Part A: Thesis

The mountain's calling

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

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Motlatjo Mabeba

November 2021

Abstract

Topic: short prose forms

My thesis is a collection of prose – in the form of short stories, flash fiction and fragments – which explore the silences around living as a queer black South African who has been called to spiritual healing. I draw on lived experiences, dreams, imagination, and my grandmother's folk tales to tell the stories I would love to have read when growing up. In my narratives, queer men navigate different spaces in urban Johannesburg and rural Limpopo. I am inspired by Bettina Judd's words: "Writing is attached to the body… it is my Black woman, queer-identified, round-bodied hand that puts pen to paper, to keyboard, and creates whatever I create." In retelling my grandmother's folk tales with a queer twist, I learn from contemporary fairy tale writers like Kate Bernheimer, Angela Carter and Taisia Kitaiskaia. And in writing about the trauma of rejection by family and community, I am influenced by Bessie Head's *A Question of Power.*

Contents

Ask Mx Badimo	4
Inheritance	7
His mother and him	8
The body	9
In a time not far	11
Of waters	14
The Gift	16
The belovedly missed	17
A tall male shadow	19
There she was	21
Third Avenue	22
An evening of boxed wine	24
Trash	27
Motlatjo's partner	28
Unsent letters	30
Gogo Kwena and that old man	36
The gift of the beast that swallows	38
The neighbourly Granny	42
Coming out confessions	44
Brotherly compassion	49
Sea of Blood	50
The Beautiful Bro	51
The Fatherless Man	53
Mom Sally, an Ally	55
The Scottish wedding knot	57
Father and I visiting them	58
The Graveyard Guardian	60
As they cross over	63
Mkhulu Thabang	64
Reject them all	66
Gogo Kwena and the farm	67

The Matriarch’s mattress 69
Now and Then 74
Fell from the sky 77
I remember them 79
The mountain’s calling 82

Ask Mx Badimo

Dear Mx Badimo,

This world has made me suffer enough, would you be kind enough to allow me to join you? What do I have to do for you to grant me permission to be beside you in your realms? If I could only be there, maybe, all this suffering will come to an end?

Mx BADIMO:

The day I left earth everything was so confusing, but then again, after some time, I realised that I was better off on earth than in this realm. So be wise earthly one, don't wish for what cannot be reversed. Well, as for me, my job is to welcome newcomers when they join our realm. Often, they are not sure where they are and cry to be sent back, they make my job a difficult one beyond measure. Child, you say you are suffering, yet by any measure, your pain and sorrows don't come close to what these family members of mine put me through. Our advice to you is for you to wait your turn and enjoy whatever your world has to offer. Before you know it, we will call upon you to join us.

Dear Mx Badimo,

Even as an adult, I have been wondering if dragons and unicorns are real, wondering about their existence and extinction. Please tell me that it's possible to glance at them occasionally, it would be so nice to see them.

Mx BADIMO:

Oh, aren't you just too charming! Age is nothing short of a sign of a lived life, being powerless to recall everything doesn't mean that it never was. You speak of mythic entities as though it's a debt owed to the fleshy ones, don't be too quick to forget that you too hold the mystic gifts. When you look outside in your garden, birds and butterflies are still there, yet they existed in the time of the dragon's spells. One can never see when their cup is full and killing them as it overflows. Some things are not to be understood in visions of monotony. We are repeatedly tested on our own existence and form, yet here we are.

Dear Mx Badimo,

The heteros are still too much, they are at it again. It's been a few years since coming out and I still struggle to handle their toxicity. It's as though they are out to get rid of me. I thought I was no longer bothered much by their views, somehow, I had made it. But little did I know that coming out never ends.

This given task is too much for me. How am I to be a leader, with all these tears of lived marginalization and homophobia. Where do I even begin?

MX BADIMO:

Aren't we born of these stupid heteros? Don't we share the same disgusting flesh as them? Stop allowing them to get the better of you, this is no game of chess. Our lives were never made to perish. Take those same energies that helped make you survive these years and charge forth. You speak of only a few years but fail to understand the rebirthing you had to do first. Failure to fulfil your path is unnegotiable. This decision was made in conjunction with that which made us. We were merely given a chance to elect a vessel, of strength and will. Our priorities were never to choose a weakling. At that moment we saw you in ourselves. The life you were destined for is one of constant change. Nothing was meant to last, each phase you embark on will bear fruits of alteration. A life that is standing still when the river flows, is not life. If you refuse to flow with the waves, then why did we bother enchanting them with your resemblance? Immortality is our companion. So that we may rise above it all entangled with guidance, grace and prosperity. Prepare yourself for the work ahead.

Dear Mx Badimo,

I never liked my body. Now that I am fast approaching 30, maintaining this weight is hard. The fears of having a tummy going through doors before my face haunts me endlessly. Will I ever have that desired six-pack?

MX BADIMO:

Oh, juvenile one. What is a physique but flesh? Who gives a damn about a jelly tummy? You have fully functional parts; many would slaughter to have what you despise. What matters is not how you've battled with your body. It's how you relinquish the existence it brings forth. Remember in your younger schooling, you were so tiny and would cry about being so thin. Now you have a bit of meat and still, you whine. Isn't it the soul that sparks galaxies? You fleshy beings worry about age as though it is the end. If you only knew how to embrace the wisdom marked through the years. When that undesired fleshy expansion takes a bow, bow back to its presence. It is a fortune few have.

Dear Mx Badimo,

Is your realm better than earth and is being queer an issue in your realms?

MX BADIMO:

It is not for us to share until your time arrives. Whenever humans join us, each one of them is taught a new life. We have no flesh, yet once upon a time flesh was what we all had and now it's just an abundance of wisdom – and newcomers whining countless times. As for the queerness you ask about, we judge not of one's sexualities. It does not matter at all to us. We know better than those humans who say otherwise.

Inheritance

My family says we are descendants of greatness, of a fragment of richness, of royalty and of a time when there was nothing but unity. Yet things started to change over the years. All that began to be unraveled.

All of us were raised to protect each other's strengths and weaknesses. Now we selflessly decide who matters the most. I mean for fucking sake we decide who to even invite into our homes, we don't even trust each other. Yet that's not how Granny raised us, although it's been said that she began the division amongst all our family members.

These days all we hear are gossips everywhere. They gossip about us their kids thinking that we won't notice it. They send each other texts elaborating how messed up we are, but they always make the same mistakes. They send their responses to one of us instead of amongst themselves. They forget that we are often tasked to go through their phones when they require updates.

They still preach of greatness, of richness, of royalty and unity. But above all they never preach about what led to their kids being messed up. After all we are just the lost generation that chose to be distasteful instead of gracious. Their actual term for us is demons that require cleansing.

How quickly my family forgets that we are descendants of greatness, of a fragment of richness, of royalty and of a time when there was nothing but unity.

His mother and him

I was not expecting visitors when I heard whispering in the parking lot. Out I peeked, it was him and his mother. I unlocked the gate, greeted them.

He stood there looking at me like a lost kid. It's always a strange event when it comes to him; a hello sometimes scares him, a high five is peculiar, a hug doesn't always do it.

His mother smiled as she offloaded the bicycle for him. She had tried to teach him, to show him the ropes. In the end all she could do was load everything into their brand new car and drive him my way. She was exhausted but still kept her Afro intact. She uttered the words *I tried but we decided Uncle will do*.

Adopted uncle is more like it. A flowery one even better, I got all the crazy hair, painted nails, piercings, makeup and awkwardness to show for it. She left us outside and it was now my turn. We got ready and at first he just looked at me.

Two hours later, he was so excited, like a puppy, and I was exhausted.
He kept saying *Uncle Mo I did it.*
I kept saying *of course you did. You got this!*
Uncle Mo, I wanna go again!
He now had the confidence to keep going on his own.
He did well for a five-year-old.

The body

Let me tell you a tale of wonder. Not a tale of joy, nor sadness. A tale of reality, the story of this body. Short and stocky. The very same anatomy dualities you fucking flaunt.

Every Tuesday afternoon, this body wanders off to yoga sessions. It can barely twist without losing balance, yet it keeps trying. Pushing itself with caution to maintain the flow of oxygen bumping through its lungs and then transporting it to the blood cells, while the brain takes its required share. An engine for its survival. It's often exposed to toxic nutrients its stomach can't handle, but it has to be fed and its host forgets not to feed it allergens, often they are way too palatable to resist. The feeding always begins with taking delicate perishables, allowing them to melt inside the mouth before going down the throat, with a final blow when they arrive in the stomach, the stomach heating up with sessions of annoyance and rejections while trying to kick them out. All too much for its host, trying to put yoga practices of caring for the body into action.

So every Tuesday late afternoon, this body wanders off to yoga with other dualities. This body not only has limits when it comes to balance, it has no ability whatsoever to lift itself up from the ground with one hand. Each tumultuous yoga session always leaves this body of mine sore, the pain isn't too much but comes with reduced mobility.

Somehow such a body always carries on. Its legs are strong. Upper body fragile. Tummy is jelly like the creatures of the sea. The feet are as small as a baby's hands. Toes as elegant as a swimmer. Body art is an extension of that which I wasn't granted while arriving in a birthday suit.

This body was once so tiny that rumours of anorexia took its toll on me. It was never assigned a fixed gender as it always moved with the flaws of everything, ignoring how its fellow humans assigned it. This body never had the stamina for playing boyish games of football. It simply couldn't keep up and found interests elsewhere. It acquired no hostility even though it was faced with multiple hostilities at an early age. It was so tiny that bullies made it a playing ground and there was never strength for it to push back successfully. Its petite fragments desired a cage to hide in, but there was never such protection for its cries. Instead it had an army of bulked up bodies to deal with, it would always run back home to Granny for a shoulder to cry on. It's no wonder that the same petite body could run long distance races. This body never stopped running, it's still running to this day. Somehow it learnt to adjust its heartbeat of fears and its inhaled nicotine, with wonder it altered its lungs.

This body of mine never knew a six pack, instead it is round. It has always been bestowed with a height not desired. Ears smaller than its host would have preferred. Curves that were once an issue.

Sexually this body is desired from a distance, by the given male gaze. Yet when the gaze is over sexualized it makes me feel self-conscious. It does appreciate the attention as it comes with warmth of desires reserved only for the brave ones. It is after all at its peak of pleasures, as the brave ones would curiously tease it from the tips of its lips with succulent entangled tongues, followed by a gentle embracement, embarking on the pleasures of flesh, buttocks to penis and penis to buttocks. As we take turns enjoying penetration and offering it, reaching the sacred male G-spot, located deep inside the anal spaces of wonderland. Sweaty from bodily fluids. It's no ordinary pleasure of the flesh, no matter how often we embrace this, this pleasure comes with penetrative pain my body has come to know, to embrace, to bow to as pleasurable pain.

Spiritually, ancestors chose this body as their host. After decades of calling and calling for family members to respond to the call of becoming traditional healers and the calling was rejected. Both male and female ancestors sought for a body to occupy. When they observed all remaining options at hand, this body was then entrusted with the gift of manifesting spiritual healing. It is a body that ancestors spoke to in dreams. They showed this body abilities not possible with other bodies. As a host for ancestors, it is their most prized belonging. This body is at the mercy of ancestors and they do with it as they please. It has been blessed with abilities to enter spiritual realms and the earthly world interchangeably.

This body somehow managed to embrace the pettiness over its assigned gender, even when that makes it a target. As a body to be slaughtered. A physicality never too safe in certain parts of the world. Similar bodies like this of mine have paid dearly, but for now, it shall keep going in its duality. Even when you try to make it fucking extinct. It's best for you to bow to it. This body of mine still has stories to tell and to inspire. It never ends. It will never end.

In a time not far

Once upon a time, said Gogo Kwena, taking a second sip of her cup of tea. In a time not so long ago and not so far away. A time just after I was born. There was a newborn who lived in a small village, on the coast of the Bakwena clan. This baby was tiny with eyes resembling amethysts and was welcomed as the family's jewel. The villagers gathered around to celebrate this arrival. They had waited long; their waiting had felt like forever. Now a newborn had arrived. It had been years of longing for a miracle and finally the waiting was over and done with. Gifts were given with good wishes. Family members travelled from far to come and greet the newborn, each with ideas of the future ahead.

The child grew up in a home of wisdom and morality. In a home filled with guests from neighbouring villages, who came with only one reason, to seek the child's grandmother's advice. Your Gogo Kwena was like no other elderly resident. She had a tongue of wisdom, and her answers drew on generations of knowledge. She had learned this wisdom from her moments spent in the wild. Every weekend she would wake up early, pack food and head off to the nearby forest. Well, it was not that nearby for you and me, but for her, a couple of hours exploring the natural habitat wasn't a big deal. Since the child was still young, Gogo Kwena could only share her experiences upon returning. In return, the child would always stare back with those amethyst eyes, filled with a smile and fascination. Within a year, the child could mumble now and then. As it grew older, having conversations became easier. Gogo Kwena would always relay her discoveries with the child. Soon she would carry the child on her back. They started exploring the forest together, returning to the village by sunset. Gogo Kwena ensured that this child was raised in a home of no prejudice, with no gender conformity. The child was allowed to express themselves as they wished and enjoyed mimicking the adults. Learning the languages of the wild, the child would ask.
Gogo Kwena what's that?
Oh, that my precious one it's an Elephant.
Aha, an Elephant. What's an Elephant?
The keeper of the grassland.
The child would then go to the elephant and imitate it's trumpeting, then quickly run back to Gogo Kwena, with another question.

And what's that?
That's a lion.
Ahha, a Lion! What's a Lion?
The ruler of all beings with eyes of citrine.

The child would giggle while roaring at the lions nearby and they would roar back.

And that?
Those are the fairy Butterflies.
I see but what are fairy Butterflies?
They are the keepers of the villagers. The ones who fly with amethysts.
The child would then try to fly like the fairy butterflies, but just couldn't.

The more they explored the wild, the more discoveries they made. One day Gogo Kwena left the child sleeping by the tree in the care of fairy butterflies. While butterflies fluttered around them with wings shining light, the child would try to catch them and Gogo Kwena would giggle with the fairy butterflies. It was now the child and two fairy butterflies having fun**.** The trio wandered off to a faraway place, in a futuristic time. Upon their return they found Gogo Kwena waiting for them, she didn't ask questions and was glad that they made it back on time. As they waved farewell to the butterflies, the child knew that spending time with Gogo Kwena was coming to an end. Gogo Kwena also knew that she could not continue walking for hours every day. She had lost count of the years travelled. Her aching body could no longer keep up. But the child was beginning to know the wild, like their playground.

I refilled our teapot with boiled freshwater, from the kettle on the burning wood fire next to Gogo Kwena. I didn't want her to move or lose the train of thought. I asked Gogo Kwena, what happened to them after returning home?

Gogo Kwena pointed to her cup. After I had poured more tea, she continued.

On their way back, the child had fallen asleep on Gogo Kwena's back. Later on, the child was tucked into bed, with their favourite butterfly blankets. The following day Gogo Kwena's body ached, it had become a burden to walk like before.

The child grew into a teenager. All the visits to the forest had long been forgotten. Gogo Kwena still had regular visitors, asking questions which kept her busy, and more and more guests travelled to her in search of answers. Then one day, a day not long ago, when the teenager greeted guests on their arrival and left to complete domestic chores, Gogo Kwena's guests argued that this teenager shouldn't be bothered with domestic chores. They argued for a while, saying that a boy should become a man and a girl should become a woman. Pointing fingers at Gogo Kwena and raising their voices, they said, Look at your

grandchild, there's no way of telling if we greeted a boy or a girl. Gogo Kwena looked at the teenager and remembered all the times they spent in the wild. With the elephants trumpeting, the lion roaring, and the butterflies flying around. That was a time not long ago, a time not far from this time. Unlike these guests, the wild understood better.

To my amusement, I had forgotten about my cup of tea, Gogo Kwena seemed to know how to make time freeze and disappear. My tea had gone cold. I wanted to hear more and more of her stories. She gazed back with a smile. Her nostalgia found its way, glowing through her eyes, as though it too was alive. At that moment, Gogo Kwena became a living fairy tale herself. I snapped out of my thoughts and asked, What happened after the guests' quarrel?

She said, You see, that was back in the days. When my memory wasn't as frail. In a time not long ago, a time not far from our time. A moment before you were all born. A time forgotten, even though it was not that long ago.

Of waters

It was three years ago, around this time of the year. As the sun warmly reached out, caressing all that came into sight, I had already found a taxi and was heading to the consultation. I had been informed that they start early. That their cues start around 05:00. How this is the norm I can never understand. But I obliged for the sake of seeking answers.

I climbed out of the taxi with my jelly feet barely able to carry me. This was a matter of deciding to live or throw in the towel. It was about death or breathing. This very same heart I am entrusted with was filled with heaviness. I joined the queue.

Finally, it was my turn. I entered a brightly lit room. There they were. Two tall figures, their smiles followed by a gaze. One lying sideways on the grassmat and the other seated, firmly grounded. Faces with veins of age and eyes with blinding silver lights. Two lions sketched by the sky through the windows. Them as in the Gogos. The healers who hear water whisperings. A bowl of water and a lit white candle in front of them.

It was time for me to face the shift to being alone. It had arrived at an alarming speed. Once it hit hard, the life I knew had taken a turn. I had lived a life of freeness. I thought that I knew everything, and it turned out that I did not know much at all. So, it happened. My partner and I parted ways. No cheating. No loveless thoughts. No third party's interference.

"Lesedi Kganya bo Gogo," I greeted. Sat on an ochre matt. Made an offering in water.

"Lesedi Kganya, what are your surnames?" The Gogos asked.

I responded with first my maternal one and then my paternal one.

That is when the revelation began. They spoke unprovoked. I think that they were too excited, they must have been. I hadn't asked a question and somehow my surnames had cued everything. That was the day I was told of him.

"I don't know who you are referring to," I responded. They looked surprised at my response.

It was not my previous partner, yet they spoke of my partner. This new person I had not yet met and still, they were referring to him. I had to take charge of this consultation. So, I asked my questions:

“I was once told that I have a gift. Do I really have a healer’s gift? I see water in my dreams. How can I stop dreaming of water in every dream? My previous partner and I separated three years ago. Will we ever get back together?”

I asked my questions. They answered. I thanked them and departed.

The trip back home was long. It just wouldn’t speed up. That’s when flash memories resurfaced.

I had a notebook, pen and thoughts running faster and faster. I started writing down what the Gogos had said. The good. The bad. The confusing. The enlightening. I made the timeline they spoke of. In three years, I will be settled. In three years, I would have met him. Him, the person I still did not know. Him, my warrior.

“He is the one who knows your name by spirit. It has already been written. He too is of water as are you. You have a mission to fulfil. A collaborative path.”

The Gogos uttered these words.

The Gift

Nobody fully understands how it works. All we know is that it begins with a few steps, as the client initiates the first contact.

Step one
book a slot

Step two
go through the instructions and select at least one option

Step three
ask a question, but don't reveal it until the end

Step four
select between three to eight cards

Step five
begin the procedure

Step six
pray, chant or channel energies

Step seven
you may meditate

Step eight
if need be, ask for additional clarity

Then we part ways. Memory reboot within three hours, thirty minutes, and three seconds. Next time we meet, all steps will be new.

The belovedly missed

My Grandchild,

I want you to know the true cause of my absence. This is the last testimony from your Granny's heart to yours.

It would have been blissful to sit you down and have a conversation about something other than death. The moments we spent together from your crawling stages to when you began running around have stayed close to this heart that was once alive. My life was filled with happiness knowing that these hands struggled to raise you, but still managed to keep you alive.

I might not be there to guide you in the flesh. To witness my blood running through your veins, with pride and joy. But in spirit, we are forever connected. The place where I am now is filled with those who crossed over earlier than preferred. We learn to watch over our loved ones. My Grandchild, you are the one I chose to look after as my last remaining wish. For now, you will be shielded from the realms of the dead.

This is my true story. I want you to know it in detail, so that you never forget to refuse death.

I was entrusted with an ancestral spirit name, my given birth name, Modjadji. It comes from all the sacred Queens that lived before my era who made it rain in times of need. I became my name and it lived through me.

Growing up I was told of the destiny that lay ahead. To marry a 'great' husband, settle down and have children. These dreams were uttered repeatedly, a constantly played record. All I ever wanted was to switch it off. I never wanted children let alone a husband. I had a girlfriend, you know. Oh yes, your Granny had a Lady Friend.

Her name was Hope and she moved like the wind greeting fire. Even in moments of rain, she knew how to find rainbows. Walking through life with her became my happiness.

Queer couples were not a thing of that time. Separated from her, I breathed in death with every breath. I was forced into an arranged marriage. Hope begged me not to proceed, but his family members were

already with mine, asking for my hand in marriage. A death worse than any in this realm of death could ever comprehend.

That day I married him, I experienced a pain like nothing before. It was even worse than corrective rape. (Oh yes. This took place in my time too.) Marrying that man was a death of its own. I lived with him in flesh only, my spirit was far away, seeking redemption. Your Grandfather promised all the wishes a worthy person would request. Not that any of it ever came our way. We were married for forty bloody years, four decades of sorrowful rainfalls, beatings, shouting and tears.

If only I could have lived to see him draw his last breath. I would have attended his funeral with a smile on my face. Now that would have been a blissful moment to watch his body sinking to its final resting place. Six feet under. But my sinking took place before his.

That last evening his truer colours were shown. It was after dinner, we dined and giggled for the first time in the death of my marriage. He seemed to have changed, repenting for all the nonsense over the years. Your grandfather cleaned the house, which was a first, let alone packing away all the dishes after our dinner, and smiled as I headed to bed. I still remember his goodnight words, uttered calmingly after offering me tea. I had such a deep sleep that evening until your Grandfather took a spear, thrust it into my neck with such force that my bones snapped, raining blood all over the bedding. My eyes opened one last time, for a brief moment, and closed.

I woke up in the realms of the dead. I arrived with so many questions. Had the death I'd lived during my marriage not been suffering enough? I was taken here without a warning. If only Hope had been here too to cheer me up.

My Grandchild, never forget to refuse death in life. Remember my true story. As I keep looking over you. You must safeguard my story. Only you are worthy as its keeper.

A tall male shadow

This must have taken place when Matome was about eight years old. It was customary to visit his cousins' house on Fridays and stay over for the weekend. Granny's place, which is where home was and most time was spent, was just a couple of streets away. A short walk even for a little one. On this Friday, Matome ate dinner at Granny's, before departing for the usual blissful visit. That night sleep was nowhere to be found. Candle lights were blown out, but not before the evening prayer. The Aunt always insisted on collective praying before bedtime. So, it was.

All five cousins shared blankets on the floor, in the Aunt's bedroom. This aided with warmth circulation and sureties of safety, besides avoiding the unnecessary use of extra blankets. The wardrobe had a tall male shadow. Matome can't remember if it had always been there. This time he was bothered by it, as it came across as frightening and unwelcoming. No one else saw it but the eight-year-old Matome, as he tossed and turned, struggling to fall asleep. Curious little boy that he was. The older cousin also couldn't sleep and heard the tossing and turning while blankets moved. That's when it happened. They were a few years apart and the cousin was much bigger. Stronger and manipulative. Since the eight-year-old was afraid of screaming, his fighting became useless. Followed by shock as he became immobile. The predator couldn't be bothered, as he devoured the prey. The Aunt must have fallen into a deep sleep by then, it's better to think this was the case, for humanity's sake.

The next morning arrived. The little one had passed out at some stage and woke up with excruciating pain. There were no other adults around when breakfast was made. Only the older cousin was in charge of everything. Only he was allowed to use the stove. That day, he dished up extra food for Matome. As if to say, if you want extra food don't tell anyone, it's our little secret. Fear was instilled and left a permanent mark. The weekend came to an end as the pain began subsiding.

They all returned to Granny's place, just as dinner was made. A meal was shared, the older cousin returned to his home. This was not his home after all. The little one went on about life without ever telling anyone. If he had told someone, then he could not remember. All he knew was that Granny never allowed him to sleep over again from that weekend. It wasn't until recently that he understood why.

Just the other day he got into a taxi heading home. That's when it all resurfaced. He got in, and sat next to some drunk guy who had red teary eyes. They exchanged greetings and Matome put on his headset. But the drunk guy wanted a conversation, so he kept initiating small talk. Eventually, Matome gave in and

responded, in his mind, he was avoiding causing a scene. The trip seemed to take longer than usual. When the drunk guy started touching him, Matome pushed him away, while feeling sorry for him. In all honesty, Matome was disgusted and frightened. Luckily, he reached his stop in time. The drunk guy asked for his phone number and he gave him a business card hoping that he could confront him once he was sober.

He got out of the taxi shaking. The scent of the drunk guy seemed to follow him around.
Filthiness and disgust. The alcohol breath was still hovering in his direction. Suddenly, he remembered why it made him feel this way. He had encountered that aura and violent approach before. He questioned how he could have forgotten what happened all those years ago. Had he been hypnotized? Was this the reason he was never allowed to go to any more sleepovers? Did his Granny know about the events? If she was still alive, would she answer him?

There she was

We knew each other from the first glance.

It was one of those spontaneous love moments at the first greeting. Of course, I was still unconscious then and have no actual memory about the details. My only recollections are what she has been narrating over the years. A smile always followed her reflections. She would gently go into details, beginning with the pain. Then remark on how the nurses were so accommodating but untrustworthy. It wasn't that they lacked training, but this had been a long-delayed wish of hers and no one was going to mess it up. Only she could provide all the needed love, protection, and shelter. After such a long wait of prayers and pleading with her God, there was no way she would allow the reward to be endangered.

As time went by my unconsciousness grew into self-awareness and things started to change. Yet the world remained the same. It was my consciousness that was gathering fuel, waiting for a chance to break loose and spread its wings. It struggled at first, sometimes there was no sign of optimism. This was the price to pay for reaching a different level of consciousness. A different dynamic from what is taught as daily righteousness. And, for a while, I kept my secret. Until independence was granted. Then a curse arrived, or so she thought.

One evening, I summoned courage and had a conversation with her. After all, I had grown tired of pretending with each visit. She was stunned into silence. After a couple of minutes went by, she uttered the words "Yoh, yoh, what did you say?" I repeated myself, while realizing that this wasn't going well for me. We then mumbled our good nights, and she left me in my room.

The next morning, I was woken up violently. She pulled my blanket, and then slapped my face. I had hoped that this was a dream, never had I been woken in that manner before. As my life flashed in front of me, I could see the disappointment on her face, followed by denial. She was faced with the truth that her son would never bring home a wife. Even her fears that he had impregnated some girl out there would have been better than this news.

