother says 'Is *this* it?'

By a divine miracle, we find a place for me at just the right price within 13 minutes of our arrival. A single room at an accommodation on High Street. It comes with a single bed, study desk and small wardrobe. Ten-month contract, no deposit required. I'm on the second floor so when I step out onto the balcony, the view I have is mainly of the accommodation across the street and its balcony. As my parents prepare to leave me, my mother asks me if I'm going to cry. I'm sad to tell her that I won't. She laughs nervously, pinching my arm and pressing me to her chest. She tells me to find a good church, to be careful not join a Satanist one, and to eat well and not starve myself. I kiss the both of them on the cheeks and wave goodbye, watching the Corolla disappear around the corner.

The first person I video call to announce a safe trip is K. She keeps me company for 20 minutes, during which she tells me not to fall pregnant or become an alcoholic or drug addict. In the same breath, she says 'I heard the drinks are extra cheap, like *ridiculously* cheap at that place, so have fun on my behalf while you're there.' In the silence of this room, I realise how far from home I actually am. Here, nobody knows me. Nobody knows my last name, or that I can do things with my body and my tongue. Here, I don't yet exist as me.

## 25.

On the morning of my first Saturday in G-Town, I take a walk to scout the route to school, to Checkers, and to Pick 'n Pay. I know already that these, with the accommodation where I stay, are the only places I will need to know the directions to. I walk along High Street and see that the town itself is no different from Bronkhorstspuit in terms of size – everything is within reach. Strangely, despite seeing the potholes and donkeys and cows and dogs, and hearing the range of clicks in the language of the people I walk past, I still feel like I'm at home. Like this is where I have been all my life.

In front of me, a boy with red headsets on drops his wallet and doesn't notice. I pick it up and tap him on the shoulder. Jeez! he says. Thanks man, I appreciate it. 'I know you're probably in a rush to some place, but could you show me where the Rhodes campus is?' He stretches his arm out in front of us and says: this is it. There are no barricades around it like at UJ. There is no real main entrance. The campus is a part of the town and the town is part of the campus. He asks me where I want to go in particular and I tell him that my classes start on Monday and I only wanted to see where it was. 'Well, I was actually heading back to my place, but I can show you around if you like. My name is Refiloe, I'm from Mamelodi.' I tell him that I'm also from Gauteng. He gives me a high five and says, 'Welcome to G-Town!'

He takes me to see where the library, the gym and the botanical gardens are. After the brief tour, Refiloe takes me to a pub that reminds me of the Dros at Campus Square where Ntando took me on our first date. I'm still in Joburg, I'm still in Bronks, and I'm also right here in G-Town. After he gets the bill, he walks me home and leaves without asking for my number. When I call K. to tell her what happened, she says 'I can't tell if you're fascinated that he didn't hit on you, or if you're smitten because he showed you unconditional kindness, but I understand your excitement. Maybe you've made a new friend. Maybe this time things will be different.' In this small town, you're bound to bump into a familiar face at least twice in a week, but I never see Refiloe from Mamelodi again.

26.

It's hard not to think about God when you're staring at the stars, unless there are streetlights below that are begging to be stared at too. There is a thin line that separates the sky from the tops of hills and houses in G-Town. I like to stare at this line until it disappears and I disappear with it. Until this town's highest peak becomes the lowest level of something called heaven. Usually at night, when the wind blows inward from high up and the clouds move with it, the horizon looks like a blanket of sulphur and smoke, as if everything was on fire throughout the afternoon. It is clear right now though, on this Sunday night: no sulphur, no burning; only star lights above as below. Before I leave the balcony, I text something quickly to Ntando and he texts me back. He doesn't hate me, but he wishes me well. That's all. I go to bed and sleep deeply. In a dream, I get bitten on my arm by a fiercely-red snake and my first lover tries to save me. He wraps a white cloth around my arm but it's not tight enough to stop the venom from flowing to my heart. When I accept that I'm going to die, Ntando comes to my home and finds me in bed, waiting for death to come. He gives me an antidote and I live. My mother walks into the room and asks him to leave. When I'm alone with her, she tells me that I have a deep and tireless love. A love that doesn't run dry. 'But in your own well, you drown yourself,' she says.

It's 03:52 on my phone when I wake up, and I cannot go back to sleep.

## 27.

When I was seven years old, my mother would read me short parts of the Bible every night before we went to bed. The first story that I knew off by heart, I remember, was of Moses freeing the Egyptian slaves and splitting the sea in two right before their very eyes. Like the Egyptians then, I didn't believe it could happen. Of course, I had never seen a body of water bigger than a modest backyard pool so even the concept of "sea" was entirely vague to me. As soon as I was able to read on my own and my mother no longer needed to read to me, I skipped through the blockbuster scenes and bookmarked Songs of Solomon. Chapter one: *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for his love is more delightful than wine.* It would be at least 12 years before my tongue would first taste wine and before my lips would first kiss another's, but at seven, this was the part of the Bible I could believe. I knew that love could exist and that it could be as consuming as drowning yourself in a body of water as big as the ocean. I believed in the depth of love, the tender violence of it, the addictive softness of its aftertaste. At seven, this was all I wanted to understand and to hope for – until I grew older, then I didn't want it anymore.

After knowing Refiloe, I decide that for the rest of my time in this new town, I will not give anything of mine away. When he didn't ask me for my number, I saw a new road being beaten into the ground through a barren veld and this was the only time that I realised that things could be different here, away from Joburg.

Studying Linguistics is different from studying English Literature. With the one, it's all theory and my work is to learn, understand, and do. With the other, a lot of the theories feel like opinions that can be accepted or rejected, and my work is to engage with and apply the multiple conversations that've been had over the centuries. I prefer these conversations to the technicalities of language. I prefer the feeling and consciousness of language over the science behind it. In my first class of the semester, there is a boy sitting long next to me with an open book under the table. He's hiding it like one would hide a cell phone on one's lap and occasionally glance at it throughout a lecture. When he sees me staring, he closes the book to show me the cover. *Capitalist Nigger*. I smile and look back at the lecturer's slideshow on postcolonial theories. Next to the boy is a girl with a short afro and a big chest. She pinches him and tells him to pay attention to the lecturer and to put the book away. He smiles at her and does what she says. After class, they introduce themselves to me as Patricia and Slice. Slice is a nickname and only his close family calls him Anathi. Patricia – Patty for short – is from Port Elizabeth and she's been studying in G-Town for two years. Her boobs quiver slightly when she stretches her hand forward to shake mine. Slice is from Queenstown and he's been here longer. They're both happy to meet me. I've made new friends.

The following week after class, they invite me to join them for drinks at a place called The White Rabbit on New Street. Slice is tall enough to rest his arm on my head and he is always wearing a different pair of happy socks every time I see him. He is the one who's a fan of the place they take me to and he tells me that he thinks it was named from a line in *The Matrix*. "Follow the white rabbit, Neo." His lanky fingers make quotation marks in the air when he says it. Patricia tells me how they met at the Rabbit when she came to G-Town and have been friends ever since. 'He was 30 bucks short on his bill and I offered to pay for him. He stuck around me since then and I don't think he could function without me in his life. He's a clumsy, careless man-boy this one.'

'Oh please, you know you only hang out with me 'cause you think I'm sexy. And don't make it sound like I was broke, I just didn't have my wallet on me and I miscounted how much I had.' Patty rolls her eyes and calls him a liar. On our walk to the Rabbit, they tell me more about what they've done in and around the town together and I learn about the place through their stories. I hear about the club where shots are only R2 on particular nights. I hear about the

botanical garden on campus where Patty and Slice's other friends threw him a surprise birthday braai last year. In between the fun stuff, they also tell me that there's no cinema, no Chicken Licken and no McDonald's close by. There's no Uber and no Taxify either, and nothing exciting to do beyond experiencing new and improved levels of boredom, and waiting for the Arts Fest to begin.

The Rabbit is one big wooden shack with dark grey booths along the walls and wooden tables on the front centre, close to the door. Towards the back, there is an open space that serves as a dance floor on the nights when the music is upbeat and people want to dance off the pizza and seafood calories. On the light grey walls, there are pop culture posters – one of the Pulp Fiction movie and one of Albert Einstein with his tongue sticking out, amongst others. We find our seats in one booth close to the bar and a waiter lets us know that she'll be back to take our orders in two minutes. Her jet-black dreadlocks are a perfect bun at the crown of her head and she has a piercing on the side of her lip. Her eyes dart over to me before she turns to leave and I see the perfect cat-eye lined on her lids. Her beauty makes me anxious so I keep my eyes lowered. 'What are you drinking, sweetie?' Patricia asks me.

'Oh no, I don't drink. I think I'll just have a vanilla milkshake if they have any,' I say. She looks at me and says, 'Are you sure? I mean, don't worry if you get tipsy or anything, I'll take care of you.'

'And the first round is on me,' Slice says. 'I promise I have my wallet this time.' They make me feel like the adopted daughter of an odd married couple. 'Beer,' I say. 'Black Label draught please.' I'm surprised when they don't react; when they don't say, 'You don't look like you drink beer.' When the girl with a piercing comes back, she takes our order for a large carnivore pizza and drinks. Soon, she returns with three drinks and a basket of serviettes and cutlery. I stare at the tray to avoid staring at her. She places the draught in front of Slice and he lifts it to place it in front of me, 'That's hers. I'm the Smirnoff.'

'Oh, my bad. I've never met a black girl in this town who drinks Black,' she says, finally placing Patricia's long island in front of her. I only smile and she walks away. Here, I don't yet exist as me. I sink into my seat and feel comforted by the space. With the doses of Slice's playfulness and Patty's sister-like affection, I can't tell that I'm the odd one out as a stranger of the town and of their company. I order another drink. As the hours tick by, more people flood into the

place looking for a table for four, for six, for eight. The customers are mostly students like ourselves, but the ages of the crowd range and pretty soon I can't tell apart the young students from the middle-aged adults. After Slice gets the bill, we clink the glasses of our last round together and toast to a new friendship. Where I'm sitting, I can see the door every time someone new walks in from outside and my eyes catch those of a man in a deep-blue blazer and a red t-shirt. He holds the door open for his two friends, keeping his eyes on my face the whole time. 'Do you know that guy?' Slice asks me. 'No,' I say and avert my eyes from his face. 'He looks really good though. Attractive.' In Joburg, he would be the man whose name I wouldn't care to know or remember. But not here.

On an odd Saturday afternoon in G-Town, Patty calls me and asks if I want to come with her to a book club on campus. A group of students started it and they meet once a month to discuss various books together over some sponsored wine and snacks. It'll be fun, she says, but I don't need convincing. The last time I read anything for leisure was when I read to Ntando and even then, it wasn't for leisure as much as it was for clarity and insight. It was personal research.

At 16:45, I leave my bed and take a shower. I put on a white leather skirt, white sneakers and a loose white jersey. Patty meets me at the Arch and we walk to the venue where a group of 20 or so people are standing around, drinking tea, coffee and wine, and talking softly amongst themselves. I make myself a cup of rooibos with no sugar and sit down next to Patty. From her bag, she takes out a copy of Paulo Coelho's *Adultery* and I wonder if it was a mistake to come.

A man with thick glasses and a goatee stands in the middle of the imperfect circle and greets everyone. 'Thank you all for coming, it's good to see you all again. If you are new here, we welcome you and we hope you will be joining us for the rest of the year.' He looks right at me and blinks his eyes through their walls of glass. 'Anyway,' he says, 'it's been a month since we last chose our book from the box of suggestions and I'm sure everyone has finished reading *Adultery* by now. We're going to open the floor to opinions on the book – how you felt about it, what you liked, what you didn't like, if you felt inspired by it to cheat on your spouse. Et cetera.' The man sits down. As the conversation unfolds, I glance around the big square room with shelves like tall barred windows along the cream-white walls. I glance at the people too. Someone is crushing weed with their hands in their lap. Someone is pouring brandy into their mug of coffee from a silver flask. Someone is sleeping with their head tilted back and their mouth wide open. At the centre of it all, the conversation is zealous and every voice fills the room like the sound of water.

After several people speak, waving their hands in mid-air and searching the ceiling for the right words, I gather that the book is about a married woman who experiences a depression that drives her to commit adultery with a married politician. Though her life is going quite well on the surface, she leads herself into odd and risky situations in the name of adrenalin and curiosity and wanting to *feel* something other than the numbness she knows. A young woman with dull red hair and too many bracelets on her left arm holds a glass of white wine to her

chest and says, 'I think everything she did was only a cry for help. I mean, what's the point of going through all of that if it's just to appease your boredom? She was seeking attention from her husband or from someone.' Patty disagrees with her. 'If you know anything about depression, you would know that on a feeling level, people will drive themselves to do seemingly stupid things to rid themselves of the feeling. Sometimes, a person might even drive themselves further into their dark hole because they either really don't think they deserve anything else or because they believe that the only way to find themselves again is to lose themselves completely. I mean, aren't those the very words on the cover of the book?' I look down at my lap and there they are, I hadn't seen them before. *Sometimes you have to lose yourself to discover who you really are.* A girl with a blue head wrap speaks in a shrill voice, 'That narrative is crazy in my opinion. The idea of having to lose yourself to find yourself is simply a lie. I think she was just bored and wanted to cheat for the excitement, but it had nothing to do with "finding herself".' Patty shakes her head but she says nothing else for the rest of the night.

When we're in the queue waiting for the shuttle to arrive, I ask her what she meant by what she said about the book. 'My older sister was depressed when she was in high school. Before she met her husband, she was quite a hoe. She used to date all these different guys because she could never be alone. When she was alone, she felt worthless and then she would feel suicidal. One time I got mad at her and said, "Why would you be so selfish, why would you want to lead such a destructive life when you have a family that cares about you?" She said when she was chasing the feeling, it gave her hope that things could be better. It didn't make sense to me but when I read this book, I think I got it.' Patty's boobs don't move when she's speaking softly, when she's not laughing. Her face is only a shadow in the dark while I listen to her. 'Anyway, that's just my opinion and experience of it. It's a pretty lovely book. If you've ever read anything by Coelho, you'll know. Would you like to borrow it?'

I hesitate but decline. I already have a lot to read with the course and all. She puts it back into her bag and laughs. 'Every time I come here, I forget that I'm a slave to lit. theory. Promise me you'll join us next time though. I'll ask Keagan to add you to our Whatsapp group, okay?'

Okay.

I can't go home as often as Slice and Patty can and I hate it. When they leave for the week-long break, I am left to wander in the town like an abandoned child. To stay in my room would be insanity and to read at the library would be boredom, so I take a walk around the town and turn at random corners until I find myself on Luke Street. It is so quiet and hidden, you'd miss it if you didn't wander or get lost. Or if you didn't already live there in the block of yellow flats opposite a handful of trees with white and pink petals. I decide that this is my favourite area in G-Town and walk snail-slow in the middle of the path to create the feeling of home. I get hooted out of the way by a red Polo Vivo and the driver rolls his window down. 'Jeez, are you trying to die?'

'I'm sorry,' I say. I recognise his face and he recognises mine too. 'Where have I seen you before?'

'At the Rabbit a while back.' He nods and asks, 'Where are you headed?' I tell him I'm going back to my place. I live on High Street. 'May I drive you there?' No. I prefer to walk. He rolls his window up and the gate to the yellow flats opens for him. He drives in. In a moment, I hear footsteps behind me and it is him. For the first 10 minutes of our walk, he talks. He tells me about his job as a lecturer at the architecture department, about his life back home in East London, and about his odd affection for animations. 'No one should know about this last bit apart from you', he says and smiles. His friends always tell him that at 33, he's too old for cartoons, yet he can't help but watch them to reminisce about his childhood and to escape the stresses of adulthood for a moment. When he asks about me, I pick things from the surface and take my time deciding what kind of woman I would like to be in his eyes. I avoid discussing past relationships and all he asks me is if I'm single. I confirm, adding that I'm not looking for a relationship yet. He's okay with this; he's not looking either. We finally get to High Street and he says, 'Please take my number. Call me up when you go for a walk again.' I look at his face closely as he types his name into my phone. His skin is the colour and texture of peanut butter, and he has a scar that runs from his forehead and splits the hair on his right brow into two unequal slabs.

'Where did you get that?'

'From Mufasa.'

‘What?’

‘It’s a bad joke, I couldn’t help myself. It’s a scar, as in *The Lion King*? Anyway, I got it when I was still a boy. It’s a long story but it involves my dad and a kitchen knife.’ His eyes get cloudy when he says “dad”. When he smiles at me, they clear up again. ‘I’m going to call you Scar from here on, until you tell me what happened.’ He laughs, ‘Then I guess you’re going to call me Scar for the rest of our lives.’

### 31.

I wake up from a nap in my room feeling claustrophobic and edgy. I dreamt of nothing that could've possibly given me this unflinching feeling of madness, but here I am. I am stuffed inside a matchbox and if I dare breathe in deep enough to expand my lungs, I might explode. Slithering to the wooden floor, I pound my right fist hard against the wall and rub the throbbing further into my knuckles. Scar calls me to tell me that he's outside. I go downstairs to sign him in.

