

Retrospective

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
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by

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Abstract

My thesis is a collection of poems, divided into 4 sections. The first section draws on my experiences and background as an Indian South African, presenting a portrait of a KwaZulu-Natal Indian community, infused with the lingo of the streets. It also delves into my background by sharing real stories from my childhood and youth. The second section is about my grandmother, who is an influential character on my writing and a source for many unique stories. The third section is a brief look at my recent past and the fourth section is a sharing of my life and what is most important to me. My collection is a timeline of my life and the events which have shaped me.

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Section 1:

The places I grew up

Sunny Park

Sorry I've not been here sooner, visited
on the sunny days
and stood leaning out over balconies
to hear aunty Feroza screaming
hailing residents 3 blocks away with
glittering proclamations

why do these insolent
brat people besmirch her reputation?
I smile at the neighbours, we've heard this song and dance
how many times? Lost count now.
Lulu is under the stairwell knocking back Castle quarts
later he'll challenge the gods themselves
and damn us all, how lucky we are.

I trample out onto the scraggly grass
and shimmy down the bank
the car park beckons
3 or 4 fresh beer cans and some stompies
a couple of empty Nik Naks packets
children playing hop scotch
and the boys round the back of Vinesh's bakkie
talking about drags.
I stroll over, groove through
the familiar thug hand shakes
and half man hugs
exchange drinking stories
like connoisseurs, that bloody mixing story
brandy and vodka, cane and whisky
and shooters, and the liver cries out for mercy.
rabid looking dogs
are sleeping under cars
I make a mental note, "call the SPCA".

Walking to 'Down shop' past the dirty marquee
filled with 105 people and some change.
I flip a greeting, over the shoulder
at some laaitie whose name I can't recall
but he shows respect
and that's what counts here
respect and cigarettes, if you can spare any.
the usual pack of puzzlers crowd the shop entrance
waiting, hungry eyes scanning my pockets
and counting the notes in my wallet
blessed with x-ray vision and thirst.
"They just want food bra!
Why you gotta be so stubborn?"
but the whoonga making Somnath sell
his mother's dvd player

even while her funeral is going on.
Marquee guests asking if it plays the pirate dvd's
I laugh and shake my head.
after about 7, 8 maybe 9 minutes
I walk out of 'Down shop'
in time to see Madoda driving past
turning the corner to industrial area.
fishing rods sticking out the side window
of the green ford escort
and I make a mental note
"how was it? any bites?"
and picturing Madoda, tipping his faded cap back
"Hell, swak bru... not even a guppie or pinky".
Trudging back up the hill, passing the bottom block
with its grimy walls talking about neglect
and bygone glory days, I hear
Tap's brothers shout a greeting.
I throw back some hand signs and nod.
somewhere close by
the tree of knowledge is burning.
I let out a long sigh

The district

Met up with couple members from the district
other day there by Kapilas
went to reach a straight, couple of ciders and what not
the brah Satish reckon big speech went down
two aunties busting it up on the road side
apparently Dirty Rani was jolling with Selvum's hubby
"All the stink came out, ey they was rolling on the grass, pulling each another's hair and all. Gonum
tried to separate and ended up with one two tight ones. You know how it vaais".
I listened to Satish
trying hard to keep a straight face while
Patrick standing behind him
repeated select pieces from his story
nodding sagely from time to time.
The ciders getting warm, my mind started drifting
recalling the last big speech in the district
8 years ago now, two ladies arguing
a few choice words exchanged
nothing more, nothing like violence
but two weeks later
people in town, talked how the one aunty
pulled out a bush knife and chopped the other
abattoir style, hacking away
they say Razaks had a special on lamb the next day
but everyone said the meat tasted like chicken

Playing in the district

Adren bought a skateboard,
a blue and red piece of wonderment.
Tunnelling down from the top of Hibiscus road
he whizzed down the steely black tar
over the speed hump
coasting through a graceful arc.

At the summit I hesitated
And down below, the base
beckoned with menace.
I dropped the board, settled on it
tested its sturdiness, setting off
and suddenly it was slipping from me
plummeting down the road

pulling to the left, swinging
missing the turn, crashing, flailing and taking refuge in the rose bush.
Dusting myself down

Shakaville

So I'm here by the Down Shop and I meet up with none other than Vincent,
one of the district vagabonds everyone indulges.

He scurries close

and shakes my hand and I ask him what the latest is.

He don't his serious face

somewhere between *I feel diarrhoea coming on and the toilet is busy*

then he launches into the past 3 hours events.