Third Avenue

At the robots, the end of my tail, I see them hop out of the taxi. Two girlfriends and a boy, out to greet the Friday night of youth. Surely they all took baths, dressed up, added glitter mascara and eye shadows. Had they asked my advice I would have said *No miniskirts ladies, this is the city of thirsty men. Cover those thighs and don't be too revealing. No painted nails little fag, this city is brewing in homophobia. Forget about embracing your heels. Sneakers, long shaggy pants and identity documents in your purse will do.*

Many taxis stop along my spine. My daytime visitors all have one thing in common, to make money and leave before dusk. My night riders do the opposite. They have a coin or two to splash. They are always up for a good night's laughter. They find me therapeutic – until the whistling. There's always a whistle or two. I feel their fear as they increase their pace. The closer the whistles, the faster they run. What can I say, I am just an observer.

Lots of people come and go. Some litter my spine and the curves where my limbs branch off – the stinging of urine is appalling. Some clean me. Some stick to the trees which grow along me. The vicious ones study my curves for weeks. Discovering my muscles, admiring their shapes. How patient they seem. Carefully mapping my length, inch by inch, width by height, as the streetlights shine on my lushness. The vicious ones don't like to be seen, they hide in an armpit curve halfway up my spine, hidden by trees, waiting for their prey.

These two girls and one boy seem strange as they head up my spine. They flinch at my odour of urine. I watch them. Eyes staring from side to side. Sweating from whistles. I know their kind. *You don't belong here innocent youngsters,* I would say, had they requested a piece of advice or two. *I might look safe, but I have been roughed up, I know not to complain*.

Ah there they go – already lost. Only been here a few hours and they're heading to the part of my spine which is as dark as a crowned eagle. Where owls hoot from the sky. A fancy car takes a sharp turn, blistering my flesh and stops in front of them. The chubby driver gets out and threatens to shoot, should they try to run. The three do just that. Run in separate directions. The driver gives up after ten minutes, out of breath. I can feel his annoyance. Disappointed with such a fruitless attempt. The two girlfriends and boy, on the other hand, have blood pumping with fear and tears.

They reach the other side of my spine. A club. Bouncers check the two girlfriends as they enter. The boy receives only a grimy acknowledgement. *Oh little fag, aren't men so amusing. It hasn't always been this way, Hip Hop music crackling my peace. But you'll be safe there*. And there they shelter until the night ends. And out they come, index fingers pointing up to stop the first taxi and they'll get off at the other side of town. Leaving me to the daytime visitors arriving at the end of my tail.

An evening of boxed wine

It started on a date. Sadly, my handsome suitor had a family emergency to attend and excused himself. I had enjoyed the date which had turned into an evening affair. I remained at the club and my friends arrived later on. The outing had offered an opportunity to explore and make new experiences. We knew that should one of us get lucky to meet new potentials, we wouldn't travel back to our places together. Hell's Kitchen was crowded, the music was even better than the venue itself. I would dance as though nothing else mattered. The goal was not only about leaving with a sex partner. But to enjoy a night out, filled with an endless joyous atmosphere.

White chardonnay is usually my target, provided that it finds me as exotic, meeting all its desires. It has always been easier to swim in a glass of white wine, it quenches salty fantasies with care. I have always found that it goes the extra mile in considering my inability to float without drowning. Even though one can never truly know what to expect from it. Undermining its stamina is a repeated mistake, but I've learned not to underestimate it. It comes with surprises and is often able to keep quenching multiple rounds with no rest throughout the night. Even after the swimming marathon, the alcoholic scent wouldn't give me a headache and I'd be left with gentle hints that should I go back to the same club, it would be more than willing to accompany my future swimming desires.

Occasionally, I would leave with a bottle of red wine in hand, providing nights of comfort with its sophisticated delicacy. *The older, the better,* it would whisper. *A couple of years I've been maturing to please your very unexplored moves. Strength and wisdom are some of my most admired qualities. A long way I've come to meet your longed for satisfactions*. Yet on this particular night, I noticed that my admiration for this wine was no help. All thanks to one lousy bartender, who refused to usher me out with a bottle of red wine.

While heading to my cab filled with rejection, a stranger offered me boxed wine. Not my usual preference but I contemplated the offering, which was dressed in bright red and white script. Everything about it seemed well-coordinated, despite the evidence that it had been through rough times. There was something about how it gently commanded assurity without having to try. I obliged and headed home with it.

Upon our arrival, its scent was unexpectedly enticing and caressing while still retaining composure. The first sip was more bitter than I had imagined, the second came with even more flavours. The entire evening was something I could only describe as a fairytale. There I was in my apartment, with clothes

thrown all over the place, in the company of boxed wine. No matter how much of it was drunk, it just wouldn't end. It was as though the more you drank, the more it filled up. It knew how to keep one begging for more, as the master became the subject. The only available salvation was surrender. To relinquish the thirst. To enjoy the raw pleasures pleasing my palates.

The morning arrived too soon. Morning, the time to throw trash away. There was no use in keeping the boxed wine any longer, I told myself. After all, this is the post night out routine. After breakfast, downstairs we proceeded in silence and parted at the dustbins. I didn't look back. My entire body was sore in places I never thought could hurt. As I returned to the apartment to nurse my headache, my ears rang louder and louder as time passed by. I tried to sleep it off without any success. My mind kept wandering.

The mind is a curious being of its own. It reminded me about the evening, of how I couldn't stop enjoying the boxed wine and how potent it was. It played back moments; of how the boxed wine knew which pace to keep, which spot it was going to target at each turn, and how to stand back when it had me begging. Begging for more. For its therapeutic enhanced knowledge. As I lay down on the bed, my body wished that it had insisted it stayed a bit longer. Holding me tight in this recovering state. All I wanted was for the next weekend to come.

The following Friday duly arrived. A breezy evening. Melville's Hell's Kitchen never disappoints, when it comes to delightful surprises. There I was tacked up in my long coat exposing just enough glimpse of leg. A guy has to flaunt their legs at times. Heading into the club, there was an abandoned boxed wine outside staring my way. It was cheap wine yet it granted me all the needed confidence. It did not doubt its abilities to sustain me for the night. Its gold run-down packaging screamed desires of belonging to more than my thirst. I acknowledged it and proceeded into the bar.

The bar had all types of drinks. I like it when there's plentiful alcohol in stock, a penny for your choice, and a penny for your thirst desires. My first instinct has always been a tall glass bottle of wine or two for the night. Now that was a distant memory. My thoughts were still captivated by the boxed wine outside. I could only imagine its flavours caressing my body with a shy gaze, followed by juicy lips. As the shyness disappears once it is firmly opened. At this moment all I knew was that boxed wine will have to do. I hoped to allow its cheapness to help me breathe more freely. To let loose once more. To drink it fast, for it to drip all-over me, leaving me with no option but to drink it naked. To throw away my coat. To have it for breakfast, lunch, and supper. I wanted it to greet my lips as it fills the mouth, quenching all cravings as

it goes deep down the throat. Its flavours wetting my chest. Tingling. Whispering. Caressing. Telling me how it has always wanted me. Submissive, as I become its master for that moment. Following my orders. Fulfilling my indulgences.

This night will not be complete without my boxed wine, it is only boxed wine that will satisfy this thirst. I could not even be bothered with societal pressures to always choose the elegant, bottled wines anymore, boxed wine has no pressures and is easily dispensable. It knows how to please, meeting all my desires without breaking my wallet. I headed out into the streets.

Trash

Yes, I am writing on this bloody piece of paper I have just picked out from this mountain of trash. Think of it as recycling. Save your responses, and your pettiness. It's nothing special, just scribbled words, with ink that could be put to better use. It's not that deep, stop overthinking. People scavenging on rubbish dumps get ideas too. Some of us have degrees and are artists. You must think me a fool, the way you are staring with judgment, as I try to gather my thoughts. They tend to off-ramp now and then, my thoughts. I have stopped trying to understand why that is the case. It's not the judgmental expressions on your hairy face that bother me. I'm rather enjoying your grim stare. It's not that appalling nor is it appealing, it is just noticeable. You keep doing it, over and over again. Even when I hardly move a muscle, you just can't help yourself, can you? You must think of yourself as the big shot in your big car, I bet no one has ever tried to challenge you. Until now, this moment, has anyone challenged your staring? What is it with human beings? We surely do enjoy a good show. I know what you must be thinking. But to save us the wondering game, I will just go ahead and say it. Someone has to, who better to say it than me? If you think about it, I am the one that won the race. The survival race of course. I wish I could explain precisely how it happened. By going into details, but the best possible way is to explain the process. I have always imagined that it started as an explosion and after observing all my fellow swimmers, I discovered their weakness. And my salvation to success. Immediately thereafter, I seized the opportunity and swam faster than anyone else. And got the reward, my reward, in the form of an egg. That's where it all began for me, and for you too, so they say. But who knows, it could be a fable.

Motlatjo's partner

It's been a year now since you and I met. At that ceremony that Saturday.

I arrived late; I hadn't planned to go out at all. Especially on a rainy day. On such days, painting is always my priority. Yet when the invitation arrived after 17:00, I immediately decided to dress up. After all, Motlatjo and I had a special relationship. A secret relationship but one nonetheless. Fortunately, that morning my nails had been pampered with a black matt polish and as for the hair, it had a tint of blonde and purple colours on both sides. I felt beautiful, androgynous, with no worries whatsoever.

As I entered the venue, Motlatjo was concluding his thank you speech. I looked around for the nearest seat to the door but all were taken. I was ushered to one right next to the podium, and sat down, nodding to acknowledge all the elders at the table. To my surprise, Motlatjo concluded his speech by mentioning my arrival and expressing his appreciation.

So, the real party began. I went outside for a smoke and returned to enjoy the drinks. That's when you and I met. You looked stoned but seemed friendly enough, even for a stranger. Nicely dressed in formal wear.

Your best friend introduced us by our first names. I had recognised his face, happy to see a fellow queer disrupting the heteronormativity in the room. He offered a gaze of soft shyness while avoiding any direct interactions, yet I could see that my presence was bothering him.

You and I had light conversations as if trying to kill the awkwardness. All I knew was that you were one of Motlatjo's guests. A couple of drinks down the throat and the dancing began.

I heard myself saying to your best friend, "You two look great together."

Your best friend looked at me with confusion, "Oh, he is not my boyfriend. He is with the party boy."

At this moment I guess the wine had run a number on me, so I asked for clarity and he repeated himself. I said, "Are you saying that he is the boyfriend?"

"Yes, he is. They are together"

“For how long?” I mumbled.

“For four months.”

I kept silent for a moment, digesting the four months part and eventually I responded: “But he ... Motlatjo and I are dating.”

“That’s funny because he is a bottom.”

At this moment, all my friendliness disappeared. I was mad with rage. How could another fellow Queerbody have such stereotypical beliefs? Draw conclusions on another’s sexual preferences based on appearances and mannerisms? In that angry moment, I abandoned your best friend and came to talk to you.

“Your best friend told me that you are dating Motlatjo.”

“Yep, we are a couple.”

All I wanted to say was “This must be a joke, how did this happen?” Then again it explained all the times I was stood up and why our relationship had been kept a secret. Even though it was a mutual decision from the beginning.

The following morning, no one would answer my phone calls. All I remembered from the night before was crying and unlocking my door.

Days turned into weeks. Motlatjo sent me a voice note: “We will talk when I am ready, for now, I am hurt.”

Months turned into a year. I decided to leave Motlatjo in peace. I hope he will be appreciated, with champagne and roses. And, when space is needed, it will be granted, and when hugs are required, they will be given.

Do take care of my friend, won’t you? Take care of Motlatjo. And may he take care of you.

Unsent letters

There is so much I would like to tell you. So much has happened since I last put pen to paper. I wept as a dancing sage. Exhaled smoke in an attempt to hold myself together in one piece. Lost myself in questioning life. I wanted to give up along the way, but the Buddhist gong told me otherwise. Ringing sounds of affirmation, cheering me to stay alive, and gradually I found strength. It didn't seem like there were other options. I could always keep searching for alternatives. But it would still be wasteful.

*

How the life we once shared has changed. Back in those early days, I would have written to you on a daily basis – love notes, lines from our songs. Then that became weekly shopping lists and eventually monthly notes about splitting the rent. Now it has become a yearly affair to write to you on the anniversary of when we parted.

Here we are in another pandemic. Another era of uncertainties. No one seems to know the cure. Even the government hasn't been of much use. Nothing new. After all, when it comes to money laundering, money is proven to be king. The politicians have once again found a way to do what they do best. Allude to promises as a way to fill their bellies. At the expense of the majority. In reality, it is the majority population who is in power, but since it is infested with poverty, it has been brainwashed to believe the politicians. They rule the country, still blaming the previous rulers. In return, they ensure that their own financial futures are well guarded. I'm sure you are as angry as I am. I know you hate injustices and believe in standing up for the voiceless.

*

Today I wrote a story about the way we met.

Saturday afternoon, a sunny day. You were hungover, I had a book in hand. Indulging in my world. Shyly you approached my seat, I stood up saluting the Goddess in you, beauty in the form of a man.

We had a great day but I don't remember what we did. I remember two chakras flaming. Lad to Chap our eyes glued. Several times we met up. I gifted you a book of hope. It spoke of a man who had it all. In the

end he had nothing. For two years we shared a fantasy, made a sanctuary for the hearts we knotted. You my light and I your darkness.

But betrayal was your mastery. Excuses your weapon. Trauma your resolution. Forgiveness never yielded its fruits. I refused it all. I let you go. Dreaming of your reincarnation. Loneliness my existence. Denied desires my punishment.

I let you go. In the hope of your return. Chanting for your healing. Dreams that never became reality. You never did come back. Four years and I haven't loved a man since.

*

In times of sorrow, writing letters always eased my pain. Since you and I parted ways, a lot has unfolded. Last year I ended up in therapy. A secret kept away from my family. You know how it is. Black people do not do therapy. It's white people's illness. It's a thing for the weak. It's just a phase. So, they would have reminded me, had they known. I couldn't bear the criticism. I pursued my therapy for an entire year. As a black person. As an individual with no illness. I had to find ways to seek strength since our breakup. You always kept my secrets. There was never judgment shown or given. But now it was all different. I was faced with a therapist. A cishet male therapist at that, who thought that medication was required. In all honesty, a secret companion was all that was needed. Fortunately, after a few sessions, he became that companion and forgot about medication. Before I knew it, my therapy season had been completed. This year with the pandemic and all, I realized that my therapist was preparing me for his absence. Little did I know that he too would be missed.

*

Through all the stages of my searching, writing letters offered a hearing ear. In my longing for you, I am encouraged to return to them again. It's like letters were always there for me, even when I never posted them, it was as if they listened.

With the fourth industrial revolution, the extinction of letters is looming. I want to say, Do not despair. There are those like me who will return you to life. You will be witnessed by those you were crafted to connect with. For those of us who have undertaken the task to keep your form alive, it's not just a matter of words. It's a matter of our lives being transferred to you. There is no better method.

*

You know, last night I dreamed I came across a flower. Bright as a rainbow. Firmly in the ground. Liberating rosy scent. I swear, the scent was pink. I hoped that underneath these hands this flower would be nurtured, allowed to strengthen its roots. That spring would be gentle with affection. Summer would present love. Winter would compensate with artificial warmth.

I promised to nourish it, I would give it water day by day. Trim its dead leaves. I was warned of its thorns. Its nature, the sudden strikes. I gazed at it, this beauty thirsty for blood. Stinging red. Lively with passion. In my black and white mood, it was all I was drawn to.

Yet in the end I plucked it.

*

Letters were my closest companion before I met you. As soon as I learnt to write I was encouraged to sit at the dining table and write letters to family members scattered all around the country. My father was one of them. He had relocated to Gauteng, a city of gold. He had found a job, earning an income to provide for his livelihood. The distance between my province and the city of gold only allowed letters to connect us with each other. It is from this same city that I am writing now, it's no longer just a city of gold, but one of my homes, a place I came to while searching for a world-class education. The place I met you and the place where I shared a home with you.

Letters have witnessed all my secrets. From my earliest inceptions of consciousness, all the way to coming to terms with my unique sexuality outside the heteronormative one. Few will ever know of the relationship letters and I shared, although perhaps you too have a similar affiliation.

It has been an effort to find your address and buy envelopes and stamps from the post office. More and more users are connecting through cyberspaces, at a set fee of course. I don't think the world wide web was ever about connecting people. Yet we are made to believe so. The underlying reality is that letters are gradually being erased. Such an erasure shouldn't be taken lightly. At least people still write, but texts and emails are nothing close to what letters used to be. As a fan, patron and letters keeper, I will keep on fighting to postpone the death that lies ahead. This vow should have been made the moment we learned to

write. To use a piece of paper. To hold and manipulate a pen. A laborious skill to perfect. Some will say that perfection is a myth. Some might argue that it shows our madness. Either way for the sake of all the unwritten letters, even if they are both correct, I make a vow to carry on.

*

Our rainbow flag is in a shambles, I haven't thought of fighting alone. I'm always reminded of our fighting for belonging side by side. I still look for gifts to buy you before your birthday celebration, our teddy bear (hidden in a storage box) still speaks. Reminding me of when you delivered it.

I thought I knew what love was, I thought I didn't have love. I thought what we had wasn't love. But when I cried over the phone, you immediately stormed in rescuing. You always held me tight, warmly, with gentleness. Promised that you will stay. That you will solve our problems. That our love was worth fighting for. Even when our parents disagreed with our relationship. I remember your mother calling us Sodom and Gomora promoters.

The day I packed away your belongings and agreed for us to separate, I did so out of not knowing. Because for me our love was still unknown. I cried louder than before. The last straw was when you said, Teach me how to love. I accused you of slowness, but now I understand the teaching of how to love. I only dream that your new boyfriend knows how to teach you.

*

Had our distance not been an issue this letter would have been hand delivered. Then again, the beauty of letters is that the recipient can live miles away. I do hope that you are doing well in these times of Covid 19. On my side, anxieties have robbed me of life. Going out, even for basic supplies, is a nightmare. Visiting family members hasn't happened. I've lost count of months, my reality is crawling into bed and only dreaming of the outside life that was once a norm. Now everything is different. I've become a prisoner because of Covid. My own quests are paused, in my acceptance of it all, in accepting the caged bird position.

Even with this turmoil taking a toll on me, as I tried to pull life in one direction, and it pushed towards the opposite direction, I somehow still manage to write. Writing has become the only sane moment in my life. Earlier this year I was introduced to Taisia Kitaiskaia's writings. As though to say that the next

coming months will be nothing close to what I've known, and I would need a companion to keep afloat. I have since continuously revisited Taisia and Baba Yaga's collaborative writings. I don't recall how Baba Yaga's writings began, I do recall watching a YouTube video about it. A few commenters joked that Baba Yaga was not real. I, however, couldn't even stand their jokes, because I know that Baba Yaga is not a myth. That is just a cover story to hide her real identity. She is a living and walking dictionary to the lost generations. She completely understands a lot of things, even same sex relationships. I do believe that she spends way too much time in the forest, like how you used to say I spend too much time in my garden. The main difference is that my garden always died because you never watered it when I was away.

Baba Yaga has found countless ways into my life. In moments of despair, she is the one I look to for answers now you and I no longer have conversations. Do you remember how we used to discuss the difficulties of two gay men dating each other? You always said that I was overthinking. Well, I've learned to ask myself what Baba Yaga would do. Baba Yaga reminds me of the pieces of knowledge my grandparents tried to share. They would often remind me that if I argued with a fool, bypassers would never know who the true fool was. And, my absolute favourite saying of theirs, if you don't learn to do everything by yourself, you will end up eating your friend's shit. I see so much of them and their wittiness in Baba Yaga and often question if they too knew each other. Maybe one day Baba Yaga's wisdom will find you too.

*

I remember when you and I met, everything felt as though it was spring. Our dates, filled with coffee and laughter. Those walks we took around the mall. You always walked besides me holding my hand. Even when I said you don't have to. I never admitted the safety you provided. I felt invincible in those crowds.

I remember how nothing else mattered. No one else was visible. There was nothing but your eyes and mine. You were once mine and now, I don't know any more. I do wish that wherever your eyes are gazing, there is warmth and peace. I remember you as though it was yesterday.

*

In my dreams, you are ashy like wood that once kept a house warm in winter. In the first dream we were at my initiation school in the mountains of Mpumalanga. I danced in unison with the drum, as part of my

sangoma training. I had never told you of my African spiritual gift, and yet in my dream you came with an intent to marry me as a healer.

The second one was by my grandma's village, filled with flowers and green trees at every corner. You had sent your uncles and aunties to meet mine. As they were welcomed by my uncle in a white tent, they agreed to slaughter animals as an agreement in honouring our ancestors: Two bulls for each of our families, a sheep to speak to my acceptance of your Basotho clan and a goat to speak to your acceptance of my Bapedi clan.

Thirdly, you appeared with your grandma, her eyes wide open and a smile expanding her cheeks. She presented her white doek and called me Lala and Bae, my pet names you gave me. "I apologize for my grandson's doings, he abused you in moments of his weaknesses. I can assure you now that all will be well," she said. You solemnly nodded your head and said, "This was not a dream."

In the fourth dream, you were crying hysterically. Tears fell as though a prisoner had escaped prison. When asked what is with the tears, you said, "I had left you before. Had I known that this would hurt as much as it does, I would have stayed, but I was afraid to love and now I am afraid to leave your dreams. I had left you before…"

In the last one, you tried to give me a hug. I was more alert that night and told you to contact me directly instead of invading my sacred dream world.

*

If I posted this letter you would know it all. But it will never be sent.

Gogo Kwena and that old man

I was once a little girl, said Gogo Kwena. Many, many centuries ago. Before rocks were as hard as we know them. Back then my body was still fresh as the land nearby the river. I would go to fetch water with my little brother. We liked to sing and dance together. He wasn't really allowed to accompany me, especially when boys his age were already herding cows and chasing girls. Of course, he was made fun of countless times. Even when they teased, he still enjoyed beadwork and playing dressing up in skirts with me.

One morning, I lost sight of him on my way to fetch water. That's when I met that old man. The old man rushed to the river as my little brother was drowning. There wasn't anything that could have saved him. The depth of the river was just too much. My little brother was never to accompany me again but now I see him in you. Each time I gaze in those eyes of yours, I hear his whispering laughter and see the smile of that old man.

That old man was so old, almost the same age as my father. He had been looking for a wife to bear him a son. A few weeks after the river incident, his uncles and aunties came to my home and soon after that I became his third wife. He had wealth. Cattles and rondavels for each of us wives.

You know, he loved to eat cats. Wild cats. But still cats and he reeked of their fat. Still, I married him. I didn't even try to run away.

Early in the morning, he'd take his livestock to the grazing fields. He was a respected old man. Your Gogo Kwena was still new in this community. Eventually, I became one of them. As they accepted me as their own. We would all gather on weekends. Sing and dance together. I became a leader of the women's dance group.

That old man still had time to lead the men's dancing group. They never refused him and respected his leadership. He had a special role. To play the impala horn. No other man could play it. They all tried and tried and still, no music would play. Only he could make music from it.

The horn was from the forest. Just behind the grazing field. It was heavy too. But only that old man could play it. As short as he was, the horn only bowed to that old man and that earned him respect.

I bore a son for him. I gave him four children in total, and still he ate cat's meat. You know he crossed over when your father was just a calf. That old man would be proud of how these four children of mine turned out, but I am glad that he left before your arrival. Queer man was something he never understood. Yet he ate cats, and I still don't understand why. Oh, that old man. And that is the story of how he became your grandfather.

The gift of the beast that shallows

At the age of 12, little Thabo left his home, the village of Ga-matlapa, for city life in Pretoria, the capital city of South Africa. He was raised in a place where life had a slow pace. There wasn't a day he worried about safety. Playing outside was all the excitement he needed. His granny would do most of the chores. She wasn't educated in a western way but knew everything there was to know.

She too had once lived the city life. Even though she knew little of English and Afrikaans, the popular languages used in the cities by those seeking jobs. That never stopped her from trying her best to get a better life. This was in the early '60s when apartheid was rife and before long, she had had enough of the city. Her time to return to her birthplace arrived sooner than imagined.

The city life proved to be too much for my sanity, Thabo's Granny would say. *Everything needed money and no money meant that one would starve. The cities always come at a cost, they are known to shallow those who bow down to them in hope of a better life. Just like they did with your father, who travelled to the cities a year after your birth.*

In her rural homeland of Tzaneen, life wasn't as expensive, and one could always have a roof over one's head. It wasn't metal roofs like that of the cities, but lapa roofs made from grass harvested on their land. Meat was always only a hunt away and throughout the year they had enough homegrown supplies of food. Everything could be attained, provided that they were willing to work for it.

Little Thabo heard stories of the city from his Granny. Its skies of harshness for those struggling to keep up, and yet many carried daily hopes that better opportunities would arrive. Listening to her, he would dream of one day meeting this beast that shallows men and women.

Now he was 12 he was not afraid. After all he wanted the gifts the cities promised to give those who were educated. And his Granny had shared all he needed to know to survive and overcome the beast.

On his departure, he was woken up early to breakfast beside a fire. They shared fresh milk with leftover mealies from the night before. Granny handed him money, with a reminder that he was always meant to become a teacher and the city shouldn't be allowed to have its way. He should always remember that he was his Granny's most important achievement and Tzaneen was only a few hours away when the city became too unbearable. They bid farewell and off in a taxi he went.

The journey was five hours long, the longest he had ever travelled to the unknown world. Passing by the open veld with greenery that seemed endless, he kept thinking of what this city would be like, would he still play on the streets and make friends? Wouldn't Granny be proud when he returned to share more stories of the place she once visited years ago? After all, it had been 22 years and surely the city had changed. Apartheid had been demolished and perhaps, by the luck of Granny's wisdom, he would become a teacher as Granny had foretold.

Little Thabo never thought that the city life meant that either one adapts to the new lifestyle or gets swallowed by it. All he saw were massive buildings, cars of various makes and a better life of finer things waiting for him. He had directions written down, so as not to forget where to get off, and asked the taxi driver to drop him off at the right place.

His city life Aunty and her husband welcomed him with open arms. They had already started preparing for dinner. Sundays were laid back for them and cooking meant that there would be several colours of vegetables to eat. A treat he had only occasionally back home. He was offered juice with biscuits. The kind that Granny only served on special occasions. This new house was smaller than his rural home, but it had a TV and a bigger radio. Enough to make him feel like life had just got better.

The following morning, he woke early and put on his new uniform. Aunty and her husband offered to drop him off at the school until he was familiarized with the area. Unlike his previous school with bare fields and dust everywhere, this school had running water and electricity and well-maintained gardens. The walk to school from his new home was even shorter by foot. Still, he had to adapt as the people weren't as friendly as the ones from the rural homelands. For a 12-year-old, it was a lot to take in at first. Everything was new and back home he had left his friends, family and a girlfriend named Lerato.