Avoiding the bed, I lay a blanket on the wooden floor and we sit next to each other. He bought sushi from Pick 'n Pay and he swallows his California roll with chopsticks. He wants to teach me how to use them but I grow impatient with hunger and just eat everything like a Nguni woman: with my hands. While we eat, he tells me about his mother. I look at his face and wonder if he looks like her; if I'm looking at parts of her in him. 'She's quite a loud woman. Very strict with absolutely no tolerance for bullshit, no matter how slight or unintentional. I spent most of my boy years afraid of her. She was never the kind of woman that I could talk to about anything. But things are better between us now that I'm older. I think she finally sees me as my own man now.' He tells me about his younger brother too and how he hopes that he will turn out to be a better person than he and their parents could ever hope to be. As he promised me, he says nothing about his father and I wonder if he looks like him too. Then, without my asking, he tells me about his past lovers. The details are from a boy who's in high school, who tallies all the girls he's been intimate with and thinks he deserves a medal for each one. I'm indifferent so I ask, 'Have you ever actually been in love?' He laughs at my question. 'Once. I was 24 and we were together for a year, then she fell pregnant.'

'So you have a kid?'

'She miscarried before we got to four months. After that, we drifted apart. We stopped having sex, stopped talking to each other, like we were an old married couple. We just lost our spark. We stayed together because we were used to it, but there was no point.'

'Because you stopped having sex?'

He frowns and says no, but he can't substantiate his answer. 'How did you break up?'

'She was cheating on me and she confessed. One day out of nowhere, she tells me that she's with one of my friends. That they started talking about what she was going through and then they eventually hooked up behind my back. She said it just happened, but then she said it was my fault 'cause I wasn't catering to her needs or some stuff like that.'

'Was she right?'

'Listen, I tried my best to be there for her. I even offered to pay for a psychologist and go to sessions with her. I mean, I would do anything for her and she knew that. But anyway, I let her go and that was it. She played me for a fool and there was nothing I could do about it no matter how much I had tried to make her happy.' When I don't say anything else, he leans in to press his lips against mine. The kiss is awkward and doesn't last long. He continues the conversation and our moment passes on like a YouTube ad. The sun is pushing orange slabs into my room through the open balcony door and we both realise that it's almost time for him to leave but neither of us says anything about this.

**To:** mpumi221@nomail.com

**From:** celiwemkoneni@nomail.com

**Date:** 4 April 2018, 18:41

Beloved, I miss you and I trust that things are going well on your side. I saw and read your last email and I'm going to reply to it after sending this one, there's something I've been keen to tell you.

As you know, the task of adapting to a new but not-so-different language here is one that covers at least 60% of my life because I'm constantly learning new words and practicing the vast range of clicks on my tongue. Here and there, the words are similar because isiZulu, isiNdebele and isiXhosa are Nguni languages. I thought to myself, this is going to be a walk in the park, but I was so wrong. Before we left home, my dad told me that some of the words across the respective languages are homonyms and have vastly different meanings. For example, the word "kusasa". We know this as "tomorrow" but to them it means "morning", so please imagine my confusion when one of my new friends said "ngomso k'sasa" and I thought she was repeating herself. The craziest case of misinterpretation was when I came across the word "ubhabha". When I first heard it from someone's lips, I was traumatised. Until Patty laughed at me and explained that in isiXhosa, "ubhabha" is to fly. We both know that the noun form of the word in isiNdebele means something explicitly different. In my experience of learning this language, the Linguistics major in me wants to knit a connection between the meanings that split apart like two sides on either end of a bridge.

The one word I wanted to tell you about is "thintitha". I heard it when a young woman read a poem in isiXhosa at our book club and when I spoke to her after class, I found out that the word means something different from what I had in mind. To them, it doesn't mean "to dust something off", it means "to stutter". I took the word, held it up against the pale white light bulb in my room, and I declared it as mine.

Before I left home, I told you about how sex feels like a cold muddy blanket against my skin, and even though I love Ntando, I couldn't shake off the feeling of hating the both of us every time we slept together. I didn't have the heart to tell him this right until we broke up. I always thought it would be different, that I would change eventually and not feel so far away. There

were times when I felt relatively close to him but nine times out of ten, my body took on the shape of an empty cardboard box every time we got intimate in that way and things got much worse after we broke up. That word “thintitha”, I took it and weaved it into the inside of my right thigh like a prayer. My body is at a point where it’s trying to dust off the trauma of feeling a black emptiness float inside its limbs; and it’s stuttering, stumbling over its inharmonious feelings and trying to find a way to feel safe and whole in its own skin.

### 33.

The first time I visit Scar's place, it's at seven in the evening on a Sunday. In his apartment, he has one queen-sized bed, one burgundy couch, and a black desk where his laptop and textbooks are scattered. The kitchen area is across from the bed and the room is spacious enough to make me forget that the bed is there with us, covered in a navy-blue duvet. I watch him cook pasta and beef goulash. He pours me a glass of red wine and I have it with my food. I decline when he offers me another. I wait for him to finish clearing the dishes before I hold his face and kiss him. This time, the kiss isn't awkward. It feels unfamiliar, careful. I let him undress me. Your skin feels cold, he says. I continue shivering even after he pulls the duvet over us. He doesn't say anything the first time he moves inside of me. He watches my face and doesn't blink. Whether my eyes are open or whether they are closed, he watches me. He doesn't ask me to turn around, or to take him into my mouth, or to call out his name. He only kisses me and watches me and breathes me in. This time, things are different, though I'm not sure how. When we finish, I hold back my tears and let my body come down from its trembling. He kisses me once more before he falls asleep in my arms and my skin is warm again.

**addictive** (*adj.*): 1. causing a strong and harmful need to regularly have or do something. 2. very enjoyable in a way that makes you want to do or have something again. 3. producing or tending to cause an addiction.

### 34.

It is not too firm and it is not too soft either. The feeling of it against my skin is rough, depending on how restless I am. If I stay still and quiet as a breath, it feels like my own skin; but when I move too much, it feels like it hates me. To accommodate its shape and length, I am always curled and bent like a foetus. Only this way does everything fit perfectly. Only this way could I stay on it for a whole day. From Scar's burgundy couch, I watch him work on his laptop. He thinks I'm asleep so he doesn't lift his spectacled eyes from the screen. He clicks his fingers frantically over the keyboard and I amuse myself with guessing how many words he's typed or how many pages he's written. Apart from the black socks on his feet, he is naked. I am naked too, wearing only the stern colour of the couch around me. I can feel my skin being masked by the fabric so that after an hour, after two hours, I am nowhere in the room and he doesn't look up to find me. He thinks I'm still sleeping. I close my eyes to do as he thinks. He wakes me up with kisses and tells me dinner is ready. I watch him roll a joint while I eat. He only smokes when he doesn't have to go to work the next day. I wolf down my food and dish up some more. He smiles and says, 'Your appetite improves when you're with me.' He is not wrong.

For a week and a half in this latter part of April, my place hasn't known my presence. I've been at Scar's place more times than my own shower has seen my grime and he's opened me up in places I didn't know had doors, portals, and windows. I'm no longer an empty cardboard box waiting to be filled: I'm floating inside the colour of his couch and within the walls of his whole room. I have transformed again. Sometimes, all he wants from me is to listen to him. He tells me about many things that he says have never been said out loud before and because he trusts me, I get to hear them first. But I don't think of this as an honour. What he says about what I mean to him and what he does to show me are two different things. Sometimes, he forgets that I'm in the room on his couch. Sometimes he doesn't look at me when I speak to him and he responds without knowing precisely where in the room I'm sitting when I happen to move. When I'm away from him, he doesn't miss me – he gets agitated and impatient. Scar doesn't know what magic my tongue can perform. He doesn't want to know. When he undresses me, he only wants to know that I feel pleasure and so he'll look at my face in search for it. He will kiss me and let me kiss him back. When he's staring, I'll believe that he cares deeply about me, but afterwards, I know that it's not true. So I stay and wait for us to go again. When I don't close my eyes to his, I want to cry because I feel full but not of love. Scar doesn't fight with me. He only disagrees and then I apologise and then I get kisses and pleasure again. Scar doesn't call me by my name. He just says, "Babe" or "Beautiful".

I tell Patty all these things and she sighs deeply. She doesn't understand why I would stick around him and stay at his place like a house pet. I laugh at her concern. 'It's nothing to worry about. I like him and I know he's addicted to my company too. I'm just waiting for him to say it out loud to me. I want to hear it.' When she asks me if that is the only reason why I stay with him, I don't know how to answer her.

It's Slice's birthday and he asks for nothing else from me but a round of drinks and my company. It's a windy Friday afternoon in May and he wants me to meet up with him at his favourite place. 'Yo, let's go drink, bruh' he texts me; 'and bring your wallet.'

I see him outside the Rabbit, standing against the grey wall close to the door. Wearing blue, purple and yellow happy socks paired with black chinos and a blue shirt tied at the collar, he looks long as always and slicker than usual. He kisses the top of my head when I tip-toe to give him a hug. I hand him a small gift bag with two pairs of animated socks inside. 'I saw them last week and immediately thought of you.' His face beams and he thanks me, opening the door to let me inside.

'I'm so glad you didn't say "May the force be with you" to me.' I don't understand what he means. 'Star Wars. It's May the 4<sup>th</sup> today. Every time I get texts from friends, it's always "May the force, may the force" – I've never even watched the damn thing, it's so annoying.'

I laugh, looking at the menu. 'Yeah, I haven't seen it either. Maybe we should get the movie sometime and watch it at Patty's place so that on your next birthday you could receive the phrase on a lighter note.'

'That would be sweet, actually. Watching classic, pop culture movies with you guys on one Saturday afternoon. Good food and good drink, and it's a date.' He fist bumps me to seal the promise. 'Now because it's your birthday, I'll order you this burger special and you can have two ciders.'

'I have a better idea. How about we get a pizza to share, and then we can have enough draughts to get us sloshed?'

'Oh, we're having beer today, are we? How grown up of you, Slice!' A different waiter from before, a dark-skinned guy this time, brings two dewy glasses of Heineken and Black. I ask Slice what he plans on doing for the night and he says that there's an open mic that his friend invited him to. 'She's performing there so I wanna go see her. You wanna come?'

'Let's see how these next few hours go. Maybe I'll feel like going.'

Slice tells me about a girl that he's interested in and I turn into his personal advisor. While he speaks, I can tell that he's talking about Patty but I don't say anything. I laugh when he acts coy. It doesn't suit you to be this shy, I say. 'She makes me weak. Worse because she's friend-zoned me.' He takes my advice to just go for it and have the conversation with her to see how she feels. He nods and changes the topic. 'Where have you been these days? You're so scarce, I didn't even think you'd be free today.'

'I met a guy. Remember the one I was staring at when I first came here?' He doesn't remember. 'Well, it's him. We bumped into each other when you and Patty had ditched me for your families, and we've been hanging out since then.' I'm playing with the rubber band on my left wrist, pulling it and letting it slap lightly against the skin, leaving a gentle kind of sting. He rubs the skin when it gets red and asks me why I'm hurting myself.

'It hurts good.'

'You sound like a masochist.'

When we came in, the light outside was still covering the whole town but now the darkness is soaking in. My face feels hot and the veins on my hands are bulging. In my head, I'm thinking about Scar. I want to tell Slice that the sex makes me believe that I'm invincible but he doesn't hold me at all afterward. He isn't falling for me like I assumed he would and I'm not sure what to do to make him. I know that there's nothing about my body that he needs, nothing about me that makes him gullible. There is nothing that I do that makes him kneel at my feet. Still, I stick around because his presence makes me hungry, and this hunger silences the hollowing. I want to tell Slice everything, but he wouldn't understand.

'At what time is that open mic?'

He looks at his watch. 'It's in 20 minutes. It's just up the road. You coming with me?'

'Yeah, I'll go with you. One last round before we go?'

He rubs his hands together. 'Standard.'

When Scar calls me at 20:30 to ask if I could come sleep over at his place, I tell him that I'm at an open mic session with Slice and that he should come pick me up in an hour. In his car, I'm excited to tell him that Slice dared me to read some of my work out loud. 'He's read an essay

of mine before and so he knew that I had something interesting to say. I took him up on his dare and read an essay that I wrote a while back, I think I was in your room at the time. It was about my childhood and how I defined love. I only read parts of it but it was one of the scariest, most exciting nights of my life!’ I say everything in a tone that fills the whole red Polo. In a stiff voice, Scar says, ‘So you were drinking all day with this guy?’

‘What?’

‘This Slice character. Who is he?’

‘He’s a guy from my class. I’ve told you about him.’

‘Oh. I didn’t know you were out with him today.’ He looks to his sides before making a left turn into Luke.

My hands drop to my lap and my shoulders follow. As soon as he parks, we step out the car in perfect silence and walk into his apartment. I walk in behind him. He pours two glasses of red wine and extends an arm to offer me one. ‘I can’t take any more liquor,’ I say. ‘We had too much to drink and—’

He turns his back to me and pours the wine into his own glass, filling it to the brim and then halving it in two loud gulps. I feel a coldness in my throat. ‘Is there something wrong?’

He laughs and shakes his head. ‘I just wish you could’ve told me that you’re going out today. I wouldn’t have bothered to buy you your favourite bottle of wine if I knew you would get here and not drink it ‘cause you were out drinking with fucking Slice.’ I remain standing in one place, my mouth slightly open but no words forming on my tongue. He gulps from his glass again, breathes past me to the bathroom, and slams the door behind him. All I can hear in his room is his piss hitting the water in the toilet, and my mind trying to find an apology for what just happened.

37.

There are some plants that cannot grow upward and reach for the sun on their own. Sometimes they'll crawl on their belly on the ground and eventually die or produce very little fruit. What they need is something erect, something to wind themselves around so that they could grow above ground like they're supposed to. I've skipped classes, cancelled numerous plans with friends, and have stopped going to church because I coil myself too tightly around Scar. Still, he isn't like the boys I've known before and so no matter how much I entangle myself around his name, he doesn't show me that he notices or that he cares. By now, I would've left but I can't. If I do, I might be left to crawl on the ground and wither. The hollowing feeling might come back. When Scar says, 'Beautiful, I need to be in PE for the long weekend to visit a friend,' this is the only time I leave his place to go to mine and the leaving doesn't feel too difficult.

In his absence, I meet with Patty in town and she buys me a pot plant to take care of. It has bright yellow flowers with dark green leaves that are glossy on the surface and rough underneath. It needs to be watered twice a week and, apparently, the plant enjoys attention so I might need to sing to it and talk to it and put banana peels in its soil. I'm not sure how true what Patty tells me is, but I like the sound of it and I thank her sincerely. 'Hopefully this will keep you at your place more than you are at his.'

'He's gone for the weekend.'

'Oh, is that why you called to hang out with me? You're so disloyal to me, you know that. Anyway, guess what? Slice took me out on a date on Thursday night. Like, it was a date-date!' Her boobs tremble visibly.

'So is it an actual relationship now?'

'Not really. We were just talking about how things are going to work out since we've been friends for a while and this would be a huge step. It was a fun date though. It felt exactly like all the times that I've ever hung out with him except this time he was more attentive to me, you know what I mean? Like, he looked me dead in the eyes the whole time as if I was his whole world for that moment. Also, we kissed quite a lot and then when he took me home, we sat outside for a while and talked some more.'

'You didn't invite him in?'

'No, of course not! If I did, things would've happened and I don't want that. I don't want to spend the rest of our relationship wondering if he's only with me because of what he can get from me. I want to be sure that he likes me because he likes *me*, you know what I mean?'

'Jeez, Patricia. I wish I knew you in my undergrad.'

In this small town, the clouds look heavy with ghost stories and everything is draped in a monochrome filter. The buildings don't hold each other close. They make a bitter coldness just standing there alone, bearing their fangs to the sky. The bricks at night are strange shadows staring down their noses at no one and the sewers swallow more bodies of water than the townspeople have to drink. This place laps at you bit by bit, like a child eating ice-cream on a cone. But you'll never see this in daylight. Sometimes, you melt quickly enough to want to die right now. Sometimes all you can do is let delirium fill your lungs and just wait... nothing protects you from it. Not the books in the library. Not the walls in your room. Not the churches on every corner, the ones with a broken clock for an eye, that one that tells a story of a different time. Once you get used to its unyielding dimness, it's not that bad. Or at least, it gives you some good things. Like people.

At a book launch in town, I'm standing next to a girl who's asking the organiser which of the finger-foods are vegetarian. I ask her how long she's been vegetarian for like it's the start of an AA meeting. Pretty soon, we're talking about her diet, then her family, and then about how her name isn't short for Bokamuso but is simply Buka. Her twin carries the rest of their name and together their name means "Behold, the presence of God." Between her and her twin, she's the behold/look/observe part of the name-sentence. I can count the number of times her eyes meet mine on both my hands. She darts hers around the room and to the roof, looking for things to help her explain, but I keep mine on her face the whole time. I know the length of her teeth and how the ones in front touch her tongue before the others do. I know how her eyes smile before her cheeks touch her eyelids. The innocence in her face makes me sad and I suddenly feel protective of her. At the end of the night, I keep wondering one thing: what did she notice about me that made her ask for my number?

Two weeks later, Buka comes to my place and I make her some tea because she's sick. The room is cold without the sun shining in so I switch the heater on for her and play some music softly as we talk. Even when she's under the weather, her face doesn't show it. Her smile still looks like something I don't want to betray with a weak adjective. From her sling bag, she pulls out a little black notebook and reads me some of her poetry. 'You write beautifully,' I say to her after she reads. She blushes but she doesn't look like she believes me. She only smiles and says, 'I appreciate it.' Changing the subject, she asks me what I like to do in my room when I'm

not busy with work. The question forces me to remember what I used to do before Scar's room became my room too. 'I watch some anime or I read. Nothing much.'