He reckons he met up with couple heavy brackets from the IV's

Sadhasivan and Goolam

and they wanted to vaai reach a pill skyf right

so, they plotted a crown from one two aunties there by the Down Shop.

They hacted like good boys and carried the packets and all for the aunties

who were buying bread and milk and all and all.

Sadhasivan and Goolam reckon they got a contact

one half nigerian, half congolese, quarter ethiopian brah,

who's got a connection of a connection who's horganising

a helluva potent, fiery, bust your lungs on cloud 9,

imported from durban act 4, section 32 of the weed smokers act,

tear your eyeballs, murder your cousin, sell your dog for a bankie weed.

I'm talking about the stuff that will make you sell your last brief to get a dose.

So Vincent being the curious ou that he is

tuned Sadhasivan and Goolam

"Check here guzzies, you'll tuning span, now make the thing happen.

I wanna smoke this weed you'll bromming about."

So they hopped into Goolam's RXI 20 valve

And Vincent motors on with the story

He reckon they hopped into Goolam's Corolla and next thing you know

the members are sliding down one side road in Shakaville

Low profile, sound off and all.

Next thing they check one skraal looking laaitie marching on the side of the road

so they decided to roll down the windows and shout

"Ey boy!! Ey laaitie come here quickly!"

This laaitie got fridged to check 3 charo's moving in a dark tinted RXI 20 valve with deep dish rims

rolling in the township.

Anyway the laaitie came by the cab and Neil leaned out the window

flicked a cigarette stompie away and tuned, "Where Pipe Ngoro stays?"

Couple minutes later they were negotiating the terms of the deal

outside the merchant's house

a rusty tin roof shack with couple broken windows

and a wire fence with a hole cut in it for people to enter and exit.

Now apparently sometime between negotiating the deal

and Vincent standing in front of me now, things went sour.

The cops raided Pipe Ngoro's house
Confiscating the merchandise as well as all illegal paraphernalia
What's unclear to me is, how did Vincent manage to evade capture?

Cause here I am by the down shop buying bread
and Vincent is telling me that Sadhasivan and Goolam are inside the trunks right now
and yet Vincent is walking a free man.

I guessed I must have been thinking out loud
because Vincent goes on to explain -
His cousin Bradley got a neighbour
whose son's school teacher is married to one of
whose sister is good friends with Sushila
and Sushila's husband Badrinarian is a reservist with the police.
Badrinarian recognised Vincent and gave him a free pass
By letting him slip away during the raid.

That's how Vincent stands in front of me telling his story
and trying to convince me to take him to Shakaville to reach for a weed consignment.
Against better judgement I consent to his humble request
but that, my friends, is a story for another time.

Glossary of terms:

IV's – slang for Indian Village, a residential area in Stanger.

Brackets – means brahs, if you not from Chatsworth unit 2)

Pill skyf – marijuana rolled into the shape of a cigarette

Down Shop has to be capitalised because it's so famous even people outside Stanger know it

Hacted - the indian pronunciation of acted

Horganising – procuring by questionable means, naturally

Bankie - a bankie is a standard unit of measure when transacting in marijuana

Vaai – to leave or go

Bromming - running one's mouth continuously without backing up statements

Fridged – scared/afraid

Pipe Ngoro – local drug dealer. Pipe is not his real name but his nickname because everyone in the area knows he loves to smoke weed through a pipe, with no filter

Trunks – prison

New Guelderland

I remember
grandma, up at 5
outside the barracks house
setting a huge pot of water over a wood fire.
Geysers were a luxury

Grandma would hurl a gob of betel nut stained saliva
onto the dewy morning grass
and mutter something in hard core Tamil.
I quizzed grandpa and he translated -
“geysers are for the whites
“that’s what aiyah is saying.”

Grandma would nod and say it again in Tamil,
not that she couldn’t speak English

I remember
birds calling out dawn amongst the trees
whilst I was splayed in bed,
hands itching to grab pine cones,
reading their rough, notched surfaces
like braille.
Grandpa would be rummaging in his tackle box,
cleaning hooks and sinkers, swivels and floats.
When he wasn’t watching I’d grab a sinker
and press it hard to my ear
pretending I could hear the ocean
in the piece of oblong lead,
fuelling my dreams of wrestling the waves

I remember
lighting candles at night
trying to convince my cousins to come with me
‘cause the toilet block was down by the trees
behind the old village hall with its broken windows and missing doors
and the walk in the darkness punctuated by a thousand
sounds out of nightmare, the back of my neck freezing
as we trekked through the long grass to the pit toilets.

