This document consists of two (2) parts:

Part A: Thesis (Creative Work)

Part B: Portfolio (Coursework)

Part A: Thesis

Pathi's Sister is Still Troubling

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

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Abstract

My thesis is a collection of micro fiction, flash fiction, fairy tales, vignettes and short stories which explore the tension of being both an insider and an outsider. I have access to different cultures without belonging to any of them: as a child, my family moved from a South African Indian community to a formerly whites-only suburb; as an adult I have lived in South Korea, the United Arab Emirates and Sudan. My prose draws on my life experiences, family legends, neighbourhood gossip, news reports and historical events to question norms and ideas that I may have taken for granted had I been fully inside a single culture. In my thesis I frequently spell words phonetically to mimic how I hear or remember them. I also borrow words from languages I don't speak. I want the languages I use and mix to *corrupt* each other, as Raymond Federman put it, in order to better express the voices and contexts of the communities I draw inspiration from. Kuzhali Manickavel's *Things We Found During the Autopsy* showed me that culturally rich imagery can be used without interrupting narrative flow with explanations. I am also influenced by the poetic sense of rhythm and melody of Lydia Davis's minimalist prose, and by Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street,* where each concise short story stands alone but together creates a broad understanding of people and place. Anthologies such as *PP/FF*, edited by Peter Conners, and *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me,* edited by Kate Bernheimer, have inspired me to be bold in finding the form that best allows each narrative to be told.

Part A: Thesis

Pathi's Sister is Still Troubling

Contents

Seaside Prayer

Softly it waits, till nudged to take a sip, dousing its camphor flame in black whispers—drowned by shards of laughter.

Where will the moon take it? To where prayers gather to be heard? Or to that sunlit cesspool where humanities' shit convenes putrid? Are they not the same place?

Pathi's Sister

I was setting dishes in my Ma's kitchen. She was talking to someone. I can't remember who. Maybe one of my aunties? Maybe her neighbour Flo? Anyway, Ma was telling Whoeveritwas about how they had a big yagam in Kenville one time because Pathi (daddy's not mine) kept having bad dreams. Pathi's sister kept troubling her and Guru said they must do prayers to settle her spirit (Pathi's sister's; not Pathi's). I asked Ma why Pathi's sister was troubling like that and Ma told me that when she died on the boat they threw her in the sea.

What happened to the body I wonder? Did it sink to the ocean floor? Get caught on a rock—seaweed swaying in the current. Was it chomped on by a cuda? Skewered by a swordfish? Did it bob along the waves, a bloated gas bag? Did it burst into pungent decay? Or dissolve into slime?

Those early ones had to bury their dead. Crematoriums didn't exist yet and pyres weren't allowed here. But the ground? The ground is as bad as the sea.

We leave in flames—rise from pure ash into our next life. Imagine being trapped in mud? Larvae nibbling at our smiles, cockroaches whispering in our ears, parasites defiling us, the stink of rot popping our eyes. Our shapes decomposing into wet putrefaction.

I'd also have nightmares if someone threw my sister's dead body over the side of a ship.

Sati Revoked

Oyo ma. What happened?

They had one fight ma. Got tired of her I heard.

Look at her face but. Her whole body like that?

How I must know?

Where's he then?

You donno? She pushed him back inside I heard.

Oyo oyo oyo.

Locked the door too.

And then?

What and then? Bloody rubbish fella that.

Aiyo ma! How you can say like that?

What I said? He bloody started it man!

For true? Still but. How you can say? That girl is kachra too. What she must have did uh? For him to do like that?

True true eh. Not even married they were. Mmm Loose thing.

But him now? No father or brother he got. Who the Koli is?

Koli? To light the pyre? For what Koli? Isn't the Koli's job is done?

Aiyo!

The Road Back Home

Close your eyes and reverse right out of now. Turn left at yesterday and carry on straight for a while. When you get to the night before last take another left. Just keep going past last year. Carry on toward the screeching fear, along the murmuring disappointment, through the crunching grief. Yes. Keep going. Right down. Now take a sharp right at numbing guilt. Carry on up. It's not there anymore but you should be able to see it. Keep going.

Black Sheep

Once upon a time, in the early eighties, a ewe and a ram abandoned their families at the coast and went to Jozi. One jumped in a minibus taxi with a friend. The other drove up with some mates.