'Oh, that's cool,' she says. 'Wait, so if you could compare me to an anime character, which one would you say reminds you of me?'

I want to say Mayuri from *Steins; Gate* but I hold my tongue and think about it a bit more.

'Maybe you're Captain Yamato,' I say. She crosses her legs and stirs the tea in her hands. She's holding my teddy bear to her lap and she looks like she's been a part of my life for longer than I've seen her smile. 'What does Captain Yamato do?'

'He's the only one who can stop Naruto from going beast mode and destroying himself and ultimately, those around him.'

'Then, are you Naruto?'

I say, 'There's something about your company that reminds me of my younger self.'

She smiles. 'Well, I *am* three years younger than you so that must be it.'

She asks me to play her an episode of the anime so she can see who Captain Yamato is, but her mom calls and tells her she's downstairs. When I sign her out and walk her outside, she takes my hand and wants me to meet her mom. Her mother is a firecracker compared to Buka's quiet disposition. Her excitement in meeting me reminds me of the mothers in Bronkhorstspuit who call all friends of their children their own children too. She hugs me and says 'I've heard so much about you! In our house, you're all Buka talks about. I'm so happy to finally meet you!' I blush and tell her that it's a great pleasure to meet her too. Buka is shy standing next to her. I hug them both goodbye and close the car door for her.

When I walk back to my room, I see two missed calls from Scar but I don't respond to them. My fingers itch to send a text message to let him know that I won't ever come back to his place; that I want him to stop calling me and that we're not an item anymore. When he calls a third time, I watch it ring until it stops. Buka makes me want to leave him but I don't yet trust that I can. I switch my phone off, water my yellow plant, and make some tea in the same cup that she drank from.

I'm waiting at a coffee shop across from campus for Scar to finish work and come get me. I'm tired from the 3-hour seminar that I just had and Patricia and Slice have left me to go to the library to complete the assignment that's due within the week. I finished mine yesterday so that I wouldn't have to worry about work when I'm with him. The smell of dark coffee makes me wish I had a palate for it, but when the waiter asks me what I would like to drink, I opt for rooibos tea with no sugar.

17:50. The sun is falling away and this brings a slight chill to the air. I take my white blazer from my back-pack and drape it over my shoulders. I'm sitting in a corner away from the small crowd of people and to anyone who cares to look over to my part of the shop, I look like I belong there, like I'm there for a very good reason. A couple walks in hand-in-hand and sits down at a table a meter or so away from me. He pulls the chair out for her and she sits down. They must be newly together, I think. She still smiles at him with her eyes as much as she does with her lips and teeth and he still does things for her, like order her favourite hot drink without missing a single detail. I'm watching his face more than hers – he reminds me of someone. His eyes pierce deeply into her face, memorising every line, every strand of hair, every expression. Not even the waiter placing their orders before them is enough of a distraction to move his eyes. I want to ask them how long they've been dating, but I know this doesn't matter. For a year and a few months, from day one to the very last phone call, Ntando handled me like a Rubik's cube in his care – enjoying moving the colours around, almost finding the right combination, and then mixing it up again so as to not finish it too soon. He saw me the same way I see Buka when she reads to me. The same way this man is admiring his girlfriend right in the middle of a coffee shop. 18:12. Scar walks in and comes straight towards me. 'I hope you haven't been waiting long,' he says. I gather my things and pay the bill. We walk out hand-in-hand.

He didn't bring his car with him because he thought he needed the walk anyhow. 'I hope you're not too lazy to walk right now,' he says to me, squeezing my hand in his. I'm never too lazy to walk. In Bronks we walk all the time. We could walk 20 minutes to go visit someone for an hour and then walk back home for 20 minutes again. He offers me his coat, but I am warm enough. He tells me that his day was a load of trash. Not only was there a gross miscommunication between his honours students and himself, but his colleagues were being a pain in the ass. He

doesn't tell me too many details because I'm a student too and that wouldn't be right. Still, he vents completely because he trusts me just like a congregant would entrust their half-truths and confessions to a priest. My boots are munching at the little stones on the pavement and the sound hypnotises me. I can barely see anything in the dimness of streetlights. His words fall to my feet and add to the crunch-crunching of the stones as we walk. 'They don't deserve you,' I say. 'You're right, babe. Man, they made me so mad! If it wasn't for you being here with me right now, they would've ruined my whole day.' His hand doesn't warm mine so I let go and chuck my hand into my blazer pocket. A streetlight hovers above us and I wait for him to look at me, but he doesn't. Another comes up and my hope remains steadfast, but he misses the opportunity once more, and then we're in a temporary dark. I think about the couple in the coffee shop and take his hand again.

\*

The clock on his laptop signals 01:00 and he's sleeping next to me. There is a small space between us. When we got to his place, he cooked, we ate, and then we had each other until we couldn't anymore. I was there for all of it. I watched his face wither and harden with an insatiable appetite, and for once, my body wasn't stuttering. For once, it spoke itself into fluency and its eloquence possessed me. Whenever he moved into me, he would whisper, stretching a single moment to fit it against an eternity. *Beautiful*, he whispered to me every time I collapsed. Hungry to hear it from his mouth over again, I bent backwards for him, pulling my back towards his chest. Cobra pose. When he lost himself, I gained a power that rushed through my limbs, bled from my lip, and filled the whole room with a blinding light. After, he fell asleep, leaving me satisfied yet still ravenous.

‘Loneliness is knowing the stretch of eternity while you’re narrowly awake. Loneliness is one spoon, one fork, one plate, one single bed that feels still too big. No other voice in the room but mine, thinking out loud. Every moment waits on the next like a last breath. Loneliness will make you believe in something that hasn’t been proven yet. I stick my head out the window like a puppy in a car on the highway. I feed my liver, feed my ears, feed my stomach but still, I remain vacant. Every voice in the street is a friend who hasn’t yet met me and I always keep my door unlocked even when I am sleeping. Especially when I’m sleeping.’

I am laying my head on Buka’s lap as she reads this to me from her old diary. ‘I was 16 here,’ she says. ‘You can probably tell ‘cause the piece itself sucks, but it’s what I felt at the time. I can still remember everything.’

‘I understand all of it,’ I say. I can’t see her face with my head on her lap, and she asked for it to be this way so that she could read her heart to me without feeling like I’m gutting her open. Her right hand holds the little pink book open, and her left hand is at the crown of my head, patting softly to the rhythm of her syllables. With every new hour that comes, the sky gathers new clouds and my room darkens. I wish it would rain so that she could stay here this way with me and never have to leave.

As soon as she grows tired of reading, I offer to make us chickpea wraps that I recently learned how to make from a vegan YouTube channel. We talk about our pasts some more. I never quite understand how we attempt to get to know each other by reassembling things neither of us can prove nor confirm about each other, but it’s alright with me as long as she tells me about herself more. There was a boy in her life once and he broke her heart. He broke up with her and she never saw it coming. After, he tried to come back into her life and she almost let him, but something changed in her heart and she knew she deserved better. When I ask her how long they were together, she asks me why it matters. ‘Three years, two months, one week – a lot happens in between and heartbreak is heartbreak. Maybe you should ask me how long it took for me to get over it.’

I sit up and cross my legs on the bed. ‘How long did it take you?’

'I'm still not over it. It still sucks when I think about it. She looks down at her chipped nail polish on her nails and chips at it some more.

'I have nail polish remover for that.' I fetch my cosmetics bag from my wardrobe and dab the remover into a white cotton pantyliner. I put her hands on my lap and remove what's left of the purple nail polish. 'Do you want me to repaint them?'

'Which colours do you have?' I show her. After she picks the navy blue one, I paint her nails on her left hand in two coats, and she watches my hands handle hers.

'Tell me about Scar.'

'What do you want to know about him?'

She props her free hand under her chin to look at me. 'Do you like him?'

I laugh. 'Would I be with him if I didn't?'

'You're not answering my question.'

I sigh. 'The thing is, I've had somewhat messy relationships too before but not in the way you're probably thinking. Knowing Scar has changed things for me. I used to think that there's no way I could ever feel like an actual person again, but he's shown me that it's possible. Except, the way he shows me makes me feel conflicted. I'm getting what I thought I wanted, but it's coming at a price I didn't think I would ever have to pay.' She doesn't understand what I'm saying. I say, 'Right hand,' and she rests her hand on my lap. I coat the thumb first and then the index finger. Her skin feels like warm water. 'When he and I met, we were both lonely. One night when I was with him, I asked him if we're each other's tickets out of loneliness and he said yes, probably. He wanted to lie and say no but I told him he doesn't have to lie.' She still doesn't understand me, but this time she doesn't say so. She only looks at our hands on my lap. 'Well, whatever it is you're going through, I hope you'll be content eventually.'

Yes, I hope so too.

41.

I am alone in Scar's room. He's left me to go to a meeting and he asked that I stay so he has someone to come home to. Since he left in the morning, I've been lying in his bed and enjoying the feel of a lazy Saturday. From YouTube on his laptop, I play a song by The Staves and balance a left-over joint between my lips. In the messy ambience of our space, I find a scrap piece of paper and write the lyric of the song first. *I could make you want me, make you need me, make you mine. I could make it holy, make it special, make it right.*

The thing about sex is. The thing about love is. The definitions of both are so blurred before my eyes that I use the undying hope from the definition of his name to spell both words. What I end up with is an idea that is closer to lust than it is to love, closer to starvation than it is to completion. An idea for which I've traded a hollowing navel. An insatiable hunger – he's the only thing that feeds it and simultaneously makes it grow.

I set the pen down in front of me and ash the last bits of the joint on my palm. A small cluster of white-grey snowflakes resting on my life line. It stings just a little when the ash breaks off and the red nose hovers above the skin. I want more of the stinging feeling, so I spark another one and sit on his couch, staring out the window.

42.

**To:** mpumi221@nomail.com

**From:** celiwemkoneni@nomail.com

**Date:** 3 June 2018, 00:09

It's midnight on my clock and I'm sitting at Scar's desk, waiting for the noodles on the stove and listening to Chet Baker play some jazz like something really life-changing is about to happen. There is nothing though. I'm only waiting for some noodles.

As I type this to you, my nails are long, painted grey and green. I have to mention this because Buka painted them and I haven't enjoyed my nails this much in all my life. It feels right to be in the company of a girl who is kin to the presence of God. When I'm around her, I remember the times I sat with the girls I knew when I was still at UJ. I remember how I used to giggle when they told me something new, something I was curious to know but not yet ready to put to practice. She listens to me the same way I used to listen to them, but I don't teach her anything that I wish I didn't know. For some reason, I've been wanting to tell her what things were like in my life before I left Joburg but I don't want her to hear about it. I only tell her the good parts about believing that you're a woman. I tell her in such a way that she won't go out in search of the word like something lost in a man's groin. With all my heart, I want her to stay as she is but of course, that's not for me to decide. In any case, since she's the one person in my life that Scar doesn't get jealous over, I spend an equal part of my time with her and, only once in a while, with Patty and Slice too. The more that I'm with them and with her, the more I remember what it was like before I left Bronks for Joburg.

Last week, Buka and I were moving my plant into a bigger pot because of how much it's grown. It doesn't have its yellow flowers anymore and the stems are turning brown. Buka reassured me that it isn't dying. It's winter and as long as there is still some green on it, it will bounce back, she said. I always buy bananas now just to bury the peels in the soil and so I hope that she's right. When I told Scar about the plant, he asked me why I haven't considered bringing it over to his place because I'm there most of the time anyway. I thought about it for a minute but shook my head. If I don't return to it when I need to, I will be stuck here at his place indefinitely and that's not what I want. For the first time since we met, I don't feel desperate to be in his presence anymore.

43.

On this Sunday morning, the weather outside is just like it was when I first came to G-Town – cold, wet, and lonely. Scar gets out of bed to go pee. The sound of his loud urine momentarily drowns the soft jazz playing from his radio. In the bathroom, he opens the tap for exactly three seconds and then there’s silence. I hear him pulling phlegm into the back of his throat and then spitting it out into the basin. The tap hisses again for three seconds, then I hear the bristles of his toothbrush scratching against his white teeth and making white foam in his mouth. I leave the bed to go stand next to him and brush my teeth too. Because he started first, I’m the last one to gargle murky water in my throat and spit. In the mirror, he smiles at me and I smile back. Many of our conversations happen like this. Like now, he smiles back at me smiling back at him. Like now, his hand creeps along my bare back. When he moves his hand to my tummy, his pelvis takes its place against my back. He kisses my scapula once and the bristles of his facial hair make goose bumps on my skin. My legs part and I lean over the basin like a buck at the waterhole.

We spend the whole day in bed, taking turns standing at the stove to make noodles and veggies, or eggs and bacon, or hot chocolate and toast, or pap and stew. The curtains are only partly open, enough for us to guess what time of day it is. We’re always two or three hours off the right answer. Buka calls me twice. I call her back. She just wanted to know if I had any plans for the day, if I would’ve liked to check out this new church her friend told her about. ‘But,’ she says, ‘if you’re not at your place right now then it’s chilled, we can go next Sunday.’

‘Yes, next Sunday,’ I promise her. ‘I miss you.’

Scar shoots a look my way. In my ear, Buka says ‘I miss you too. I hope you’re taking care of yourself, Naruto.’

**undertow** (*n.*): 1. a current of water below the surface, moving in a different direction from any surface current. 2. an implicit quality, emotion, or influence underlying the superficial aspects of something and leaving a particular impression.

Slice calls me at five in the afternoon. He and Patty want to go to a spot in the township later, they ask me if I want to come with. I'm excited enough to say yes before he finishes his sentence. 'We'll come get you at 20:00 and we can all crash at Patty's place after if you don't want to come home. And no, you won't feel like a third-wheel, trust me.' He laughs like an anime character and gets cut off before I can respond. After I finish packing some clothes into my suitcase, I sit in my room and wait. I don't like waiting but there's not much else to do. I think: it's my last night here before I head home for the semester break, so there's always something to do. I put on a pair of blue jeans and a white sweater, and walk alone to the nearest shop. There, I ask for two loose draws of the cheapest brand and carry myself back home. I empty out the tobacco in the loose ciggie and replace the contents. Outside, there is a woman across the street on a balcony at her place. I can't see her face, but her skin tone is the colour of a chocolate Sterri-Stumpie, and she's singing a song I've never heard before. Something soulful and sad, a bit off-tune. I spark up and see a lone golden cat strutting towards the dark side of the street. I don't look up at the stars, only at the street lights below.

At exactly 20:05, an unsaved number calls me and it's Slice. He tells me to get my things, he's outside in a silver Audi. I hurry down the stairs. Slice is standing long against the car, his happy socks sticking out from his grey Palladium boots. 'You didn't tell me you have rich friends,' I say to him when he hugs me hello. 'I *am* your rich friend, c'mon.'

In the driver's seat, his friend reaches a massive arm back to me and introduces himself. 'Prince, nice to meet you,' and then he says nothing else to me. They look like opposites, Slice and Prince, sitting together in front and talking about the beauties of property and wealth. The one is long, light and skinny, and the other is short, buff and dark. One with the personality of a 19-year-old boy, the other with the seriousness of a middle-aged family man. I recline into the backseat and watch Prince driving. His left arm is holding the wheel steady. There's a tattoo on it but it's half-hidden by the sleeve of his black golf shirt. It's an arm as thick as both of Slice's arms together, as dark as the soil in my mother's vegetable garden. I miss my mother. She would be disappointed to see me in a car with two men, breaking curfew and coming down from a high. She would make her eyes sad and say nothing to me. She would switch on her TV and watch her soapies, leaving the details of her disappointment to my wild imagination. Slice's voice comes at me from the front passenger seat. 'Yo, please call Patty and tell her we're

outside. My phone's off.' I do as he says. Slice leaves the car when he sees her and he stoops low to hold her around the waist and kiss her. I stare at them for so long, I forget that I'm in the car with Prince until I hear him breathing. He looks in the rear-view mirror to see if I heard him breathe. I'm too paranoid for small-talk so I breathe too, and we agree on keeping the silence.

In the backseat, Patty has her hand on my thigh and she's telling about how she and Slice almost slept together last night. He and Prince have left the car to get liquor at another shady place in the township after the one we'd planned to go to turned out to be too packed for comfort. We decided, then, to just get drinks and stay in at Patty's place. While they're out, she tells me that she's given in to the idea of being his girlfriend and that the fears and worries she had before have since disappeared. She trusts that he genuinely (romantically) likes her, but still she didn't give in. 'Why are you holding back?'

'It's just still too soon. And I think I'm in love with the way he respects me. Besides, if we're still settling into our relationship, there's no need to rush it. There's really more to dating than what we do to each other's bodies.'

Patricia lives in a commune with two other people so this means that we can't be too loud lest we irritate her house mates. At around midnight though, we're well into a game of *30 Seconds* and we can't hear how loud we are to each other. Prince is the only one who doesn't look or sound drunk, yet he always has a new can of Castle Lite in his hand. It's his turn so he takes a card and faces Slice. 'Okay bro, stay with me,' he says in a low, excited voice. 'Uh, damn it! Okay, you call this guy your step-father...'

'Tupac?'

'No, the rich one!'

'Patrice Motsepe!'

'Yes, boy!'