Someone would always be playing a prank
trying to push you backwards so you’d fall in
and I’d ask grandpa the next day
“Thatha how come we don’t have normal toilets?”
Grandpa would grunt
“Fancy toilets are for the whites”
I imagined fancy toilets with gold seats and built-in air freshener.

I remember
the 5-mile corrugated road trip by foot

to Dootaan beach, on Saturday mornings
when the shad shoal came too close to shore.
Running behind grandpa's long legs,
five breathless steps to every one of his
and every two minutes, I'd chime in
"Thatha, how far the beach is?"
Without stopping or turning back,
he'd float the words over his shoulder
"Just over this next dune"

I didn't understand what dune meant
but the words were enough
to silence me for another two minutes
until we'd come to the beach
to capture my eyes.

I knew I'd be dreaming of the beach that night
as I lay in bed waiting for grandma's 5am wakeup call
and all the while I never knew
we were on the Indian beach every time

Mornings in the barracks

Every holiday
I would cry and perform
for Dad to take me to New Guelderland
so, I could stay by Jaan aiyya and Bachwa thatha
cause all my cousins would converge
at the same time on the barracks house.
Aiyya would wake us up at the crack of dawn
and race us to the bath to wash up.
Whilst we scrubbed and jostled
she would slice bread and butter it
and dole out steaming black tea
from a large pot into enamel mugs.
Then we'd line up
and savour the tastiest breakfast ever.
Soon after, we'd be running wild in the dusty roads outside
Spinning tops and playing marbles.

Tugela river

I was 8 years old when I first visited Jumana thatha,
my paternal grandfather's eldest brother.
Indian custom is that your parents elder siblings
are Big Daddy and Big Mummy and so on.
Jumana thatha and his family lived in a big tin house in Tugela
with a chicken coop in the yard
and they had to burn wood to heat water for bathing.
Even though it was a tin house it still managed to be warm,
maybe it was the body heat that made it so
and the huge duvets we called goodhrees
which were sewn by old women and weighed about a ton each.
Once you covered yourself in a goodhree
you'd be sound asleep in minutes and overheating in an hour.
Jumana thatha took me down to the river one morning, and
while he waited patiently for a fish to bite
I wandered off a little-ways, lost in day dreaming.
Suddenly he called out and motioned me to come over,
pointing out a big rock in the water about 10 meters away,
and in a hushed voice asked me, "*What's that?*"
I gazed long and replied "That's a rock thatha"
He smiled, bent down, picked up a stone
and with careful aim flung it at the rock
and the crocodile erupted from the water,
thrashing its tail as it swam away to the deeper water.
I sprung backwards, shocked,
glanced over at thatha and he smiled
"Must stay close by me"

The good old days

There was a time when bread was R1 a loaf
and Zulu Motors was a sweet not a car dealership.
Stove pipe jeans were a style statement
and bell bottoms meant you were cool.
People wore mullets on their heads
and if you didn't own a pair of North Star takkies
then you had no chance of being with the in-crowd.
Adults were uncle or aunty
and the most exciting thing about weekends
was waking up at 7am on Saturdays
to watch the k-tv marathon.
Sleep-overs meant staying over at cousins
to play Mario bros on the tv game station,
blowing on the cartridges when they malfunctioned.
Families ate dinner together
and the scariest thing in the world
was the maths homework lying untouched
in your Ninja Turtle school bag.

Section 2:

Gran

Once she was sharp

The doctor says gran is losing her mind
going off the map
bonkers in other words
well that's just what my mother says
the doctor calls it senile dementia
something difficult sounding and momentous
it makes me picture gran in a strait jacket
running wildly from white coated nurses
as they try to inject her with Sanity and Normalcy
those cocktails of medicines with names fourteen words long
and enough lovely chemicals to strip tar and dissolve metal
the stuff that resets your hard drive and deletes all the lunacy files
so you can reboot as the proper human and act appropriately
and be the next textbook case study for Psychology 101.
but apparently gran did not get that memo
or maybe she read it and decided "fuck the establishment!"
because here she is moonwalking through the house at 1am
rummaging for titbits of evening supper in the broom cupboard
and putting her thick socks inside the fridge, top shelf of course
looks like she's off to Antarctica next week
I hope she brings back some penguins for me!