The ewe says that the ram and his mates crashed on the living room floor of her Lenz South boarding house before finding proper lodging in Benoni.

The ram says that the ewe and her friend spent a night on his Joubert Park living room floor before boarding with a friend's family in Lenz South.

Both sheep have shit memories so it's impossible to say what's true.

On the weekends, the ram would take the bus from Benoni to Lenz South to hang out with friends.

On the weekends, the ram would take the bus from illegal lodgings in Joubert Park to Lenz South to hang out with friends.

On weekday evenings, the ram would take the bus from his job in Braamfontein to Lenz South to hang out with his ewe.

On weekday evenings, the ram would take the bus from his job in Braamfontein to Lenz South to hang out with his ewe and with his lamb.

With the lamb born under lucky skies who gave all the luck to her parents and kept none for herself.

With the lamb who washed the black from her parents' wool; from her siblings' wool.

With the lamb who stood in black and grey wool and watched them glow.

Two Babies Were Born

When the first came, careful consultation with the Book revealed a combination of sounds and letters to confine. Her parents pored over a handful of names. “Not This. All Thises are bitchy.” “Not That. I just don’t like it.” “Not This thing. It’s too old fashioned.” Until in frustration they threw together sounds and fudged letters. A name that sounded like it fit but looked like it didn’t.

Favoured by her Pathi, being her first son’s firstborn, she was given her name in a hall. Dressed in a white gown almost suffocated by lace, laid on the back of a swan in the front of cinema style seating (obviously). A celebration—lamps and murtis, garlands and glitter. A feast. A priest to sing the name, fix the label. Hundreds of witnesses peering, poking and cooing.

When the second was born, careful consultation of the Book revealed a single sound—the possibility of infinite combinations. Her parents pored over lists of names. “No That’s too common.” “No, This sounds awkward.” “Not Thatthing. It’s That Otherone Aunty’s cousin’s name.” Until the first called out a name not on any lists, with spelling that matched.

The second was given her name in a hallway. Dressed in a white gown almost suffocated by lace, laid in a brown sari threaded through rafters tied into a make-shift cradle. Four loved ones there to bless her. A muddle—Aiya singing protection, parents praying with fruit and milk, Aiya forgetting to sing the name fixed. Aiya remembering to sing the name.

The second was a child with the freedom of the Book and was loved for it. Then she grew her own limits and bound herself within them. For this too she was loved.

The first stayed within her boundaries but she rubbed against them, softened them until they stretched and bubbled and expanded. Obedient but not. For this she was despised. She looked like she fit but she didn’t.

Nanny

A little girl in Lenasia South decided that she didn't want to go to nursery school that day. When her mother came to wake her up, she coughed pitifully into her pillow and pulled the blanket over her head. Now this was unusual for the little munchkin, who actually enjoyed going to school and playing with her friends, so even though she had no fever, her mother let her stay home.

The little girl waited for her parents to bustle out the door in a flurry of car keys and bus passes, before bouncing out of bed. Yay! She got to spend the whole day with Nanny. She normally just spent the afternoons with her, after the school combi dropped her off. The little girl would chat with Nanny as she ironed, she would walk with Nanny to the spaza shop for bread and milk. Sometimes, Nanny would let her have a Chappie if there was change left over. It was their secret because it was Mommy and Daddy's money and they never let our little miss chew bubble gum. Sometimes, she would sit in Nanny's room with her when her friends came over to visit (this was a secret too) and she would listen to them gossip. The little girl would ask Nanny to explain what they were all talking about and sometimes Nanny would explain but most times she told the little girl to mind her own business—but Nanny said it nicer than that. When Mommy got home and made supper, Nanny would give the little girl a bath and make sure she was good and clean and fresh tralala.

While the little girl got dressed (by herself, because she was a big girl you know), Nanny made her breakfast. She sat our little girl at her small table facing the wall and gave her a bowl of pap and milk, sprinkled with sugar. Yum. So much better than boring old cornflakes. The little girl devoured the bowl. Then asked for another, with just a bit more sugar on. Puhleeeese. This one she ate slower, savouring the sweetness and alternating bites with sips from her mug of tea. Staying home from school was great.