Patty blames their flawless progress on the fact that Prince is the only sober-acting one, but I know that it's because their friendship has more years on it than ours. 'Maybe we should switch team mates, this isn't fair,' Patty laughs. 'Sure, but you and Slice can't be together,' says Prince. 'Oh, but we already are,' Slice says. I like the way Patty and her boobs blush at him. Slice and I

are in a team against Patty and Prince and this time, Prince is at a loss. Every time Patty takes a card, she looks at it and laughs for five seconds before she tries to give clues. He always gets one or two, never more. When it's Slice's turn, Scar calls me and I have to pick up. He asks me where I am.

'We're at Patty's place, we're playing *30 Seconds*.'

He asks me if I'm drunk.

'Only a little.'

In the background, Slice calls out my name urgently. 'Scar, I have to go, Slice needs me.'

'You with Slice again?'

'He's a friend Scar, c'mon, don't be like this again. I'm hanging up.'

'Do it and you'll regret it. I'm coming to get you now.'

Scar, no.

His voice erupts and then he breathes once before it lowers, pleading. 'Listen, I'm the one who needs you right now, babe. It's your last night here before you leave, how are you not going to spend it with me?' Then he says, 'You've been with them for hours now. Can I just come get you – please?' Slice calls out my name again and I pause. 'In an hour. You can come get me in an hour.'

'Finally!' Slice says when I take my seat and gulp down my drink. The brown bubbles make me choke and when they're sure that I'm okay, we continue our game. 'Okay, let's go. Flip the time, Patty Bear. Uh, jeez, where do I know this from? Snap, only Prince would get this! Okay, next one: uh, it's this guy with a split personality. One is evil, the other one is a scientist!'

'The Nutty Professor?'

'The white people version!'

'Jekyll and Hyde!'

'Yes!'

## 45.

45 minutes after midnight, Scar parks his car outside and calls me. Patty walks me out and hugs me goodbye. 'I can't believe you have to go,' she says. 'But I understand. Just call me when you get to his place so I'll know that you're safe.' I get inside his car and the doors lock automatically. The quick, loud bolt makes me jump. Am I still paranoid from the high? Patty stands outside until the car is out of sight.

He doesn't ask me if I had a good time. He wants to know how many guys there were. I tell him. 'Was it a double-date or something?'

No, it wasn't. Slice is my friend, Prince is Slice's friend.

'How do you know they weren't trying to set you up with him? I know your friends don't like me, I can tell. You think I can't tell?'

I want to kiss him so he'll stop talking, but he's driving. You're being paranoid, I say, and he slams his hand against the dashboard. 'Don't you dare call me that, don't act like I'm stupid!' I lean against the window, close to the door as possible, desperate enough to wish to unlock it with the weight of my body.

When we get to his room, the first thing I do is sit on the couch. Maybe, like always, he'll think I'm asleep. Forget that I'm in the room. He walks to me and analyses my silence. 'You think I don't care about you? Why would you be here, why would I want you here, if I didn't? Why do you think it pisses me off when you spend time drinking and being cosy with other guys?' I hesitate to answer. I don't have an apology. I know I don't need to give him one. You have no right to raise your voice at me, I say to him. The harder I hold a rock in my throat, the more my eyes sting. 'You can't cry your way out of this,' he says. 'I want you to explain to me why you would deliberately play me for a fool like this.' His anger, I can't understand it. It makes his eyes black and cold. The colour of the couch doesn't hide me from them.

He scoffs, turning away from me. 'Your tears are worthless to me right now.'

'I am not your ex.'

'What did you just say?'

'You're insecure because of what she did to you – I said I'm not your ex!' I'm standing when I say this. His mouth skews to the side as he reaches for his keys on the table. 'Pack your things, I'm taking you back to your place. We're fucking done.'

'Monwabisi...'

'I said we're done, Celiwe.'

Buka was wrong about the plant. No matter how much I tried to water it, how many banana peels I shoved into the soil with the hand-sized garden fork that she bought for me, or how many times I spoke to and sang to it, it still died. Maybe the winter killed it. Maybe I didn't sing or speak to it enough. I don't mourn over why it died. I'm carrying the pot with a bone-dry plant inside it on my lap like a crazy person. The old white woman sitting next to me doesn't ask me why I'm carrying a dead thing. She doesn't ask me why I look depressed either. During the whole 12-hour trip from Frontier Hotel to Johannesburg Park Station where she gets off, all she says to me is: Here, have some biscuits, my darling. Eating always cheers me up.

At the station, my phone vibrates in my back pocket. 'Hey Slice.'

Patty's voice answers back. 'I don't have airtime so I'm using his phone. Yes, he is still here with me. I think he's ready to move in with me, this one. He's been here since you left. But never mind that, did you get home safely after you left? You didn't call and I was worried. I tried to reach you like a hundred times but your phone was off.'

'He broke up with me and then he took me home.'

'What! Oh honey, I'm so sorry. I know how much you liked him. You should've told him to drop you off at my place. You weren't supposed to be alone. How are you feeling? What happened?'

'My plant's dead.'

'Love, don't worry about the plant. We could always get you a new one when you come back. I want to know how *you're* doing.'

'I got on the bus safely. I'm almost home, we're heading to Pretoria now. Can I call you when I get home? Greet Slice for me there, okay?'

'I will. He says I should tell you that Prince said he wants a re-match when you get back. This time, he's on your team. Okay, call me when you get home, right? Don't forget or I'm going to blow up your phone again.'

47.

**To:** mpumi221@nomail.com

**From:** celiwemkoneni@nomail.com

**Date:** 29 June 2018, 18:09

I hadn't realised when I meet Monwabisi that I wouldn't be the only one between us bringing the baggage of insecurity into a relationship that didn't want to be named as such. I thought I was going to use his presence in my life to prove something to myself, but not once did it cross my mind that he would do the same with me. After he dumped me and dropped me off at my place, he called me and attempted to apologise. I say attempted because to him, an apology always comes with a justification for why we should both believe that, deep down, he is right and I'm the one who just doesn't understand. On the phone, he told me that when I asked him the things that I asked him in the beginning, I challenged him to pursue something real with me. Something different than what he's known before. Something that he wasn't able to pursue after he got his heart broken some time ago by a woman he thought he was going to spend the rest of his life with. He said to me that all the women that he was with thereafter had all been satisfied with only the physical intimacy, never requiring more of him. That's what he was used to. He told me that it scared him when he saw that I had come for more than that. He said all these things, not touching on the thing that hurt me the most: the fact that my tears didn't matter at all to him. That's what he had said during our fight. When he was done explaining, he asked if he could come over to see me just so we could talk in person, but I told him to stay at his place. I told him we don't need each other for anything anymore. This was the hardest thing for me to do because this was the part where I had to think and believe that the hollowing wouldn't come back just because he wouldn't. This was where I had to surrender to the chance that my body would find its eloquence again on its own and that from here on, on his part, he would let his future lovers in and bravely ask them to stay. The last thing he said to me was this:

I do care about you. I've cared about you this whole time, I just didn't know if we were going to last.

I'm sorry that I took so long to respond and tell you details of why we broke up, but my mom's been keeping me occupied here at home because she missed me. She expresses her love for me through giving me tons of chores and dragging me around to run errands with her. I'm home for another three weeks before I have to go back and I'm hoping that by then, I'd have healed and moved on. And by move on, I don't mean romantically – or even sexually, for that matter. I think I want to become a nun, actually; I think that's what's best for me in this lifetime. On a serious note though, I'm starting to learn that what I've known and what has happened to me up until now doesn't matter anymore, and I'm grateful that people like Patty and Buka can remind me of this on a daily basis.

Don't be touched if I take days to respond and likewise, I'll wait patiently for your reply since I know how busy you might be. Don't forget to send me pictures and say hi to all your adorable Chinese students for me.

I love you, friend.

PS. Monwabisi's birthday is on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November. I don't know which star sign he falls under 'cause you're always the one who explains these things to me but I hope that answers your question.

I find my dad working in the garden and tending to the vegetables that my mother told him to plant for the winter. The moment he sees me, he speaks in a low, tired voice and says, 'To be honest I don't like winter spinach, but your mother insisted that we plant it. And you know what the most annoying thing is? She only likes to reap when the vegetables are ready but you won't ever see her with a spade or hose in her hand. This wife of mine adores the beauty of a garden but does none of the work to maintain it.' He shakes his head and shoves a hand-fork into the soil to turn it and uproot the weeds. The spinach is at least seven centimetres high; still too young to be cooked but old enough to survive the scavenging of birds. The green of it is dark and robust; utterly pleasing to the eye. I take the tool from my father's hands and resume his work. He stands between me and the rays of the sun to shield me from the glare. 'You've lost weight since the last time we saw you. Are the Xhosas not feeding you enough that side?'

'They don't like or eat atchaar, Baba, imagine that. But maybe it's the school work. Honours is different from undergrad – there's just more work.' He says okay and doesn't pry further. 'That blompot you came home with, why did you put it beside the bin?'

'It's dead, unfortunately. The flowers were so beautiful and bright yellow, you would've liked it. I think I didn't water it enough. I'm just keeping the pot for another plant. Maybe I'll use it when I come back home officially.' My dad walks slowly towards it and lifts it to the air to take a look. 'It's not dead,' he says loud enough for me to hear him. 'As long as the roots are still alive, it's not dead. You don't believe me? Just keep watering it and you'll see. As long as it still has its roots, it will not die.'

**platonic** (*adj.*): intimate and affectionate but not sexual.

For the first week that I'm back in G-Town, I avoid walking along the streets that Scar would usually drive through, so High Street becomes my default route to school and back. Just this once on the weekend, I walk along New to meet up with Slice, Buka and Patty at the Rabbit for lunch and drinks but we don't stay as long as we used to do. Patty and Slice are headed to Port Alfred for their anniversary. It's been two years since they've been friends and that's what they're celebrating under the umbrella of their newly romantic relationship. We leave the Rabbit and say our goodbyes at the door. Buka turns to me and asks if I have plans for the rest of the afternoon. I don't, so we walk to my place. On our walk, she insists that I show her my favourite place in all of G-Town. I'm not sure if I should. I mean, it's the same street that Monwabisi lives in. She takes my hand and I give in to her request. On Luke, I know exactly which window belongs to his room. I've stood many times before it, looking at the trees with the white and pink petals, often waiting to see his cherry-red car pull up at the gate. But as we walk past, I don't look at the yellow building in case he might be there looking back. I show her the trees on the other side and tell her about Cornelis Street in Bronks. 'Maybe someday you could travel up and come visit me, then I'll show it to you,' I say. 'Yeah, maybe.'

At my place, I make us some tea and she sees the chipping nail polish on my finger nails. She gets the cosmetics bag from my wardrobe and places my hands on her lap. I watch her while she works. I hadn't seen it before but she has five tiny light spots on her forehead that are only visible because of the ribbons of sunlight coming in through the open door. She dabs nail polish remover onto a white pantyliner and rubs the green and grey patches off, one finger at a time. 'Do you think you're going to miss him a lot?'

'Probably. I spent a lot of time with him last semester. I know that I'm bound to bump into him sometime, I just hope that I'll be able to look at him as a friend when that happens.'

'Do you think he'll miss you too?'

'Honestly? I want him to, but I don't think he will. He seems like the type to move on quickly. Find another woman easily.' She asks me which colour I want her to repaint them and I'm not sure. She jumps when she remembers that she brought with her a few colours from her mom's collection. 'There's black, and there's this weird-looking green – I don't think you should try it

though since you already had green on. I actually don't know why I brought it with me. And then there's this one. It's like a very deep red, almost purple—'

'It's burgundy.' A colour warm and fierce; aloof and infatuating. The colour of something that shouldn't have been but was, anyway. The colour of his couch. She is gentle with my hands as she paints a second coat, holding each one like water in the cup of her hand. 'After this,' I say, 'will you read me some of your poetry again?' She smiles at me and nods. My phone vibrates in that moment and a Whatsapp message flashes on my screen. It's a picture from my dad. I giggle and show it to Buka. She takes a closer look and says, 'I told you so.' In the image, there is one bright green shoot in the middle of the pot that I left behind in his care. It's emerging vulnerably and is surrounded by five dry, brown twigs. There it is: resilient and quiet. Dusting off the dirt and stuttering into its reanimation. In this very moment, I know: it is the most beautiful thing in all of Bronkhorstspruit.

PART B: PORTFOLIO

## **PORTFOLIO**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Thobekile Hlobisile Masombuka

November 2019

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## AN INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last ten or so months, all that I have learned and all the skills that I have acquired as a budding writer are all culminated in this one aphoristic and religious phrase: *the word is god*. From discovering the writers that have shown me the powerful possibilities that come through allowing creativity and language to triumph over writer dictatorship, to putting to practice the art of excommunicating myself as god of the text, I have built and refined this portfolio through the truths I have found along the path of this intensive creative journey.

In this collection, I have included a series of reflective journals written over several months that document precisely how I came to realise and believe in this aphorism. Additionally, a poetics essay on the wonders of letting word and content take precedence over all else coherently and neatly summarises my objectives and experiences as a writer. Lastly, I have included to this work reviews on books that have not only influenced my technique, but that are tangible examples of the kind of work that I both enjoy and aspire to produce. It has been through the chiselling of this portfolio that I have established the creative identity that weaves itself into the writing of my novella and so, this offering should be read both as a mirror that reflects my creativity and as an organised list of the ingredients that have contributed to my craft.

## REFLECTIVE JOURNALS:

### How I Learned to Read and Write

February 2019

Before I started this course I thought I had a case of writer's block, but I know now that that was a misdiagnosis on my end. I realised that it's always and only a matter of showing up, sitting down and writing, instead of hiding behind a procrastination/insecurity block. My greatest challenge during this month was having to do exactly this. So then, I adopted the habit of writing without knowing where my story would climax or end; what the characters' names and designations would be; and whether or not my characters would want to cooperate with me. 'Trust the writing,' my lecturer said, as if the writing had a mind of its own. But trusting that I would always find the words and that the form and style would naturally come to me was an important start because, amongst other things, it gave me the cushioning I needed for the blows against my writing as an individual.

During a feedback session in this month, I received one or two comments on how "white" my writing sounds and how my characters don't portray a particular kind of blackness. The word "coconut" made its way into the room and I took a direct hit to the chest. It was not just a critique on how I think and how I speak, but essentially a critique on who I am and on the experiences that have stitched me together. In any case, I asked the individual who made the observation what their favourite South African novels are so that I could read and see what their versions of black voices sound like. On my own, I ended up getting a *Penguin Anthology of South African Contemporary Short Stories*, *The Whale Caller* by Zakes Mda, and my favourite novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* by Phaswane Mpe to see what I could take from these. In the anthology, I found a short story by Njabulo Ndebele and took pleasure in his way of amplifying a character's personal perspectives, thoughts, and actions, instead of magnifying their socio-political contexts. This was the only memorable one that I found and learned from.

I hadn't even realised it until now, but the comments I received on my work – paired with the "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" essay by Ndebele that I read at least four times religiously – compelled me to look at South African literature, including my own work, through a new eye. I'm questioning why the stories feel like home without stating the geographical and socio-political obvious, and I'm finding out that there are different voices that are used to say

different things. All of these voices that make their way into our literary canon, by virtue of the writers' identities and experiences, are absolutely valid. To refer back to my first point above, my work as a writer is to trust the writing while paying close attention to (and taking responsibility for) what it says and what it does.

### March 2019

As a die-hard prose writer, I spontaneously decided to try my hand at poetry instead of defaulting to what's familiar. The topic at one of the seminars encourage me to do this: to be comfortable in the chaotic, to venture into the unfamiliar, and to relish in the confusion of whatever there is to be confused about. The number of times that I pedantically wrote and rewrote (and rewrote!) lines to make my poems cannot be counted. Whether I edited excessively because I was trying to feel some sort of comfortable, or if I did so because I was focused on creating the right images, I eventually realised that I cannot have the one with the other: I cannot seek sense and seek to create a feeling at the same time. And so, I ditched the sense and the result was rather fascinating. This exercise alone gave birth to a poetic voice that I now weave through my writing and the less I try to make sense, the more genuine the writing becomes. Daring myself to sit quietly in the eye of the creative chaos allowed me to build a habit of finding new ways to say things and finding new things to say, and in so doing, I picked up a tool that helped me add colour to my prose voice. It allowed me to go out in search of images and ideas that, as poetry desires, *show* more than they *tell*.

Since I could very well call this the month of deserting my comfort zone, I must add that a classmate double-dared me to share one of my so-called poems at an open-mic session. It's not in my DNA to chicken out of a dare so I did it, and this experience further drilled into me the idea of painting images in a way that a reader – or in this case, listener – could have enough material for their imaginations to chew on and digest. Where emotions and experiences are involved, *show* them what you want to say, because when you just tell them it takes the fun out of everything. One other cool thing that writing poetry gave me is the faith that I can scrap an idea and find another without worrying that ideas and words are finite. One of my classmates said that poetry is like pottery in the sense that when you get the clay to make your vase, you only use what you need and you don't always have to use all the clay. Because of the excitement of using words to create larger-than-life imagery and emotion, and because of the awe I have for writers who are able to do a whole lot in just a few lines, I thought to myself

that maybe poetic writing and flash fiction are something worth exploring a bit more. This is why I picked up the *PP/FF* anthology edited by Peter Connors. I chose it specifically because Lydia Davis is featured in it and she is the first-ever writer whose flash fiction I read and fell in love with. Like with poetry, there is this art in saying little-yet-enough that draws me to flash fiction and I want to wield the same superpower.