Crazy pills

Gran's mind was in the firing line
before the first whiff of faulty
even tickled her nostrils
Genetics - they said
that which scorched the minds of forebears
left indelible marks in the blood that followed
like stains which scientists had to invent Jik for.
Now there's a small plastic bottle showing up every month
as regular as a vegan on a high fibre diet.
I swear those pills are so tiny
they're probably the crumbs left over from making aspirin.
No wonder gran is still doing the electric slide
from 9 to 5 with the night shift brigade.
I bet they're only called crazy pills
because you'd have to be crazy to think they'd work

Hearing dust

Gran's hearing is going
but she refuses to get hearing aids
because they will make her look old
and gran still thinks she's 21.
So God forbid anything as unfashionable
as those infernal devices
after all gran still uses Oil of Olay
for that youthful looking skin
that they promise on the bottle
and damned be anyone
that even suggests a walking stick
unless they want to be beaten

It's all relative

Gran is 87
so anybody in their 70's
is automatically classified 'young'
last week she found out
that Visvanathan died, aged 75.
The child who delivered the news
spoke hesitantly, fearful of shocking gran
into a sudden heart attack.
Gran took the news in her stride -

Vis died? Ahyyo, he was soooo young"
I smiled
felt much younger and thanked uncle Vis.

Cane knife

Gran keeps a cane knife under her bed
which she claims is a “remembrance”
of her father who crossed the ocean as a boy
to seek a new life in South Africa.
That explains why gran handles the knife
with such reverence
but I think she’s bluffing
because once a week she pulls out the knife
and sharpens it methodically
honing the blade to deadly sharpness
I have a feeling that blade
has tasted more than just sugar cane

What's cooking?

Summers in KZN are ravaging.
Heat hovers like the Grim Reaper
as we scabble to survive the burn.
Air cons work overtime to sustain life
as we claw our way to the evening
when ice cold beers can dull heat stroke,
but gran remains unfazed
as she pulls the blanket up around her chin
and complains about a draught.
She feels cold in mid-December.
Hence NASA phoned last week
to say they want to send gran
on the first ever mission to the Sun.

Old age homes

I hear whispers
about putting gran in an old age home
she's at that age now
where it becomes inconvenient
for people to inconvenience themselves
never mind the fact that she grew them up
that she wiped their backsides
and cleaned their snotty noses
worked in sugar cane fields
to put bread on the table to feed mouths
educated them against the odds
and never asked for a dime.
I mean come on
It's not their fault
people's lives are hectic after all
so much stress and pressure
who can blame them?
Gran has seen life
she's had a good innings, as they say.
At her age she should go quietly and be happy
but nobody tells her so

Craft

About twenty years ago gran would sit on faded sofas
with a book splayed across her lap as she clutched long white needles.
Her gaze would focus on pictures of sweaters and doilies
as her hands danced rhythmically with Radio Lotus in the background.
The DJ waited patiently whilst Mrs Naicker scrolled through her list of shout outs.
There was no way she could leave out any family, relatives, friends
and 47th degree connections, especially after the one time
when she forgot to greet aunty Pushpa from Asherville.
That caused three months of telephone warfare because everyone found out
about the big blunder she made on the radio that day.
Gran crocheted intently, as Mrs Naicker “Hmmm’d” and “Aaah’d”
trying to make sure that she didn’t forget anyone whenever she called in
for Diwali, birthdays, anniversaries and funeral notices.
An hour or so of knitting later a garment, soft blue and pearly white
would land softly on the coffee table next to me
looking like it had been there for twenty years already
as gran picked up a James Hadley Chase novel and dipped into mystery and espionage.
The radio was ever present, with Gypsy Bhai singing merrily
“dhania, karala, methi, bhajee! Bring your aaja and your aaji!”
advertising the herbs and spices we’d be raiding the market for on the weekend
when gran would put aside the craft of hands and gather the latest gossip
from Mrs Naicker’s cousin’s son’s neighbour’s uncle, Johnny
who sold cane herbs by the bunch on Sundays down by the local farmers market

Section 3:

Not so long ago

Brandy and memories

Saturdays, parking with the brahs
Fish Eagle and Sprite and some bites
or a bottle 1818 to lubricate the bearings.
Thunee and a quarter mutton bunny
waiting for the big game to start.
Cracking a six hand and watching like a hawk
so you can four-ball when anyone hits a flop.
You can tell when a member hits his limit
suddenly the brah vaai's over quiet
face gets all serious.
Then you know somebody is gonna bust out
with a sad Tamil song
or strum a guitar badly
and mumble through Hotel California.
When the member starts crying
it's either for their late mother or bru
that died tragically.
So everyone joins in the song.
and cracks another straight
so we all can create.