After breakfast, the little munchkin stood up, tucked in her chair as she'd been taught and took her bowl and mug to the kitchen. Nanny was just finishing off wiping down the counters. She wanted to sweep and mop the floor and so our little girl was sent back to her room to play for a while. The little girl spent some time chatting and dressing and having tea parties with her favourite dollies. But dollies can only entertain for so long and soon the little girl was back at Nanny's side as Nanny dusted and wiped and sprayed and polished. The little girl followed her friend and prattled and asked question after question. Whys and whos,

whats and how comes, followed Nanny around the house as she swept and vacuumed and mopped. After a question too many or a prattle too far, Nanny snapped at the little girl to shut up and go play with her toys. The little girl was a proud miss and a bit embarrassed to have irritated her friend. She didn't know what she'd said to make Nanny so annoyed, so she shouted back that Nanny was mean and that she would tell Mommy and Daddy. Nanny looked at the little girl with a different expression on her face. She looked a bit unkind, you know. Nanny told our little girl to tell her parents anything that she wanted to, and then quietly she went out of the kitchen door, to close and lock it behind her. The little girl ran to the living room window and watched as Nanny locked the pedestrian gate to the garden and walked away.

The little girl sat down on the visitor's sofa to wait for Nanny to come back. Her bum began to hurt and her tummy began to rumble so she got up and went to the kitchen. She opened the cupboard and took out a packet of bread. She got out two slices. Then she opened the fridge to get some butter, but it was too far back on the top shelf, and no matter how much she stretched or how tippy on her toes she was, she just couldn't reach it. She closed the fridge and went into the dining room. She took a chair and tried to lift it. Too heavy. So, she dragged the chair. Then she pushed the chair. Out of the dining room, down the hall and into the kitchen. She opened the fridge pushed the chair against it, clambered up and got out the butter and now she could even reach the jam, so she got that out too. She bent to put them on the counter, jumped down, pushed the chair against a cupboard and closed the fridge. The little girl made herself a sandwich, put it on a plate and went to sit at her small little table facing the wall. The sandwich didn't taste very nice.

After finishing her lunch, our little girl, stood up, tucked in her chair as she'd been taught, and took her plate to the kitchen. She placed the plate and the messy butter knife in the sink. Nanny wasn't back yet, so the little girl took the lappie that was next to the sink and wiped the crumby, sticky mess she'd made on the counter. It wasn't a perfect job—most of the crumbs ended up on the floor. Our little munchkin went back into the living room to the little table next to the visitor's sofa. She stared at the beige rotary phone, stuck her finger in one of the little holes and twirled the dial. She played with it a bit more but didn't call anyone because she didn't know anyone's number. It was still bright outside, but the TV room started to look a bit dark, like a cave, so the little girl put on the light in the TV room but it was still too dim for her to want to sit in, so she went back into the living room. She sat on the visitor's sofa and looked outside the window.

She wondered if anyone could see her from the street. She hadn't known that the house could sound so quiet, and she hadn't known it could feel so big around her. It felt like the house didn't know her anymore—that it didn't want her. The little girl scuttled off the sofa and crawled under the coffee table. She pressed her back against a broad wooden leg and pulled in her knees. The house felt a tiny bit smaller there and she couldn't see the window so the window couldn't see her. Her bum went numb and her back ached and her knees hurt but she didn't move.

She didn't move when she heard the front gate rattle. She didn't move when she heard the front door handle click. She stretched out her knees when she heard her mother's voice and peered out from under the table when she saw her mother's stilettos click hurriedly toward the TV room. Mommy? Her Mommy kneeled down, pencil skirt, heels and all, to help her crawl out from under the table. When her Mommy asked what happened, our little girl started to cry because she was scared her Mommy would shout at her, but she told the truth anyway. She had said mean things to Nanny and the little girl was very sorry that she made Nanny cross. Her Mommy hugged her very hard and kissed her in her hair until she stopped crying. Her Mommy told her to go get ready to have a bath. While the little girl got undressed, her Mommy phoned her Daddy and told him to buy some pizza for supper. Then she went to the bathroom and gave the little girl a good scrub a dub.

When her Daddy came home, the little girl had such a good time that she forgot. They all sat on the floor(!) and ate pizza and she sat in her Daddy's lap and they all watched her favourite movie and when her Mommy asked if she wanted some ice-cream, the little girl said no because she was full from pizza and cuddles. Our little munchkin snoozed in her warm cocoon and snuzzled her Mommy and Daddy good night when they tucked her into bed.