While browsing through *PP/FF: an Anthology*, I found “The Neighbour’s Dog” by Jamey Dunham and called it my favourite. What I liked about it most is how ordinary inanimate things become so animated, and how he uses language to create this ambiguity between a dog and a child. In my notes, I wrote that he gives every little thing its own spotlight and creates a kind of imagery that is damn-near impossible to forget – like ‘the small eyes of cigarettes blinking in the alley’ and a dog ‘running with scissors through the pages of its parents’ wedding album’. Every sentence in that piece is deliberate, and together, it is all enough. I approached my assignment with the plan to write every sentence with a thoughtfulness that is in Dunham’s flash. Within a single week, I generated more bite-sized pieces than I’ve ever come up with in a month. Most of them were very random, but a few were thought up when I dared myself to play a game of making abstract things – like an emotion or feeling – tangible or personified. This prompt also came from reading *Freshwater* and seeing the way that Akwaeke Emezi makes sentences and images come to life like it’s nothing; piecing each and every single one together to make a fine portrait. This is one of the lines that came to my mind this week:

His love for me was menstrual: predictable and nauseating, annoying and inexorable.

With the pieces I’ve been writing, take for an example one that stemmed from the words above, I’ve been going back to tweak some words and to remove or add others just to see how the meaning or impact of the whole piece changes. This taught me how to simultaneously look at how a single word impacts the whole frame and how the whole frame dictates the words and sentences within.

His love for her was a menstrual bleed: predictable and nauseating. Necessary to her womanhood.

Only a few words changed, the meaning pretty much still the same but the presentation: not really. That added clause does something to it, it explains something that the first version left open to interpretation. These are the things I’ve been enjoying playing around with. The short

story I wrote from these lines was initially titled “Womanhood” but then I renamed it “Wedlock” because I learned from Lydia Davis’ *Can’t and Won’t* collection that the titles of flashes matter just as much as the content. The final version of the line in the whole piece read like this:

His love for me was menstrual: predictable and nauseating. My love for him, I placed at the top of my list of household chores. We were long married.

My decision to erase the clause came from this idea in poetry that you don’t need to explain anything if you could place it as is and let it do its own explaining. Already, the image of his love being menstrual hints that it is something that she believes she requires in order to feel like a woman. Of course, the interpretation could vary depending on perspective, but my triumph was in leaving it open for interpretation rather than spoon-feeding the reader everything. Still, even after the practice and exposure to flash fiction and prose poetry, I constantly felt uncertain about my decisions. No matter how much I edited a piece, it still needed more – or less – work. I began to ask myself a series of questions on repeat. How can I make one word shift the whole trajectory of the fragment? How can one sentence add or take away? And when everything is done, is it precisely what I had in mind: the feeling, the mood, the effect I hoped to create? Eventually, I casually answered “yes” to all my questions and just ‘trusted the writing’.

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In an assignment we had to do on editing, I experienced short-lived excitement in being a Language Practice graduate when I realised that editing creative work is not quite the same as editing, let’s say, a formal report. This creative kind of editing came as a test to me in two ways. One, this is where I got to see exactly how much I trust myself in trimming a piece to make sure that it functions at its best; and two, it would test me on how well I could distance myself from the text to accomplish this. The practice came in the form of having to edit someone else’s work, which wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be considering that, on the surface, every line and sentence she wrote somehow belonged right there, just as it was. I couldn’t bring myself to take anything away, to rearrange it or rephrase it. I had to go deep in order to start my work of editing and through this, I saw how important it is for me to spend time with the text in order to see things for more than what they appear to be. Beyond the use of punctuation and

grammar, there's also the context of meaning as well as the energy and synergy of the words on a sentence-paragraph-page level. One thing my lecturer said during the seminar for this assignment was that sometimes you have to cut out a line that you think is really good when it doesn't work in your piece as a whole. This put things into perspective for me and now I'm able to look at the drafts of my writing with the idea that everything needs to work for the good of the text, no matter how attached I am to a particular phrase or character or paragraph or clever line – and God knows I love my clever lines.

### April 2019

I waltzed into this course at the start of the year with the nature of writing without really considering why or how I do so. With the experience of writing critical essays in my undergraduate and honours years, I've thumb-sucked my way through academic writing with only one commitment to a writing theory and that is PEE-ing on my paper. Passed down from my grade 12 English teacher to me, the acronym means that with every academic thing I write, I must make a *point*, give an *explanation* and provide an *example* within each body paragraph. Pretty fool-proof, top-secret methodologies here. I was trained and equipped for any and all topics that varsity could launch at me. In creative writing, on the other hand, I've always adopted a care-free approach and just let the words come to me – that's literally all I did. I want to say, then, that I only actually started thinking about why and how I write during the strenuous five days of reading and reading and reading about the poetics of creative writing, but this wouldn't be the truth. I started to think about my writing when I was told that my characters lack the kind of melanin that makes a story “black enough” and so when it came to reading the pieces by Njabulo Ndebele, Lidia Yuknavitch, and Taiye Selasi, I pretty much found the exact words to articulate what I felt about my writing and what it was beginning to mean to me.

With the readings we did, I was confident that I would write a kick-ass academic essay as I'm so used to doing. I had all of my notes collected, ready to PEE my way through the 3000 words with any topic they would serve to me. But then, I wasn't given any topic to PEE on and this threw me off my game. How do I comment on other people's writings without being a mere spectator? How do I remark on my own writing when I haven't properly defined it before recently? I was biting my fingernails down to the cuticle in my room at home, staring at all my notes and going crazy over the “no topic” topic we were sent off with, when the painting on

my wall stared at me and I stared back. I started to describe what it looks like and how it came to be, and this is how I got my poetics essay going. I didn't wait for the words to come to me. I first fetched them from somewhere and that somewhere was the very place I thought had forsaken me: my voice in academia. Kicking the essay off with a creative perspective, I substantiated it academically, thus channelling both my creative and academic side towards one objective. I went back to some of the essays on literary theory that I wrote as an undergraduate and I revelled in the fact that I could finally write on a theory and add my own take on it instead of simply regurgitating what I was told about it. It's not until I finished writing the essay a day later that I realised I now have the words to justify where my place is as a writer – what my hopes and intentions are, what I want the reader to think of me or not think of me.

### May 2019

For an assignment on writing the body, I was challenged to write about it as honestly and as viscerally as I could. What I found in my memory was a moment where I was in my head a lot during a particularly personal experience, thinking about what was happening, how it was happening, and what it meant to me. The difficulty was in putting into words the exact things that I feel within and see outside the body without turning to clichés or insufficient descriptions. This is how I turned to channelling the kind of imagery that poetry allows for. Based on the responses on my piece from the feedback group, however, my poetic voice – my *trying* to paint the picture without actually depicting it for what it really is – drowned the rawness of a narration that was supposed to showcase the honesty and realness of the lived experience. I have become, so to say, “too poetic” for my writing.

In retrospect, I'm not surprised by this comment because even while I was writing the piece, I realised almost mournfully that I couldn't find my short-story voice in those free-writing sessions. Everything came to me in rounded sentences and pictures, so much so that I couldn't even write out a conventional dialogue between characters (even though this was an upside and it gave me an opportunity to try something new with the dialogue). In any case, this brought me to the reality that I need to binge on longer pieces of writing like novels and short stories just so I can balance the voices in my head lest I find myself in an impractical limbo between poetry and prose. I kept Xiaolu Guo's book, *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, at my bedside and devoured it one fragment at a time. I remembered that it was suggested to me in a seminar on writing desire and the recommendation was made based on the style of writing

that I gravitate towards. The way Fenfang, the heroine in the book, narrates her life is precisely the kind of voice I had before I dived head-first into the poetic side of things and got stuck at colouring in the content to make it look and sound pretty.

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I picked up a few books that cater to both my original voice and my budding poetic style. Amongst these book is Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water*. Here, I gathered that she is pretty much one of the coolest word magicians I know because she knows how to write about the body in a way that uses powerful imagery without silencing the sincerity in her voice. Likewise, Sam Pink's *Rontel* showed me a narrative style and form wherein I enjoyed how everything went on in the mind of the narrator; how the words and descriptions were real-time narrations via his internal monologue. Pink's work reminded me that simple need not be plain and so I came back softly into writing about what goes in inside the mind, through the body, and into the world. One other thing I liked about Pink's writing was that there is an adorable humour in the thoughts that are streamed live as the narrator navigates through his world. He randomly thinks about saying things like 'phew' if he were to discover that he has cancer (2014: 21) and I like that dark humour.

I also realised that what I tend to do is sort of like Pink's style: I make what is seen and heard the basis or portal to what is felt and thought and experienced. Pink uses the narrator's seeing other people next to him to start off the internal dialogue about how he doesn't matter to anybody. I do this in my writing too when I talk about an outside world in order to give hints of the on-goings of the internal world.

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I was deliberate this time around in my choice of the form of my piece, unlike in other times when I wrote without considering the form. My choice was made official when I got the bright idea that my thesis could be written as a series of letters, journal entries, or emails. The challenging part about writing in a form as intimate as a letter or journal was that I wasn't able to put onto the page my experience as clearly as day. This is because firstly, I wanted to fictionalise it in order to take a random, ordinary moment and turn it into something packed and sufficient. Like Pink does. Secondly, it was challenging for me to tie random moments to something deeper; something more personal; something I haven't even jotted down in my

own personal journal – thoughts that haven't found their designations yet. I had to constantly leave the face of my laptop to take a break and distance myself from the narrative while still sticking around to give it a truth. I'm not sure yet why I wanted it to be this way, but it mattered to me.

On the topic of form, I spoke to another one of my course mates about a piece I sent to her to critique. We edited each other's work for a previous seminar and since then, our lecturer said that we could work together to critique each other's work, so I sent it to her and she gave me feedback. She suggested I take a look at essays by Chelsea Hodson and see how she writes about the body and experience. She suggested this to me because she thinks I might have something going with the forms I choose, and essays may be one of the forms of writing that I could explore further. In Friday's feedback session, another person also commented on how my piece reads like an emotional essay. Thinking back, the only creative essay I've seen thus far is a piece in either the *PP/FF* or the *Short* anthology that I've since forgotten about.

In other news, I passed my piece to one of the poetry students who read my previous assignment and he commented that my "darling voice", the poetic one that I was told to kill in the last feedback session, was less obvious in this piece than it was in the last. He said that he could tell there's definitely a positive difference in the latest piece, but that I still need to avoid playing it safe and get into the depth of the things I speak about, like the longing to be scarred and what the scars mean and what it means to negotiate for ownership of the body. I think I have *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* to thank for the change in narrative; for sharpening my narrative voice into one that is as honest and deliberate as it is poetic.

For the re-edit of the piece I wrote, I'm going back to Lidia Yuknavitch via her book, *The Small Backs of Children*. The narration in Yuknavitch's writing is useful to look at because she's able to make the images poetic and vivid but not to the detriment of her narrative authenticity. I appreciate how she talks about the body as its own character and she does this by the simple naming of body parts and talking about them openly. Mouth, breast, vagina, teeth, hair, body. Body! The "more" that I was told I need in the writing of a personal lived experience is the "more" that Yuknavitch writes. This is what I added to the second draft of my assignment. After all, simple need not be plain.

Some time at our reading group, a classmate read from a book that I am interested in reading. It's called *Blind Owl* and it's next on my reading list. I remember that I enjoyed the way it was written, the use of lengthy, punctuated sentences almost like in Edgar Allen Poe's "Tell-tale Heart", where the sentences are written in a way that helps create the mood and keep the reader engaged with the progression of the story. I need this book to get me back into the atmosphere of long prose, something I've been struggling with a bit lately. I can barely make the recommended word count for this week's assignment because I was writing in flash mode, and I'm hoping to get to a point where, even though I am so comfortable with the forms I've chosen and the brevity that comes with these forms, I am able to write and expand on the few words I have to make a piece more than just compacted and bite-sized.

### June 2019

The first thing that I did with the sites provided as references to good book reviews was to browse and see if I recognised any of the books they reviewed. I chose to do this because I wanted to see how they review a book that I already know of: what they include, how they analyse it, and so on. Fortunately, I found two reviews of the book *Aviaries*, which I read a few parts of. Both reviews were on the *Rain Taxi* website. Written by Jeff Alford and Seth Rogoff respectively, I read both and got to see the different approaches that writers may have to the same book. Alford's review addresses the main themes of the novel and how they unfold, and he did this without sharing much of the plot. I didn't particularly like this review because, if I hadn't read the book myself already, I wouldn't be burning to read it afterwards. I'm not sure if it's because the review is pretty short, but it felt to me that it was missing something else – perhaps some commentary on the structure of the book, like Rogoff took time to add in his review. I suppose then that Rogoff's was the better review, but it still wasn't moving me to go out in search of the book.

Then I found the two reviews that I pretty much enjoyed reading: one from *Bookslut* written by Felix Haas and another from *The Johannesburg Review of Books* written by Simon van Schalkwyk. Schalkwyk's review is on Ian McEwan's novel, *Machines like Me*, and in it, he not only explains how the novel works in its storytelling, but also how it performs as a work of science fiction. He goes on to add his opinions of the author's previous works and how the one he's reviewing compares. Finally, he touched on how the book misses the mark and on what themes the book carries through. He does all of this without giving too much of the plot away.

The way his review is written strikes a near-perfect balance between his opinion of it and a general overview of the book so that a person who hasn't yet read the book can know what they're getting themselves into, and someone who has read it can feel engaged and dis/agree with him. The parts that he brings in from the book are all there to substantiate his reasoning: he shares snippets of the novel's plot to round off his analysis of the themes and tropes that the book uses, and this works well enough to make me feel satisfied, intrigued, and well-informed by the time I finish reading the review. Likewise, Haas' review of *One Hundred Twenty-One Days* by Michèle Audin includes a mention of the author's previous work and even how the text should be read, according to the reviewer. Obviously, this information isn't the gospel truth to how the book should be read but it does help me figure out what kind of novel it is when I'm advised to approach it like I would a 'book of science or mathematics' because – as it turns out – the author worked as a professor of mathematics. It's these small pieces of extra information that make the reviews sweeter to me. From these examples, I can follow suit when I review *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* by Xialou Guo and two other books that I'm yet to choose.

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In the meeting with my supervisor, we spoke about what I'd like to do and how I'd like to do it. At the end of our meeting I felt less panicky about my thesis than I was before we had a chat. In fact, I believe that the ideas I have are already a bit different from the abstract I sent in. I'm thinking, I don't want to be extravagant with the form anymore – the diary entries, emails, text messages, et cetera. What I had in mind when I wrote the abstract is a bit too much and my focus wasn't very sharp. Before the meeting, I compiled my most favourite assignments in order to give Paul an idea of what I'd like to do and the forms of the ones I liked are nothing close to what I had in mind when I wrote the proposal. In most places, I just wrote plainly and simply without changing the presentation in any way. It's only here and there that I used a diary entry form and even then, it wasn't planned but that is what the monologue chose. What matters to me right now is the writing itself: the content, the voice and the style. The form will find or create itself as I go.

In between assignments, I've taken time to read *Awake Asleep Awake* by Jo-Ann Bekker. The first thing I thought about it was how it reminded me of Chwayitha Ngamlana's *If I Stay Right Here*, which splits its chapters in a similar way. They are fragments that flow together. They

make sense when you think about them as a whole, but they can also be read individually and still satisfy you. In “Dolphins left a chocolate in the fridge”, I love how Bekker put poetry in the mundane and simple. She has this thing of writing in such a way that the showing tells enough on its own, and *all* she does is show you. In her other pieces, she tells and it’s still done so well that every line carries enough to move me. I wrote in my notes that her book is a visual answer to my worry about how I could tell my story. There is this hazy, thin line between fiction and creative nonfiction – that line that threads together the vivid and unreal – that I see in Bekker’s writing that I’d like to harness in my own.

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“Sometimes you have to lose yourself to discover who you really are.”

This is on the cover of my copy of Paulo Coelho’s *Adultery* and I keep reading it over, feeling that it is something the narrator in my thesis can deeply relate to. It sums up the unravelling, demolition, and reconstruction that my narrator goes through and so I’ve been paging through the novel to see what I can take from its main character, who goes through a reflective journey from one state of being to another. When I read this *Adultery*, I immediately saw on the pages the effect that I would like to create with my writing: a sense of inwardness that isn’t self-absorbed, but that observes things on the outside with as much attention as the things that happen within. At this point, I’m not very concerned about the forms of writing and how things could look on the page, but I’m more focused on the tone, style and narrative. The voice that I give to the main character/narrator of the novel is something that occupies my brain space whenever I sit down to write. Over the past several weeks, I’ve somewhat adopted various voices and experiences for the sake of finding the one that fits and works best. I’ve played on the grounds of present tense narration and past tense narration, and when it got a bit messy at some point, I had to keep reminding myself that this is a draft and I could always go back to change certain aspects. In a few days, I wrote the first six “chapters” and when I came to a sort of block I, for some random reason, went back to two of my favourite books, *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. What brought me to think of these books was how I vividly remembered feeling closely related to the characters of the created monster in the former book, and of Jekyll and his alter ego in the latter. The writing is the kind that I’ve always been in love with: the narration delves deep into self and into the consequences (good and bad) of the expressed self. I remembered the paragraphs upon paragraphs wherein

Frankenstein's monster expresses its self-awareness and its need for affirmation, and I couldn't shake off how "human" that was of it to do.