Glossary of terms:

Brahs – close friends

bites – usually snacks of small servings of meat to accompany drinking of alcohol

1818 – Smirnoff vodka, also referred to as karate water

Thunee – world's greatest card game, invented by South African Indians

Mutton bunny - a bunny chow. If you don't know what a bunny chow is then please kill yourself

Six hand – a game of thunee which involves two teams of 3 players each, facing off against each other

Four-ball – a penalty incurred in thunee for a mistake or breach of the rules

Member – a close friend

Brah – a close friend

Straight – a 750ml bottle of spirit alcohol

Create – perform, behave badly, general insubordination

Sound offs

There are few things a char ou loves more
than some thumping sound in the cab.
Two 12's, a set of splits and a mother fucker of an amp
strapped to the back of the back seat like a slab of granite.
All Rockford Fosgate bru, cause we don't play games.
Pull into the Autostyle show
drop the windows and dial up the bass to set off car alarms.
Pilot in the back seat pouring slugs of brandy and tinting with Coke
cause we only bought a litre dash, cost saving.
Preston in the front, resident DJ
spinning the jol numbers whilst Cuzzy Kal
dances in the back seat.
The sound comp heats up
and the usual fights break out.
Pull into the lane and run the machine
and clock 160 decibels, easy bru.
cause we don't play games.
You put eyes
we turn salt.

Glossary of terms:

Slugs – shots of alcohol
Dash – a mixer for alcohol
Put eyes – to eyeball people with envy
Turn salt – a practice to ward off evil eye

Section 4:

Sunflower days

Saffron

At 7pm we jumped into the Yaris
I'd made reservations,
Saffron sounded exciting yet safe,
The night slipped in, traffic drifted by
Stepping off the elevator
I showed her my green socks
Matching my green shirt to her green pants
Her favourite colour
The guy at reception mumbled something
I swiped a card, we sat down
The waitress, I named Nonhlanhla
Dumb as a brick
Thrice interrupted our mutual staring
Finally got the order down
Disappeared in a swarm of confusion
A guy in a suit played piano
Mood music
We made big talk
Politics and weather
Siva, the maître D
Checked in on our table
Made odd guttural sounds
Grunted like a baboon
Nodded to the huge bay windows behind us
Something about a view of the ocean
From our vantage point
I said something polite
Tried in vain to read his name badge
Thankfully he wandered off
The ocean could wait

The letter

An hour before our date
I scrambled into CNA
Grabbed materials, colour pens, envelopes
Back in the car, everything spread out
Across the passenger seat
I wrote frantically, a stream
The words shot, rebounded
Like poetry, when you're trying to clutch
At every idea, every feeling
And failing but hoping
That what ends up on the page
Hits that groove
Finally my fingers cracked
The scented envelope swallowed the pages
And waited on the back seat
For the end of the night
Sitting outside the driveway
I pulled my mind and placed it in her palm
She gazed down and blushed
I'm still buzzing now

Sunflower

3 January 2017

the day sunflower arrived
the first thing Dr Warnich did
was turn her around to face us
and we felt miniscule
in her gaze.

I followed the incubator
on a leash, keeping guard.

Sunflowers first bath
she peed from fear
and I cried.

She fit in the palm of my hand then
and now I'm in the palm of hers.

Sundays

Sundays are made for
taking up our assigned positions
wifey on the left, I'm on the right
and sunflower in the centre
8 months old and taking up the most space
adjusting every now and then
shuggling I call it
until one or both adults
have to balance on a precipice.
Moving back in
invites the casual back hand
or two chops to the throat.
I lean down
to kiss the shuggle footies
and pray they don't connect with my face

Peasants

The wife and I have taken to calling ourselves peasants
and we watch what we say because we're both convinced
that sunflower knows when we're talking about her.
We tread with caution and protect our necks
because the Queen of Hearts is fond of beheadings

Walking ring

Sunflower is a master of the reverse gear.
In the walking ring, she kicks down backwards.
One arm out the window of her ride
leaning out to the side, all Fast & Furious.
Wifey says I better watch out
cause one day she'll be stealing the car
and going out to meet her friends.
Err, what friends?
Her friends are Mom and Dad.
End of story.

The cot

The one good thing about buying a cot
Is that we keep telling ourselves
“One day it will come in handy”
or, “We can always donate it”