Lerato has eyes that could draw one's soul with ease and brains to match her beauty. The two had made plans to be together, perhaps start a family of their own and have the happily after fairy tale. They were now five hours away from each other and could only see each other twice a year. But those reunions were always something they both looked forward to. He would share stories of city life with Lerato while they played together, mimicking his classmates who were mostly of mixed race, had long hair and spoke English every day, as if they were whites. During these moments everything became like it used to be. Their twice a year visits and chats continued until the Varsity years arrived.

Thabo then moved from the capital city to the city of gold. He could hear his granny's whispers: *Johannesburg. A city even more fast-paced, that can shallow you in a blink of an eye. Its streets are as dirty as its life. This is a place where money changes fates. The trick is not to get swallowed up by it for if you can survive, all desired riches will be yours.*

Varsity life had its own coming of age for the no longer little boy who left the rural homeland five years ago. Thabo's first year flew by fast in this city. At the start of his second year, he bumped into Victor, a first year student who had moved from the capital city to study at this prestigious varsity. A tall, skinny, flamboyant guy who walked with confidence. If the gods had a way of showing off, they certainly did so through him. The two met when Victor approached Thabo for directions on campus. Victor was wearing clothes that would brighten any room: a pair of yellow running sneakers, white pants, and a light-yellow jacket. He made hand gestures as he spoke, followed by a smile. Thabo was drawn to this fellow. *Even when you are in the city, don't forget to always be kinder to those needing help. It is in your nature to teach those in need*, his Granny's whispers were gently uttered. He proceeded to assist Victor the newcomer and that was the last time they would see each other that year.

In Thabo's third year they encountered each other once again during a varsity party on a rooftop. A fundraiser with alcohol and a vegetarian rice dish on sale. Thabo took on odd jobs to help fund his studies and this was one of the gigs. He immediately recognised the flamboyant boy who had worn such bright yellow clothes. Now he looked completely different. His feminine gestures and postures and everything about him kept Thabo's eyes glued to him with curiosity. Had the gods cast a spell or was this a sign of how the city swallowed those who came from far seeking riches? He pondered for a few minutes and continued to bartend.

Victor approached the bar accompanied by his friends and placed an order. He was served with a smile. Victor didn't seem to remember meeting the bartender before but looked delighted with his smile. His group took their drinks and headed off to the dance floor. Thabo had invited a lady friend to accompany him, but she sent a text saying that she had too many assignments due. So, the varsity party buzzed with music and laughter.

It had been one year since their paths crossed. Yet the confusing feelings Thabo had towards Victor had not changed much. During his break, he joined the dancing floor. By this time, many students had offered him drinks each time they bought a few and he was already feeling drunk. Somehow, he had the courage to go and introduce himself to Victor once more.

Hey, man, I'm Thabo and I couldn't help but notice that you look familiar. I think that we met sometime last year by West campus when you were looking for the library? Victor smiled and introduced Thabo to his friends, and they returned a smile. Beside Victor stood a tall dreadlocked guy who looked like money and followed Victor wherever he went.

This guy nodded his head throughout the introductions until he saw Thabo gazing at Victor more and more intensely... *What's up man, I'm Jabu – law student, the son of Prince Tzaneen and Victor's friend.*

The only thing Thabo heard was Victor's friend. Then he laughed at the thought of meeting the son of a prince from his homeland. On his next break, Thabo was invited to join Victor's table. They offered him drinks and the more he drank, the less interested he became in anything but Victor's flamboyant confidence. Jabu's phone rang, and he stood up and walked outside.

The city only grants gifts to those who are true to themselves and willing to take the risks. Remember to always be courageous and insightful and be kinder to all, his Granny's words reached his thoughts.

Thabo and Victor made small talk and within a few minutes, Thabo asked if he could hang out with Victor. When he received no reply, Thabo asked if they could exchange numbers. To his dismay, Victor shook his head. *Sorry Thabo, I am here with Jabu. He's my boyfriend.*

Boyfriend. Boyfriend. The word danced around his mind as his heart grew colder with reality. *The city life moves fast, and when you don't act quickly enough by the time you want to act, it'll already be too late*, his Granny's words resurfaced.

Jabu returned and said it was time to leave the party. As Victor and Jabu walked away, Thabo wondered what might have happened on that day on West campus had he asked to hang out with Victor.

But Thabo returned to the bar with a smile. He realised that the city's gift to him was to allow his unexplored sexuality to flourish. All the time spent in the homeland of Tzaneen has made him believe romantic relationships happened only between men and women, and now there was the possibility of new discoveries, as Victor and Jabu had openly shown.

The neighbourly Granny

I grew up in a village of peace with a sense of community. These were days when all the neighbourhood's kids could play outside until it was dark. Sure, we had no electricity in the early 90s, but no streetlights denied us fun. We all looked forward to Fridays. Friday was like December time. School ended early, household chores were minimal, even for me who had such daily headaches from house chores. Friday was our best friend. Once in a while, the neighbours would send us to the tuck shops and tip us with coins, should we be lucky enough.

Most elders were pensioners and didn't know how to count, let alone read. Had I thought of this then, I could have been rich today. Our sense of community shielded us from such evil thoughts. Every month end, the pensioners would buy chickens and invite us to indulge in a feast. A drumstick went a long way. That's all the reward we needed, even when our neighbours would send us to those shebeens for a bottle of lion lager or two. Sprinting was the best mode of transportation. When money was low, African brewed beer was King. The elderly granny next door had fewer worries than her neighbours, even when her body was frail, a beer or three was all that mattered.

As I grew, old age knocked her way. She rarely left the yard, but we weren't bothered, this allowed us to play next to her street without being shouted at. Her seven grandkids were older than us and they made the rules whenever we played. But when they started dating, we became their granny's security guards whenever they had to visit their girlfriends and boyfriends.

One Friday, we stopped playing earlier than usual. Our neighbourly sisters and brothers left without telling us. So, we all went home early. My Gogo Mapula cut slices of her famous biltong for us next to the fire and, after bath time, we headed off to bed.

"Sebata kgomo…sebata kgomo," a bypasser uttered the community alarm for danger. In unison, a call and response, "Sebata kgomo…sebata kgomo." We all woke up, and rushed outside, first the village's older boys, then the men, followed by women and then us. The neighbourly granny's house had caught fire, lighting up the street. There was so much smoke coming from her house.

Our own Granny held us back. Men and boys rushed inside the house, coming out with a burning mattress. We all stood back as they tossed it into the open field, then some older boys came out carrying the neighbourly granny.

Water buckets were rushed into the house. Her bedroom had gone pitch black. We stayed around for a while. Until our neighbourly sisters and brothers came back to their granny's burnt house, only to be scolded. They were terrified, and burst into tears.

Early on Saturday morning, we visited the neighbourly granny. She looked more fragile than before. She had woken up in the middle of the night searching for a bottle and had knocked over a burning candle. The community ordered us never to run any more beer collection errands for her. Our Fridays had suddenly changed. We never ran to those shebeens for a bottle or two. But we still got our monthly chicken feast.

Then one Friday, after a few years, we were told not to go next door should we not want a hiding. All we saw were many visitors coming in and out the whole week. Our neighbourly sisters and brothers never played with us anymore but were always busy with their lovers. Our Fridays were never the same, and now there was no monthly chicken feast either.

Last Friday I gazed at her house. There were no kids running around outside, even with electrified houses illuminating light to the streets. My Fridays became foreign.

Coming out confessions

It wasn't long before I realized that there was something different with me. Most of the boys in my class had girlfriends but I secretly had my first boy crush. He was a short boy with flawless skin and a short temper. The girls liked him, even though he paid little attention to them. The only girl I remember him showing compassion for was his brother's girlfriend. I admired his strange spirit and courage, but he was not academically gifted, and the others often made fun of him. At first he barely noticed me, other than as a classmate, but over the five high school years we became good friends. I had secret fantasies about having him as a boyfriend, I never dared approach him, or let him know. Especially since he'd often make it clear about the Quran's stand on homosexuality – to me as a Catholic this was also a sin – and he wouldn't hesitate to bully any guy who seemed feminine. But that didn't matter much, as he and I had a common interest, our unlikely friendship. On Fridays, he would always walk me halfway home and then head off to his place. Our friendship carried on until the end of high school. On the last day of exams we bid farewell as though we would keep in touch, but after I moved to Johannesburg's inner city for my varsity years, we never saw each other again. The last time I checked his social media account he was married with kids and running his uncle's business.

Varsity years brought privileges. For the first time I had classmates questioning my 'heteronormative' sexuality, but each time the topic was raised I'd quickly deny it at all costs. Occasionally boys would hit on me and I disliked everything about it.

After completing my studies, I got a job and my dreams of independence were in sight. Still, I was too embarrassed to explore my sexuality. Occasionally I would flirt on a few online dating sites. I met Tshepo on one. He was a few years older than me, shy and seemed kind enough to meet in person.

Our first in-person meeting was at a restaurant. Luckily, the awkwardness died out within a few minutes. After a couple of days, I decided that I was dating him even though Tshepo was still thinking about the idea of us dating. After all, Tshepo had dated several guys before me and was more experienced at this.

Nearly four months later, we were having lunch in a fancy area of Johannesburg, Rosebank. A place where all types of queer bodies can be seen freely living their lives. It was one of our favourite spots for an outing. The waiter serving us that day complimented us on being a cute couple. I froze. Tshepo had the courage to smile and wink at the waiter. As we finished our meal. Tshepo leaned on me and said, Yes, we are the badass couple.

Two months after that I asked him to move in with me and he didn't hesitate to say no. A few weeks later, I returned home after a hectic day at work and found Tshepo's clothes, heels, sneakers and accounting books neatly packed in the living room. I was beyond excited and looking forward to our lives together. Everything then moved quicker and quicker than I had anticipated. We started acting like the ideal old married couple, but something was missing. Eventually, I realised what it was. It wasn't that there was something necessarily missing from our relationship. It was simply that even though we were living together none of our parents knew that that was the case. The more I thought of this, the more I got ashamed of keeping this a secret. For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret except to come to light, I heard myself mumble. Perhaps, I was afraid of going to hell. I wanted to meet Tshepo's family and assumed he wanted to meet mine. I knew that coming out would come at a cost. So, I started planning carefully.

The first step was to recruit an army, in the form of family members that would ideally take my side should things not go well. I introduced Tshepo to all my friends, then to my colleagues and then to my siblings. Once the idea of coming out to my older family members seemed doable, I discussed it with him. I told him I was planning to come out to my parents, and that the moment I came out, I was sure my family would like to meet him in person. He suddenly had a change of heart, he seemed scared and upset at the same time. It didn't make sense to me, as he too had gone through the process of coming out. I expected him to understand where I was coming from, to share my feelings and concerns. I was done living in the closet with the fear of rejection. I had a job that paid my rent and there was nothing to stop me. I lived an honest life with the man of my dreams, Tshepo.

After listening to my reasons, Tshepo insisted that it was wrong for two guys to be together, and that we could not expect society to accept us, as it would always be a battle we can never win. I certainly expected more from him, from anybody else these words wouldn't have mattered but from him, they were uncalled for. Within a few weeks we ended our relationship, he packed his stuff and moved out. Again, I was left alone.

I chose to travel back to the rural area of Limpopo, to visit my mother, and tell her about my sexuality. I told my friends what I was about to do, just in case I needed to be rescued. I contemplated changing my mind while in the taxi. Even though I was going back to the place I had spent most of my childhood, it was no longer the home I used to adore. Each visit always had drama, as our neighbours would stare and whisper amongst themselves asking "For how long will he act like a girl instead of the man he was meant

to be?" It had become clear that this place was no longer a home for me and that I had a home of my own, in the inner city of Joburg. Perhaps my home was with Tshepo, but now that we were separated, I had lost that home too.

When I arrived, I walked from the taxi rank to my mother's home. My grandparents welcomed me with open arms as they always do. When my mom arrived home after work, she walked into the house, greeted me, and offered me something to eat. We had our usual chats over dinner and as usual I brought a cup of tea to her bedroom, and we talked some more before I said goodnight and went to my bedroom to sleep.

I spent most of the days with my grandparents, they kept asking if everything was ok, as I normally don't visit during winter. I assured my grandparents that all was well, and that I missed them, hence the sudden visit, as the city life was sometimes just too much for me. Days flew by quickly. I started doubting my plans to come out to my mother.

On the fourth day after dinner, I summoned all the strength I had in me and asked my mom if she and I could have a discussion. She was surprised at my request and asked what was wrong. I told her that everything was OK but there's something I needed to discuss with her. She invited me to sit by her bedside, as it has been one of our rituals to conclude the day with small chats and a cup of tea. She looked at me for a few seconds as I tried to utter the words. I told her that what I was about to tell her might not be an easy thing for her, but I hoped that she would understand. She looked at me and said that I must just say whatever I wanted to say. I told her that I was gay, and I just wanted her to know so that she too could understand who I was. She took a few moments, deep in thought and after a long pause, "Jesus, my lord, our saviour," she said. Then asked when had all this gayness begun. I told her that it had not begun recently, it had been something that I had always known but had been trying to make sense of. My mother seemed weak and less interested in having further discussions about my sexuality. She noted that she had an early day at work so I should go to sleep. I headed off to my room, switched off the lights and went to bed.

In the early morning, I could hear her footsteps going up and down as in her usual ritual before leaving for work. Ordinarily, she would leave a pot of porridge for me on the kitchen counter. But on this day, when I got out of bed and headed to the kitchen, there was no breakfast waiting for me so I made a cup of tea and cut a few slices of bread. I spent that day with my grandparents catching up with their endless storytelling. When my mother returned from work late in the afternoon, she told me as soon as she walked into the house that she had been thinking about what I had told her the previous night. She said that it

didn't sit well with her. I asked why it didn't sit well with her. She responded by saying "When did you start becoming gay? Why did you suddenly choose to be gay?" I told her that I was born gay, and this wasn't new as it had been something that I had always known but never dared to tell anyone about. She paused and told me that this meant that I would never have a family of my own, a wife and children. I told her that yes, I would not have a wife but surely I could have kids if I decided to.

My mother then told me about a friend of hers who once was in a similar situation. In disbelief, I looked at her and asked what she meant by situation. But deep down I knew that she regarded homosexuality, my sexuality, as a situation and a phase that I was currently going through and as nothing but a choice that I had decided on. My mother told me that she had heard of traditional healers that could reverse and fix one's sexuality. Her friend who had struggled with his sexuality and confusion had received help from them, and he was now happily married to a wife and had kids. I took a moment to think about what she had said, and once courage had been summoned and strength headed my way, I responded by informing her that I had no interest whatsoever in having a wife and kids. She shook her head many times and said goodnight and went to bed. This was the first time that my mother had no interest in staying up late to have conversations about everything in life.

In the early morning, I felt my blanket being pulled away violently. At first, I thought I was dreaming, until I felt a hard slap on my face and immediately woke up shocked by the burning heat on my cheeks. As I opened my eyes, I saw her looking at me, and aggressively shouting, "Wake up! I have made an appointment with the traditional healer Mmabatho. She said you must arrive at her ancestral roundel at seven o'clock and you mustn't be late."

Still trying to process what she had just said, I dressed, there was no time to have a bath, and headed off to visit the traditional healer. I had only met this healer, Mmabatho, once before, as visiting traditional healers had never been part of my upbringing. I dragged my feet on the dusty road in hope that I would never arrive at Mmabatho's place. But I arrived and was welcomed by her initiates. They had been informed about my visit and had prepared a medicine for me to use before their teacher came back from her trip. They gave me a 5-litre bucket with boiled concoctions and instructed me to drink all the contents and once done, to purge all the liquids out of my system. This would assist in cleansing me before the consultation. I obliged and afterwards felt weak, as tears started rolling down my cheeks. My mother trusted Mmabatho, a traditional healer, over my understanding of myself. Betrayed as I was, I knew that for my mother to understand my sexuality, I had to endure this a little bit longer.

After two hours of waiting, the traditional healer arrived. She greeted me with a smile and welcomed me into her rondavel. I took off my shoes and left them at the door and sat down. I greeted her and she asked if we could begin. She then asked me what was wrong, and I told her that nothing was wrong, it was my mother who had arranged for me to come and see her. Mmabatho asked where my mother was if I was here at her request. At work I said. “But she has to be here with you, she shouldn’t have sent you alone.” I had to think on my toes, I reached for my phone and phoned my mother to see if she could join the consultation, but she couldn’t be excused from work. The only feasible option was to put the phone on the loudspeaker.

Mmabatho began the session, asking that I blow air into her bag of ornaments filled with seashells, beads, and bones. She then asked why we arranged for this consultation. My mother responded on the other side of the phone: “This child will be the end of me. Last night he told me something that does not sit well with my spirit, he thinks that he is gay, and I am hoping that you could—” Before my mother’s sentence was finished, Mmabatho interrupted by burping and screaming: “I do not see anything wrong here, there is nothing wrong with your son and I don’t understand why my services are required. I am joined here by the spirit of his great-grandfather, who wants you to know that there is nothing wrong with your child. He is perfectly normal and was born this way.” My mother tried to argue but was not given a chance. Mmabatho concluded the session. I made an offering of a R100 note and left her rondavel.

Walking back home was more pleasant than going to Mmabatho. When my mother returned from work, she avoided acknowledging my presence as though I didn’t exist. After one more day, I returned to Joburg. Once I arrived, I informed her, but my mother’s response was “Ok bye.” It has been three months since we spoke. Again, I feel left alone. At least the clothes are taken out of the closet. Knowing my mother, she must be fasting and praying for my salvation.

Brotherly compassion

Make your own. Leave me and my son alone. I know I'm doing nothing for him. Nothing at all. That is how we were raised with no father figure, just a sperm donor that never cared. So, he too will learn to follow the traditions of fathering the same way. He is still my son and I will never do anything for him. His mom separated from me and moved on, so why should I.

You say you are. A what...? I heard rumours of your deciding to be gay. I knew and cared for you as my older brother and now you turn out to be what, my sister? No, no. This can't be right. You can't be gay and expect me to call you my brother. You are not a man. Do you understand, sister?

Not your blood. You are just his uncle by default. My blood does not produce gay kids. Should he turn out gay, I'll beat it out of him – to death. Can't you just fuck a woman and stop this gayness? You do have a penis right, don't you? Ya, you do, so use it to increase our family.

Can't stand you. All the gays at the club always hit on me. I hate them. In fact, they disgust me. Always flirting and you know I don't like your kind. So disgusting. You all are. I'm a man, I don't eat a man's ass. I eat pussy. How can a man sleep with another man?

Your kind. Did you notice our nephew, he is way softer than you. Hai man, that one is also gay and shakes himself whenever he walks. He can't even play soccer. There's no hope for him. It's so sad for our cousin, his firstborn. Wait, you are also the firstborn – at least you can play shaking hips and dress fitting together.

Rubbish show. I don't watch wrestling anymore. Look at what they are wearing. Shiny girly costumes. This is way too wrong and stupid. TV shows have become gay. No man. Wrestling used to be nice and not this nonsense of wearing women's clothes. Look at them, fighting in such pink outfits. Is this really right my brother?

Your salvation. It's easy, you know. Understand your royalty. Know of your bloodline. Go to the mountains and come back as a man. They will beat the gayness out. You should have come with me when I went. It was nice being there, our uncle, the king, was always looking after me. When will you go to the mountains.

Sea of Blood

They arrived in 1652 with their sea of blood. Oh blood, oh blood. It danced and danced as chained bodies disappeared in the realms of deep waters. Became one with the sea. One in blood, it was said.

We were lost in the colonial regime. We were silenced. They kept our land in 1913 and hatred was birthed. Our dreams were not forgotten, just derailed. Written in our tears. The known old life vanished in the sunset.

In this land of cruelty, in 1948 they increased our bloodline of trauma. Souls linger in search of their righteous homes. Just because we are simply born with a noticeable skin tone. Inherited from our forefathers and theirs before them. Our keepers of secrets. They all disappeared too soon.

1976 came and was buried. The trauma still breathes around us. In 2015, the sea of blood returned. Colouring our streets. Souls pleading for belonging. They were never acknowledged. They are still seeking a home. We were born in a skin of never belonging. Trauma has become the only existence we know.

Six years later we are still lingering for an answer. Still not belonging. The buried souls were never collected from the streets. Their denied dreams became ours. Blood met fire once more. Our skin colour turned on itself. Greed has led to bloodshed. Our own have become the sea of blood. It gave them land. Their skin colour has been forgotten as they sacrifice ours on the streets to save theirs. The sea of blood has no end. We bleed in its trauma.

The Beautiful Bro

“Bro, you are handsome.”

He said these unexpected words as though they’d make him appear less queer when the heteros came to the bar to get drinks. It is a straight club after all.

Those defined cheekbones of his, combined with his shiny beard and eyes radiating light, made him so desirable. Except for the “Bro” part which he uttered repeatedly in an attempt to compliment me.

When he said “Bro, you are handsome” my nails were painted turquoise, with a glazed topcoat. My braids were dark purple with a hint of blonde.

If only he had summoned the bravery of the guy who regularly says “You are so so beautiful”, without any care of what people think. That guy had been the pillar of strength during my struggles. The strength that I needed – and even my little brother knew how to give support freely.

Not this stranger standing next to me calling me Bro and handsome as though it’s a compliment.

When all the word Bro does is remind me of toxicity. Does he know that each time I consider getting into a taxi with my painted nails, I think of all the horrors that might happen to me? To catch a taxi home I always have to change taxis at Bree Street, the busiest taxi rank in the heart of Johannesburg. The looks my queer body get haunt me every day. Whispers of “Isn’t that a guy?” “This generation has no future.” “What are his parents thinking?” as passengers mumble amongst themselves.

When each time I get in a taxi full of men, my anxiety levels head rocket high. As I never know if I’ll make it back home alive. Solely for being myself.

Yet here I am at a party, standing next to a desirable handsome guy who could make me forget about life outside this space of belonging. Instead he calls me Bro and reminds me of the toxicity of men.

Still, all I wanted was to strip him of his clothes. Make him moan for me not to stop, beg and keep on begging for more as I make the hair on his legs rise with every touch. All I wanted was for him to stop saying “Bro, you are handsome” and to instead recite words about my queerness. “You are, damn, so

beautiful in your queer shades.” Words that would make me see his desire to worship this queerness, not a word that denies it like Bro.

The Fatherless Man

I was born in a village of fatherless people.

When I was growing up my mother always said, “Your father left for work, two weeks after your birth.”

She never spoke about her own father. I always assumed that fathers didn’t exist in our community. The children of both our neighbours don’t know who their fathers are.

This village of fatherless people has only male youths and as soon as they have their own children, they all disappear.

My mother said, “By the time you have a child, and marry that wife you too will turn out to be like all the men before you. You will pack your bags and leave. If we are lucky, we will see you when you come to our funerals.”

I seldom know how to respond to her. Inside my mind always has a response, “If only you knew that I shall never marry a wife. If only you knew that I am more likely to disappear with someone’s husband.”

The healer next door once said, “You fatherless youth, wannabe men, you think that you are better than the fathers that gave birth to you. Look at you, busy flaunting your hopes and mothers’ love in our faces.”

I often wondered how this lady became a healer. Because she is nothing close to the title we are told to refer to her by. If anything at all, she is horrific at everything she does. I once heard her tell some girl on the street that “Young women like you, should not be wearing trousers let alone be bothered with going to school.” Poor girl just bowed and nodded to the healer as a sign of respect. It is not strange to bow in the presence of a healer but not me, I have since stopped bowing to them. They all know that I can see through their bullshit and why they decided to call me by this name.

I got this name Fatherless Son not because I am fatherless. It happened as a result of calling them to order. People of this village don’t like it when anyone thinks for themselves. They will love and adore you, should you agree with everything they say.

It happened when there was a wedding a few streets away from my house and everyone complained that they weren't given enough food. As for the drinks they all spoke about how three cans of beer can barely tickle one's thirst. One of them turned around and asked me "Don't you think this couple could have just waited to save some money first? This is so embarrassing giving us only a can of beer."

It was at this moment that I got called names for responding, "Are you only here for the food and—"

Before I could even finish my sentence, somebody interrupted me. "If it isn't that useless son of whoever replying as if he knows better than most. Fatherless son, not even human."

For me, this was just an ordinary day in my village of the fatherless.

Mom Sally, an Ally

Mom Silly Sally and I met a couple of years ago through her daughter, my friend Emily. Emily and I shared a studio. We immersed ourselves in creating paintings and sculptures. That is how we began to know each other. The two of us became inseparable as our friendship blossomed into what it has become. I watched her go through multiple breakups and was the first person to meet her new lovers.

She was the first lady friend my parents met while visiting me at varsity. They thought that she would be their daughter in law. The one I bring home. To be introduced as a wife to be. But little did they know that Emily and I had no intention of being more than friends. When I got introduced to Mom Sally, she remarked that I should be her son in law. She didn't hesitate in referring to me as the son in law from then on, although over time she made peace with reality. But I am still her son.

A day before Emily's wedding Mom Sally invited us to the nearby town for drinks. We were going to carpool. She instructed, "Son, you will be driving with us, quickly get in the back seat."

Mom Sally and her best friend, with neatly done manicures and silky grey hair, were in the front seat. Emily, the bridegroom and me squeezed together. We had spent an entire day sorting out wedding decorations. Everything was given immaculate care. Orchids. Daisies. White roses and eucalyptus.

On the way to drinks, Mom Sally looked at us in the rear view mirror and confidently said, "Give me grandkids, I want grandkids. I am getting old, and you guys don't see it."

"Silly Sally there won't be any grandkids until after a year and a half," the bridegroom said.

Mom Sally insisted that she wanted grandkids, "I want to spoil the grandkids so that you have to be the ones to discipline them."

She said she was exhausted from having raised a daughter and we all giggled for a while. Then she turned her head my way, "Son you will give me grandkids right? Am I right to say that you will give me grandkids?"

I looked at her with a smile on my face, "Of course, you are right. You will get grandkids, but not from me yet."

As we were having this conversation, we had forgotten about Mom Sally's best friend sitting next to her. I hadn't met the best friend before and she had kept quiet for most of the drive.

Finally, the best friend looked my way, "But you do have a girlfriend, right?"

Everyone giggled but her. "Oh no, I don't have a girlfriend. I am gay..."

Mom Sally was unconcerned, "I don't care if you're gay! I don't care if you're gay! I don't care if you don't have a partner yet. All I want is grandkids to raise. You must give me grandkids."

We laughed some more, arrived at the hotel, parked and proceeded to the bar. But the best friend was in deep thoughts, like a judge assessing the responses.