In the first few parts of my thesis, I mentioned *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is another book that blew me away and held me close at the same time, so I thought it'd be cool to sew in the other two. I'm only doing this because: one, I like writing about the literatures that I like; and two, I'm hoping that dropping these titles in my work will help the reader and the narrator find ways of understanding and articulating what the latter thinks and feels and is going through. I started the whole thesis with the line 'I am a venus fly trap', and it moves on to 'I am Victor Frankenstein's monster' – same concept of menace but different ways of perceiving it.

Another bit of reading I did was in *I Was Trying to Describe What It Feels Like* by Noy Holland. A few stories in the collection reminded me of some of the stories I enjoyed from the *40 Likely to Die Before 40* anthology, which I've made a mental note to revisit. As I read Holland's writing, I almost lost interest because it wasn't like the writing in my two monster stories. Nonetheless, I pressed on and read "Jericho". If I didn't reconsider the title of the whole book after reading this piece, I would've dismissed it as irrelevant to what I wish to do. I read the story and in it, she only writes what the eye can see and what the mind can remember, and nothing more. But, she was 'trying to describe what it feels like', so the feelings were hidden in-between the lines. One thing I enjoyed in the story was the image of the blue of the beads of the sandals that the main character's father bought for her. I liked this because of the repetition and repetition is something I use quite a lot, sometimes without even realising it. The way she did it in this short story makes the colour become something tangible instead of just another description. She ultimately creates a whole plane of feeling below the surface of her telling, and I think I do that (or would like to do that) too sometimes. When I passed one of the chapters of my work to a course mate, she told me that she'd like more details on the sexual act that my character participates in and on the decapitating that the character speaks of. With the sex, I preferred to keep it as is because I don't want it to be about the sex itself, but what goes on in her mind afterwards; how that sets the tone for her latter experiences. Perhaps more detail would make it a bit more real, tangible; but having read Holland's short story, I want to trust that my less is enough. Also, I generally don't gravitate towards the explicitly sensual, it's not a strength of mine.

I'm reporting all of these things backwards as I remember them and so I need to mention now that when I sat down to begin writing my thesis, I had a big bold heading – BODY – at the top of the page, and I started writing with that theme in mind. But, it obviously didn't go as planned because eventually, I found myself wondering whether or not a fragment belongs under that heading. So, I erased it and just kept writing. The heading was limiting and at the same time, I couldn't bring myself to exclusively place one fragment under one heading when some of them feel like the best of both – body and mind. I'm still very keen to hold these main themes – body, mind, mystery – up and weave the story down from there, but for now I'll just gather the fragments and see how the bolded headings will come in.

### July 2019

When I looked at the alarm clock, the time changed from 11:52 p.m. to 11:53 p.m.

Somehow it was the worst feeling ever, to watch that happen.

The end of something, but I didn't know what.

Just, the worst.

I read this part in Sam Pink's *Rontel* and I couldn't think of any other time when a few absolutely well-written lines drew an exact portrait of my whole life. I wanted to do nothing else but fall into this part of the page and say, 'I know exactly what you mean, Pink!' I finished the novel in a day with the intention of writing my review on it, but shortly before I read the very last page, I had a burst of random pieces pop into my head, and I was kind enough to myself to write one of them down on a scrap piece of paper:

I stuffed my stained thong into his mouth and said, 'Okay. Now say something romantic to me.'

He could only grunt. I said, 'See how you stupid you look with all that lust on your face.'

They all came, the words in my head, in a small handful of lines and I believe that reading *Rontel* inspired this – both the bursts of inspiration and the sizes of the pieces. It's almost a pity that I can't yet offer these loose-ended lines of flash fiction as parts of my thesis, but I'm looking to find ways to knit them in and make them work where I can. What I enjoy most about Pink's book is the condensed-ness of it. I appreciate how his work keeps things to a minimum while still carrying bursts of thoughts and ideas and dialogues and humour, all packed into a series of single lines. I won't bother saying that I would like to adopt this kind of writing because I

wouldn't mention it if I didn't. My one concern is just that my voice is quite different from Pink's. Unlike me, he channels humour effortlessly and I'm jealous. The way he moves inward and outward, however, is a skill I could master for myself the more of his lines I read and re-read. In my thesis so far, the main character does move inward and outward to an extent, but the outwardness is a thing I could work on. For instance, Pink writes scenes on a train, in the street, between alleys, and in neighbours' apartments, and these places contribute significantly to the narrator's stream of thoughts. Doing this creates this balance that doesn't make me feel saturated and bored with reading pages and pages of the narrator's inward state of total isolation and so I'm going to keep this in mind as I continue writing the thesis and unravelling the story.

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The one thing I'm wrestling the most regarding this thesis is this obsession in my head to produce something perfect, something that could be read and enjoyed by more than just a creative department of supervisors and examiners. In contrast to before, when I would merely write something and only thereafter perfect it, nowadays I want to write something perfect from the first try – it's under this pressure that I put myself. I've been reading George Orwell's *Decline of the English Murder* and in one of his essays titled "Why I Write", he says – almost as if knowing my plight – 'every book is a failure'. This line opened up to me a wormhole of all the theories and poetics that I read this year that substantiate this one thought: every book, every fabric of literature or writing, is indeed a failure in some way or another. There is no need for me to put this much pressure on myself on something that will still be a potential work-in-progress weeks after it is graded and considered worthwhile. I read his essays to get a feel of essay writing because I want to incorporate it into my work without sabotaging the voice that I've already established. The crazy thing for me is, the more I read and enjoyed his essays (I wanted to read so many more!), the more I remembered that I've been writing (creative) essays ever since my honours years and even way before that. What I was trying to do was to learn a skill from scratch, but I already had it before reading Orwell, I've just been feeling insecure about it because of these false ideas of writing perfectly on the first try. Every book is a failure. A failure in some way or another; open for improvement after it is written. This is a reassuring thought, as discouraging as it may otherwise sound.

August 2019

A funny thing happened while I was thinking about my thesis in the shower: I decided to scrap a whole chapter and I replaced it with a different, updated one. The reason why I scrapped this chapter was because the writing in it felt tired and unnecessary – it wasn't doing what the other chapters were doing; it wasn't doing what I wanted it to do. Also, I think I only added it because I thought it would be cool to introduce this character that I was introducing but I eventually realised that what I was hoping to do wasn't necessary at all – the characters themselves, like the words and sentences, have to be there for a reason and not just because they sound romantic and sweet. While I was writing the replacement chapter, I wrote the last line of it, which I really wanted to be beautiful and emotional, with a particular song in mind. The Civil Wars' "Poison & Wine" – beautiful song! – came to mind after I wrote the particular line because of the chorus that sings 'Oh, I don't love you, but I always will.' I just thought it was pretty cool that there was a soundtrack to a moment of writing.

This sudden and almost random decision to scrap several hundred words was, I'd like to think, born from the time that I've spent reading *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction* page to page. Usually, with the books I carry home with me under my arm, the idea isn't to finish them but just to get a few tens of pages in and see what I can learn from those. Call it window shopping but for writing. With this one though, I couldn't put it down after just a few pages. Instead if I could, I would swallow it whole and paste every page along the walls in my arteries, but the library would fine me. One essay led to another and found myself taking a lot of notes on writing that I believe will not only help with writing the thesis, but will also help with editing it to keep what matters intact and to give me a precise focus on what every word-sentence-paragraph is doing for the book as a whole. Flash fiction requires that kind of precision for it to work therefore I'm taking this truth to my longer writing just to maintain the posture of what I want to do and achieve; which, to be honest, I'm still 100% unsure about. But alas, the first leap of action I took after reading this brilliant and delicious *Field Guide* was to clear a whole chapter and fit something else into that gaping space. This was me cutting to precision: stripping the book of characters that are cute but are really not necessary, and trimming moments that are lovely but otherwise flabby. If I can maintain this "Terminator" attitude throughout the rest of the work then I think I'm on my way towards zoning in on exactly what it is that I want the whole thing to do.

At this point, I'm at least 64 pages into my thesis and almost nearing the end. Before I met with my supervisor last week, I wasn't sure how to maintain the tone and pace of the writing after I replaced chapter 10, but what we spoke about during the meeting – the fine line between telling and showing – gave me the kick I needed to add on to the chapters I already have. The development of the story is going well so far and every time I write a new fragment or part, I have to remind myself to think about the story as a whole and not just as a diary-like platform for me to patch events together sloppily. Everything has to fit into the puzzle, everything has to flow inside the same stream, and when I think about this while writing and while editing, it makes it easier to delete some things and keep others.

What I'm looking for a lot in books now and what I've been taking in lately are different forms of storytelling. I picked up one of Sue Townsend's books in the Adrian Mole series because the novel's form is a diary, and I've taken Chris Kraus' book *I Love Dick* for its use of letters. I used the diary form again when I wrote this week's assignment and this time I was more conscious of what this form allows me to do and what I could do with it. I've found that it's the most convenient form to use for the kind of writing that I like because it uncovers all thoughts and feelings, and even characterisations, without the embellishment of dialogue and tedious descriptions. In the name of research, I've also read *Friday Black* by Nana Kwame but I didn't feel that I had any use for it at this point. After having read two of the stories in there, I could only take note of the way he uses absurd visuals to create a world that desensitises a person from the familiar, which is pretty cool.

### September 2019

For several days after I met with my supervisor at, I think, the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter mark of my thesis, I did absolutely no writing (well, I wrote stuff but just not for my thesis). This must've been in late-August and during the first week of September. I completely neglected my fiction and decided to read for leisure instead of for research. The reason why I did this daring thing was because I felt somewhat stuck in terms of how I would end the book, how the plot would move from where I had last stopped. I made the decision that, instead of thinking too much about how to continue, I would let the work simmer and I would return to it after a few days. Likewise, instead of reading to find new techniques and ideas, I read merely because the books were on my to-read list. During this impromptu writing sabbatical, I finished *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman and *The Meat and Spirit Plan* by Selah Saterstrom. The former is a book I've

been personally meaning to read but never found the time to, and the latter is one I chose because the writer is featured on our reading list and so I was curious. At least my school work wasn't entirely side-tracked if I procrastinated with one recommended read.

The initial several days turned into a week, and then the week ushered in the afternoon of the 12<sup>th</sup> day of September – this is when I finally sat down to finish writing my thesis and this is when I sent it to my supervisor for review. In between, something beautiful happened. Firstly, while reading Postman I rediscovered my love for academic writing. I hadn't entirely lost it, but I had forgotten how wonderful it is and being reminded of it was refreshing as much as it was inspiring. Secondly, and this is the most beautiful thing of all: I found my writing twin in Saterstrom's work; particularly in her novel *The Meat and Spirit Plan*. What I mean by this is, as much as I've been saying throughout these reflections that I write almost like this and that writer or that their writing is something I want to practice, with Saterstrom, I can align myself to her work without striving to; without feeling like it's still out of reach. It's an uncanny thing how her book turns into a mirror right before me and I can't say that I wish that I could write like her because I already do. What I can do is to appreciate her writing as a greater river into which my stream flows. I got to the end of her book and saw the ways in which she leaves loose ends in her fragments almost like Sam Pink. This is what gave me the confidence to continue and finish my work even when I wasn't sure how it would end. Of course, I wasn't yet brave enough to leave a series of loose ends like my twin, but I understood that even if certain things don't "make sense", the wholeness of the fragments would speak for themselves. And so I wrote.

I remember a seminar we had in my honours year where we were talking about a book, *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith. During the conversation, my lecturer mentioned how unfortunate it is that in literary studies, it is not enough to merely say that you love a book. You have to justify your response. You have to say what it is about it that you love and why you love it. With our creative writing course, it has been the same thing. When it comes to commenting on someone else's work or reflecting on the books we've read, we must substantiate, and so I know what to do since I've mentioned that I hold *The Meat and Spirit Plan* tangibly close to my heart. Except, right now, I cannot justify why I love this book beyond this reason: I am in Saterstrom's writing and Saterstrom's writing is in me. If this were to be the very last book that I read for my research (even though I said it was it was for leisure) then I think I could not have chosen a

better book to end with than one that I see myself in without hoping to first earn my spot in it. But of course, I'm not done reading (we're never really done reading!) so I've borrowed her other novel, *The Pink Institution* to read for leisure and to admire her work a bit more.

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Although I've completed my novella, *Signs of Decay* (working title), I still have some doubts about certain parts of it, especially those closest to the end. On the bright side, it's amazing to see how it has progressed from the initial plan and structure. It has certainly exceeded my expectations in terms of how it has unfolded right to the end. However, whenever I read through it, I can pick up almost as clear as water the influences behind my style and they seem to differ slightly as the novella progresses. For instance, perhaps due to the timeline of the events, the ones in the earlier parts are written with less quoted dialogue than the latter ones and this is something that irritates me just a little bit. Reason being, I sense that the former part is stronger because of the fewer real-time conversations that happen between the narrator and other characters. But at the same time, there is a characterisation that is offered by the latter conversations that I don't want to forfeit completely. During the writing and editing process, I've been periodically referring back to the first few segments to remind myself of the atmosphere of showing that I kicked off with and want to weave through the entire work. This has helped in instances where, as with the deleted chapter 10, the writing becomes flabby and I need to tighten it. I feel like the energy almost drops compared to how it started off, but before I make any changes, I want to first get the reader report back and see what it says, then I'll make my move from there. A big part of me is tempted to go terminator and erase all the chapters that come after the 26<sup>th</sup> one and start from scratch in the spirit of "trusting the writing", but like I said, I'll see what the reader report says.

## POETICS ESSAY:

### Whose Writing Is It Anyway?

In a 1925 essay titled “Modern Fiction”, Virginia Woolf called for the reforming of literature from its materialistic, shallow centre, to a literature that ‘examine[s] for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day’ (1925:3). Decades later, Njabulo Ndebele calls for the “Rediscovery of the Ordinary”: the writing of a kind of literature that does not surrender to ‘what the conditions dictate’ (2006:41) but instead one that pays attention to the ordinary and its methods, resulting in a significant growth of consciousness (2006:46). Like Woolf’s perception that the writers of her time were preoccupied with superficially plotting life onto paper as if it weren’t any more complex than what they wrote, Ndebele remarks that without the writing of the ordinary, ‘we have a society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon the subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation’ (2006:42). It is pretty ironic that both these writers would call for writing on the “ordinary” when it is the last word that anyone would attach to the raw experiences of humanity; however, it preaches the diving into the very essence of what we really are and how we really feel and think, perceive and know – the ordinary of what makes us.

The writing that Woolf and Ndebele speak against is the kind of writing that paints existence on a superficial level without allowing the very essence of humanity to strip itself bare page after page. It is the insincere depiction of basic life without offering anything more on it. Brian Evenson (2017:79) phrases the opposite of this kind of writing this way:

Life is something fiction can use as a catalyst to get elsewhere. Fiction is not a question of trying to depict what *really happened*, but of using some aspect of life as a catalyst, of recognising those moments when life begins to take on the shape of the fictional wasp, of using life in ways it doesn’t even suspect it is being used. In other words, using life as a provocation.

If everything remains on the surface, there is not much that literature does but perpetuate what already exists, what is already known, without making room for more, whether worse or better. Woolf calls this the ‘dark place of psychology’ (1925:3) and she writes that ‘honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over in hopeless interrogation that fills us with a deep, and finally it may be with a resentful, despair’ (1925:4). Though she presents a darker, more chilling idea of what literature should do, Lidia Yuknavitch shares the sentiment when she writes that she is on a mission not

to get the reader to dis/like her or her writing, but to make the reader actively *feel* something 'in their actual bodies' (2015:344). She says this and I can immediately picture a book so deliciously written, I could lick its pages and taste the stench of my own soul. This is the kind of literature Woolf would be proud of, the kind that I would like to bury myself in, and also the kind that I, like other writers, am intimidated by. This is because when it comes to the articulating of souls and secrets, of desires and bodies, language falls short of adequate and the objects of description are often so carefully elusive.

### **The language of lungs of sighs of skin of memory of us and me**

One of Albert Einstein's famous quotes is: 'if you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough' and it rings true. In mathematical equations, as in desire and hatred and confusion and isolation, the clarity of language tells you how much is understood of what you need the language for. To Woolf, who is one of the pioneers of the stream-of-consciousness narrative, modest language – in other words, language that is neat, language that makes sense so perfectly that you want it printed on your coffee mug and on the bumper sticker of your car – is not genuine at all when the 'mind receives a myriad expressions [...] from all sides' (1925:3) and when the rawness of being human is itself hard to define. 'The magic in a word,' Velimir Khlebnikov writes, 'remains magic even if it is not understood, and loses none of its power. Poems must be understandable or they may not, but they must be good, they must be real.' This echoes true for fiction; for all writings of the mind-body-soul. In a 2016 article for *The Guardian*, titled "Samuel Beckett, the maestro of failure", Chris Power comments on Beckett's use of language and form in telling his stories. Power writes that one of Beckett's pieces makes use of language in a way that says "Of course language is insufficient, but approximation is better than nothing", and I suppose this is what many writers and poets believe when they attempt to illustrate the un-illustratable.

As with the consciousness and the essence of life, Amina Cain finds it almost impossible to treat a text as if it isn't a perfect circle with an infinite number of right angles. 'When I write', she says in her essay "Slowness", 'I follow the mind of the text I'm working on.' Following a text sounds absurd, until you understand that there is a voice that speaks that eludes edits and definition and making sense. There is a language in intuition that writers use to give voice to the kinds of things that can't be explained simply. This intuition that causes Cain not to think,

that beckons her to ‘start from an open place and trust that the elements that need to be in the story will find their way’, is the raw essence of writing.