BoomBoomBoom

The little girl woke up in a quiet fright.

BoomBoomBoom.

The little girl heard voices.

BoomBoomBoom

The little girl heard footsteps past her bedroom and the clickety clackety of the front door unlocking. She slipped out of bed and out her room. She didn't say a word, tried not make a

sound. She stood very still around the corner. Nanny had come back. She sounded wibbly wobbly—like when Next-Door Uncle drank a lot of beers and went outside to talk to the flowerpots. Nanny was talking but the little girl couldn't make out what she was saying. Then her Daddy said that Nanny was fired. Was it her Daddy though? His voice was all low and rumbly like a gravel truck and it was scary sounding. Nanny got very cross and started shouting and saying very bad words to Mommy and Daddy and then Mommy screamed at her to Voetsak, you witch! Go from here before we call the police! And she slammed the door shut in Nanny's face and the little girl ran back to her room and jumped into bed and pulled the blanket over her head and her eyes wet her pillow. She didn't mean to be a meanie. She didn't mean to get her friend in trouble.

Sisters

When Hector went to face Achilles, she told me that she didn't understand why. I told her that he was Paris' big brother. Then she told me that Hector was an idiot. I guess that makes me an idiot too.

You're Just Like Our Father

Remember that Saturday when Mummy randomly decided to make roast lamb for supper?

And Daddy took us for lunch when we were out grocery shopping?

When we came home, she called us from across the backyard. Before I could stop you, you called back that we'd already eaten. She slammed the kitchen door shut and I smacked your confused head.

I didn't look at Daddy's face as I dragged you inside and told her "We only had a snack. Dish up."

Your mouth opened but I glared it shut.

Lost in Translation

Mmm^{m}?

Mmm mm

M$^{mm}_{mm}$?

.^{MM}

$_{mm}^{mm}$

What are you two grunting about?

I just wanted to know if Akka wanted a bite.

Electric Windows

Do you know those stories with *that* uncle? You must know them. The ones where the uncle left the neighbourhood for work or to strike it lucky in the big city or to go study? And then he pitches up every once in a while—maybe when there's a wedding or a funeral or you know, just to visit his mother? And then when he comes, he has the coolest, fanciest car you've ever seen with electric windows and air-conditioning and central locking, and his wife wears a pretty dress with flowers and smells nice like sunlight soap and Vaseline Intensive Care; and his kids wear those clean white leather buckle up shoes with pretty petal fan cut outs and they're soooo snooty and think they're too good to play with your barefoot selves because you're too grimy and dirty and dishevelled in your old manky clothes?

My dad was that uncle.

Donuts and Flings

I used to tease my sister because when we were younger (she was about seven or so) my dad bought four chocolate donuts on a shopping trip. We each ate one in the car on the way back home, which meant that either we would all have had a third of a piece of donut with tea after supper… or that my sister was going to pull a job. That isn't why I used to tease my sister. I used to tease my sister because she got angry with my dad for giving away that leftover donut to a homeless kid, begging at the robot. Not in front of the kid—we were better brought up than that. My dad did the decent parent thing and explained all the things he should have. And she got it. She had got it in the first place.

I don't tease her anymore because when I was about thirty, I was at my Ma's house and a middle-aged man came and asked for any food we could spare for him and his children. My aunt and I scuttled about gathering together some bread, a tin of baked beans, an ice cream container of leftover sugar beans curry and rice and about a cup's worth of sugar tied up in an old bread packet. Then my aunt handed him my opened packet of Flings and finally I understood my sister's shame ridden rage.

Climbing Walls

I don’t remember how you got up but I remember you standing in the sky.

I don’t remember how you got down but I remember saying, Aiya stole peaches from the neighbours.

Read Quietly

My sister tells everyone that I was the one that taught her how to read silently. I don't mind because I was. I was lying tummy down on my bed and my sister was sitting tukkies next to me. I think it must have been winter because we were in there for the afternoon sun, and you really don't want the afternoon sun in summer. I was trying to do my homework. We had a study, but we didn't use it much because it was dark even with the lights switched on and like I said…afternoon sun. We did use the study to store our books, but the shelves were exploding at that point because my mother hadn't yet done the big purge. That happened years later when I went to varsity and my sister was on a school trip. Boxfuls of books, including some of our favourites, got bundled off to our younger cousins because my mother hadn't thought to consult us, because she hadn't realized that people can have an emotional connection with a book. Mommy found out very quickly when my grade eleven sister discovered that she had given away *Ten in the Bed* and on the verge of tears said

"But that was the first book Akka ever bought for me."