The Scottish wedding knot

it was late afternoon, the day that we had all been waiting for had finally arrived, the bride was anxious for the last few seconds and counting every millisecond there was, the bride's mom called me to run some errands and ensure that everything had been prepared as per instructions, she insisted that the bride practice tying the knot; I was about to learn a new language, a new wedding ritual, the scottish knot tying ceremony, they had used the bride's family emblem in its design, and this was the first time I had seen it; the bride's mother insisted that I stand in place of the groom, as it is customary for the groom not to see the bride before the ceremony, so we stood face to face, hand to hand, flesh to flesh, the bride's mum showed us how to tie the knot, we had to practice, she said, so that in the event where the groom does not know what to do, I will quickly step in, and assist the bride and the groom; it is not customary for the friend to practice tying the knot with the bride, this ritual symbolizes marriage, a commitment, a promise between the two beings about to be united; in practising with each other, we tied it three times and still it was not perfect, eventually, we got it right, we got a perfect entangled knot, so delicate and well-handled that it was good enough to be framed, photographed, set as a memory of that moment; I thought of the significance of tying this knot, could it be that I have been designated the first husband of the bride, could it be that this black gay boy is officially married to a bride, of course, that is not the case, it was just a rehearsal, it was just to prepare for the ceremony, which was about to take place; the bride's mom took the knot, untangled it, the bride noted that we were now divorced, I left their sleeping chamber, ran to run more errands; at that moment my heart was full, it was content, filled with pride, honour; if only my mom were here to witness this, the bride's mom and mine always fantasized about our wedding, they always tried all possible tricks to convince us that we were the ideal couple, they always assured us that even though the bride was white and I black, they saw no colour, it didn't matter what race we belonged to, their hearts were content for us to tie the knot, when the day comes.

Father and I visiting them

My father and I grew up having no bond at all. He's from a generation with absent men for mentors, so he says. He never met his father, or his father's father. That's what sets us apart, his father and his father's father speak to me, and visit me occasionally.

Only I can see and have a conversation with them; they like to overshare and order me around. Like the other day, they invited me to our family's altar. They even showed me where it was, how to get there and who owned the land.

"You must visit a healer to assist in the preparations for this journey," my father's father said.

I went to a healer who is like a father to me. And he is like my father: the same age, similar height, and identical stubbornness. In response to the instructions, I visited this traditional healer, only for him to instruct me further.

I obliged and returned after three days with my father.

"You must embark on this trip together. It is now time to work together," the healer instructed my father and I.

Immediately we stood up and headed on our way. It was already late afternoon, and the rain was approaching. Still, we continued to the family's altar. We walked in silence for the first 20 minutes. Then My father told me about his school days walking 30 km daily, I smiled back with a disbelieving smile. When we arrived, the gates were closed, so we returned home.

In the early morning, he woke me and the two of us headed back to the family's altar. The rain stopped, we walked and walked until we arrived. We were welcomed by an elder.

"I do not know either of you, but I recognized the boy's features, they are the same as his father's father and his father before that," the elder noted as he opened the gates and instructed us to follow him.

He then accompanied us to the location of the altar, and offered us a wooden bench. "Please have a seat," the elder commanded.

He left us for a few minutes, right in the open field. It was freezing, the ground was still wet from the rain and I was barefoot.

He returned, pointed to the altar and I kneeled – snuff out, calabash in hand, filled with water. He then asked why I was there. I responded. I made the offering and stood up. Sat by the bench. Waited for a few minutes.

Then the wind arrived. An army made its presence known, played with the calabash. Tossed it around, back and forth and placed it down. Looked at the snuff container, lifted it, emptied it all and then dropped it clockwise.

I observed all this, my father saw none of this. I wanted to see more, to know more, to converse with my father's father, and his father's father.

"Father, did you see that? The calabash just flew for a few seconds and the snuff danced around," I said to my father.

He looked my way with a sceptical smile. He asked if we could leave.

The Graveyard Guardian

At the age of 16 years, Masilo began to love the graveyards. *There is peace in those muted,* Gogo Kwena said to Masilo as they went to clean graves. *They never make noise. All they seek is to be looked after. In return they will do all the spiritual warfare biddings for you*. A spade, water, rake, grass broom and snuff, are all they carried in the early mornings.

Gogo Kwena always kneeled facing the sunrise, as the sun rose, she'd pour water on the ground and snort snuff. *Blood of my dust. Tears of your bones,* Gogo Kwena said. *Greetings to those who once walked the earth. You are no more with flesh, but in spirit we acknowledge you. Don't be alarmed by today's noises. Today I'm accompanied by Masilo. We shall clean this overgrown grass and sweep off your tombstones. It is what we want to do. In return we ask that you grant us wealth and blessings*.

Masilo was never like children his age, in his teenage years, time was spent with Gogo Kwena instead of playing with his own age groups. He enjoyed Gogo Kwena's company more than that of his peers. Returning from school meant that Gogo Kwena would share her saved meal with him. He always knew where Gogo Kwena hid her lunch to share with him.

Blood of my salvation. Breath of existence, said Masilo*. Greetings to you all. Let's not be too bothered today. Allow us to remove this grass. In return when schools close let me play the whole day. Make Gogo Kwena wealthy so that she can buy me running shoes*.

The duo began, back and forth with the spade, penetrating the ground and uprooting the grass. Followed by the broom's dancing, tickling the freshly exposed soil as grass pushed out. The first grave owner spoke, *How fortunate I am that you started with mine. As the head of the graves' family, I can make all your dreams come true. Remember this; whenever you visit my family you must start with my grave first. Should you ever defy my request, you will walk around this entire graveyard seeing no other graves until you find mine. This is the only spell I cast in return for all your requests. Off you may proceed*, said the first spirit.

Gogo Kwena and Masilo headed off to the second grave, greeting Grandfather's spirit: *We haven't visited you in a while. Allow us to clean your home.* As they were nearly finished, a bird flew by the head of the tombstone. *Ahh, what a clear view you've given me,* said the Grandfather spirit*. From now on, whenever*

you starve, summon my name followed by 'so it shall be granted' and a stranger will gift you food. I seek not much in return; your regular presence is all I long for.

One by one, as their graves were cleaned, the spirits spoke.

Oh, beautiful creatures who still roam in the earthly realm, what a lovely gesture you've shown this old rusty home of mine, said the third spirit. *It does get lonely out here. Many have forgotten about me, yet somehow you two remembered. How delightful this day has proven to be. In my time, I led wars and overthrew Kings that dared to challenge my chosen ones. If only their descendants had kept their parents' promises, they too would have flourished. The fire in me still lives on. In exchange for your hard work, I will safeguard you both against that grumpy King in your village. There's no need to be too concerned with calling me to action. I have already begun my work. The debt is paid in advance*.

Oh Gogo Kwena, it's so lovely to have visitors today, said the proud spirit. *This grass is overgrown since that disgusting rain. It has been hiding my crown from sight. Few family members are able to notice my home when asking for favours. But not you Gogo Kwena, somehow you always know where this home of mine is. Be it in its glory or its darker days. I'll leave you two to it, and do tell me of your wishes once the job is done*.

In my time, I had a promising life, said the fifth spirit*. I died too early before life could reach its highest peak.. My father was our head before his death. I lived for a mere 10 years after his death as the head. So many things left unexplored. The family was left in chaos and since then, they accuse each other of witchcraft. Even in my grave, the requests about witches still arrive. If only they checked their egos before asking such stupid questions. Asking and asking they all do their best. Giving is never what they see fit. How greatly they can learn from both of you. Gogo Kwena, you've always returned to my home. Cleaned and cleaned, leaving it spotless. Still, you don't ask me stupid questions about which relatives are witches. The past few years, this young boy has accompanied you. How big he has grown. When your time comes to join us, may there be seats next to my home and maybe we can laugh about relatives asking who the witches are*.

I died a rich woman, left cattle and farming land and businesses across the city borders, said the spirit who had riches. *Haven't I fed all that slept under my roof? It is with a heavy heart that I note none of them ever visits me. I still haunt them to this day. They will never see peace until they join me. Only death is their salvation. Did you know that they divided all my riches amongst themselves? They excluded you*

in the dividing of all that was not theirs to share. But do not worry too much about their doings. I still have enough magic to use in your world. This younger boy of yours, Masilo, will inherit all future blessings. Wealth will be his to enjoy and you Gogo Kwena will guide him from the spirit world.

When I crossed over, said the seventh spirit, *my parents welcomed me to this world. I found my mother waiting for me at the gate. She looked stronger than before her own death. In her hand were silver bangles, shiny as the ones worn on my wrist. She winked from a distance. Once I was in sight, she reached out to embrace me. How I had missed her. She told me that all will be well and indeed it has been well.*

Gogo Kwena wiped the sweat off her face with her doek, looked at Masilo and said: *I can no longer accompany you on the next visit. You are now a man and know our family graves by heart. Our time to return home is due, Masilo, would you let them know that we are done and are leaving?*

Masilo spoke: *Blood of my dust. Blood of my salvation. Tears of your bones. Breath of existence. It was nice to spend time with you. Gogo Kwena and I have finished our work, and we are going back home. Our lunch is waiting for us. Make Gogo Kwena well and I will come to visit soon.*

As they cross over

I get sick. It is not medically related. It is when the spiritual sickness greets me. When they see their due date approaching. They start to look for a negotiator to make amends. They have ill-used their time. But I still have time. They all know it. I know it too. So, they visit me. Trying their best to negotiate with me. It's a time of acknowledging their wrongs. They all used their time differently. Now, they are desperate. Tricksters they all are. Forcefully making me feel their time is nearing.

I often feel their last moments. As their time runs out. I feel their souls leave their bodies. Everything around me becomes cold. I know this as I freeze to death. It's like sea waves in the early mornings. I always hope that this will be the last one. It keeps happening. With every time that runs out. They keep heading my way. Pleading for help. For more time to be alongside me in my own time. They insist they are spiritual beings. Ready this time, to do all the work they missed out on.

I try to tell them that this is my time. They always refuse to listen. Instead, I feel their last moments on earth. Every time. It's all on a loop. There's no way to escape it. I endure the pain. The coldness. Trying to keep my body warm. Whilst they become spirits who refuse to crossover. It all happens so fast. My time struggles to keep up with theirs. My sight becomes blurry. They all vow that this is not their time. They beg me to share my time with them.

I always try to ignore their cries. But they are always loud. I see them. They become figures not visible to anyone else. Only to me. They like to be in command. Their crossing is new to them. I know that they are scared. In need of company. I can't go with them. It is not my time. I try to tell them. But they don't understand that this time is theirs.

I suffer. But those who have already crossed over, come to my aid. They defend my time. They and I have an agreement. Way before all those refusing to cross over. Way before I cherished my time. They've mastered the time of the dead. Their time healed them. I don't get sick from their existence. I know that they will protect me. In exchange, I share my time with them. We have an understanding to pause in between. I do not have much choice. My time became our time.

Mkhulu Thabang

At the age of 26, Mkhulu Thabang was called to be the community's traditional healer. The revelation took place when Thabang was shopping at the suburban mall after his lectures had concluded for the day. He heard voices of feet stomping, of an army charging to fight. A song of the Ghanaian drum played. The first beat almost shook the mall, so he thought, as he struggled to maintain his balance. By the second set of the beat he was down on the ground. The drum played louder and louder as he screamed in a deep voice. His legs were moving in sync with the beat of the drum. It was at this moment that he was dancing with lions and elephants, as they tumbled on the ground. As the white lion kept roaring, Thabang's voice got deeper and more husky, and the more the elephants stumbled on their feet, the heavier his body became for the passers-by to lift up.

Thabang kept shouting to be taken to the mountain's waterfall. An elderly man wearing a leopard's skin with an ivory necklace emerged from a nearby shop, kneeled to greet Thabang and remarked that there was nothing to be afraid of as he came bearing gifts in honour of his ancestors and those that lived before both of them. The white lion approached, bowed and informed Thabang that it had been assigned to be his spiritual protector in the realm, followed by the elephant trumpeting, as if to say that it'll offer him transport to the mountain of prayer. It was there that his questions would be answered at the place of his ancestors, they had all gathered there waiting for him, the mighty elephant pointed out. But Thabang had never had this event unfold before and fear overwhelmed him.

After struggling to ignore the drums playing, the voices repeating themselves, the lion and the elephants, he woke up to find himself encircled by onlookers. Some had kneeled, some were staring down at him, and an elderly lady was fighting to push everyone away from him, insisting that Thabang needed space to breathe and under no circumstances should he be touched. The elderly lady was barefoot with a doek wrapped around her head and another tied to her waist. As she helped Thabang to get up, she told him that being uMkhulu, a spiritual male elder, was nothing to be ashamed of.

Upon arriving home Thabang hoped that all these events were only playing in his head, he wished that they were nothing but a dream. Sadly, for him, this was not the case. He relayed the events to his parents who in disbelief informed him that they were not a family of healers and had never heard of such a gift from their bloodline. Thabang's father, while denying knowing any family history of healers, still wanted to know more about the events that had unfolded. While his mother insisted that Thabang must stop being

so imaginative and forget about everything that he thought he had seen. They prepared dinner, ate, and went to sleep.

That night, Thabang slept like a dead person. Paralyzed. And the elderly man from the mall visited him and showed him his leopard regalia, the outside was of leopard skin and the inside of purple cloth. He instructed Thabang that he should make one for himself before embarking on the healer's path and only after that would the old man reveal himself.

Thabang woke up scared, shared the dream with his parents, and they decided to visit a traditional healer on the outskirts of the inner city.

When they arrived at the healer, Thabang's parents insisted that their son's calling be reversed. The healer asked if they were sure, and they confirmed multiple times. Thabang had only one request, to negotiate when the initiation from the calling would begin, but his parents wanted to hear none of that. The healer threw bones for the mother and the answer was not to reverse the calling, Thabang's parents still asked for the bones to be thrown again. Yet the second time the same answer was given. Thabang then asked for the bones to be thrown, the answer was still the same. His parents begged the healer to take away his gift, but Mkhulu Thabang saw the elderly man in leopard skin appear in front of him and instructed him to get up and leave immediately.

Walking away, Thabang remembered what his parents had told him about his name. His grandmother had named him, after her grandfather, 26 days before she passed away. She asked that Thabang be loved and not treated poorly as one day he would fight to reunite the family. But only once he understood the meaning of being a Mkhulu, as one did not choose the title of 'Mkhulu' but was born for it.

Reject them all

Never pray to God.
How can an invisible being create the world?
Do not give him power, make his existence extinct.
God preys and needs your praying. Do right by erasing the word God completely. After all, had God been so godly he'd be a woman. God's way has come to an end, and you can complete the circle.

Speak this truth out.
Don't acknowledge the universe. It is nothing but a make believe that there are forces at play.
The universe itself is an empty place for us to trap our hopes in.

Understand that ancestors are not more than flesh that has decomposed.
They once roamed the earth. Ate what you eat and breathed air. Once dead, they saw fit to claim your birth. So, create a new surname for yourself. Forget about having kids. Kill the bloodline so that the ancestors can't claim any more children. Despise kids at all costs. Connect only with people your age.

Avoid the bible. It has always been only a novel praised as the word of God.
Accept that our existence is solely scientific.
Be an atheist.

Gogo Kwena and the farm

Light shining through the green leaves above us created shapes of animals which shifted from one direction to the next. Seated on chairs beneath the peach tree in Gogo Kwena's garden, our feet rested on brown leaves as we took shelter from the beaming heat. I had a glass of water next to me and Gogo Kwena had her rooibos teapot.

"This morning I moved from the left corner until I reached the right corner of the house. See, even this dress of mine is wet. How was your day, my grandchild?" Gogo Kwena asked.

"Ah, it was alright. Before the sun smiled, I went to find a farm. I was told that it had a special stream next to a praying field. It can heal many people who need help," I responded.

"Where did you say you found this farm again?" Gogo Kwena asked.

"I didn't say Granny, but it was far. I had to walk and walk with the sun behind me, after four hours I found it," I responded, reaching for my glass of water.

I sipped a few times, as Gogo Kwena's eyes looked in my direction. As I put my glass down, she poured her hot tea and put in half a teaspoon of sugar.

"They told me that you were going to visit them. I was surprised when they woke me up, saying our grandchild is heading our way. But then again, you and your mother never tell me anything these days. You all think that I can't remember a lot and am useless, don't you?" Gogo Kwena shook her head as she went on. "That farm once belonged to your great-grandmother before it was taken by those white men."

"How did she make peace after the farm was taken away?" I asked.

"She didn't. It drove her crazy and gradually she lost her mind in her own madness. She became disconnected from herself. Who are we to blame her though? That farm was everything to the family, the family's sacred place of praying was located right in its centre, so I have heard. Did you get a chance to see it?" Gogo Kwena enquired with a smile on her face.

“Yes, I did but I wasn’t sure at first if it was the place of praying. A tall and gentle shadow said that I need to go by the stream and that if the sun follows me, I am heading in the right direction. All I knew was that she, this shadow, must have been a family member,” I responded.

“Yes, she was always peculiar. How I miss that about her and my grandfather the great,” Gogo Kwena now had tears falling from one eye.

“Granny, how come you never spoke about them? And what was my great-great grandfather like?” I eagerly enquired.

“A professor of note. Always secretly going away for months without telling a soul. The first time was when he returned with healing ornaments, bones, seashells, and herbs. The second was when he returned with a freshly slaughtered lion and the last, was when he never… forget about it,” Gogo Kwena said.

“Forget about what, Granny” I asked.

“You always have endless questions. Maybe another day. Let me rest, it’s been a long day,” Gogo Kwena said.

The Matriarch's mattress

On Mother's Day, our matriarch insisted that her long-term partner stay with her. Usually, he comes to check on her daily and then goes back to his place. Since they both had previously married and saw no need to remarry to have a partnership. An arrangement I had admired, even though in their old age it's not as practical. But he still manages to visit her in the afternoon and leave for his place at night, ordinarily around 8 pm. This time it was different, as the matriarch didn't want to be left alone and he obliged. The two shared the mattress, a queen-sized mattress. It was covered in rose printed fitted sheets and a fluffy blanket I bought for her a year ago. It kept them warm, and they fell asleep embracing each other. The following morning, she asked him for a glass of water and they went back to sleep. At 08:00 the matriarch left this world to join the spiritual world. Her long-term partner called for nearby help, he had always been the grandfather we never had. It makes sense that he would be the last person she'd share the mattress with.

I was the first grandson to share her mattress and would always end up rolling flat onto the floor. When I began going to school, I always insisted on having my mattress next to hers, and she never complained about that. It made it easier to have evening conversations and be woken up for school the following day, but that is all in the past now.

Upon the family hearing of her not waking up, they were in shock, perhaps denial and convinced everyone that she might be in a temporary coma. It had been two years since they had visited her and should the state of coma be true, at least they could spend some time with her, so they thought. They all got in their cars to embark on the 350 kilometres drive.

By afternoon, it had all been confirmed. The matriarch had begun her journey of crossing to the spiritual world. "Only the body had remained, cold as ice and stiff as a stick,*"* her long-term partner informed them.

When I received the phone call, I knew that something was off. My body had been weak since the day before, but still, I couldn't locate the source of it all and I hadn't spoken to her in a few weeks. On the phone, the caller was crying and mumbling in distress, but still, I could make out enough to understand what was said. I knew this day would come; I have known it for some time. It's been a secret I kept for years, for more than three years to be exact. I had confided in no one, for fear of being called a witch who brings bad luck. Instead, I would travel to her rural village, in Limpopo, a few times a year. A taxi or a

bus allowed me to have a nap or two along the trip. Each time I arrived the first thing she'd offer was something to eat, even when I had already eaten. A smile always returned while I ate, frozen in the moment of her presence and knowing that her time had already been marked and that was that.

So, I kept quiet about it, her limited time before joining the spiritual world. Until two years ago when I shared this with my psychologist. He at once said "Don't worry about what everyone else is doing. As you said that when the time comes, they'll be crying. Let them cry and mourn in their own way. Do spend time with her as you see fit. Do not worry about others but yourself.*"*

These words kept coming and coming to mind after the caller concluded the phone call. It has indeed been confirmed, the matriarch has left us all. To be in a place different from ours. I shed no tears and proceeded to make funeral arrangements while they, everyone, was crying louder and louder with every hour that passed by.

By Tuesday morning, a rental car had been dropped off. It had been more than six years since I drove a car. But this trip had to happen, I loaded everything I could think of and by late afternoon embarked on the drive. Johannesburg had already entered peak traffic hours, a norm for city life. There were only a few options for me in this instance. I knew that it was either I prepare for a five hours drive and half of the trip in the dark or wait until the following morning. But the matriarch had fallen and the sooner I arrived the better for both of us. Especially since a month ago, I had planned to spend this weekend with her. Surely, I was to still spend time with her, just not in the manner I had hoped to. The first hour's drive was slower than expected and the road got darker faster than usual. I wasn't worried about the darkness, as surely, she was watching over me along the freeway drive.

In flesh, it was just me driving on the road, but spiritually I was driving with her alongside. It's hard to put it in words, but I knew that there were other presences on the empty seats. They must have driven with me for most of the trip. I barely remember half of the details of the drive. Just as the time was approaching fifteen minutes to 8 pm, I realised within 10 minutes I would be home and so it was.

I slowly parked the car by her street, not minding the gravel road with its red dusty soil. I had to put on a jacket covering my vest before entering the yard, it's a sign of respect for the homestead that has a funeral. And in order to honour her, I had my nails painted black – this was the grandchild she had known over the years, the one with long braided hair, painted fingernails and it was important not to cage myself now that she was gone. I entered and greeted everyone that was sitting outside and proceeded to the

house. Inside it was packed with people filling every chair and couch. Some of them I knew and some I had no idea who they were. They must have been the matriarch's relatives and friends. They welcomed me with open arms and smiles, as I was ushered to her bedroom. Mattresses were laid on the floor and her bed was out of sight. It's a tradition that when an individual has passed away, elderly women sleep on mattresses until the burial. Men aren't allowed to enter this room at all. But the matriarch had taught me not to be bothered with gender expectations – I would be woken up early to clean the house, we would cook meals together and fix roof leaks – so no one could deny me access to the room of mattresses. As I entered, I kneeled to greet the elders laying down. The matriarch's sister was about to go to sleep when she heard my voice and immediately got up from her mattress to greet me.

Everyone gets united during the week of burial, the witches (otherwise known as spiritual healers), the grannies, the aunties, the children, and even their children's children. This is one time when everyone is expected to show unity no matter their differences. I bade everyone a brief farewell and headed off to sleep. I woke up early as there was a lot to prepare, and days run faster when everyone is mourning. By Friday afternoon, we had more travellers coming to join the mattress sharing and the matriarch had been transported from the mortuary. Respectfully placed in a wooden casket next to mattresses.

By now everyone was used to me entering the mattress room at will. On this night I walked in before heading off to bed and one of the mourners greeted me. She had travelled from far and was one of the eldest elders. After a few minutes of conversation, I stood up to leave and she instructed me to sit down, I obliged.

*"*O beka le eng? When are you introducing us to your partner*?"* asked the elderly mourner.
"Nna ka beka? Me getting married?"
"E wena! Yes, you. Why are you laughing*?"*

I had been in similar conversations before, so I knew where this was going and I adjusted the way I was sitting cross-legged by the corner of the mattress and faced towards the elderly mourner as she looked reasonable enough and ready to have the conversation to come.

"Maybe in five years," I noted.
"You must bring us makoti, your wife, it's time to get married now*,"* the elderly mourner declared.
"Oh, there will be a partner but not a wife!"
"What do you mean not a wife?" the elderly mourner asked loudly.

“I mean to say that my partner will be a husband and not a wife”.
“Eehh, are you all hearing this kid?” she said looking towards my mom and the matriarch’s sister.
“I love men, so I can’t have a wife,” I proudly said.
“What are you?” the elderly mourner asked with authority.
“A man,” I said.
“So why would you marry a man?”
“Because I love men and not women,” I said unshakingly.
“I don’t understand what you are saying. I really don’t. Why would a man love another man and want to marry a man instead of a woman?” the elderly mourner asked in annoyance.
“Well, sometimes a man can love another and sometimes a man can love both men and women and sometimes a woman can love a man and sometimes love both men and women.”

“Bathong, are you all hearing this kid, what nonsense is he speaking? she asked.
“It’s just nonsensical foolishness he speaks,” my mom softly said.
“Nonsense you say?” I gently reiterated.
“Yes, it is,” my mom responded.

Mom knew about my sexuality and after some struggles to accept it, all had seemed well, but now suddenly she was betraying me at the most unexpected time. All I could do was look towards the casket and wonder what the matriarch would have said if we could still hear her voice.

Luckily her sister had been listening all along.
“So did you ever tell your mom that you love men and not women?” the matriarch’s sister asked me.
“Yes, it’s been more than three years since I told her”
“And what did she do?” she asked.
“Mom, please tell them,” I insisted.
“She won’t say anything. She never speaks of serious topics. So, you better tell us”, the matriarch’s sister said.
“How is this even possible? This is madness,” said the elderly mourner.

“Aowa, no, no,” the matriarch’s sister said, “he respected us enough to answer honestly when you asked about a wife. Let’s not get worked up, let’s calmly have this conversation. I understand them and have spent so much time getting to know his kind. They might seem different to us, but they live a life of their

own and all they want is peace. I have noticed that most of them love to live in apartments or suburbs as well," she said while adjusting her laying down position to make more space for me on the mattress.
"Why is that the case?" the elder mourner asked me.
"Because we prefer areas that are safer for us. In most places, we get murdered because we are told that we can't be homosexuals with lives and that it is wrong to be queer," I responded.

"They are right to do so. You can't be a man loving man and woman loving woman," the elderly mourner replied.
"Well, that's what they all say. So, would you rather have them kill us instead of letting us live our lives?" I asked emotionally, as a tear fell.
"Let us not get worked up and try to understand each other's point. We are having a peaceful adult conversation and should try to understand each other," the matriarch's sister said.

"Now that you have said it, even his cousin, the one teaching at a school, also says that she loves women. These kids are going to be the end of us," asserted the elderly mourner.
"So, I am not the only one? There are more family members and still, I am questioned?" I felt exhausted, said my goodnights and left to sleep.

The following morning everyone was up early, I made a fire and boiled water. One of my relaxing times whenever I am home in the rural areas. Took a bath in a bucket and afterwards, all the elders in the mattress room were given buckets with hot water to bathe. By 7 a.m. the church service had started.

A prayer was said before we left for the funeral service, details in the programme for the day were shared with all arriving. Farewell cards with messages were read, but only cards included in her obituary were placed in her mattress room. Her obituary read: *The matriarch was born in the rural area of... in the year 19... On the 12th of... and attended school at... She leaves behind seven grandchildren. Rest in Peace the lioness.* There was another card I felt deserved to be placed in the mattress room, the card from the matriarch's long-term partner, which read: *The gift is that we are separated in flesh but forever together in spirit. Until we meet again.*

Now and Then

If negotiating with Mum's spirit was possible, the last few days wouldn't have been as hectic. Several times, the spirit of my mum has been delivering messages without any space for objections. In my world she hasn't left yet, and I didn't understand why people kept saying that she is no more. She is just as vocal as before.