The reliance on intuition doesn’t particularly rescue a writer from making a mockery of their feelings and perceptions, because even when the text guides you along its delicate curves and face, the language could still betray. As much as our feelings and thoughts come from a somewhere that hasn’t been fully explored yet, the language we use to articulate what’s alien to us is also just as alien – neither can be trusted. From his “Notes on Poetry”, Antonio Machado laments the issue of having to use language to express his feelings when ‘language is already much less [his] than are [his] feelings’ (1979:168). To Mxolisi Nyezwa, (2015:1) ‘a language stammers through a myriad of soulless and barren images like an infant, incapable of articulating its real self’; and to Federico García Lorca, there needs to be a presence of *duende*, which – by virtue of not providing a fixed definition of it in his “Theory and function of the *Duende*” – cannot be conjured with any logic or ignorant intentions. It is all purely intuition. For Lorca, Nyezwa, Cain, and Yuknavitch, whose mission it is to create ‘an alive body inside language’ (2015:344), there is a relationship between language and poetry, language and fiction, language and feeling that is orchestrated by the writer/poet through intuition. It’s almost as if the writer becomes a surrogate mother for every page. And sometimes, because of this surrogacy, the writer becomes overtly responsible in the eye of the reader, playing god for absolutely everything.

**There are many consequences to playing god and so many more to chaining the writer to their offering.**

At this point in my writing, I would like to report a crime. In 1967, Roland Barthes challenged the literary public to kill the author. He said, ‘writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.’ The crime I want to address is not his proposal to kill the author, which I personally think is pretty genius, albeit impracticable. What I wish to report and reiterate on his behalf is that decades later, the author is more than alive: the author is god of the text, and for many, the author *is* the text. Even before Barthes released his game-changing theory on killing the author, the relationship between art and artist has been an incredibly delicate one. The ideas of how much of their bodily fluids a writer needs to drizzle over their work, and how obsessively a reader must go sniffing for traces of the writer’s natural scent in

order to fully understand the text, are still a sensitive topic of discussion, and no one really knows wherein the balance between the reader-writer-text relationship lies. In the culture we live in currently (not so different from the one Barthes was addressing), the expectation is that there is always a face, a backstory, a personality behind every tweet, blog post, podcast, and baby-eating-a-lemon-for-the-first-time video, and Barthes notes it thus:

The image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; criticism still consists, most of the time, in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh's work his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice: the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his "confidence."

There is no crime in either placing the writer under the same spotlight as the text, or shovelling dirt into the writer's unmarked grave and running off into the sunset with the text in your arms – absolutely no crime at all. It is only when the former choice renders the writer a puppet hanging from the noose of narrative responsibilities and societal expectations; it is only when the choices centred in writing are chocked into an obligation; that the relationship between artist and critic or consumer is suffocating and dispossessing.

As a young woman with decent taste in music, I take it upon myself to share my playlists with anyone who loves themselves enough to want to have their souls blown away. In one of my endeavours of sharing music and converting listeners, a friend of mine thought it important to tell me she had suspicions that Florence + The Machine's song, "Never Let Me Go" was written because a woman close to Florence Welsh (her grandmother or somebody) committed suicide by walking into the ocean. Because I was crying to the song way before I knew this, all that the paratextual information did was to make me cry some more. Nevertheless, the lines of the song on their own already told me that this was a song about loss and suicide, and their meaning neither improved nor changed with this unsolicited information because the song itself already does its own telling:

And the arms of the ocean are carrying me

And all this devotion was rushing out of me

And the crashes are heaven for a sinner like me

But the arms of the ocean delivered me

Though the pressure's hard to take

It's the only way I can escape

It seems a heavy choice to make

And now I am under

Though I'm so tempted to write out the song's lyrics down to the very last heart-wrenching line, it is clear as blue that the text on its own performs beautifully without my knowing from whence the inspiration came. One of the short stories I've written thus far is about a girl in high school who is left traumatised and depressed after she terminates her first pregnancy on the same day that her younger brother dies in a car accident. When I shared this story with several people, their initial question was if this happened to me or if I know someone who's had this experience, and my response is usually a question of why this information should matter. How the story came to me was in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep and the voices in my head were chattering away. When I typed the story on my laptop the next morning, I had a roll of tissues next to me: I was crying as if I knew this fictional girl. Actually, the most profound thing was feeling like I *became* this girl while the words found their way across the 20 or so pages. My responsibility is not to provide paratextual information so as to make the story more palatable or – god forbid – more “meaningful”, but instead all I have to offer as the writer is the writing itself, on its own, just like that. In the same way, Joanna Walsh's *Vertigo* is not for one to find out what was happening in her life for her to write such a work, but for one to read the text and *feel* the vertigo as if it's one's own vertigo too.

This need to know – the hunger for meaning behind things that are very well capable of telling the story if you'll just listen; this craving for the writer to sit you down and explain everything – is why the reader, as with the writer, must die.

**And if we cannot pigeonhole the literature, then we must pigeonhole the writer who gave us the literature!**

When one is given a lingual substitute for an object, as Brian Evenson writes, and when the writing is the substitution of language for reality, it isn't very practical to dictate what writing should or shouldn't be. With assigning the writer as god of text, readers and critics often then

presume that a writer should maintain their godship in a particular jurisdiction and form. This is not entirely in relation to genre, which, Camille Roy says, is 'not about representing experience but producing and organising feeling.' No; this is where the restricting categories such as (South) African writer, Black writer, queer writer, etc. come in.

The categories are limiting to a writer when they are assigned in order to restrict the writing to that one group or cause. Dambudzo Marechera's objection to this habit of pigeonholing writers is more blatant, saying that 'if you are a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you'. The pigeonholing of a writer into a particular space and form is an imprisonment that's as good as tearing out their larynx. 'No one novelist can bear the burden of representing a continent and no one novel should have to,' Taiye Selasi writes in her call to "Stop Pigeonholing African Writers". The consequences of squeezing writers into a certain cookie mould is that it limits what kind of writing can come from a certain group of people. It also limits the expression and experience of the writers themselves because now there is a yardstick of how far their identity can trek before reaching its restrictions. The writer finds themselves having to first 'wrestle with this question of identity before talking about what should matter most: their book,' Selasi says.

For Marechera, the confines of a category prohibit the writer from expressing their true self. In one of his essays, he says that there are writers who can only write while they are free to develop their own personality, to be true to themselves (1988: n.p.). These are the kind of writers that Woolf was calling for. When the reading community puts the writer's face to the text, they expect certain things from both the writer and the text, projecting beliefs of one onto the other and expecting a text to "sound" African or queer or Black or feminist *enough*. When the reading community determines the yardstick by which relevant and successful literature is measured, it limits what the writer can express. When we're constantly looking for writers who will pacify our obsession with finding sense and meaning, we're doomed to perpetuating a conformism that doesn't belong in any art form; and 'those who view form as static and reified are doomed to repetition, historical as well as personal' (Lauterbach 2005:np).

Perhaps the flaw in Barthes' murder manifesto is that the writer is the only target. Perhaps, if the writer kills themselves to give the text a life of its own, then the reader must die too: that

is, their fixations with categories and meaning and regurgitation and experiential comfort zones. After wrestling with the task of writing, Yuknavitch finally came to this conclusion:

When I opened my eyes for a time I felt sort of pissy and rude. I thought, well fuck, if you don't need the money, applause or time, then you for god damn sure don't need to feed the reader anymore. The reader is a big fat stuffed pig (2008: n.p.).

Yuknavitch is right, and I suppose this is one of the several reasons why her writing resonates with me as much as it does. Like her, I don't write to feed the reader. I write for the imaginary voices in my head that often have conversations amongst themselves without acknowledging my presence. I write for people who love to eavesdrop. And when those conversations are had, when there is someone who can delight in the eavesdropping and the observing and the empathising, I want no trace of me to be found, since the very act of taking thought to paper is to excommunicate my godship in the story. After all, I am only a kamikaze writer, dying to self to let the story live. I am only a surrogate.

### **This is art for art's sake!**

Hanging on the wall in my room in my mother's house are two paintings that I made for my visual art class in high school. The first one, a picture of a ballerina with one leg suspended in the air and the other anchored on a timepiece, is quite terrible and I'm ashamed to call it my final work. The second, the one I've been staring at for the past several minutes, is one of my favourite things I've ever created – in fact, I think it's pretty darn amazing. It's a painting of a feminine face, incomplete, with a mane of black hair around it, and an inner outline of translucent Bostik glue that was burned brown with my art teacher's lighter. Even now, as I keep looking up at it, I can't really explain what it looks like clearly enough to highlight what makes it so pleasing to look at. There is a kaleidoscope of colours, all mashing into each other so that you can't tell where one colour starts and another dies. There are textures of dried wood glue, white outlines made with Tipex correction fluid, and burn holes from the lighter. The face, I can remember, isn't something I drew from imagination. The face originally belonged to someone (a model in a magazine or an actress's picture from the internet) but it's been so creatively edited that I wouldn't trust the original if I happened to see it again.

The technique is something my teacher taught us how to do weeks before the assignment. What you do is, you create a monochromatic edit of a face, press a blank paper over it and the

press both against a window so that light comes through. Thereafter, you trace along the white parts so that your rendition is only an outline; a distorted copy of the black-and-white original. After some colouring and texturing and painting, the face becomes something entirely different, sometimes even exceptionally original from its original.

I can't remember the exact visage that inspired the painting that hangs on the wall of my room at home, but the original doesn't matter anymore. The one in the painting is its own. I cannot even call it – the painting, the face, the burnt line – exclusively mine and mean it. The fact that art becomes only a replicated substitute for – the simulacra and simulation of – the real thing, the number of ways of articulating the 'myriad expressions' is almost infinite. So, then, even if the writer is boxed into one space and the reader is found to be the manufacturer of those boxes; or if meaning is found or missed or was never created to begin with; or if the text becomes your body and vice versa; 'the word will still be alive and moving,' said Lesego Rampolokeng in a 2003 *New Coin* interview; 'it will always be alive.' To this I would only add: 'because the word *is* god.'

## WRITING IN COMMUNITY:

### A Workshop on the Body and a Public Reading of Words

I hosted a **writing workshop** on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July and it was a fulfilling and pleasurable occasion. I generally enjoy teaching and so running the workshop was a way of sharing what I've learned in the course and in the seminars up to this point, while allowing others to take that shared knowledge and use it for themselves. Because I'm home for the holidays, I decided that it would be great to do the workshop in my hometown, where I know that a majority of young people are into the creative arts. With my pastor's permission, I used a room at the church building as my venue and sent out an invitation to everyone I knew. There were eight people who made it, and one person who arrived as we were closing. The group was aged between 16 and 27, and the maturity of the group in understanding the topic I chose made the workshop a whole lot of fun.

I decided to make the topic about writing the body and for some reason everyone who arrived thought that I meant writing a body paragraph in an essay. They weren't too disappointed when I explained what I actually meant, though. I chose this topic because it was the easiest to prepare for: I'm currently writing the body in my own thesis and so I figured the writing exercises and discussions might help me with my own work as well. Reading through some of Stacy Hardy's notes on the same topic, I focused on three aspects that I wanted to introduce, and explore, while providing examples from the readings I've encountered so far. I took excerpts from *Freshwater* (Akwaeke Emezi), *The Chronology of Water* (Lidia Yuknavitch) and *Awake Asleep Awake* (Jo-Ann Bekker) to use as examples of writing about the tangible body, the observed body, and other bodies. For the first two parts, I let the free-writing run for three minutes respectively. By the time we got to the last part, they wanted me to set a longer time, so we went for four and a half minutes, which was still too short for them. This made my heart swell: the fact that they wanted more time to write and more things to write about. The inspiration kept flowing consistently from the discussions, readings, and the pieces that people produced. As per the notes on running a workshop, I tried very hard (so hard!) not to applaud one person's piece louder than I applauded another, but honestly, they all wrote so well that I couldn't help but blush in awe at everyone's work. Initially, I did ask that they participate fully in terms of the writing, but eventually, they decided for themselves as a group that everyone should participate in the reading of their work, so I got to hear everyone's interpretation of the

prompts. I didn't realise that the individuals in the group were so good at writing about their bodies and experiences, and the best part of the whole workshop was honestly listening to them read their work out loud and hearing how they used imagery to tell their stories. After the session, one guy, an upcoming rapper, said that he'd take one of the pieces he wrote and expand on it for a song. He said that the writing exercises inspired him to write a bit more on the topic and he wasn't the only one who felt this way.

In the feedback questionnaire that I asked them to fill out, they all agreed that this workshop shouldn't be the last, and I'd be happy to do one again – some other time in future, maybe – for the ones who were there and for those who wished to come but couldn't make it. I understand that there are usually challenges to doing these sorts of things, but I faced none and I think it has to do with the fact that everyone who was there *wanted* to be there, and so getting to them to participate or cooperate wasn't something I had to toil over. They did it willingly without my having to ask. The whole experience made me realise the value of being a part of a group like this. When I asked a few of them if they write as a hobby or as a form of expression, they said that they seldom do but the exercises from the workshop moved them to consider doing it more often. (I think I might've recruited future MACW students without realising it.) The workshop – having helped them awaken their inner creative and encouraging them enough to write more and to believe in their work – is something I won't take for granted in future if I ever get to schedule one again.

I told them that they should take their work home and work on it a bit more if they wished to, so I kept none of their pieces. But I asked one of the participants to text me one of the pieces he wrote. The prompt was about a scar on the body and the story behind it and so this is what he wrote:

My face, the now most important prized possession on my body, had to be the one place where I got the most dangerous and painful attack from a house pet. The dog ran like a horse chasing its owner's cup and love but my 5 year old body couldn't even move any faster than a bag of potatoes carried on a turtle's back. The paws came out and I felt the nail pierce the top of my chubby cheek. It felt like a bullet had taken animal form to stab me, the blood running down my cheek like I had an entire murder scene on my face. I felt like all the pain I was meant to feel my entire life was coming over me at that very moment.

The rest of the group produced work along these lines, using descriptive images to retell stories from their past and present.

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The **public reading** of my work took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July at the University of Johannesburg. My honours lecturer helped me organise it and he, another lecturer, and six students came through to listen to me read my work. At first I was unsure about what I would share, since I feel like most of my work is incomplete, as in not ready for public eyes (or ears). But eventually I decided on sharing from my poetics essay and from four of my short pieces that I wrote for assignments. The reasons why I chose to read from my essay is because one, what I learned in my honours year inspired me to write that essay and so I wanted to pay homage to my beloved English department; and two, because I wanted to give an outline of why I write the way I do before actually delving into the pieces I'd written. I only read a relevant section of the essay and then went on to read the four short pieces. All in all, it took me about 25 to 30 minutes to read before I opened the floor for questions.

The discussions and questions that came after my reading were intriguing to say the least. Basically, what everyone was mostly curious about was how I navigate around writing stories that aren't part of my personal experiences (like the story I wrote about a high school girl who had an abortion) and how I responded to having my characters being called coconut and "not black enough". One of the students who came said that that he could relate to my writing experiences that aren't entirely mine because he's done the same. The more we spoke about this, the more I affirmed that as a writer his duty is to offer his writing and so long as it doesn't show signs of having been written from a place of blatant and audacious ignorance, then he is free to write what he feels compelled to write. Because it was sort of an academic space that I was sharing my work in, I also got questions of whether I consider myself as a postmodern writer and whether I agree or disagree with the structuralism theory that everything that is written has already been done and that, therefore, the concept of *creative* writing is obsolete. I had to laugh a little when they asked me that, and I had to quietly pray for the right words to give an educated answer.

I was pretty grateful that there were questions after I read, because what I expected when walked into that room was that no one would have anything to say and that would be that.

What was supposed to have ended in 45 minutes went on for an hour and a half all because of the questions and discussions and insights that came afterwards. My biggest challenge, apart from trying hard not to stumble over or choke on my own words from nervousness as I read, was finding the right ways and words to defend my work and to share my experiences as a writer. Ultimately, I was able to do this eloquently and comprehensibly enough. I actually felt like I already had a book published and was ready to answer for all my decisions and choices in writing it.

In addition to the questions I received and the enjoyment of reading a part of my essay with my honours lecturers in the room, the sweetest part of the session was that they also organised food – yay! – and that we stood around the table talking about writing and literature long after I concluded and closed the reading and thanked them for having me. When I got home, I found this email from my lecturer and it made my day:

It was so good to see you and listen to you reading from your work, which I just find as exciting as your academic writing. I also think the reception to your presentation was great: everyone was really impressed by the high quality of both your writing and your ability to theorise it in a dynamic and accessible way.

Overall, both the reading and the writing workshop opened a whole new portal for me in that I now know that there is more that I could do as a writer apart from just writing: there is the sharing of knowledge and skills, and the sharing of work that leads to many interesting discussions and revelations – all of it is just as fulfilling as the writing itself. If I never get to pursue a professional career in writing, I know that I could stretch my wings to cover the other scopes of creative writing.

## BOOK REVIEWS:

### **'We now enter: Total Isolation.' A Review of Sam Pink's *Rontel***

When Virginia Woolf suggested the birth of a literature that could examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day, I don't presume she ever predicted that a Sam Pink would come along to midwife this brand of literature and then blast the whole concept of stream-of-consciousness from its humble state to a mind-blowing new level. In his 2013 novel, *Rontel* (published by Lazy Fascist Press), Pink takes us on a fragmented, almost-linear journey through Chicago, Illinois, where the narrator finds himself contemplating stealing chips from a dancing toddler, eavesdropping on conversations about murder, and considering a better life through jumping off the ledge of a building. Starting off on the morning of his supposed last day of work, the narrator takes us on a vivid course of his ordinary life and the whole progression of the book coils around the words of the spaceship captain in his head: 'Original route, impossible. We now enter: Total Isolation.'