I was in Standard two and there was one of those book fair things at school and I bought it with my own spending money, sacrificing two books that I wanted for that single book. I read it to my sister, every day, at least twice a day for the next almost forever.

So, this sunny afternoon in my bedroom was before that big purge. My sister was reading a book off of my shelf in the study. I didn't mind because her shelf was still full of first readers. You know the kind:

This is Dick Whittington.

He has a cat.

He wants to go to London.

Dick heard that in London the streets are paved with gold.

That's not exactly how it went but you get the idea. I didn't mind her pilfering from my shelf as long as she didn't give me grief about borrowing her *Treasure Chest of Fairy Tales* from time to time.

I can't remember what homework I was doing but I was struggling to concentrate, and my sister was working on my last nerve. She was old enough to read but young enough to still do that mumbling the words under your breath type of reading. I was slowly losing my mind. Let's be honest, I was a preteen—I was quickly losing my mind.

"Yah. Read quietly"

"Sorry Akka."

More mumbling at a lower volume.

"See here."

I got a pencil out of my bag and clamped my teeth around it sideways and looked at my sister with a graphite grimace.

"You try."

She put the pencil in her mouth and tried reading. It worked. I don't know how I found out about that trick. If it had happened now, I would say I probably got it from YouTube, but YouTube wasn't a thing back then.

My Aiya was staying with us that time. She never interfered with us when we had to do homework, but I was a big reader you know, and whenever she felt that I'd spent too much time behind the covers of a novel, she would gently but seriously warn me that if I read too much, I would go mad. She turned out to be right, in a way, but that's another story.

One time, after we'd finished our homework and while we were waiting for Mommy to finish cooking, my sister and I wanted to watch TV and we saw Aiya sitting on the sofa with her glasses on. It was those ones that turn your eyes buggy. Her eyesight must have been bloody awful.

"De ee k. Dick. Wee…Wut..ing…tone. Wutington. He has a c a t cat. He wa nt s wants to go to L on d on London."

She sat with a book in her lap pointing at the page.

"What you doing Aiya?"

"The writing is too small…"

I plopped down on the armrest beside her and my sister climbed onto the seat next to her.

“…the story is nice but.”

“Ja. I like it too.”

“I don’t know this story. What happens next?”

“De ee k Dick. he are d hee-ard heard th at that in Lon don London the str ee ts street are p a v e d paveed paved with g old gold.”

Monkey Business

Ma's up a tree again. Who called? Isn't there down they doing prayers. She must have caught the bhajans. Call Janaki then. She's the only one who knows what she wants when it comes. JANAKI!

Look how high she is. How she gets up there? Should we give her some fruit? Maybe she'll come down. No wait a bit. Subri Uncle is here. Remember last time she chased him and broke the broomstick on his back. Must leave her in the tree? Little while. He's going now now.

—Take some guava ma. Come.

Hands beat chest. Puffed out fulcrum and cheeks. Warrior eyes.

—MMMM. mmm MMM

—Where's Janaki? JANAKI! What your mother wants? Coconut and milk. Fresh milk.

Chiffon flutters as a body swings from branches and Kuchipudis through leaves.

—Therewa ma.

A coconut flies into the tree. Charcoal cleaned teeth gnash off fibrous husk and small, dainty, well worked fingers break hard shell neatly in half, rip at the flesh to nibble.

—Amma, come down for the milk. We can't throw it up there.

—Amma climb down. Don't jump.

A tiny body soars down, mundani tail. Lands in a squat with knuckles gracing dirt. Fierce eyes glare. Snatches down cool milk from a steel cup.

Hackles rise. Legs bent, sari pleats flare, takes off in a four-limbed primate lope.

Subri Uncle.

Catches his hair. Throws him to the ground. Picks him up by the throat.

Half a coconut in one hand. Dangling uncle in the other.

Looks at him. Until he chokes and covers his face with his hands.

Sets him down gently, bangs chest with fisted hands once and looms over him, thumb pressed between his eyebrows.

Looking and looking. And looking.