"Nana, come and see mum one last time," Mum said a day before the farewell.

"But Mummy I am afraid of peeking through. The last time I saw you by the hospital, you were swollen and seemed to be in so much pain. Please don't make me have a peek," I responded.

"But Nana, I am not dead. I just went to a different place to get a different body, a new body, a better one than that one laying in there," said Mum

"Mum, you are scaring me," I said.

"Nana, my handsome son, wake up. It's time to go and fetch your little sister from boarding school," said Mum.

"But Mum, it's only 04:00 am and it's freezing outside. Can't I sleep a little bit longer? Just a while longer?" I tried to reason with Mum.

"Oh, my gracious handsome Nana, don't be too concerned about what time it is. It's Friday and traffic will be unbearable from 06:00 am. Tomorrow it's my farewell day and I want all my children to be in one place, preparing for the farewell. And don't forget to all wear solid black clothes," Mum stressed.

"Mum, why did you leave us? This month was supposed to be your birthday photoshoot and now it's only fading memories to hold on to," I said.

"It was time to do so. A photoshoot would have been wonderful. But my birthday is still at the same time and day. Just because I left doesn't mean that you should cancel all your plans," Mum responded.

"Mummy, the other day the radio played your song. The part of 'but worth it' suddenly makes sense. I get

it now, even though it makes my heart sore," I told Mum.

"Nana, I am so happy that you finally understand the song. You are growing into such a wise young man. Mummy loves you still," Mum said.

"Mum, where have you been? I haven't seen you in weeks and have missed you dearly" I said.

"Nana, I have stopped visiting you because each time I do, you always end up crying so I saw it fit to stop visiting. Come a bit closer and give mummy a hug, we don't have much time left. I have to go back before sunrise," said Mum.

"Mum, you are back! How I have missed you. Since you are back, may you help with this writing?" I said.

"I too missed you. I do however have to recharge once in a while. No, I am exhausted and it's time to leave, maybe next time," said Mum.

"Mum, wait what about keeping your…" I said as she disappeared again.

*

I remember when I came out to my mother and she cried. After a few minutes she looked at me. "I am crying not because I don't accept your sexuality. I do. Yet I am sad, my heart is heavy with sadness. Because this means that all these years you were with us, you were pretending to be someone that you are not. You were not free to be yourself around us. Now you are 26 years old and only coming out now, imagine all the years you've lost. Nana, you are my baby and mummy loves you as you are. Come a bit closer and give me a hug," she said while wiping away her tears.

"Ahh Mum, don't be sad. All is not lost, there's still time to catch up on all the lost moments," I responded with pity to her honesty.

"So! You do have a boyfriend?" she asked.

“No Mum, I don’t. I had one but we parted ways,” I responded.

“Oh, I see. So did he dump you?” Mum asked.

“No, I dumped him,” I replied.

“Well, I can’t speak for him since I never met him,” she responded.

It was at this moment that I realised my little sister had entered the room. She raised her hand and said “I knew him and he was a nice guy, fun and caring.”

Fell from the sky

I woke up in Gogo Kwena's yard. Her garden had turned brown, and the yard had dead leaves covering the ground. It looked as though no one had looked after it for years. The paint on the walls was worn out from all the heavy rains and heat. Everything about how I remembered it had changed. It had become a field of emptiness. I hoped that she would be welcoming me to her yard. But that was not the case.

I immediately headed out to the outside tap area. This is where a hosepipe is used to transport water to her juju tank, which then takes the water to the house. Providing water to the entire house for her to use, especially for her bathroom. The tap had started leaking this morning, and luckily, I woke up in her yard. A new tap had been installed and yet the old one was left to operate next to the old one. Rust shows its age, and the top handle can't stop the leak. Gogo Kwena had used a stone to balance the tap, by putting pressure on the handle. It was held in place with a knotted string. As though to mark it as a remembrance that she was once here. She forgot to tell us not to remove the stone and I blindly removed it. Water began to uncontrollably spill at will.

I had to act quickly just in case she came through. Even though I couldn't see her, I felt her on the other side of the tap. The more it leaked, the quicker I tried to fix it. Ordinarily, she would have shouted at me. Followed by a lecture of how hard it is to get water and fortunate we are to receive it. Even if it's only once a week, it's free and should be appreciated. No matter how salty the water is. So, in avoidance of the drama, I moved as quickly as I could to fix the leak but then I fell. By the time I woke up, I was heading towards a door leading to a room.

A room I hadn't seen in Gogo Kwena's house before. It was a square room in the middle of the house. I reached to open the door and a hand reached out from behind my back to accompany me as I walked in. It was a rough hand but felt comforting and somewhat gentler than I remembered it. This hand was bigger than both my hands combined and came with a firm grip. It was the hand of my partner; we hadn't seen each other for a while. I didn't have time to ask what he was doing here and how he knew where to find me. As I opened the door, it was dark and yet we could still see each other. He was at least happy to see my face. I was still deciding if I felt the same way. Beyond the door, there was a couple, a gay couple, next to us. Kissing and kissing each other. They seemed happy and didn't mind us at first when they saw us standing there and just looking at them, as they took off their clothes. They paused and asked that we leave the room. We apologized and left. I woke up in a different urban settlement.

I fell from the sky as though it were raining. I dropped flat into a house I hadn't seen before. It had a view, and I could see that I was now in Europe, Copenhagen to be exact. I could recognise this location for its familiarity. Even though I don't remember ever setting eyes on it. I could feel that once upon a time I too had lived here. There were old buildings everywhere. Tall architecture with styles from the renaissance. Marking a time when pride in creating concrete cities was a priority. Each building had rounded Tuscan columns with flowers and snakes around the pillars. Everything was made from marble stones while the buildings themselves were occupied. The city itself was full of life. I couldn't get a sense of time as there was an orange light shining on every surface. The city explorers had wealth. Some were wearing capes and gold pieces of jewellery around their necks. Their fingers were made of silver. As I looked around for my partner, a lady with long hair looked at me and laughed. I kept on looking and looking for him. The lady then told me that when I woke up, he would remain in this world. She refused to show me how to get back to the other world. I fought her to let me know. She had now tied me to a street pole. I struggled with the pole in the hope of freeing myself. The more I struggled, the more newer arrivals fell from the clouds.

I remember them

I remember being raised by Granny. How she always prepared hot food from the coal stove and while I took a bath, Granny would make soft porridge. I remember her learning to read the clock, which hung on the wall, so that I would never be late for school. I remember the day I left her, for high school in Auntie's city in a different province, and phoning each other was a regular ritual.

I remember the day that Granny passed away. I hadn't spoken to her for three weeks. Usually on Sundays, I would call her. But on her last Sunday, I didn't phone. I remember receiving the call from Auntie telling me of Granny's passing. I remember thinking back to how I'd been sick for the past few days. My body temperature had been ridiculously low. No matter how I tried to keep myself warm, it just wouldn't help. My legs were also failing me as I could barely walk. They were burning hot as though I had put them inside a fire, and all these symptoms stopped when Auntie phoned to tell me of Granny's death. I remember when I arrived at Granny's home, in the rural area of Limpopo. It was three days before the funeral. Auntie was happy to see me. She kept a strong pose and reassured me that all will be well. I remember after the funeral I nearly lost control of the car. I remember before returning to Joburg, Auntie asked if she could get a lift with me but then later, she changed her mind.

I remember when I passed grade 12 with exemption. Auntie knew that I would have to attend varsity in a different city. I remember Auntie phoning Rangz, her brother-in-law, to say that I would be studying in Joburg. I remember renting a back room in the heart of Soweto for the first four months of my varsity life. Until the flood of 2009 when Rangz took me in as his son. I remember how in winter his car refused to start in the mornings and we would push it to kick-start it. I remember how Rangz treated me like an adult son instead of a kid. I remember the first time he got critically ill from cancer, and I went to spend a day with him after he was discharged from the hospital. I remember how scared I was that he wasn't going to make it, but he did. I remember how Rangz loved his tea break. Rooibos with boiled milk, served with two slices of bread. I remember how he'd always ask me to make tea.

I remember last month when Rangz got ill again. I remember he visited me in a dream in which he dropped me off at work. I remember when Auntie phoned to let me know that Rangz had been admitted at the hospital and a day later, at 05:00 on Sunday morning, her phone call, informing me of Rangz's passing away.

I remember the last conversation Auntie and I had, after Rangz's funeral. How Auntie phoned to say she had been admitted to the hospital. I remember her next phone call letting me know she was in the ward, and I told her to get some rest and we will chat later. I remember her voice struggling to make sense. I remember her breathing was heavy the day after that, when she was put on the ventilators.

I remember praying that Auntie will be saved. I remember praying so much that tears bled internally. I remember phoning her children, my only siblings, to check on them. I remember having faith that God and the ancestors would fight for Auntie's survival. I remember when the doctor praised Auntie's improvement and how I felt relieved. I remember when my body started to get cold, when my feet started to burn as though I was dancing to the drum in a trance. I remember thinking that my ancestors themselves had decided to request a dance from me. I remember the first time I learnt that each time a person is about to pass away these are the symptoms my body endures. I remember trying to tell myself that I was just imagining things, as Auntie would surely survive, and my burning feet were nothing but an illusion.

I remember thinking how scary it would be to become my siblings' guardian. I remember I was the same age as my siblings are now, when Auntie took me in and raised me as her first born. I was in my early teenage years, and she was my current age. I remember how she struggled with the extra responsibility of raising me. I remember when I came out of the closet to Auntie and she cried while embracing me. I remember her saying: I've always known that you are gay and Are you dating anyone? I remember crying back in Auntie's arms and saying: I was dating but I'm no longer dating anyone. And Auntie responded while giggling: What is it that you've done to the guy for him to run away? I remember Auntie and I laughing about it.

I remember asking her to keep on fighting while she was at the hospital, and she fought for her life throughout the two weeks. I remember today although it feels so long ago. I couldn't sleep at all. I remember the phone rang at 05:00, it was the hospital to tell me that Auntie had passed away and that is when I realised, that with everything I've been robbed of, a part of me has been permanently taken away from me. I remember my last words to Auntie: Get some rest and we will chat later. I remember writing her obituary and struggling to finish the last paragraph.

I remember how Covid has robbed me of my family. I remember not crying at Granny's passing. I remember being strong during Rangz's funeral. I remember crying like a baby when Auntie's passing away finally hit home. I remember how many plans we had. I remember all my loved ones as they keep leaving me.

The mountain's calling

Sunrise hides within this mountain. It wakes up early in the morning. Its sunray emerges from the mountain. Piercing through the solidness of its highland. Through the hills. As the trees welcome its light. It called my name. A name yet unknown. I have never woken up so early. But today is certainly not an ordinary day, as the mountain has called. It witnessed my stamping feet hiking the day before.

Many have walked along its spine. Felt its heartbeat drumming. Acknowledged its vibrating mysticism. Embraced its healing energies. Few forget its stature. Many are still to witness the beauty it holds. An entity that decides who gets to know it. A mountain of existences. It has many names. A force of wonder. A place of prayer. A home of answers.

We became acquaintances. The mountain accepted me and I it. It even knows how to take away my sleep. So that I am up before the sunrise arrives. I hadn't hesitated on the wakeup call. I simply got up. Put on my shoes and unzipped my tent. Out I walked, walked and walked. Sunrise was arriving, illuminating light as if to say good morning to the called one. The one we accept as one of us. I looked around, there weren't any other sounds. There wasn't any noise. There weren't any humans in sight. Just the mountain. The stream. The grass. The breeze of fresh air. The sun rose with a smile. The mountain had called and here I was.

Part B: Portfolio

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

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Motlatjo Mabeba

November 2021

Contents

Introduction 3

Part One: Coursework 4

Reflective journals January – October 2020 (Weeks 7-43)

Part Two: Thesis 16

Reflective journals November 2020 – October 2021

Part Three: Essays and Book reviews 34

Poetics essay

Book reviews

References 56

Introduction

This portfolio is a chronological account of my reading and writing journey over the two year period of the part-time MACW. Part One includes reflective journal extracts from January to October 2020, Part Two reflective journal extracts from November 2020 to October 2021 about writing my thesis, and Part Three my poetics essay and book reviews.

PART ONE: Coursework

Reflective Journals: January – October 2020 (Weeks 7 to 43)

Weeks 7 and 8

Our first online seminar was "Fierce Writing" given by Kerry Hammerton. Of the readings, I understood Vangile Gantsho's "red cotton" with ease and it took me back to a similar experience while I was still child. However, the usage of lower case and one paragraph throughout the piece, made it difficult to read, as it challenged my perception of what a written piece's structure should look like.

The fierce writing theme scared me greatly. The assignment seems to expect too much depth and asks us to go back to a place that I have locked away. It feels like being in therapy once again, facing that wall which I had always been reminded to demolish by my therapist. Only this time the demolishing will be done through writing. I wrote "His mother and him".

In our reading group, where we all choose a piece to read from the MACW's list of anthologies, I am surprised at the way everyone notices different details in the pieces. Particularly as I tend to read the complete opposite of what has been written.

In the feedback session, we each read our creative work aloud and received further feedback from classmates, and our lecturers, Kerry and Hleze. I was nervous at first to give feedback, for fear of being wrong or rude and hurting the writers' feelings. Reading our assignments aloud revealed a pattern of seeing more; errors, (mis)understandings and meanings. My classmates picked out meaning in my "His mother and him" that I did not understand fully myself.

I find myself rereading and rewriting more and more. I even dreamed I was making changes to my assignment before submitting the final version.

We submitted our Fierce writing final assignments and received additional comments, which led me to exploring and making clear decisions with regards to my submitted format of writing, as one of my poems had similarities to Haiku poetry. However, I had spent so much time editing that some of the re-edits were overdone to a point of watering down the written pieces, and I was so mad at having allowed self-doubts to get the better of me.

Weeks 9 and 10

Stacy Hardy's seminar "Archives of the Body/Body Maps" asked us to see our bodies as separate entities. All week, I paid attention to how my body reacted to people, and responded to my daily activities and yoga sessions. I dotted down my thoughts on public transport.

In the seminar readings, I was drawn to the extract from *A Question of Power*, by Bessie Head, which is relatable from a South African context, particularly in townships and rural areas where female bodies are often regarded as sexual objects and less worthy of societal belonging. It provided an accurate take on patriarchy, of how certain Black men view themselves as holier.

I also enjoyed the extract from *The Black Insider* by Dambudzo Marechera. The writing has elements of simplicity and I followed the narration with ease, but that simplicity also highlights the depth and hectic-ness of the subject matter.

In our feedback session, when I read "The body" some classmates felt I should bring in more humorous moments. Others said allowing the reader inside the body would aid my story. Interestingly, no humour was intended. But like art a piece of writing tells its own story.

I read the graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic,* by Alison Bechdel. It looks like a comic book, yet the story told is filled with heaviness: death, family crises, complex sexualities and LGBTQIIA+ related topics. This book made me teary and took me back to a time where my own sexuality was a draining phase in my life, particularly coming from a religious family.

Weeks 11 and 12

Black Sunlight by Dambudzo Marechera left me questioning if I understood what was written or if I made up my own meanings along the way. At times the narrator is speaking to his multiple selves. The heavy themes of explosive-sex, sexuality, war, consciousness, and religious resistance left me feeling that maybe it's better not to fully understand it. I appreciate that the writing raised more questions than answers. I feel *Black Sunlight* is the embodiment of timeless literature.

In Mxolisi Nyezwa's seminar, we were tasked to write from a place of emptiness or vulnerability. I write better when sad or angry, but still I pushed myself to go back to failed queer relationships and I wrote a poem called "Dancing" [the genesis of "Chanting"]. I was inspired to take more risks in formatting the poem, as I used different fonts and alignment.

Weeks 13 & 14

These past two weeks had been filled with uncertainties, as a result of the lockdown of the entire country as the number of coronavirus infections is on the rise.

Fist of the Spider Woman: Tales of Fear and Queer Desire, edited by Amber Dawn, is an anthology which consists of writings by women identifying as Queer. *Introduction: What are you afraid of?* by Amber Dawn (9-12), was a creative piece on its own and still served as an introduction.

The story "In your arms forever" by Courtney Trouble (127-130) made me extremely happy. I enjoyed the unapologetic expression of what same-sex (in this case queer female) lovemaking entails and how such a sacred world was normalized. Larissa Lai's "nascent fashion" (98-101) is beautifully written with rhythmic and lyrical sensations, but the irregular or absence of punctuation made it difficult for me to follow. Overall, *Fist of the Spider Woman,* showed a diversity of writings from writers willing to take risks and express their sexual desires, kinkiness, fears, and fantasies.

For Nathan Trantraal's seminar "The only writing is rewriting", I chose *Ask Baba Yaga* by Taisia Kitaiskaia, a dialogue with a mystic being who offers their wisdom in the most complex manner; with riddles that requires one to constantly be ready for responses that might not be clear or straight forward. This offered a nice contrast with the narrations/questions.

At first, I was worried about plagiarizing. Then, I ended up reading *Ask Baba Yaga* during bath times and coffee making and I wrote the story [now called] "Ask Mx Badimo". A classmate chose the same book and I was fascinated with our different outcomes. This showed me that our writings are as much of an individual lived experience, as they are of a collective narrative and that our interpretations of written work will not always be the same. For some, it's easy to rewrite work and for some, like myself it's difficult.

Weeks 15 & 16

The Beautyful ones are not yet born by Ayi Kwei Armah transforms the ordinariness of everyday lives into the hecticness of greed and political corruption. Even though it was written more than 40 years ago, it reflects our current times. Phrases like “It did not really have to fight. Being was enough” p12, and “New people, new style, old dance” p157, kept me captivated.

A sad note about this book with its beautiful title is that I am still to find happy literature by a black author. Surely, there must be happy black authors out there?

Don Mattera’s “Afrika Road”, *f*rom *Under the African Skies: Modern African stories* (1998 edition), edited by Charles R. Larson *(p222-227)*, was written at a time when South Africa’s Apartheid scars were still very much fresh, a time when I was too young to even know what everyone was experiencing, but this story captures the struggles and brutalities experienced. It left me drained, with sadness for what the country has been through and the legacies left us, such as townships populated by Blacks. Mattera made me think about how everyday objects could be used to tell a unique story.

Our assignment this week tasked us to write against “Narrative Conventions” and ask strangers to give us the protagonists and plots for our stories. The sense of not having the usual writing control was terrifying and at the same time liberating. I felt as though I’d been given an unplanned baby and had to care for it until adulthood.

Weeks 17 & 18

To investigate what makes a good book review, I first had a look at the Los Angeles Review of Books. I felt their reviews were easy to understand, as they did not use jargon. Researching approaches to book reviews I found that the review should offer the gist of the book, have a detailed analysis of the positives and negatives, and an observation of what readers may expect.

I also looked at different reviews of *The Beautyful ones are not yet born.* For example, Joshua Masinde’s 2010 review began: “In *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, this deeply symbolic book published in 1968, Ayi Kwei Amar vividly captures the seemingly endless spiral of corruption, moral decadence, and spiritual death in post-colonial Ghana.” This paragraph tells the reader when the book was first published, what the writer's main themes are, and it also starts to set a mood of the reviewer’s take on the book – by using the word “vividly” I already got a sense of the applause.

I found that the review also reflected his political bias, for example Masinde states: “On the other hand are Ghana’s new leaders, ‘the black masters’ who prove to be worse than the colonialists.” To me “worse than the colonialists” came across as emotive and problematic.

Weeks 19 & 20

I haven’t tried to write poems in a while. However, Marike Beyers’s seminar “Poems from other poems” managed to spark a dying flame.

“In Praise of Ancestors” by Mazisi Kunene (SA 1930-2006) (https://kentakepage.com/in-praise-of-the-ancestors-by-mazisi-kunene/), has taken a long time to grow on me. I’m drawn to its poetic, melodic elements. I do admire how Kunene has beautifully dedicated this poem to those before us, using simplified terminology that brings out its vibrations. It inspired me to question and explore further how one could applaud their own lineages. As a result, I had to travel back into my Grandparents’ oral stories and tap into narrations often experienced through dream realms as the two often grant exclusive knowledge. I ended up writing, “Applause to Gods”, and somehow it felt right for the first time to pray while writing.

As much as there is sadness in Robert Berold’s “My Death”, the way it’s written takes away the feeling of fearing death, and rather makes me feel the need to prepare for it when it arrives. It’s amazing how something like death, which I used to be scared of, came across as peaceful in this poem.

With Berold’s “Letter to Mary”, I enjoyed the directness as to who the letter is written for. It made me reminisce about my love for letters and offered a realization that letters don’t have to begin with a greeting. I became flooded with memories I thought I had dealt with and in that sombre state, I wrote, “Letter to the disappeared” [now included in “Unsent Letters”]. I’ve learnt that a writer’s thoughts and pain are transferred through their craft. This is amazingly achieved when we resonate with a poem and write our own poem from our own experiences.

After having written the three pieces, I was feeling drained and self-doubting. I sent my poems to a grade 11 student for comment, he responded, “Did you write these? I sense as if they are not complete.”

This critical experiment revealed that even though we do have the privileges of fellow writers' feedback - outside audiences' thoughts are also a nice treat. I would have never thought that a high school student would have such refreshing feedback, with such clarity.

Weeks 21-25

"Poetics of the Wor(l)ds We Live" was a reading seminar facilitated by Paul Wessels.
We met twice a week to read the essays and mentally I was exhausted afterwards, but there was also an abundance of writing rejuvenation and reminders as to why it is that we write.

Virtual Contact Week 6-10 July

In preparation, we were asked to arrange our portfolios into: writing you are unsure about, writing that may not work, and writing that works. I struggled with decision making.

The virtual sessions were unexpectedly intense. The creator of the written piece would read their piece, and this always offers the privilege of hearing the work in the writer's voice, emotions, and pronunciations. After the reading, the feedback stage began. There was no way of knowing if feedback would be leaning towards the positive or negative or the in between. It revealed that as much as we write from our own need to tell a story, it's not always going to be perceived in the desired manner. Some of my writing which I thought worked was received differently.

Even though the virtual contact week has ended, there is still feedback arriving. It had never crossed my mind that my stories could move a fellow writer to reach out and share their overall experience of them.

*

A Question of Power by Bessie Head

In the first chapter, I struggled to keep up with the narration and it made me feel as though I was the crazy one, for not understanding. It felt as though the writer was all over the place and I was inside her mind.

By chapter two, I had fallen in love with this book. Each place and character were so real that it gave a sense of belonging. The theme of community unity was beautifully real and well told. One thing unexpected was the inclusion of a variety of sexualities. The writer hasn't held back on such controversial topics, considering that this book was published in 1974, I can only imagine how it was received or what she must have gone through as a result of the book. This book allowed a feeling of having access into her world. Without any holding back as though this is as real as we would ever know her. I also couldn't help but wonder if the writer had a sixth sense gift or a spiritual calling.

Weeks 30 & 31

Our ninth seminar "Experimenting through Sex" was facilitated by Chwayita Ngamlana.

I had thought that I was sensual enough to write about sex scenes until this seminar. As difficulties came quicker than expected, it wasn't from writing about sex scenes or introducing it into the narration, but rather because we had to choose one of the listed fetishes as the main theme.

After a few battles of a few dotted lines, I decided on hobophilia. It was the only fetish that I felt could be explored further from a different angle. But I hadn't foreseen that it too was just as difficult as the rest. My "An evening of boxed wine" took a metaphorical and unexpected approach, which also gave me a headache. I later realized that in order to bring the writing to life, I had to embody a completely different identity and perspective.

Ngamlana gave us a PDF of her novel *If I Stay Right Here*. I particularly enjoyed that each chapter in the story was an individual story which could stand on its own. For example, the chapter *Head,* had a combination of narrative sentences, grocery lists and WhatsApp conversation. Such experimental writing made me think about how risks can either make one's writing or break it completely.

This was the first time where I had to reconsider my first version in its entirety.

Weeks 32 & 33

For our reading session I selected "Tale of an Old Woman (Africa: Bondes)" from *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales,* its structure, language usage, narration, and genre. Before this course, I thought folktales were for children. I hadn't foreseen the possibilities of embarking into the wonderland that lay ahead.

Reading it, my imagination and childhood resurfaced. The simplicity of this folktale carries life lessons of wisdom in a manner that ensures easy access.

It reminded me of growing up surrounded by folktales. Often after dinner Granny would narrate various tales. None of us had imagined that someone could make a career out of folktales, let alone that stories like Granny's could be written down. To her, it was how she was raised and now she was passing on the generational knowledge. Either for edutainment or at our demand. This was one of our cherished moments while growing up. To us, it did not matter how many times the same tale was narrated.

Carter's tone feels the same, clear, and avoiding jargon, the reader is easily drawn in and wants to know more. The effectiveness of beginning "There was once …" What kept me captivated was that the story is relatable not as an experience but as a concept: wanting something so badly that one agrees to any terms and conditions. Only later to forget this agreement and miss the privileges when they are taken away. Morality is a simple reminder to cherish the smallest things in life.

Carol Leff's seminar was "Writing about death". The task was to write about the death of someone we knew and then to turn that initial piece into fiction. I found the transition refreshing and wrote "The belovedly missed". In her edit, Leff made a wonderful paragraph swap suggestion, and that adjustment immediately tightened up the writing.

Weeks 34 & 35

Our seminar was "Tell it slant: writing obliquely" by Jo-Ann Bekker. A challenging yet freeing assignment. It's a whole different scenario when one intentionally writes indirectly about a specific theme.

To purposely write about sexuality for example, while aiming that no word directly speaking of sexuality is used and while maintaining the same essences, came with difficulties. I had indirectly written within a similar spectrum. The only difference this time is that it was part of the brief and that somehow erased the usual comfort zone.

From the provided reading materials, these works: "DIY 3-step Rape Kit" by Ronelda S Kamfer,

Schizophrenia: some definitions by Vangile Gantsho, If I Stay Right Here by Chwayita Ngamlana and The Incident by Robert Berold, aided the thinking and inspirations in my writing processes. I wrote a poem and three stories “The Transaction”, “There she was” and “A tall male shadow”.

In *Bluets* Maggie Nelson focuses on her fascination with blue to write about life experiences, philosophies, etc and to narrate her life. The book is a system of numbered paragraphs from 1 to 240 which serve as a collective thread.

“2. And so I fell in love with a color—in this case, the color blue—as if falling under a spell, a spell I fought to stay under and get out from under, in turns.”

One can even read this book from the last page to the first and it would still read with ease. It manages to emphasize the conversational elements it contains. That feeling of not reading but having a discussion with the author throughout the writing came through strongly. It felt experimental and pushed her writing from first-person narration a step further.

Bluets obliquely explores issues of identity, love, and life through the color blue. The author mentioned various writings or artforms which used blue as a theme. Thus, she included collective theories while still focussing on blue as a theme and including her views with ease.