While most stream-of-consciousness narratives tend to feel saturated and almost predictable after some time, Pink writes in a manner that retains its crispness after every page. Through his unnamed narrator, he takes us along a series of scenes in his life in Chicago in a first-person narrative that keeps flowing without pause or break. The narrator shares an apartment with his cat, Rontel, and his unemployed brother. To the reader, he's just another ordinary human being, which he very well is; yet his ordinariness is not plain: with a dark humour that makes his personality both absurd and easy to relate to, he leads us along an unpredictable path down the rabbit hole of his life.

The morbid tone of the narrator's voice is set from the first page when, after seeing his miniature self in the bathroom sink, he writes: 'And I decided when it was my turn to be the smaller version of myself riding a flake of makeup down the drain – I'd wave to the normalized me and yell "into the terror" before entering the drain, laughing.' This surfing into the terror sets the tone exceptionally well for the rest of the book, as seen in the terrifically dark ways that the narrator contemplates being stabbed in the back while receiving a hug from a stranger, and being shot in the head and chest, only to thereafter complain that his shirt has been ruined with bullet holes and blood. It's scenes like this that evoke in you a sadness and empathy to his misery, while tickling a laugh out of you for his blunt and absurd honesty. It

might not be too far-fetched to believe that the sequence of events after this moment are all a result of him making it down the drain and into the terror, but his encounters in the streets and homes in Chicago are too tangible and too detailed to merely be a fragment of his wild imagination. Still, it can't be denied that as you read, you begin to feel yourself floating with him into the terror and laughing, too. That is what Pink's writing does to you: he has a way of writing you into the story without even mentioning your name. The authenticity of the narrator's thoughts, urges, actions, and mannerisms is uncannily relatable; and therein lies the dark humour that makes the book a worthy read.

In between the gloomy thoughts that slither into the narrator's stream of thought, Pink knits into this novel a handful of characters that create a realistic world outside of the narrator's head. His interactions with his brother, with his neighbour, with his girlfriend, and even with his cat, Rontel, make the read something that's packed beyond a series of thoughts on life, death and the in-between. The interactions are sometimes seemingly random. For instance, shortly after he buys a new phone, the narrator gets a text from a Wisneiski that was clearly meant for someone else. Though the narrator admits he doesn't know the person whose name he even misspells, this doesn't stop him from sending a heart-felt text in response to the wrong number, saying 'Wiskieski, just tell me. We used to be so good man. It was me and you. Just me and ol' Wisneiski. What now.' This is a silly thing you would think no one would ever dream of doing, but Pink writes this like he knows that some of us do get *this* lonely and *this* weird when no one else is watching – when total isolation is at its peak. It's this kind of scene and characterisation that makes the events in *Rontel* as memorable as they are relatable.

If you have ever read and enjoyed Adrian Mole's socially awkward humour and contemplative monologue in Sue Townsend's collections, then you might equally – if not exceedingly – enjoy Pink's matured humour and philosophy through the main character, his brother, and his beloved cat, Rontel.

**Reading, Writing, and Eating Flash: a Review of *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction***

The most important things in life exist in threes, certainly. Think of the body, mind, and soul. Or gas, solid, and liquid. And then, in the same train of reasoning, welcome aboard *Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction* with its flawless balance of essays, examples, and prompts. Published by The Rose Metal Press and edited by Tara L. Masih, the *Field Guide* is a collection of 25 essays from not only writers in the field, but from editors and teachers of flash fiction too. Robert Olen Butler, Shouhua Qi, Pia Z. Ehrhardt, Vanessa Gebbie, and Tom Hazuka are some of the names included in the selection of essays that drop a spotlight on the genre in succinct and ingenious ways. Whether you're newly discovering the genre, or working on refining your skill in writing, or simply looking for new and inspiring ways to teach this nuanced form of creative writing to others, this is a book that caters to your particular need in each and every short (as if I need to mention this!) essay.

Kicking off with an introduction from Masih, the book offers insight to the birth, growth and influence of flash fiction in the literary universe. The history of it in itself is comprehensive enough to fascinate you if, like me, you thought that the genre is pretty much the love-child of our modern generation's shortened attention span and the need for less words. Described in one of the featured essays in the book as 'a story in miniature, a work of art carved on a grain of rice', flash fiction is not a new creation but instead, it has gathered much hype in the past few years after a long period of silence. Think about our limited Twitter characters and creatively neat Instagram captions, and know that literature has been available in short, short lengths even before the era of Edgar Allen Poe. 'Poe's own stories,' Masih explains, 'broke with the convention of seeking story through plot and character. Instead, he sought to capture a mood or feeling, and then to translate the same mood or feeling to the reader.' This art of capturing a mood or feeling is the foundation of flash, as justified and substantiated by the writers, teachers, and editors that contribute to this concise collection.

The refreshing thing about this compilation is that to each contributor, flash means and requires different things. To Jayne Anne Phillips, 'the words of the last line should create a silence, a white space in which the reader breathes'; and to Nathan Leslie, 'flash fiction is about ambiguity... about a singular moment, a slice of life, a sketch.' At the end of it all, these unique concepts tie together well enough to create a rounded portrait of the flash.

Without a doubt, the introduction takes on a form and tone that reminds you of an academic textbook. However, the essays that follow are nothing short of creative and free-flowing: the energy in the rest of the book shakes off the intimidating and stiff nature of a conventional textbook. The essays are divided into various sections – namely “Finding Freedom and Feeling in the Form”, “Imagery as Inspiration”, and “Focusing and Editing” – based on the strategies involved in writing, reading, and appreciating flash. Moreover, every essay includes a unique perspective on this genre and is coupled with a relevant example of flash fiction and a delicious prompt to get your creativity flowing. By the end of the last essay, you might have an insatiable urge to write yourself into the trajectory of flash fiction right away, whether as a teacher, an editor, or writer.

As opposed to most textbooks that seek to define and tighten the borders around a particular subject matter, this textbook only offers informed insights and guidelines to equip you in whichever way you would like to participate in the genre, without restricting you or defining the genre in any rigid way. It offers definitions while still leaving things to interpretation as far as your creativity can take you. If you give yourself enough time to savour the well-written essays and examples, and to follow the prompts down into your creative rabbit hole, not only will you have fun with it but you might just feel ready enough to add to the future history of flash fiction – or microfiction, or pocket-sized fiction, or the short short, or as I like to call it, canapés literature.

The “Growling” Pains of Being Young and Ambitious: A Review of Xialou Guo’s *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*

‘I had always wanted to leave my village, a nothing place that won’t be found on any map of China. I had been planning my escape ever since I was very little.’

These are the two lines from Chinese writer, Xialou Guo’s audacious debut novel, *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, which form the skeleton of Fenfang Wang’s coming-of-age story. In this fragmented young adult novel, Guo offers a character and a story that is as messy and as genuine as the first few years of anyone’s 20s. At the tender age of 21 – which isn’t too late for one’s youth to start if you’re ‘the average dumb Chinese peasant, who leaps straight from childhood to middle age with nothing in between’ – Fenfang decides to leave her mundane home and peasant life on a sweet potato farm to pursue ‘those shiny things in life’ that she believes are waiting for her in the hustle and bustle of Beijing. The first ray of hope that Fenfang gets as she begins chasing a career as a film actress is a red-inked number on her application form to a film and TV industry. She is extra number 6787 and this is enough motivation for her to soldier on and never look back on her decision to leave home. Whether things get worse or better for her from this moment is hard to say, but the significance in a story like hers, of course, is in the leaving home to find a place in the world. Anyone who has ever had to live on cheap noodles and jump from one job to the next can relate to Fenfang’s journey, whether or not her nationality and culture are familiar.

The novel has been translated into English from its original Mandarin, and though the socio-political contexts may differ from what you know, the story at its core is one that is both comfortably universal and attractively specific. It is separated into 20 well-written chapters or “fragments” in Fenfang’s life in the greener, polluted pastures of the city and through these, Guo takes the reader along the journey of a young woman’s attempt at making a better life for herself away from the routine of home. From her messy romantic relationships with a fellow co-worker and an American man from Boston, to trying her luck in scriptwriting, every fragment of Fenfang’s life evokes in the reader the feelings of believing in Fenfang’s dreams, sympathising with her shortcomings, and laughing with her at the rough luck in her new life in Beijing, on which she blames the Heavenly Bastard in the Sky.

Fenfang's gutsy attitude is coated with a humour that's unique to her voice. When she moves to a new place, she writes: 'I've been blessed with cockroaches in every place I've lived in Beijing, but it was in the Chinese Rose Garden that I was truly anointed. [...] They lingered on the rims of cups, sat in my rice cooker pondering the meaning of life. The thing about my cockroaches, they were very cinematic, like the birds in that Alfred Hitchcock film.' Every line in the novel places you right at the centre of the socio-political climate of Beijing, as well as in the ravenous flow of Fenfang's career as a film extra and a budding scriptwriter. The brilliance of Guo's writing lies also in how the reader is close as close can be to Fenfang's life, thoughts, and dreams.

A notable aspect of the novel and the writing that makes it a delight to read is the fact that Guo, similarly to Fenfang, is no stranger to the field of film-making. Apart from the creativity in how she introduces each new fragment with a photograph that illustrates the setting that Fenfang occupies, there is also a cinematic, picturesque feel in Guo's writing that illuminates the fragments as creatively as if it were a short film in which Fenfang is the leading lady. From the detailed descriptions of the city and its inhabitants, to the narrowness of Fenfang's life in her different apartment rooms, Guo's writing carries a poetic voice that is funny and above-all, authentic and rich. In between her musings about city life and her position in it, Fenfang weaves commentaries on films, novels and screenplays by the likes of Maguerite Duras and Tennessee Williams, reminding us that she is, ultimately, a young woman floating inside the pop-culture bubble of her time.

Because of the "fragmented-ness" of the novel, Fenfang's story doesn't move in a linear progression in the conventional sense of a coming-of-age novel. Instead, each fragment is a brief aspect of her life – shortcomings and successes, and all the stuff in-between. As each fragment ends and another begins, you begin to realise that the book isn't about the events along the path to her success as much as it is about the fundamental growth and the reality checks that come with leaving home to chase after shiny things. As beautiful as the images that signpost a new fragment are, the writing in Guo's fragments is enough to drag you into the existential space of being young and hungry for something different.

## RESPONSE TO THE READER REPORT:

### What an Anonymous Reader Said About My Work and What I Did About It

Two weeks after I sent in the first draft of my novella, randomly and naively titled *Signs of Decay*, I received my reader report and I chose to read it in a very public place so that I wouldn't afford the luxury of dramatically falling apart if I found it to solicit such a reaction. It didn't take me long to read it so after I got to its end, I read it again. And then, I read it for a third time before I walked home to digest it and act on what it said. Before I had received it, I'd already had ambiguous and negative feelings about my work, to the extent that I wanted to press *CTRL + A + Backspace* on my keyboard and find comfort in the blankness of a page. After I read the report and went back to my room to change only one line that I thought needn't be there, I ended up writing more than I'd intended to and the first six chapters of the work morphed into an entirely different beast. There was no going back after that.

Like I said, my plan wasn't to change anything significantly, only to edit something out and replace it with something else. However, because of the feelings I had before the report came, and because of the amounts of anime that I was binging on by the time the report came (I'll explain later), I was swept away by a massive wave of I-don't-know-what, and pictures and scenes and words were coming to me in ways which I had no other choice to respond to but in submission and surrender. In reading the report, what I came to realise was this: what I was doing with the work was entirely opposite to what I was preaching in the essays and reflective journals in my portfolio. I was putting myself into the story and trying to fictionalise that, instead of allowing the story to fictionalise itself and then weaving into it the parts of me that it allowed me to. I was being a hypocrite and this explains why I hated it so much.

How the work came to be was that in watching the deadline for submission approach and craning my neck to see the top of the 30 000 word count, I panicked and scrambled for content to fill the pages. I turned to my personal life and figured that this content was enough, it just needed a few tweaks here and there and then we could call it a thesis. I acted out of worry and not out of faith in the writing, and it showed. I'm bummed at how long it took me to see my mistake, but at the same time, I am rather amused and grateful that I took the long way 'round because at this point, as I'm working on the revised version of my novella, I understand – I fully comprehend – the gravity of what I mean when I say that the word really trumps all.

From this experience, I realised that when I settle down before a blank page and I don't know how things will begin, progress, or end; when there is nothing else to rely on but the next word and the sentence that follows after that; there do I find my strength as a writer. The anime that I confessed to binge-watching earlier is called *Shokugeki no Soma*. It's an exaggerated, high school version of Master Chef that comes with English subtitles and really interesting characters. In an episode that I watched, one chef, named Eishi Tsukasa, said something that affirmed what I had been preaching all along. What was said, I will write in English as per the subtitles I read. When a red-haired character told the particular chef that she would like to try a dish of his that featured more of his passion for food in it, he replied to her and said:

No, I don't need to put myself into my cooking. My work involves erasing all evidence of my involvement in the dish. I focus solely on the quality of the ingredients and enhancing them. But, paradoxically, that work involves expressing myself in the dish. That defines my cooking.

Replace the words "cooking" with "writing", and "dish" with "thesis", and you'll understand why I had to watch this before delving back into my work. As for the "ingredients", that word could remain there as a metaphor for content and sentences and words.

Before I both forget my purpose of writing this, I need to return to the report and to what I did about what it said. The ingredients of my thesis were what I needed to review the most, and it was not until I heard what another person thought of my work that I started to see what was amiss about the content. Firstly, when the reader mentioned my use of small caps throughout the piece, I realised that this was the first thing I did out of panic at the start. I was trying to photocopy a technique I'd used for an assignment, hoping that it would work the same way, but instead all it did was reveal my own insecurity because I couldn't even defend that decision to myself. So, I began writing the piece in normal caps and it immediately felt and looked 20 times better. A second thing that the reader mentioned that made me feel like a big phony was the timeline of events and the way the novella moved imprecisely back and forth. This was yet another attempt at doing something extravagant with something plain and it ended up confusing the plot unnecessarily. That, too, I couldn't defend to myself and so it had to change. In the second draft, I've let go of trying to do something avant-garde and I've opted for a linear timeline with no complicated back-and-forth. Remember when I said that I had initially gone back to the work to change only one line? By the time I had digested and implemented these changes as per the report's constructive observations, I was sitting with 20 chapters that were

a blend of newly-written and heavily-edited. These may sound like rather drastic changes to make from a one-page report but like I said, I hadn't allowed the words to flow to me unfiltered and uncut, and so what the report did was to give me the nudge I needed to unclog the blockage.

In the finer details of the novella, I picked up things from the reader that I hadn't noticed on my own. She (I presume that the reader is a woman so please allow me) mentioned that the main character's sense of place wasn't as strong in Grahamstown as it was in Joburg, and she, the reader, would've liked for that to be consistent throughout. That was pretty interesting for me to see and to both my supervisor and me, we figured it was because Celiwe is more familiar with Joburg than she is with G-Town, to which she had only just moved. Nevertheless, we figured that one or two street names or names of buildings, even if fictional, wouldn't hurt, and so I'm keeping that in mind as I work my way through the story. Another fine detail that she mentioned was when Celiwe's friend asks her what star sign Scar is and then I don't write what her answer is. The reader said she would've liked to know, and then she went on to suggest, or rather guess, that Scar is a Scorpio. Clueless about these things, I consulted with my good friend Google and found that the characteristics of a Scorpio man are precisely parallel to the character of Scar. Go figure! So I've decided that Scar is a Scorpio, born sometime in November. This helped me quite a lot because then, in trusting the direction that the words will take on their own, I have an image in mind of the kind of man he is and this image can propel the words to a particular end. You see, how I write now is vastly different from how I wrote before: now, I feed myself images and ideas and let the words take their course; whereas before, I was trying too hard to squeeze words out of a mould that I had already established, narrow-mindedly so.

Yet another detail that my beloved reader touched on was the image at the beginning, where Celiwe, in an email to a friend, writes that she is a venus fly trap and her prey never knows of it. This image, my reader said, is strong and great but it disappears by the end of the novella. I agreed with her and in the new edit, I moved the email to somewhere in the middle, after Celiwe expresses her admiration for plant life. The way I did this renders the image a passing one instead of something that grounds the story. So, then, she still feels like a venus fly trap after one or two particular relationships, but now, because so much happens and so much is realised before she arrives to this conclusion, it becomes only a metaphor of the moment and

not entirely a central image. This change has enabled me to review the details of what I've been trying to do with the story and what I've been meaning to say, and I actually realised that many of the things that I was placing beneath a spotlight were not the backbone of the story itself. To an extent, I have readjusted the focus of the story and while it was about Celiwe and her relationships before, it is now about Celiwe herself. A thing that my reader said that keeps me alert amidst this change is how Celiwe's reflections in G-Town are 'heavy-going and insular'. The last thing I want, when I say that the story is focused on Celiwe, is to have it be insular and heavy-going.

There are more minor things that I've changed but there's no need to mention them here because the gist of it all, ultimately, is that I've let myself surrender to the wonder of approaching the page with mind that is less of a dictator to the work and more of a literary chef who only attempts to bring the best out of every ingredient.

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