Picnic at Cape Point

A family met with their relatives from afar, after many a long year. Their relatives descended upon their abode and there was much merriment. In their joy, it was decided that there should be an outdoor party. On a day when the blue sky was clear and the sun shone warm but did not burn, the family departed for their day of recreation. The place in which they chose to set their party was full of the wonders of nature. The scene was not of the tranquil pastoral kind but had the rustic, untamed charm of the bush. A ball was kicked around, and many stories were told and by and by it came time for eating and all were hungry and ready for their repast. The women folk laid their table with a delightful array of foodstuffs. Such fare to be seen. There was potato salad, slices of watermelon, cubes of mango and the rarest of treats—sandwiches. Not leftover green beans curry or potato sandwiches. Not even the much-prized mutton mince sandwich. No, even rarer still—cheese and tomato, and chicken mayo sandwiches. Not often were such treats made but on this day of leisure and being so very happy to see each other after such a time apart, the woman folk decided on simple deliciousness.

Alas, this merry party was assailed most mercilessly. A band of primate rogues leapt over a nearby stone wall and raided the gathering. The youngest of the merrymakers was thrilled to see such sport. She giggled and laughed as she watched the brigands filch vittles from her family's spread. Ah but her glorious laugh caught the attention of one these treacherous rogues. Now this babe was not of a bold demeanour and was in fact a delicate, meek little thing. The vagabond made for her and in her terror the little one ran. Her family relatives all pled with the girl to drop the treat she held firmly in her grip. Our sweet girl was slow to understand but when comprehension dawned, her determination grew. In her hand was the last of the chicken mayo and she would not falter. It would be hers and so she kept up her flight and dodged and ducked. But as fleet of foot and high in energy as little ones can be, they are no match for baboon bandits and our heroine began to tire and her pace slowed. She pondered whether to turn and stand her ground.

Her family's cries increased in frenzy and the babe cast a glance over her shoulder. Finger-long canines, sharp as a mother-in-law's tongue were coming for her. They would tear at her cheeks and gorge out her eyes in but a heartbeat. And in despair she turned and flung the bread from her. She watched with raw hatred as the wretched outlaw snatched up the

sandwich and departed. Her satisfaction at watching him stand on a shard of broken Tabasco bottle was tempered by her anger at the loss of her treat.

Her parents saw her absence of fear and noted her rage, and they knew. They knew they reared not a sweet princess nor yet a noble lady. They knew that between them, they had created a Hongra.

I Don't Understand White People

My dad had a colleague who called himself an SABC2 and he invited us to have dinner at his house. There was a whole bunch of people there—my dad's colleagues and their families. The grownups slipped into the men and women groups and had their skinner sessions, and we kids had a blast climbing on the jungle gym, playing games and just running around. And the food. Oh my goodness. The food. There was sticky rice cooked in a rice cooker (the first time I'd ever seen one). There was stir-fried this and braised that, roasted something or other and marinated something else. There was this thing deep fried and covered in chilli oil and another thing steamed and mixed with nuts. And for dessert tinned litchis and ice-cream. Everyone sat together and enjoyed the meal. It was so cool watching everyone munching on all these different foods.

Another managerial get together was at my parents' house and for some reason we had a braai. I suppose it was so that my mom didn't have to navigate the whole mild, medium and hot thing. We had masala marinated lamb chops, and honey mustard chicken. We had Cajun spiced steaks and mild and medium lamb sausages. We had tikka spiced chicken sosaties and potato salad, and pasta salad and bean salad. We had green salad and carrot salad (with chopped up green chillies for a little zing). We had pap and chutney and we had hotdog rolls. And raitha, in case some of the masala stuff was too spicy. It was a braai so of course everyone ate themselves into a shiny lipped coma. There was almost no space for ice cream and chocolate sauce.

There was the dinner at one of my dad's white colleague's house where they put all the kids and teens in a room and had us watch movies which was fine and gave us like two chicken drumsticks (a bit bland) and a bit of slap chips which again I thought was fine if a bit less. Then my dad snuck me some grownup food to taste. He thought the food was delicious and wanted his kid to experience it too. There was some rich warming stew thing with a mouthful of fluffy dumpling. There was some oven roasted veggies, which looking back probably had a balsamic glaze, and some roasted chicken with a beautiful dry rub and a lovely garlicky potato bake. I got just a nibble of each because he didn't want me to waste the kiddy food.