“220. I am writing all this down in blue ink, so as to remember that all words, not just some, are written in water.”

I have always regarded blue as a color of life and possibilities, and as an artist have used it as a persona since 2013. However, Maggie Nelson uses Blue as a theme in a way that allows the reader access to her world and still leaves us with elements of ambiguity.

Weeks 36 and 37

The seminar “Monologues from Beckett and elsewhere” was facilitated by Paul Mason.

The most daunting aspect was conceptualizing and then writing monologues. Of the videos we watched, *Withnail and I* dir. Bruce Robinson 1987) resonated instantly. But I read Beckett’s *Malone trilogy* in confusion. I explored extra guidance, but an online expert did not seem to understand him either. This

meant going back to reading Beckett's works was the only available salvation. With the *Trilogy* there were now moments where I felt that I was starting to understand. Yet he just couldn't allow me to fully indulge in assurity. For example, on page 299: "I might as well tell another of Mahood's stories and no more about it, to be understood in the way I was given to understand it, namely as being about me."

As such, the style of writing reminded me of psychoanalysis theorists such as Sigmund Freud and particularity the phrase "I saw myself seeing myself, sinuous, and from gaze to gaze gilded my innermost forests" by -Paul Valéry, from La Jeune Parque. As it's a similar feeling achieved in "Fizzle 4", for example, "I didn't wail, I didn't see the light, it's impossible I should have a voice, impossible I should have thoughts, and I speak and think…." p234.

I think that in order to write like this, one has to accept their sanity or lack of, and through that write freely.

My first attempt at a confession/diatribe took almost a week to write and felt as though it was not going anywhere. It was as though somehow Beckett's thoughts were merging with mine, resulting in confusion of not knowing if there was moving forward or the writing was motionless. This resulted in writing "Trash" late on deadline day. It was also influenced by the wonderful opening lines Beckett's used in Fizzle 4, "I GAVE UP before birth, it is not possible otherwise, but birth there had to be, it was he, I was inside, that's how I see it" p234. I enjoyed the usage of first person throughout Fizzle 4 and adopted it too.

After another back and forth editing process with "Trash", I am starting to be fond of Beckett's writing style and still can't articulate how that got to be.

Weeks 38 & 39

The seminar "On Voice: An Experimental Seminar", facilitated by Masande Ntshanga introduced us to the concept of authorial voice and how it is learned and applied. According to Victor Lavalle, "My definition of 'voice' is personality. And since everyone has one (just about everyone) then everyone has a Voice."

It is one thing to be aware of the 'authorial voice' and another when self-assessing it and its processes. We were tasked with selecting a work-in-progress and finding ways to bring out our voice through the process of editing.

I chose a draft from 2018, “Dear Future Kabedi’s partner”. A letter I never sent. Reading it, a voice came forth from two years ago and I realized that elements of life shaped aspects of my writing voice. The editing processes inspired me to revisit the writing of Angela Carter, Bessie Head and (c) Maggie Nelson. Writers whose voices set them apart. I tried to assess “Kabedi’s partner” [now titled “Motlatjo’s partner”] from a reader’s perspective, while asking who am I, and what is my writer’s voice? Victor Lavalle mentioned that “the mastery of Voice begins with shamelessness.” p13. I saw that my draft was intended for an individual, and my voice had been toned down or suffocated, whereas writing without that intention could allow the ‘shamelessness’ to be.

The process of revision showed that our written voices do change with time, it is a never ending process to refine one’s voice.

Weeks 40 & 41

“Motifs in writing” was facilitated by Henali Kuit.

Henali pointed out that “Your piece of writing has no responsibility to its reader. Your writing is its own audience, its own conversation partner.” I think that often I focus on the ‘how and what’ the writing should be in relation to the reader, that it ends up becoming a self-imprisonment. Claiming back my liberation, I felt less pressure while writing and allowed the piece to have fun with itself.

I revisited “My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales” edited by Kate Bernheimer and re-read Lily Hoang’s “The Story of the Mosquito”. Hoang creates a thread through the piece without it being overworked and forceful. One method I explored was to let the work do the guiding itself and learn to trust its direction.

“The Story of the Mosquito’ begins “Once, in a place far away from this place, in a time that was before this time…” and these words were still in my mind when I began “In a time not far”, a Gogo Kwena tale with the motifs of amethysts and butterflies was born.

Weeks 42 & 43

Our last seminar was “The epistolary form” facilitated by Stacy Hardy. Hardy began: “Dear writers, As many of you know I'm recording this seminar from Cairo - a city of the Gods but also of the dead. a city that has seen multiple pandemics in its long history - the ghosts of whom are buried beneath my feet. I am here in many ways by chance”. Undoubtedly it is common for us to be addressed in a digital form and still, her address contained the essence of a letter.

We had to write a letter to our favorite writer and I chose Taisia Kitaiskaia. Whenever I’m faced with a creative writing blockage, *Ask Baba Yaga* by Taisia Kitaiskaia, is one of my go-to texts. [I later included a portion of this letter in “Unsent letters”.]

For my creative assignment, I was inspired by Etel Adnan’s, “Conversations with my soul,” Night (Nightboat Books, 2016), and Grey Vild’s “Dear Gone” (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2016/04/dear-gone). Adnan’s piece has questions that serve as answers and has no ending as though it continues to live on. “Dear Gone” works as a whole and as individual pieces. This encouraged me to create a piece in an epistolary form, addressing the form itself. I wrote “Dear unwritten letters”. [Now edited as “Unsent letters.]

This seminar was a beautiful way to conclude our seminar journeys. I doubt that I have fallen in love with writing: as a form, as a being, and as a God, as much as I have now.

PART TWO: Writing my Thesis

Reflective Journals from November 2020 to October 2021

November 2020

To write my thesis abstract I began by relooking at my identity as a writer. That is being black, queer and spiritually called. Ordinarily, I would have overlooked these three repeated themes of my life. But I have always wanted to tell stories from this point of view. Writing for me is about searching and relearning. In the hope that somebody out there can feel a sense of belonging after encountering my stories.

Experimenting with forms allows me the freedom to tell the stories I want to tell. Prose fragments, short stories, flash fictions and fairy tales grant limitless space.

*

Freshwater by Akwaeke Emezi tells a story of entities (spirits), coming of age and individual identity. Repeatedly the narrator uses "We". This confused me at first, but the more I read, the more I realised that it is the spirits that are addressing us, the reader. "We were at once old and newborn. We were her and yet not."

I often use English words to make my characters more 'relatable'. For instance, Granny instead of Koko (Sepedi for a female elder) or Gogo (Isizulu for a female elder or a spiritually gifted person irrespective of their assigned birth gender). But in *Freshwater* I noticed that unfamiliar words and phrases, such as: no wahala, Mgbe nnukwu mmanwụ pụta and wallahi were used with no explanation. I didn't mind encountering them. Their inclusion and unfamiliarity became part of the story's voice, even though the narration is in English, not fully understanding their meaning didn't bother me. But I do think that as much as it's a wonderful technique, using it in a shorter piece wouldn't work best. As the closure for the story would arrive quicker.

The book's title reminded me of a time when I visited two Gogos who used water for consultations, and birthed my new piece, "Of waters" which I sent to my supervisor, Jo-Ann Bekker.

December

Helen Oyeyemi's story "books and roses" from *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours* captivated me, as did the name of the Montserrat monastery where the action begins. Montserrat means serrated mountain which I felt could be an entire story of its own. While hiking in the Drakensberg and trying to describe majestic views, I wrote "The mountain's calling".
Oyeyemi writes in a way that does not overtly give an indication of race – and that is not to say everyone should. I had never thought that there is a specific tone a black writer brings to their writings until I read these stories where it is missing. I felt very little connection with most of the characters. Even in the characters in same-sex relationships. I felt like it's a missed opportunity. It came across as though there was a hesitation to expand on these themes.

I loved the repetitiveness of phrases in Oyeyemi's stories and her uncanny way of introducing characters without giving the reader details about who they are. (Even though it frustrated me not knowing their background stories.) I used the latter when writing "Mom Sally, an Ally", where Mom Sally is a white LGBTIQA+ ally.

While writing "The Scottish wedding knot" the language and punctuation of Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies* and "Fizzle 4" constantly popped into my head. I wanted to try a playful approach to Beckett's and Oyeyemi's forms. An approach that worked for "The Scottish wedding knot" as I could play with form more freely and was still able to carry out the needed narrations.

January 2021

The past weeks have been nothing short of life's chaos. The Pandemic has sent the world into a phase of uncertainties and for some of us who are prone to anxieties everything became difficult to handle. My writing from November to December helped me not to overthink about my mother being critically ill. But this month my creativity reached a brick wall and removed any sanity left. I just could not produce new written work. Not even re-reading Taisia Kitaiskaia, Maggie Nelson and Bessie Head, could aid my plea.

This phrase reminded me of essays from our seminar "Poetics of the Wor(l)ds We Live." It unexpectedly occurred to me that as writers we don't necessarily remain the same and so we are our experienced turmoil. Taiye Selasi asks, in her essay, *Stop Pigeonholing African Writers,* "Can we really not imagine that the African novelist writes for love: love of craft, love of subject?" p52. I chose writing to give life to the voiceless stories, and to enhance my writer's voice, a jewel worth valuing, and yet the words just

seemed to be refusing to come my way.

What then becomes of a writer that cannot produce written works? This writer's body of mine had reached its limit. In *Narratives of Struggle,* Bell Hooks says, "Writers in exile speak about the struggle to come to voice in alien tongues. Those writers who hold to the language that most connects them with home, work to maintain ties." I felt utterly exiled from the writing world I had become acquainted with.

Ordinarily a taxi trip or walk to the mall, encouraged me to write something. But now living in an era of the pandemic, everything is different.

When I did manage to write again, I wanted to explore lightness. Although "Flowers" [included in "Unsent letters"] and "A heart belittled", do allude to a sense of sadness.

February

I didn't want Amos Tutuola*'s The Palm-Wine Drinkard* to end. It came across like one was reading a confession. The narrator immediately takes ownership of the drunkard title, not my usual connotation of drunkards. At this moment, I remembered the Granny next door to my mom's place. She too was regarded as a drunkard but was sweet and lovely. Thus, my new story "The neighbourly Granny" was born.

Tutuola narrates the story of the "Father of gods" or the "Drinkard" so earnestly with no judgement, to a point where I fell in love with all the characters. I wrote my story with no judgement as well.

The Palm-Wine Drinkard has moments of being conversational and unconventional. For instance, "So I shall be very much grateful if anyone who reads this story-book can judge one or both cases and send the judgement to me as early as possible." p56. I enjoyed engaging invitations like these from Tutuola. Especially as I did not expect to be addressed.

There's also a delightful time lapse carried out in the narrations. This I found aided the narration to not rely on chronological order, easing the reader into when the action shifts into various spiritual realms.

In December, I had a spiritual quest to embark on. I had to visit a family altar from the generations before my father. I wanted to write about it without giving away its sacredness. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* offered

guidance in how this altar visit could be turned into a different story, without losing the importance of engaging with a different realm. I wrote “Father and I visiting them”.

March

I thought that I knew how to dissect and digest novels until crossing paths with a little gem, *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo. It required multiple visits, even then I wonder if I understood it in its entirety. Then again the written form does not always have to make absolute sense to awaken discoveries in the reader.

The novel does an amazing job of offering details and setting the mood in a short time. The descriptions of walking along the road to Comala through it are lively and made me long not just to experience this road, but to hear it narrate its story. The road felt like it had witnessed countless secrets, overheard conversations and met various characters seeking something or someone.

I had starting writing “Third Avenue”, a story sparked by a conversation I had with a transgendered friend, who had accepted a terrifying lift from a stranger, and my memory of when my cishet woman friends and I managed to escape a kidnapping. But reading the surrealist *Pedro Páramo* – where characters exist in ambiguity, I couldn’t identify if they were on earth or in the spiritual realm – led me to experimenting. I rewrote “Third Avenue " as a narration by the road itself.

*

Pedro Páramo and *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales* deal with death in most unexpected ways which are not overwhelming. A method or language I still hope to perfect, however, this week had my trauma triggered.

This week I wrote “Sea of Blood” after an innocent by-passer in Braamfontein near Wits University was shot dead by police during students protests. It took me back to the police brutality during the 2015 FeesMustFall movement, which I supported and observed closely. Students and some universities’ staff members were united from different learning institutions. The disheartening part was the police brutality and much of the violence was not recorded by the media. I remembered a moment when queer students (Gays and lesbians), held hands and used their own bodies as shields to protect everyone. A spontaneous

moment and it did not matter if those they were protecting were homophobic or not, as we all had a common enemy that day.

Even after the 2015 protests, things remained the same and this year again the protestors raised the same demands. I wrote “Sea of Blood”, while remembering Marike Beyers’s seminar “Poems from other poems” and Mazisi Kunene’s “In Praise of Ancestors”. Last year this poem gave me a sense of pride and belonging alongside our ancestors. This time, I tried to understand where all this blood-shedding started and what might be the underlying spiritual influences involved. It always comes back to the old ways of ruling a nation. That is with trauma, greed and blood spilling.

*

I began “Brotherly compassion”, a piece that’s been lingering in my thoughts for some time. Initially, I wanted it to have a call and response approach, a back-and-forth dialogue. I felt that my point of view needed to be heard as well. But after the first few lines, the more life my voice was given, the more the story’s direction altered.

I decided that as writers, our writing already has a voice, and this can be achieved by varying choices of words, structure and genre of a piece. So irrespective of what we do or don’t do, the final piece would still have that unique blueprint of the writer. (And readers would know that these aren't my views.)

It wasn’t an easy piece to give birth to. It was inspired by my own lived experiences of family members finding every opportunity to have a say on my queer sexuality. The unnamed narrator in this piece took the form of my younger brother, who at some point through primary school was my protector but the older we both grew the more homophonic his views became.

Reflecting on its structure, the beginning and end paragraphs can be swapped around, and the story would still flow. This happened unconsciously but reminds me of Maggie Nelson’s fragments in *Bluets.* I have long hoped to find a way to translate her technique into my writing, and this never happened when I tried to force it. It’s almost like there’s a different place in our brains storing fellow writers’ bits of knowledge and syncing them with it the moment when they are required the most.

April

The Book of Chameleons, by José Eduardo Agualusa is narrated through the eyes of a gecko that communicates with its owner through dreams. A lovely twist and the themes are so real, I couldn't help but wonder how much was influenced by psychoanalysis. I find it a rather unusual read for my taste and yet I can see myself falling in love with this writing.

*

Of late death has been a continuous theme in my life. Since the year began, I've lost three family members. Two in March, who were both elderly. I was reminded of a high school favourite poem, "Death, be not proud" by John Donne and "My death" by Robert Berold. These two authors have written about death in the most beautiful way, as to say that it is what it is, it shouldn't be feared.

In writing about death at this time, I was pulled to death from a spiritual juxtaposition and in "As they cross over" I try to explore both the spiritual realms and the earthly world.

As a spiritually called individual, the passing over of a relative can have negative implications for me. I have experienced low energy and loss of sight while experiencing the individuals' last few moments and have been required to often be their mediator in their crossing over to the spiritual realms. It's hard to explain. It's like going on a rollercoaster.

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* takes us through this parallel of two worlds existing in one. The protagonist Elizabeth is aware of the spiritual beings that interact with her on a daily basis but everyone else around her regards Elizabeth as mentally disturbed, to the point where she is admitted into a mental institute. This is not to claim that those living with mental illness aren't actually living with it, but rather to outline that there's more to our world than we often consider, and the other world can only be understood once one has witnessed aspects of it. Even with that, speaking of it isn't as easy. Perhaps it has to do with fears of being stigmatized by those around us.

In "As they cross over" the two worlds (our world and the unknown) coexist in every possible way from a time perspective. In *A Question of Power,* the spiritual beings are given names, but I left the beings in my story unnamed. It was important for me that these beings are not given too much power, even if they are persistent. I worried that my story might have too much telling rather than showing. But sometimes the telling needs to be allowed to exist as is, and this is one of the instances.

April intensive week

A week where all part-time students attended face to face online sessions with all the creative writing lecturers. A week spent reading, writing and sharing feedback with fellow writers.

Preparing to share my new stories with my classmates, I realised I often fall in love with my pieces after their inceptions but when looking at them later, I don't always have the same feelings.

Terminology and language change with time, and this was evident in "A heart belittled", where I had chosen phrases such as "unmatched existence of duality". Now, it suddenly made less sense than before. It is almost as though I was in love with the idea of such phrases and now the work became naked, and I could suddenly see it for what the piece was insisting to be, rather than shaping it in my desired image while resisting its whispering cries to be listened to.

The feedback sessions went well overall but there were mixed reactions as to how pieces could be improved. I had the opportunity to read "Of waters" to two different groups. The first group suggested that a lot of detail be added as they were not understanding exactly what the work was about. However, one writer in the group suggested it be trimmed down, for example, "Two lions sketched like the sky hugging them halfway" was unnecessary repetition. But another classmate insisted that those were their favourite lines. The second group said the story evoked a sense of being let into the world of healers. I found this interesting as both groups had different audiences with varying racial identities.

As with everything else, we respond differently to work. It has also made me realize that written works cannot be received the same way by everyone and that should not be taken as a negative thing but rather as an opportunity to acknowledge that each work has a life of its own.

With "Mom Sally, an Ally", there was a great deal of a debate about how it was not "Queer-fied" enough. One classmate noted that often queer writing concerns queer trauma and this should be written without it being emotionally overwhelming on the reader. A simplistic argument that reminded me that one's take of what queer writing is will undoubtedly differ from reader to reader.

I was surprised that some of the narrators in my stories were read as having a specific gender. This was the case with "the mountain's calling", "As they cross over" and "Gogo Kwena and that old man". The first time that my narrator was referred to as "Her/ she", I didn't pay too much attention. But by the third

time, I was encouraged to start a conversation as to how it is that the work comes across as having a female versus male voice. Particularly as these stories have no gender pronouns whatsoever. A technique I am still to unpack with the aims of perfecting more.

On the final day, I was asked how “As they cross over” would fit into my thesis about living as a gay man. The question was unexpected. I have since spent some time thinking deeply and I can’t help but wonder why queer lives are expected to be performed. That is not to say that everyone sees our lives the same way, but rather to acknowledge that often there is an alienating expectation when discussing queer writing. Perhaps, by the usage of queer man, a gay man and black gay man, there is an expectation of how we will write, and which themes will be covered. I do understand that by having used words that speak outside of the heteronormative spectrum, I have positioned my writing towards a set of connotations. However, I find this an interesting narrative to challenge even further. For instance, is there much difference in how a heterosexual individual makes coffee compared to a queer man? It seems that once one is aware of the individual sexual and identity differences, there's an automated expectation on how that coffee will be made.

Overall, the intensive week reminded me that writing is not as easy as it seems, particularly when presenting one’s work to an audience, and that there is a beauty in being able to receive feedback on one’s work in real-time.

May

There has never been so much death surrounding me. Apart from Covid scares, which keep claiming lives from those around me, there is also old age and one by one my family members eventually give in. This week the sixth family member passed away this year. This time I lost my grandmother whom I loved and shared stories with.

The most unsettling part about her death is that it wasn’t a complete surprise. Four years ago I dreamt that my late grandfather, whom I had never met, told me that my grandmother would pass away in a few years. I decided not to share details of the dream with anyone and tried my best to visit and spent as much time with her as possible. I secretly recorded our conversations and stored them away safely. Last year I knew that her time for leaving us was soon, and I kept denying it.

On Mother’s Day, she suddenly became ill after the announcement of her uncle’s passing away and she

too gradually passed. I feel as though I have exhausted the theme of death but a story had to be written about it. After the funeral I began “The Matriarch’s mattress”. I knew I had to begin writing without overthinking the details.

It was only after the first draft that I chose to look at readings that are themed around death.
In *The Word That causes Death’s defeat*, by Anna Akhmatova, the poem “To Death” (112), asks death to come their way as it will eventually come and why it wastes time instead of arriving now. It reminded me of my grandmother. She still wanted to live a bit longer, however, old age had arrived and doing chores for herself was no longer possible. Akhmatova’s “My lights are out, you'll find an open door. Do what you please, take any shape that comes to mind…” p112, reassured me that when the body has already started to give in, then the soul is ready. I wondered if my grandmother had also willingly opened her door for death to reach her. It’s interesting how something so commonly known can suddenly be looked at in a new perspective.

The first few lines “The Death of the Young British Pilot” from *Writing* by Marguerite Duras profoundly inform the reader of what the story is about. “The beginning, the opening of a story.” I feel as though I have met the writer in person through Duras’s conversational writing and detailing of little moments. This approach assisted me in writing “The Matriarch mattress”. I wanted to avoid mentioning the word ‘death’ but still explore its essence, while telling a story that reflects on life too. I was hoping to allow the story to take a shape of its own.

Writing this piece and reading literature with themes of death, I realised that even though I have lost my own personal living dictionary, my grandmother, I have been entrusted with creating a new dictionary.

June

‘Coming out’ for the LGBTQA+ community is one of the most dreadful experiences. Heterosexuals never ‘come out’ to anyone. It is their privilege to assume that being straight is the norm hence greatly accepted in communities.

“The Matriarch’s mattress” includes a moment where a mother disagrees with her son’s stand on his sexuality. While writing it, I felt that there was an opportunity to zoom into that moment and produce a new story from it. I must admit that I have always wanted to write about ‘coming out’ as a gay guy.

However, each time I tried, I got drained after jotting down a few words and the immediate instinct was always to stop writing. I never revisited any of my multiple saved drafts.

Reading *Running & other stories* by Makhosazana Xaba, I was drawn to two stories. The first, "Prayers", took me back to my earlier upbringing, when living by catholic beliefs was the norm. I was inspired to write "Coming out confessions" and include aspects of religion in my piece. I thought of revisiting my stored drafts, but I wanted to write a new story from scratch. I chose to use religion as a layer of clothing and tried to take the reader on a journey of the narrator's life unfolding before their eyes. The more I wrote the more I realised that the emotions I experienced in the process of 'coming out' had since changed and were somehow more bearable to write about. It felt as though the story was in charge. Instead of me trying to direct it, words showed me a direction. In return for not resisting, I was consciously guided.

The other story, "Running", is politically charged, set in the time of Apartheid during an ANC conference in Zambia. But the opening line "I'm a runner. That's the role I've given myself" p62, made me realise how words can have a different impact on our lives at various moments. I was pushed to look at my own running away from 'coming out' stories. And when one of Xaba's characters reminds the delegates that the struggles continue. I thought the same can be said when coming to queer lives.

July

Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales made me realise that fairy tales are the result of multiple generations keeping culture alive. ~~I~~n the introduction, Carter writes that "These stories have only one thing in common – they all centre around a female protagonist; be she clever, or brave, or good, or silly, or cruel, or sinister, or awesomely unfortunate, she is centre stage, as large as life." I cannot deny that a great deal of me has always been pro-female, after all, I was raised by female warriors.

Re-reading this collection filled me with nostalgia for my childhood and I remembered a recent dream in which I was at my late grandmother's place, and everything was slightly different. I wrote "Fell from the sky", aiming to bring the story close to how it was in a dream. After all, everything is possible in the dream world and fairy tales as a genre give us reality through storytelling.

This weekend I travelled to Limpopo for the first time since my grandmother's funeral. I wanted to spend time in the graveyard, but never had the time. I kept thinking of the graveyard and what a peaceful place it

is and how I didn't associate graves with death the first time my grandmother sent us to clean family's graves, before Easter weekend. Over the past years whenever time allows, I clean a few graves as per tradition. Most of these graves are of people I've never met in person but only through their pictures, my dreams and the stories told of them. Reading "Little Red Riding Hood (French)" and "The Hare (Swahili)", in which animals can talk with humans, got me rethinking about graveyards in a different light. Before each cleaning, there is always a greeting and offering of water as taught by older family members. But one can never know if those buried there are asleep, hearing or ignoring us. Such questions led to "The Graveyard Guardian". Instead of animals talking back, the spirits of those buried are brought to life, without disturbing the sacredness of graves.

August

In *The Teeth of the Comb & Other* Stories by Osama Alomar, "Journey of Life", tells the story of looking for their lover. The development of the story takes place in such a fast-paced manner, the narrator reaches old age, that the 21 lines feel like an entire book. The personification of 'him', this lover, in the narration created a longing in me to write about a loved one and cheering for the narrator to find him. But the ending was so surprising: "I stood on my shaking legs and continued my journey, searching for humanity until the last moment." P.2 I felt robbed of the much-needed closure, but I do appreciate that the story turned out to be something other than I had hoped.

I also read *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma,* by Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde. The memoir of an African lesbian sangoma and how their life has informed their practicing as a healer. Having read the book, I was drawn to the possibilities of writing multiple stories of healers told from an African perspective.

Ignited by Alomar and Nkabinde's words, I began writing "Mkhulu Thabang", using life events, places, and events that are not real but feel like reality.

Soon afterwards, I suddenly got spiritually sick, but didn't want to acknowledge that death was hovering around once more. I was preparing to submit my draft thesis for a reader's report, and still needed to write new stories. But I was struggling to write after my family in Pretoria had Covid. Uncle's death, knowing my Auntie was fighting for her life at the hospital. Some days I would wake up to pray and stay in my pajamas the whole day. Reading and writing became a heavy task to accomplish. Everything felt as though life itself had come to an end.

A month back, I read *I remember,* by Joe Brainard. It filled me with inspiration and the result was a draft about a lover I once had. Brainard's words "I remember not liking myself for not picking up boys I probably could pick up because of the possibility of being rejected." convinced me that writing about a lover from a queer narration was the best approach to my new piece. In his *I remember* there is a sense of time fed throughout the poem without mentioning years, giving a sense of timeline. Yet my attempt would not flow.

Then I read an extract from *Native Life in the Third Millennium*, by Masande Ntshanga. I liked his detailing of years and events that don't appear in chronological order. His use of the phrase "I remember..." was so effective. On page 6, "I remember being ungrateful to be alive.", His narration allowed me to continue reading as quickly as I could and still the phrase 'I remember' was used as a way of reminding the reader of the protagonist's view of the world.

On Sunday morning around 05:00 I received a phone call informing me that my auntie had passed away. I remember the time as it was the exact time she phoned on the day my uncle passed away.

In this moment of despair, the shaping of my story "I remember them" began and all initial drive to write about a lost romantic lover disappeared as the songs of my loved ones who left me too soon began to call for their birthing. Strangely enough, I suddenly had energy to write and was crying in between as I remembered the last conversation I had with each of them, how my aunt and uncle both meant so much to me and were my biggest supporters in all my artistic careers. Yet they, and my grandmother, all left within a span of three months as though to say our cheerleading contract has ended. Remembering the words of Joe Brainard and Masande Ntshanga, I managed to give my story direction at a time least expected.

In writing "I remember them", a sense of anger resurfaced towards the ideas of God, ancestors or higher forces that be. This anger at death and sense of betrayal by higher beings led to the writing of "Reject them all". Perhaps this is the most difficult piece I've written, as I knew and felt emotions but there weren't words to describe everything that I felt.

September & October
Reader's report and editing my thesis

If there is one thing that I've learnt from writing this year, it would be the privileges and appreciation of receiving feedback on my written works. The 8th of September was particularly a special day as my thesis feedback was due. Just before 21:30, the much-awaited reader's feedback was submitted. From the moment of reading the first paragraph, I had a smile on my face. "There's a wonderful grasp of psychology at work in these stories and fragments. The writer also has a good grasp of rhythm, and the sentences read smoothly and flow well. Another thing that works in these stories is the details the writer introduces to make the action come alive. From a granny's jojo tank to a taxi ride, these moments anchor the writing and make it feel substantial and lived."

I didn't know what exactly to expect from the reader, I do appreciate that they offer both what they liked and didn't like about the draft thesis, but so far the feedback was good.

However, from the second paragraph, I had a shift of emotions. Suddenly everything moved towards confusion. I just don't know how to feel or what to say. The reader noted that "particularly when it comes to sections like 'Chanting'", "the internal takes too much precedence over the explicit". I feel that this is perhaps a bit too harsh. I accept that this is how the reader felt about the work, yet I find it hard to believe their point about "precedence over the explicit". Saying that this is one of the pieces where growth "might be strengthened by incorporating more of the ordinary tools of narrative" comes across as a call to water down this piece. The recommendations aren't without merit; however, I do feel that very little chance was given for this piece to be read for what it is. As much as I can understand the reader's desire to "catch sight of the lover", I find it difficult to see this as necessary.

The reader felt that in my "Ask Mx Gogo Kwena" [now called "Ask Mx Badimo"] "the voice of Gogo Kwena still feels undefined, lacking in the particularities and bite of Kitaiskaia's Baba Yaga". I do feel that it is worth pointing out that while my story is inspired by Kitaiskaia's Baba Yaga it has no intentions of being a replica. As I keep trying different techniques of exploring writing in my work, I am glad that this specific work is commented on. "A lot of the writing veers into abstraction," I am still undecided about this point, it is a lovely comment to keep in mind, yet I find it difficult to agree with. There is a risk in basing a narration on a well known and established character. Baba Yaga and Taisia Kitaiskaia, are a force to be reckoned with and now I see the dangers of trying a different narration based on theirs, as my story will be compared to theirs most of the time.

“If more was shown rather than told,” the reader advised. This has been one of the concerns that I’ve had. I am reminded of Mxolisi Nyezwa’s seminar early last year, emphasizing the need for showing instead of telling and creating new languages from our writing. I often wonder if my written works do enough of showing instead of telling.

“Of waters” is without a doubt one of my written pieces that is either understood as is or not. I always find it difficult not to defend it.

Another point where I disagreed with the reader concerned their “Sea of blood” feedback. I feel that there shouldn’t always be ‘individual suffering’ in order to feel history's impact. Yet, the reader does make me look at the piece in a different light, like how would a European reader or a reader born years from now take this piece of work?

Overall, part of me is glad that a reader who never read my work before got the chance to provide me with feedback. As I feel this prepares me for the real world of writing for public consumers out there. We cannot always have positive or negative feedback as sometimes it will be mixed. Another part of me feels emotionally exhausted and a bit discouraged, particularly that time, sweat, and sleepless nights were spent writing for almost two years and still there will always be a few written pieces that aren’t well received. But I do believe this is what it means to be a writer.

*

Trying to write and edit my thesis after the reader’s feedback has proven to be more challenging than expected. It has forced me to look at my work in a different light, mainly from confusion, while trying to address some of the issues of not leaving the reader out, or helping the reader see what I see, with certain pieces.

At the same time, I have been trying to unpack *Seven steps to heaven* by Fred Khumalo and to my surprise, I have no idea what is going on. Several times I went back to read the part about the cockroach. I find it difficult to follow through the narration. As a result, I have been asking myself if it is worth reading further.

However, with that said I have begun to wonder if this is how the reader felt with some pieces in my thesis. This resulted in re-editing “Ask Mx Gogo Kwena”. It is one of my favourite creations and now I wonder whether I had gotten too sure of it, to a point of denying it a space for it to grow further. The editing process resulted in “Ask Mx Gogo Kwena” becoming “Ask Mx Badimo” in order to explore additional ways of not leaving the reader out. Even though it does feel as though the additional narration takes something away from the initial mystery. But I do hope that the inclusion of “Badimo”, which means one’s spiritual guides who once lived on earth and have now ascended, will assist this piece in the right direction.

While working with the reader’s feedback, two new stories were birthed “The Fatherless Man” and “The Beautiful Bro”. They encouraged me to investigate how queerness and spirituality can be merged into a single narration in a way that I haven’t aimed at with my thesis work before. And, most importantly, anchoring these works more and showing more of the characters’ tensions other than telling it, made the narrations more relatable.

*

After rain there is always a shiny rainbow, my rainbow has arrived in the form of having to look at my thesis from a different perspective, especially after the reader feedback. Final changes have started to take shape, even though editing is a taxing and never ending process, particularly when afforded a chance to look at my work from a reader’s point of view.

The reader pointed out that “the internal worlds of the characters are thoroughly and thoughtfully explored” before going on to discuss “Chanting”. I have reread this story several times and have decided that it’s best to include it in “Unsent letters”. Even though “Chanting” was written to be a stand-alone piece, a lot of its missing components are resolved by making it part of “Unsent letters”.

I have also written a new piece for “Unsent letters”. The addition narrates several imaginative dreams, which came to me after reading a fragment from “I’m standing in the middle of the road” by Vangile Gantsho. In one-part Gantsho explores a dream and being “haunted by the shadow of an old man”. This inspired me to write a letter informing a lost lover of dreams I continuously have with themes such as regrets, sexuality, and African spirituality. At first, the addition was meant to stand on its own, yet the words of the reader’s report “A lot of the writing veers into abstraction when it could benefit from being underpinned by the visceral and particular” reminded me that at the end of writing, readers are the ones to

make the written pieces have a life beyond that given by the author. And in my editing process I have included dialogues and imagery to aid the reader on the journey as they read these letters.

A similar approach was used in editing “Father and I visiting them” and “Of waters”. These two pieces had no dialogues in their first creations, and even though I was sceptical of editing them, I do think that by doing so they are strengthened and more grounded in the narrations given. In addition, in the editing of “Of waters” I included elements of showing instead of over flooding with the telling, and in the process I began to see how this piece can now be more understood.

I must admit that at first, I was heartbroken by the reader’s report, “A few of the stories read as just the stream-of-consciousness of an individual, rather than stories with conflict, progression, and resonance.” And yet now I am grateful to have received such comments. Without this feedback, my latest stories “Now and Then” and “Gogo Kwena and the farm” would not have been written the way they are. Writing them felt like learning to ride a bicycle again.

However, it was only after I had started reading, *She Called Me Woman* by Azeenar Mohammed that I began to realize how effective the techniques the reader was pointing out can be. Azeenar Mohammed covers themes of queerness by understanding the strength and benefits of having the narration anchored without losing the reader.

Editing, I have now come to understand, is more taxing as it’s more difficult than the initial writing of the pieces themselves. From the moment a piece is written, a lot of events unfold from the writing to the editing phase. And our attachment to our pieces does alter in the process. I have been attached to most of my written work and had hoped that they would be understood or accepted as they are. A short-sighted stance on my part as that approach also means certain stories and myself included won’t be allowed to reach our fullest potential.

For example, work such as “The Fatherless Man” would have not been edited to fill in the gaps that they so longed to receive, as pointed out by the reader that “a recurring issue is the writer indulging in emotive language without anchoring it in the particular that makes the political and moral come alive and have resonance”. So, to best avoid leaving the readers out and making them confused instead of enjoying the written work for what they are.

The readers' comments were considered in editing the thesis as a whole. I had to read the works aloud to identify areas that didn't sound complete to the ears. This process has allowed me to decide which works needed editing and which felt alright the way they were, such as "The belovedly missed", "A tall male shadow" and "Sea of blood". Perhaps this worked, or not. However, I do feel that they are some of the few written pieces that should be given a chance to be as they are and own the risk in that process.

Whereas reading "There she was" aloud, it became clear that it required a bit of refocusing. I hadn't read this story in a while and struggled to remember how this work came into being and this made me realize that readers will not have the background knowledge of the story. Either it will speak to them or not, but as its author, I can make changes to it that will best give it a more fighting chance. I am reminded of earlier in my master's degree, when I started to understand that "once a piece is complete and sent out to the world, it has a life of its own to live and fend for".

My editing process has also taken a slightly unexpected turn. Even though several times my African spiritual calling, connection to the spiritual realms and experienced events have assisted me in writing a few stories (such as "Fell from the sky" and "The Gift"), this time the same gateway to spirituality came in handy in a different way. After having compiled a copy of my thesis and sent it to my supervisor, I had a revelation that the "Now and Then" included in my thesis was not the correct version. Immediately after waking up and going through my thesis, I found it was indeed the incorrect version of the piece. Similarly, after a few days, I woke up with a message that "There she was" still required a few more edits.

These are examples of two pieces from my thesis where suggestions of changes that had to be made came from beyond the reader's report or my own thinking on the written piece. Several times, I would be instructed by my guides that I had not addressed the required edits to the thesis. Perhaps, it is a difficult take on the editing process, but I must realise that almost everything is possible through writing, reading, and editing.

*

The arrangement of stories is one element of the editing process which did not come easily. Considering that in my abstract some themes are covered at different times within my thesis. For instance: queer, black and spirituality, family and their views on queerness, and spiritual narrations. How the thesis is arranged per story can either make or break the experience of the readers and I had to think carefully about this.

This process reminded me of Angela Carter's choice of arranging stories by themes and the power this comes with, undeniably. And I found myself going back to Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* with even more admiration for the powerful way the narration began and ended.

*

In conclusion, I cannot deny that a few weeks after receiving the reader's comments, my outlook on the reader's report feedback is different. I now approach it with ease and sincerity compared to my previous responses. It is almost as though the reader has somehow become an editing friend, whispering words of encouragement while offering ways of improving my thesis further. I am reminded of the reader's words: "One piece that works is 'The neighborly Granny'. In this one, we're given enough visceral detail to feel located and anchored in the physical world." And again: "Two other strong pieces are 'Unsent Letters' and 'I remember them' — here, the writer's full skill of delicately crafting internal worlds is anchored in sensory detail that bring the characters and situations to life." It is only now, in the final stages of my thesis, that I am beginning to realise and understand the place where the reader's comments were coming from. I might have not applied all the suggestions to the entire thesis, but they are there to guide me throughout my writing career.

PART THREE: Essays and Book reviews

Poetics essay

Writing within the multifaces of being: an individual identity quest in a collective

The condition of creation is a condition of entrancement. Till you begin – *obsession*; till you finish – *possession*. Something, someone, lodges in you; your hand is the fulfiller not of you but of *it*. Who is this *it*? That which through you wants to be.
– Marina Tsvetaeva[1]

Disappearing into the sense-making of why we write, I look within my various inner selves and outer identities. I've come to repeatedly alter these identities, the person I was yesterday is not the same person today, then there's the tomorrow and the after that. When thinking of the alterations of identity, two writers' words come to mind.

Firstly, the words of Tim Seibles, *when we think about voice, generally, we think of an individual speaking (writing) from a single position—his heart, her mind—but it is worth considering that a voice can be representative or stand-in for a community's voices. And, though one might rightly think of community in narrow terms—race, gender, class, or sexual identity— the idea of community also cuts across such boundaries to include members of many different groups who share a sensibility, a particular feeling about life.*[2]

I have always been seeking to belong, through my own individual voice. An identity that I could shape uniquely to best suit its purpose through writing. Even though my voice can be distinguished from fellow voices, it does have its own presumed identity of the community that it belongs to. I cannot deny that it is part of my African identity, therefore it is black, falls under the middle class and identifies within the LGBTQA+ spectrum. But outside of the collective, I will always feel that it deserves a place to occasionally be acknowledged in singularity.

[1] Marina Tsvetaeva, p172
[2] Tim Seibles, p11

And secondly, the words of Antonio Machado, *My feeling, in sum, is not exclusively mine, but rather ours. Without going out of myself, I note that in my feeling other feelings are vibrating as well, and that my heart is always singing in a chorus….*[3] It is during moments like this that I am fuelled to keep on writing and claim the title of a writer. Even though in that instant it might seem like an individual path. Yet it is remarkably collective. In telling a single story I am encompassing its collective nature. This allows for an opportunity to engage in the most poignant manner, aided by the written form. As though the writing is in the form of a sibling waiting for us to be reunited.

Robert Duncan said: *I am more and more fascinated by the idea of form as creation or fiction of a universe, as a way of "knowing" the real universe. Form as a mode of participation in the real. It is not only in order to participate in the universe but also to participate in self.*[4] In writing not only am I on the endless path of seeking, but I too become part of creation.

Writing is not easy, rather it is a strenuous process that may afford one happiness or sadness. It's a form that equates the equilibrium of communication and a way of passing on the planted seeds onto the soil of reading. For me, it's a process that begins somewhere in order to lead elsewhere. I may begin writing about the struggles of queer black men and yet conclude the narration by parents accepting their queer children. It is within that beginning of the story from somewhere that carries multiple layers, of which when unearthed a synergy of possibilities comes to life. That beginning elsewhere may introduce us to categorizations, as means of understanding writing better.

Furthermore, this 'elsewhere' also introduces a new dimension, and the cycle is continuous. Be it poetry or fiction etc. In the words of Aime Césaire: *The poetic process is a naturalizing process operating under the demential impulse of imagination.*[4] And, in the pleading voice of Bell Hooks: *Critical fictions emerge when the imagination is free to wander, explore, question, transgress.*[5]

When I write a story occasionally I am first inspired by reality. Soon after that, the imagination of creating an ideal world of the narration takes place. Allowing me to freely envision a world that only I can access at the time with hopes that the end result will be relatable to the space it will occupy.

---

[3] Antonio Machado, p168
[4] Robert Duncan, p262
[5] Bell Hooks, p54

As Vincente Huidobro pointed out: *The work of art has as its cradle these two elements which also constitute a parallel duality: feeling, which is the effective element, and imagination, which is the intellectual element. In automatic writing, feeling takes up more space than imagination, because the effective element is much less controlled than the other*.[6]

Often, I've tried to imagine not having access to writing. Then questions present themselves; would the world even exist as we know it, would all the writing I have come to know, appreciate, even be? Where would my feelings be given life and imagination, given a platform to exist and how then might my identity be expressed in written form?

Identity starts somewhere in order to lead elsewhere. The order doesn't necessarily have to be chronological. As I may start from a different stage and still end up at the writing greeting. It comes from a place that we may willingly acknowledge. Embrace. Elude. Reject. Rediscover. Reassess. Retell. This requires a deeper gaze into our darkest secrets. Like an escape of reality that's crucial into the new. I had often questioned the identity I'm classified as and soon after that led to the gender aspect of identity and sexuality. All these add up to making part of my blackness. Of course, at times insisting on seeking an alternative blackness identity other than the norm, comes with being regarded as an outsider.

As Bell Hooks states: *All too often the colonized mind thinks of the imagination as the realm of the psyche that, if fully explored, will lead one into madness, away from reality. Consequently, it is feared.*[7]

For me, writing is an opportunity for creating a different reality. A safe space. A space where I can proudly claim my own blackness and queerness. A place where I belong to create my own narration.

An envisioned reality where desires become part of the world through my writing. Specifically, if the one I am presented with is not the ideal. As Bell Hooks points out: *I chose to be a writer in my girlhood because books rescued me. They were the places where I could bring the broken bits and pieces of myself and put them together again, the places where I could dream about alternative realities, possible futures*.[8] Writing wouldn't be as much of a necessity if there was not healing in its form. The beauty of writing is not only found in the essence of self-healing but often in the healing of the potential reader. Says Lidia

[6] Vincente Huidobro, p51
[7] Bell Hooks, p55
[8] Bell Hooks, p54 - 55

Yuknavitch: *What I need, what I live for, what I write for, is this: that moment when the reader is holding an actual book in their hands and they can feel their skin differently. Their heart beating. Their torso, their face, the place where their very sex sits. An alive body inside language*.[9]

Like many, I am a tortured soul. Disturbed in more ways than I can comprehend. Trying to find me. In searching for the self, I, like many others, find myself through the process of writing.

Each generation of writers has its own purpose to fulfil. We don't just exist to experience life. Mine is to bring blackness, African spirituality, and queerness to the forefront. To aid them to occupy spaces they haven't been given a platform to exist in. It is part of my purpose and writing ensures that it is achieved. To quote Yuknavitch again: *I'm on a mission. Writing to bring the delicate dream to the tips of words, to kiss them, to rest your cheek on them, to open your mouth and breathe body to body-to resuscitate corporeal selves*.[10]

Seems fairly easy but this process can be a rather daunting and straining one. I often gaze at it from a gardener's perspective. A gardener's hard work gets revealed after intense labour, so with writing a similar approach is needed. In order for the reader to be involved, they will have to start observing the gardener's work, in this regard to start reading the literature produced. Should it be of their admired or preferred genre, then their gardener has chosen the correct seeds to plant for that season. Through selective breeding and nurturing the reader, therefore gets a space shifted gradually while activating their imagination. The very same writer and gardener have used their imagination in this creation process and now the same energies of imaginations are then synchronized with the reader. The writer is absent in this phase but their grown and often still maturing yet ready to be harvested plants are the ones doing the activations.

Which has always made me wonder if it's the written literature that makes the writer or if it is the writer that makes the literature. It was Aimé Césairo that uttered the words: *Mankind, once bewildered by sheer facts, finally dominated then through reflection, observations, and experiment. Hence-forth mankind knows how to make its way through the forest of phenomena. It knows how to utilize the world*.[11]

[9] Lidia Yuknavitch, p344
[10] Lidia Yuknavitch, p345
[11] Animé Césairo, p42

What then becomes the writer's identity? Does our collective being rely on lived and imagined experiences, or is it simply by the desire to view all around us through multifaceted perspectives?

According to RM Berry, *In fact, difference and identity may seem at times to have cross-dressed. What appears unmistakably new and important about globally diverse texts is their representation of societies and cultures previously disregarded by the West.*[12]

I bleed from the eternal torment of life, evolve with each pain; each failure and trial brings forth a new leaf to life. Our emotions are the essence of who we are as writers, and the privileges of being able to turn that into our own psychological in-house therapy are what strengthens us further. It's almost like turning pain into medicine through words.

Said Wei T'ai: *Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling, for as soon as the mind responds and connects with the thing the feeling shows in the words; this is how poetry enters deeply into us.*[13] The same mechanism of words is part of the writer. The element of the 'thing' is a little component of the literature creators. It's a soul bending as the reader or consumer can rarely get to know the creator in its entity. The only knowing in that moment is that which has been presented and put in front through works of words, ink, and the invisible margins. Thus, serving as a form of that writer's identity.

This can be pushed a step further and raise the question of what then of a Black writer's identity. Is it the same as the White writers? How do they differ, can it solely be based on race or does it extend beyond race? I am unable to answer for the White writers, particularly from a personal perspective. Nonetheless, from a Black writer's perspective, a shot of gin is worth indulging in while attempting to answer.

Tamiko Beyer: *It has always been difficult for me to talk and write about race. My level of discomfort or fear depends on the context and the audience; this kind of very public declaration is particularly hard.*[14] Even within my blackness identity as a writer, race as a form of identity I am born into comes with challenges of its own. For example, I am a black writer not based in his birthplace and another Black writer might be based at their birthplace. Both of us are Black with different added identities and a sense of community that we did not necessarily assign to ourselves. One could possibly be regarded as more

[12] R.M Berry, p5
[13] Wei T'ai [11th century] p3
[14] Tamiko Beyer, p245

rooted in their blackness. Often it is a complex narration to openly discuss around peers, let alone agree on. Thus, showing how the complexities of identity tend to be a never-ending path.

Tamiko Beyer's experience of race pokes me like a dagger violently implanted, *My experience of my own race is complicated and fraught. I am mixed race – Japanese and white. I have light skin, brown eyes, brown hair, and facial features that seem to be read as white much of the time*.[15] Both my parents are black, and just the mere mention of that already positions and locates me in a different racial experience. There are many more like me, as there are many more with diverse racial identities. That is not to say one's experiences are valued more than the other, but that we exist within a diversity of diversities when coming to race. It is not solely a matter of racial identity, but more a question of unpacking the dynamics it presents. When looking beyond just the race aspect, we begin to view the layers and layers of distinctiveness, that gives voice to a larger displacement.

Raymond Federman said: *Though I exist bilingually, in my life as well as in my work as a poet and a fiction writer, I have never really tried to articulate a theory of my bilingualism*.[16] I am a product of bilingualism, born of parents who speak Sepedi and feel more comfortable using their mother tongue. Yes, when I am home we mostly communicate in the same mother tongue (Sepedi), but I have become more comfortable speaking and writing in English. And while on the streets I predominately communicate in Sepitori (a lingo from Pretoria, with a mixture of Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Afrikaans, and English).

Our sole existence and contributions may vary and come in multiple forms, but in that individual and collective displacement, rests a more complicated and daunting sense of belonging. I try to make sense of the world by pushing to understand my individual beings, my beings of blackness, African spirituality, queerness, an urban being with rural roots. By acknowledging the elements of literature. For me, these elements come in various forms and locations. While commuting in a taxi, having a conversation with my grandmother, and through dreams. I then put words down one after the other, writing my sense of beings.

In the words of George Quasha: *There is a sense of otherness – of engagement with a living entity whose existence is constituted in viewing. The sense of identity is interdependent –perhaps one receives in proportion to what one gives up. In instances of high-intensity viewing the configuration may appear*

[15] Tamiko Beyer, p245
[16] Raymond Federman, p77

multidimensional, multiversal, perhaps one could say inter-ontological.[17] In order for one to be, there must be a comparison to another. It is a collective existence of humanity. To be myself, I must recognise the other. To reach my full potential of being, I must have a seeking soul, observe my surroundings, and belong to the likeness that resonates with me. In order to question, retain my curiosity in pursuing their truth.

I write to make meaning of all that makes us a collective with individual entities. It is Robert Duncan who noted that *Each work is an individual belonging to a species but, complete in itself (as contemporary life sciences view every individual as the end of a species and the beginning of a species).*[18]

*

I have always been driven by the thirst to know more, although I come from a family that doesn't value reading or writing in general.

My earliest memories of reading were of often been asked to read the bible, and write the letters that had to be posted – and of course, there was school. This created an assumption that reading and writing wasn't something one does of one's own free will. It became a sort of torture or task, only necessary to do if rewards were expected. A sad reality, I realized later in life, almost daily adults chanted their gospel of "Don't read too much, you'll lose your normality and age quickly."

Up to this day, as a grown-up man, when walking around or sitting in silence with a book in hand, I still retain the experience of being frowned upon for being surrounded by books. It was only when the butterfly phase of self-evaluation kicked in that I understood my identity and claimed: I am a black man filled with the complexities of the past while striving for the future.

The poet Mxolisi Nyezwa helped me see that *The Individual positions himself in the social and cultural world around him to better understand his present and future roles.*[19]
Before this, for the longest time, I almost denied owning the Black identity, it always felt as though irrespective of my race and skin tone I was never quite black enough.

[17] George Quasha, p231
[18] Robert Duncan, p261
[19] Mxolisi Nyezwa, p6

Yet with that said I was still regarded as Black when compared with different races. It's that unbalancing juggling of the individual existence of belonging when required and still not belonging when required, that I am still making sense of and peace with.

Tayi Selasi shared her perspective when participating as a panelist: *A question was asked almost immediately: do you consider yourself an African writer? It seems that every new writer with any remote connection to the continent of Africa, either willingly or unwillingly, has first to wrestle with this question of identity before talking about what should matter most: their book.*[20]

Why there has to be race as a category or form of identification, is one of the things that will forever baffle me. Yet it does make sense in trying to identify ourselves with others. Having a category that one is of a particular writer's group, has become one of the normalities. With the same breath, it questions my own positioning. Can one be a writer without having to pinpoint their location or history? Could I be regarded as a writer without the racial category, and what then happens to the Blackness within?

The identity of Blackness has always reminded me of the past that took place before my arrival on earth. I was not there and did not experience it, however, I have been raised in an environment that is still recovering from the past. Blood was splattered, lives lost and many more hideous acts took place. Such realities do make one insane at times, yet these are part of most of our identities. I cannot ignore the past which played a role in my blackness, as I embark on finding myself.

On the essence of identity, George Quasha notes that, *There may be a threshold of performative criticality in identity that is tantamount to direct transmission of alternative states of being.*[21] The words "performative criticality in identity" make me think of back in time where my Blackness identity wasn't appreciated and understood.

In addition to Blackness identity, there is also my queer identity. Both have been part of my making. My queer identity came with no choice in selecting but a choice in accepting. As I exist within dualities.

My queerness encourages the view of the world in a different light. Even though I was raised in a heteronormative household, it is difficult for me to relate to and view life from that perspective. Difficult

[20] Talye Selasi, p48
[21] George Quasha, p231

for me to understand or embrace my family's life experiences – the absence of their queerness leaves an emptiness in our relating. It is my embodiment of LGBTQA+ that fuels the approach of my writing, making it difficult to view my identity and body as an outsider.

The queerness identity had always existed even before there was any self-sense of understanding what that meant.

As Bettina Judd states: *Writing is attached to the body. This statement is quite a literal for me; it is my Black woman, queer-identified, round-bodied hand that puts pen to paper, to keyboard, and creates whatever I create*.[22] Judd's words remind me that it is in the queerness that I exist, that I too matter and that in queerness writing is where my fighting belongs.
Over time my queerness became an identity that I easily accepted and is still the most cherished. Irrespective of the marginalization that it comes with, it has allowed a comfort of never longing to belong to any group but that of the Queerness.

It is the form of queerness recognized from the moment of waking up, going on with daily life, and quite frankly the one immersed in with confidence. Of course, there was a time of questioning it and wanting to wish it away, as it always stood out. Looking back, I now have little imagination of being without it. Through the writer's path of creating literature. As a writer, I want to give a voice to the voiceless, to those who are not embraced, who are viewed as freaks, who don't fit into the heteronormative. I want to expose the toxicity of the heteronormative that vows to be the truth. To show that this truth is biased, and this bias torments.

This is a quest that inspires me to keep writing and reading more, in the spirit of filling in the gaps. As much as there are fellow writers out there that who identity as Black or not Black and/or within the Queer spectrum, there is always a space that is still to be filled. After all, it was literature that allowed me to understand my own queerness better and have a point of reference to research further. I want to contribute to the body of queer literature so our stories are normalized, visible and available in all spaces.

It's like being given a life-changing task, to write for those that matter the most. It rarely bothers me how that will be achieved as writing does involve one being vulnerable and true to their thoughts in written form. As Queer stories are worthy of telling, it's not just my story but the story of those identifying as

[22] Bettina Judd, p5

Queer. The community is sickened by the injustices of being silenced and refusing to be muted any longer. Thus coming with an attempt in aiding those requiring a better understanding of us.

As Tim Seibles pointed out: *And, though one might rightly think of community in narrow terms – race, gender, class, or sexual identity – the idea of community also cuts across such boundaries to include members of many different groups who share a sensibility, a particular feeling about life*.[23]

These are some of the embodiments that we are all faced with as writers, within an individual embodiment of them, lies a spectrum of multiple embodiments. As we are all interlinked in one form or the other. Through our writing and reading, we aim to utilize the best weapons we have: words, thoughts, dreams, as Literature has the potential to provide the key to all that we try to understand.

Writing has aided my exploration of spiritual identity, as a spiritually called individual undergoing traditional initiating. It too has been a journey like that of my queerness. Again, I have found refuge within the art of knowing and expressing the less explored traditional spirituality in writing. As much as I find that spirituality is more concerned with spiritual realms, which is not visible to the ordinary naked eye, it still plays a crucial part in my identity, and the body I possess. As Bettina Judd puts it: *To say that my writing is attached to my body also recognizes the particular mode of thought that does not separate mind from body and spirit to which I closely attend*.[24] Judd's words confirm that as humans inhabiting writing spaces there is more to us; individually and cognitively. As I exist not only in my Blackness and Queerness but also within the African spirituality realms.

In closing, we write when we want to share, explore, and understand a certain topic. As the words of Robert Duncan sparkle: *The word, its sounds and meanings, may be "recognized" by the poet, but the word itself initiates all possibilities*.[25] The lived soreness, happiness, the loss has delivered us to this point of "possibilities". A point of reconciliation.

In writing, I come to dance to the lyrical beat of life. Bow to cherish all that lived and wished to be here. I seek to make meaning freed of heteronormative connotations. To embrace vulnerability, to allow it to tell stories of Blackness and Queerness. In doing so, the emptiness of spaces will overflow with fulfilment.

[23] Tim Seibles, p12
[24] Bettina Judd, p5
[25] Robert Duncan, p262

I've always found life in books; the imagined and silences coming to life. A world enchanted with sacredness and elevation. An ecstasy of art. The art of texts. The texts of life. A life that is universal.

I came to writing as a method of self-discovering. A tingle of muted voices called me to a platform denied to many like me. A space where Blackness and Queerness will be heard around the world.

Through reading and writing, we begin to understand a bit more about the essence of life. It is a never-ending journey, as the more life goes on, the more we try to catch up with it. Our state of thinking and of reasoning are not the same as they were the day before and there's no guarantee that they'll be the same tomorrow. And, that is the beauty of literature, it's a mind map of all that we've come across along the way. By utilising it, I can fully explore my identity amongst the world and be better equipped to understand myself better.

References

Berry, R.M. "Introduction: Writing in the Present" in *Forms at War: FC2 1999-2009*. R.M. Berry, ed. Fiction Collective Two, 2009.

Beyer, Tamiko. "A slanty kind of racial(ized) poetics" in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* Eds. Claudia Rankine, et al. eds. Fence Books, 2015.

Césaire, Aimé. "Poetry and Knowledge" in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946–82*. Trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. University Press of Virginia.

Duncan, Robert. "Notes on Poetic Form" in *The Poet's Work: 29 Poets on the Origins and Practice of their Art.* Reginald Gibbons, ed. University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Federman, Raymond. "A Voice Within a Voice" in *Critifictions: Postmodern Essays*. State University of New York Press, 1993.

Hooks, bell. "Narratives of Struggle" in *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing.* Philomena Mariani, ed. Bay Press, 1991.

Huidobro, Vincente. “Creationism” in *Manifestos.* Trans. Tony Frazer. Shearsman Books, 2020.

Judd, Bettina. “Writing about Race” in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* Eds. Claudia Rankine, et al. eds. Fence Books, 2015.

Machado, Antonio. “Excerpt from ‘Notes on poetry’” in *The Poet’s Work: 29 Poets on the Origins and Practice of their Art.* Reginald Gibbons, ed. University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Nyezwa, Mxolisi. Extract from *I Heard Rhythms* – Unpublished MACW dissertation, 2015.

Quasha, George. “Axial Drawing” in *The Body in Language: An Anthology*. Edwin Torres, ed. Counterpath Press, 2019.

Seibles, Tim. “Desperate & Beautiful Noise” in *Of Color: Poets’ Ways of Making: An Anthology of Essays on Transformative Poetics*. Amanda Galvan Huynh and Luisa A. Ingloria, eds. The Operating System, 2019.

Selasi, Taiye. “Stop pigeonholing African writers” in *Critical Creative Writing*. Janelle Adsit, ed. Bloomsbury, 2019.

Tsvetaeva, Marina. Extract from “Art in the Light of Conscience” in *Art in the Light of Conscience: Eight Essays on Poetry*. Trans. Angela Livingston. Bloodaxe Books, 2010.

Yuknavitch, Lidia. “Why do you write it all weird?” in *The Force of What’s Possible: Writers on Accessibility & the Avant-Garde*. Lily Hoang and Joshua Marie Wilkinson, eds. Nightboat Books, 2015.

Book reviews

There is life beneath the water

Freshwater by Akwaeke Emezi (Grove Press, 2018)

Many times, our known world is seen as the only existence there is. That is, reality is often seen from a scientific perspective. Often this results in the overlooking of the spiritual realm, as it's not easy to prove its effect in a tangible manner and how it ultimately shapes our experiences of life by adding fragments to our identities. What then becomes of an individual with a connection to the spiritual realms? Are their existences and experiences solely theirs or of the intangible world? These themes are what Nigerian-born writer Akwaeke Emezi explores in her book. By showing how forms of religious beliefs are threaded into our identities, thus contributing to our day by day dualities. In this coming of age novel, Emezi leaves no stone unturned, from Catholicism, to the thriving of Igbo deities in their human host.

We are introduced to these deities from the first chapter, speaking in the first-person pronoun. The "We" becomes a form indicating that the narration is by the deities. They are eloquently given a voice, an identity and a place of belonging. Not only do they familiarise us with their presence, but they also make their disturbance of Catholicism known. They introduce the host they co-exist with; Ada is her name. Born of two respectable parents. A Malaysian mother, Saachi, who works as a nurse, and a Nigerian father, Saul, a doctor. Ada was the result of her father's Catholic prayers; the Igbo goddess, Ala, and the brothersister deities saw an opportunity of reincarnation. Thus, equipping Ada with a unique aspect of belonging in her early development, "The Ada belonged to us and Ala and Saachi, and as the child grew, there came a time when she would not move on all fours, as most babies do. She chose instead to wriggle, slithering on her stomach, pressing herself to the floor."

The more one travels on this surreal narration, the more powerfully the deities show their influence on Ada's life choices. An intense relationship between the two emerges which is certainly not for the light hearted. The deities are afforded qualities of humanness. Each with roles and personalities of their own. "No, Saint Vincent preferred to move inside Ada's dreams, when she was floating in our realm, untethered and malleable."

Just as one becomes acquainted with the multiple presences that Ada has to deal with, the narrators swiftly take us to another dimension of this relationship. We get to experience her coming of age in America. It is here that the deities' full influences begin to show. Ada is given the strengths and freedom

of a young adult finally set free to explore the world. It's a time when sexual explorations are added as part of one's identity and Ada is accompanied by the fierce self in a form of the deity Asụghara, who ensures that the host is well versed with masculine energies, feminine qualities and is looked after. "As far as I'm concerned, I have been loyal, both to Ada and the brothersisters. When Ada tried to look for help, I did many things to stop it because she was mine, but believe me, I never wanted her to feel alone."

By the end of this book, one is left with a sense of understanding how deities might narrate their stories. They are given a voice of their own, a uniqueness to their existence and a place of belonging. This has been carried out without coming across as though Ada has a mental illness. One can argue that in a typical narration tackling themes of African spirituality in a Western location, Ada would have been classified as hearing voices and therefore being mentally ill. However, *Freshwater* does not give that assumption a chance to breathe. It does however ensure that the deities' rule over Ada is clear, as is her position of being their host. This is certainly a book that makes the reader fall in love with the idea of having deities of their own, even knowing the hardships involved.

Akwaeke Emezi offers a challenging reading experience that requires effort, but *Freshwater* is a work of literature like no other. Its title suggests elements of a fresh life, and it undoubtedly offers the reader what is promised. A fresh approach to narrating a story and unusual characters with a life of their own.

Unleashing fairy tale wisdom

Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales edited by Angela Carter (Virago Press, 2005)

In this one of a kind anthology, Angela Carter introduces us to a world of fairytales unlike the happy-ever-after ones we read in our childhood. *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* brings us a tapestry of adventurous and humorous stories she has collected from the Arctic to Europe, America, Asia and Africa.

In the introduction, Carter writes that "These stories have only one thing in common – they all centre around a female protagonist; be she clever, or brave, or good, or silly, or cruel, or sinister, or awesomely unfortunate, she is centre stage, as large as life."

This anthology is divided into 13 parts with titles such as "Clever Women, Resourceful Girls and Desperate Stratagems" and "Up to Something – Black Arts and Dirty Tricks".

In the story, "The Hare" (Swahili), a lesson of lust is taught in a unique playful way. It is not every day that a story of wishing for more than what one desires is told in such a subtle manner. Animals talking to humans, tricking each other, and offering a bit of a sweet ending to their chaos. Not an uncommon method of fairy tales yet done so without providing too many details. One must connect the dots to fully grasp the depth of the narration. "The woman went with him, but when she saw the lair of the hare and had eaten grass with him and slept in the open with him, she was not satisfied". It would be a lost opportunity not to applaud the human qualities given to the hare and the woman. The moral of the story remains ambiguous, as the hare boils away in the woman's pot we are left not knowing if this was indeed the woman's plan all along or if it was a result of the reality she was faced with.

Perhaps one of the most well-known fairy tales would be "Little Red Riding Hood" (French). "As she walked through the wood, she met a wolf, who wanted to eat her but did not dare to because there were woodcutters working nearby." At this moment everything seems predictable, Little Red Riding will later be tricked by the wolf but will manage to escape, followed by the moral of not trusting strangers in the woods. But the surprise in this 1697 version by Charles Perrault lies in its ending. "At that, the wicked wolf threw himself upon Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up too."

In "*Achol And Her Adoptive Lioness-Mother"* (Sudan: Dinka), we are introduced to Achol and Maper, siblings dumped in the wild by their half-brothers, in the hope that Achol and Maper would not survive. The two are then encountered by an unlikely being: A talking Lioness. "We were abandoned by our half-

brothers,' said Maper. 'Come along with me,' said the lioness. 'I will look after you as my own children; I have no children of my own." Maper escapes leaving his sister behind, who the Lioness raises.

This fairy tale presents an unlikely pairing of wild beasts and human beings. The two exist as a family of their own despite their obvious identity differences. In the world of magical possibilities, Achol and her mother prove that their relationship is as normal as that of two humans. "My little one who was left behind, / My little one whom I found unhurt, / My little one whom I raised, / Achol, my beloved one, / Come, meet me, my daughter."

When Achol and her brother are reunited and Achol returns to her human home, like a good mother, the lioness goes out searching for her daughter until she is found. (Unlike the humans who did not bother to search for Achol when she went missing as a child.)

As a South African, I was interested in the following: "Achol's father took out a bull and slaughtered it in hospitality for the lioness. The lioness said she would not go back to the forest but would rather stay among the human beings with her daughter, Achol." The slaughtering of a bull in welcoming the lioness is of significance to African cultures. A bull is regarded as a symbol of wealth and unity between two families. Furthermore, elders are the ones entrusted with selecting which animals are to be offered. More importantly, spiritually the bigger and the sex of the animal, the more meaningful and respected the ceremony. This goes hand in hand with status. The way this pivotal African ritual is included in a modern fairy tale (first published in a 1974 collection of Dinka folktales from Sudan) is remarkable proof that each fairy tale included in this collection, has considered the location it was inspired and retold from. Each story had been given its uniqueness without betraying the art of fairy tales. This is further explored with stories that include the city as the central location, rather than the typical forests scenarios.

Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales is a treasure wrapped in the humorous worlds of maids, crones, clever women, resourceful girls, odd sisters, and mischievous aunts and so much more. This is an ideal read for those looking for something outside of the norm in literature.

* *Angela Carter's Book of Fairytales* was first published in separate Virago collections in 1990 and 1992. Carter (b.1940, d.1992) was also an English novelist, short story writer, journalist, and poet.

Suffering to heal the broken

Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma by Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde (Fanele, 2008)

In *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma,* South African healer and proud lesbian Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde (1975-2018) delves into the story of an individual who walks alongside the ancestors from the spiritual realms. The memoir skillfully informs readers about the basis and core of African spirituality without exposing the sacred Sangoma secrets or compromising the integrity of ancestral voices. The eleven chapters are both a coming-of-age story and an account of the life of a traditional healer while tackling the complexities of sexualities, identity, differences beyond the heteronormative spectrum, family relations and the contrast between living in rural and urban areas.

The first theme, "Life and Death", introduces us to Nkabinde's ancestry as it opens with a praise song to them. This unusual introduction personalises the ancestral connection for the reader. It opens the door of understanding through the pride and joy of living a life of service to your ancestors. Praise songs are an integral part of African culture and are often heard in ceremonies as part of celebrating and honouring a certain lineage. Nkabinde achieves this effect on paper, using the power of the isiZulu lyrics while retaining the essence of the praise song in the line-by-line English translations.

Nkabinde's origins were complicated by politics and death. "I was born in Soweto, six months before the students protested about apartheid education and held the June 16th march in 1976. Soweto was tense in those days. There were police everywhere. Life was stressful and people were fed up." The author's twin brother, delivered just before her, was stillborn, and her grandmother and great uncle died on this day. "[My mother] said, 'I have given birth to a daughter instead of a son and two members of the family have died. The problems in the family have increased.' My mother always reminded me that I was born with death all around me".

Viewing this world through the eyes of two beings serving as one entity isn't an easy skill to achieve and readers are aided by the narration in distinguishing which part is said by whom. Done without the use of inverted commas or italics. Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde does not hold back on sharing personal information alongside individual views. "My grandmother died of a heart attack but I can't help thinking that she probably had a broken heart as well". The chapter requires the reader to race along, particularly with all the naming of relatives and different deaths mentioned.

“A Child in Two Worlds” explores the South African economic reality of parents working in the urban cities while their children are cared for in the rural areas. Nkabinde’s mother relocates to the city of Joburg to work as a domestic worker, leaving her children in the care of their grandparents in rural KwaZulu Natal. The author writes warmly about this innocent time. “(Vusumuzi) was my favourite uncle. He taught me about Zulu culture and to love the land and to respect everything about life in the rural area. That respect is still in me...My uncle taught me to recognise the birds and how to tell from the sounds they make when it will rain.” The consciousness of their surroundings and understanding and respect for all forms of life included the family dog. “I used to share my food with this dog when I was a young child. My aunt would prepare soft porridge and I would eat half and intombiyebhayi would eat the other half from the same bowl”. (A description that undermines misconceptions that rural dogs are kept solely for hunting and security purposes.)

Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde isn’t shy about letting us into the two worlds they inhabit: both spiritual and physical. “Since I started to have the spirit of Nkunzi in me I hardly menstruate. I only menstruate when I have a female ancestor in me. With Nkunzi I can stay up to a year without menstruating.” It’s not every day that one is given an insight into how having an ancestor of the opposite sex can alter one’s biological life. And just as the author ignores taboos around speaking openly about menstruation, as a child Nkabinde defied stereotypical gender roles. “If I was playing house with my friends, I would always make sure I was the father of the house. I wanted to be a truck driver like my father and used to play truck games with boys from the neighbourhood.”

Growing up, Nkabinde was not spared from the infestation of rape and abuse. “The second time this happened I saw that it was my uncle Mandla. He covered my face with my nightdress. He was on top of me and he closed my mouth with his hand so I couldn’t scream. I collapsed again.” The suffering narrated in the first chapters is not for the weak.

In “Out and About”, the schoolgirl Nkabinde is sent to consult a social worker. “After I closed the door, the social worker said, ‘You are beautiful.’ I turned around because I thought she was talking to someone behind me, so she said, “It is only you and me in this room.” She told me to sit down and after a while, she said, ‘Come here,’ so I went to her and she said, ‘Kiss me.’ I bent over and gave her a baby kiss and she grabbed me and kissed me. I couldn’t believe what was happening to me. It was so wonderful. She told me I was a lesbian.” There is a shaking truth in this chapter: once more the narrator has been molested and yet the abuse is casually mentioned. “This woman gave me an opportunity to find out about my sexuality and I couldn’t turn it down. I was 13 and she was 30 when our affair started. It went on for

five years…" Although grateful to the social worker for helping them understand their sexuality (under what is now known as the LGBTIAQ+ umbrella), the author does acknowledge, with hindsight, that they were abused. "For me now it feels wrong to have a relationship with a girl who is younger than 18."

In "Following the Light", the narrator tells of the first time they heard voices. Their mother was very sick and the voices said they would take the mother away, so Nkabinde asked the voices why. "I waited for an answer that made sense to me. The answer came: 'She was called to do the work of her ancestors but refused.' I heard the words but still, I didn't understand that the voices were the voices of my ancestors calling for somebody from their clan to carry on their work in the world". It is rare that outsiders get to read about how the spiritual gift might manifest. Hearing voices might be mistaken for schizophrenia and schizophrenia for a calling. Nkabinde was admitted to Sterkfontein mental institution by their sisters, but the voices instructed Nkabinde to escape. Finally, after a period of distress, voices, and visions, they met a sangoma they trusted. "On a Saturday in May, my sisters took me to my trainer's house to begin my training as a sangoma. My sisters had told my trainer that I was a lesbian and she said I would be healed and get married to a man."

In "Remembering the Ancient Paths", the author's training as a sangoma is related in the same straightforward prose as the rest of the book. "Next I had to learn how to control my ancestors. If you can't control your ancestors, they can destroy your body." This might feel like a fictional story for some, but to open-minded readers, it offers a different understanding of how the dead and living can bend the will of life to co-function. Just because something is hidden from ordinary eyes does not mean it doesn't exist.

"Finding the Balance" begins "I was still a lesbian after I completed my initiation as a sangoma." This is a proud moment in Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde narration for the LGBTIAQ+ community. Not only is it reassuring, but it demystifies the idea that sangomas can change someone's sexuality. Her book endorses the truth that one is simply born with a gender role one feels comfortable with. "I can dance like a woman and wear a woman's clothes and dance like a man and wear a man's clothes. I can do the work of a man, like slaughtering a goat or a cow, although in traditional Zulu culture a woman cannot slaughter." The complex roles that Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde carries out on a daily basis.

In "In Search of Community", Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde connects with people on the same path: queer bodied individuals and sangomas, whom Nkabinde interviews as part of their research commissioned by the Gay and Lesbian Association of South Africa (GALA). "I wanted to live my life as a sangoma and a

lesbian – as one person – not divided into pieces and I wanted to connect with other lesbian sangomas who felt the same way."

"The Ancestors Don't Mind" challenges those who believe that homosexuality isn't African and that there is no record of homosexuality in our history – including back in King Shaka's day. (If only this were taught in the school syllabus...) Nkabinde continues their GALA activism and forms an organisation to represent queer healers. "Today there are 40 same-sex sangomas aged between 18 and 34 in my organisation."

In "Doing Things Differently", the author becomes a tour guide at Constitution Hill in the early years of South Africa's democracy. "I know that as a Zulu lesbian I have rights and I deserve to be protected."

"Hate Crimes" deals with the rape and the murder of queer people by straight men, and efforts to raise awareness of this. "It is difficult and dangerous for black lesbians in Soweto. Lesbians are contracting HIV because of rape. Men don't accept lesbians. They think they have to teach them a lesson by raping them. They call it 'corrective rape'."

In "Making Connections", acknowledges that "Each of my different roles, as a Zulu woman, as a lesbian and as a sangoma, comes with its own challenges.". Later, they write: "There is someone who gives me power and courage not to give up. I believe this is my male ancestor in me. I believe Nkunzi assists me, pushes me, and helps me." As the book began, it ends with the praise song to Nkunzi.

"*Abe sekunjalo kakhulu*
(Lo! It is now well so)
Abe sengingu Nkunzi Emnyama
(Lo! I am now Black Bull)
Insizwa yakwa Sangweni
(The young man of Sangweni)
Abe sekunjalo kakhulu
(Lo! It is now well so)"

This time it feels as though we can openly praise Nkunzi ourselves, with no hesitation, as we now understand his story and the story of Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde.

Weaving Stories to Create New Memories:

The Book of Chameleons by José Eduardo Agualusa translated by Daniel Hahn, Arcadia Books, 2007

"I was born in this house and grew up here. I've never left. As it gets late, I press my body against the window and look at the sky. I like watching the flames, the racing clouds, and above them, angels – hosts of angels – shaking down the sparks from their hair, flapping their broad fiery wings." (3)

These are the opening words of Angolan writer José Eduardo Agualusa's *The Book of Chameleons.* The first-person narrator – we soon learn – is a gecko with human qualities.

The story is set in Angola during the civil war and our gecko narrator lives in a house in Luanda with Félix Ventura "a man who dealt in memories, a man who sold the past, clandestinely, the way other people deal in cocaine". (16)

Ventura specialises in reinventing personal histories and family trees for politicians and other people who need to reinvent or disguise their unsavoury pasts. Early in the book, we realise that Ventura has a unique relationship with his gecko because of inherent loneliness due to the fact that he's an albino. Due to certain beliefs in the community, he is isolated and has no friends or relationships.

The gecko converses with Ventura (and occasionally with other people who visit the house) through dreams. (40) He reveals that he was human in his previous lives: "I lived for almost a century in the skin of a man, and I never managed to feel altogether human either." And perhaps his understanding of human life is what reaffirms his bond with Ventura.

As the novel progresses, three characters become increasingly important to Félix Ventura: A beautiful photographer, Ângela Lúcia, who becomes a companion irrespective of his so-called affliction. Another companion is a foreign photojournalist to whom Ventura gives an Angolan identity and the name José Buchmann. Lastly, Ventura befriends a homeless person, Edmundo Barata dos Reis, a former agent of the Ministry of State Security.

The short chapters add excitement and a fast-paced sense throughout the novel. The author employs a variety of forms. These include dreams: "God gave us dreams so that we can catch a glimpse of the other side," said Ângela Lúcia. "To talk to our ancestors. To talk to God. And to geckos too, as it turns out." (69) And a letter written by Buchmann to Ventura: "My dear friend, I do hope this letter finds you in

excellent health. I realize that what I'm writing to you isn't really a letter, but an e-mail. No one writes letters anymore these days. But to tell you the truth, I do miss those days when people communicated by exchanging letters – real letters, on good paper, to which you might add a drop of perfume, or attach dried flowers, coloured feathers, a lock of hair." (99) The book is also grounded in literary classics from across the world featuring references to writers like JM Coetzee and Richard Burton as well as an epigraph from Borges.

The novel reaches a powerful climax of love and spirituality. "She sighed. Her skin was alight, her lovely eyes filled with tears: 'And that is when I saw the face of God!'" (51) Followed closely by a violent bloodbath after secrets of shared pasts are revealed.

The question of false identities lingers. "I think what I do is really an advanced kind of literature," [Ventura] told me conspiratorially. "I create plots, I invent characters, but rather than keeping them trapped in a book I give them life, launching them out into reality."

Whether you believe this conjuring of new memories is a form of lying or not, the story in its entirety presents us with a refreshing outlook on memories, truth and lies.

"There are dozens of professions for which knowing how to lie is a virtue. I'm thinking of diplomats, statesmen, lawyers, actors, writers, chess players."

References

Adnan, Etel, *Night*, Nightboat Books, 2016.

Agualusa, José Eduardo, *The Book of Chameleons*, Arcadia Books, 2007 - Hahn, Daniel (Translator).

Akhmatova, Anna, *The Word That Causes Death's Defeat: Poems of Memory*, Yale University Press, 2004 - Anderson, Nancy K.

Alomar, Osama, *The Teeth of the Comb & Other* Stories, New Directions, 2017 - Collins, C. J.

Armah, Ayi Kwei, *The beautyful ones are not yet born*, Heinemann, 1988.

Bechdel, Alison, *Fun Home: A family Tragicomic*, Mariner Books, 2007.

Beckett, Samuel*, Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, Grove Press, 1955.

Bernheimer, Kate, *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales*, Penguin, 2010.

Berold, Robert, *All the Days*, Deep South, 2008.

Brainard, Joe, *I Remember*, Penguin Books, 1995.

Carter, Angela (ed), *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*, Virago Press, 2005.

Carter, Angela (ed), *Strange Things Sometimes Still Happen: Fairy Tales From Around the World,* Faber & Faber,1993.

Dawn, Amber, ed, *Fist of the Spider Woman: Tales of Fear and Queer Desire, Arsenal Pulp Press,* 2009.

Duras, Marguerite, *Writing*, University of Minnesota Press, 2011 - Mark Polizzotti (Translator).

Emezi, Akwaeke, *Freshwater*, Grove Press, 2018.

Gantsho, Vangile, *red cotton*, Impepho Press, 2018.

Head, Bessie, *A Question of Power,* Heinemann,1973.

Khumalo, Fred, *Seven Steps to Heaven*, Jacana, 2007.

Kitaiskaia, Taisia, *Ask Baba Yaga: Otherworldly Advice for Everyday Troubles,* Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017.

Larson, Charles, *Under African Skies,* Farrar, Straus & Giroux,1997.

Marechera, Dambudzo, *Black Sunlight,* Heinemann, 1980.

Marechera, Dambudzo, The *Black Insider,* African Research and Publications, 1999.

Mohammed, Azeenarh, & Nagarajan, Chitra, & Salau, Aisha (eds), *She Called Me Woman*, Cassava Republic Press, 2018.

Nelson, Maggie, *Bluets,* Wave Books, 2009.

Ngamlana, Chwayita, *If I Stay Right Here*, Blackbird Books, 2017.

Nkabinde, Nkunzi Zandile, *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*, Fanele, 2008.

Ntshanga, Masande, Native Life in the Third Millennium, Model See Media, 2020.

Oyeyemi, Helen, *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours,* Picador, 2016.

Rulfo, Juan, *Pedro Páramo*, Grove Press, 1959 - Kemp, Lysander (Translator).

Tutuola, Amos, The Palm-Wine Drunkard, Faber & Faber, 2014.

Xaba, Makhosazana, *Running & other stories*, Modjaji Books, 2013.