Then there was the time when the company went on a team building weekend away. The first night, there was a glorious buffet for the adults while the children were packed off to a playroom which was great. There were arcade games and dolls. There were board games and

Lego. It was fun. The thing is, my dad forgot to tell the caterers that while he was a heathen and ate beef, I did not. The meal for kids that night was beef burgers and chips, which meant that I only got chips. My mother found out when she came to check in on me. Unacceptable. So instead, I was taken to graze at the buffet. Because they let me, to be fair, all the other kids got to as well. While the other kids were whinging and asking for more chips, me and my Chinese buddy got down and enjoyed some grilled prawns, chicken satay, little mini spinach quiches, dolmades, braaied lamb riblets, stir fried noodles and and and. All while the other mommies gushed about how lovely it was that the two of us weren't such picky eaters. Are all white people like this?

Fairy Tale Lives

No one lives happily ever after. Someone always dies before the end.

One Day in High School

I learnt about the number of women who have miscarriages before they have viable pregnancies and, being the dumbass teen that I was, while my Mom was cutting chicken for that night's supper, I asked her if she'd ever had a miscarriage. I wasn't a complete dimwit; I did tell her what I'd learnt that day at school first. As she ripped slippery floppy skin from pink flesh, she told me that she hadn't, but that she'd had a molar pregnancy between me and my sister. I didn't know what that was. Jamming a knife between the thigh and drumstick joint, she told me the cells didn't form a baby. They just formed a lump and she had to have a D&C. I asked her how she felt about it. Rinsing the meat, she told that at the time she felt a bit sad but that she didn't really feel bad about it anymore. I was an arsehole but I wasn't blind. I can't remember if I hugged her or not. But I hope that I did.

A Handful of Salt

An aunty phoned her sister and spoke to her nephew. She apologised for forgetting his birthday the day before. When he asked what she got him for his birthday, she told him to bugger off coz twenty-two wasn't a big birthday.

A twenty-two-year-old boy went for a joyride with his friends. There was a collision. There may have been drinking but there was definitely speeding—by both cars or one.

A mother who was a nurse listened when her son said "Mommy these doctors don't know what they're doing. I'm going to die."

An aunty got a phone call from her sister after which she woke her children up at 2am to let them know that they would leave for Durban at 6am for their cousin's funeral.

The children were dazed and didn't fully compute and so went back to sleep.

While the children were getting ready to drive to the coast, a girl was getting dressed in the generic white pants and dress that Indian high schools in Durban all seemed to use back then.

The girl went to school and wrote her Biology prelim.

The girl came home after her exam and went to her room to study for the next day's assessment. She was still wearing her school uniform when her brother's body arrived at home. She came out of her room when she heard her mother's wail as the casket entered the living room.

A father changed into a dhoti and went into autopilot as he followed the instructions of a priest that helped his son rest peacefully.

A mother sat in a chair and gazed at her dead son's face and her niece thought she looked like the Pieta.

The house and garden emptied when the casket was transported to a community hall.

Everyone at the house arrived at the hall way before the hearse got there, because the hearse got a flat tyre.

The undertaker changed the flat tyre in his black suit and looked dusty and brown at the hall.

When the casket got there it was placed at the front of the hall with the caskets of the two other boys who died. Three caskets in a row. The two remaining friends missed the funeral because they were in ICU.

The caskets were placed that way so that everyone would pass by all of the caskets in one round—like a buffet.

A cousin paid her respects to all three boys with her parents. She will not remember what the boy on the far end looked like because he was ordinary. She will only remember her cousin's face because she knew it. But the face that she will try her hardest to forget is the boy in the middle casket, whose mouth was open and filled with flower petals. He did not look grotesque. He looked like he was in pain. The petals didn't hide that.

While hundreds of friends and relatives sat in plastic chairs or stood in huddled groups to gossip and commiserate, a toddler slipped away from her parents and politely rejoined the queue to view the bodies. The people behind her thought she belonged to the people in front of her and the people in front of her thought she belonged to the people behind her.

A mother looked for her toddler and found her standing next to a casket, looking at her cousin. The mother took the toddler by the hand and led her away.

Another cousin arrived a bit later and joined the back of the body viewing queue. The toddler went to stand with him. This time her father went to fetch her from the side of her cousin's casket.

A brother noticed his sister standing next to his cousin's casket and gently pulled her away and towards their parents.

A granny noticed.

At the most auspicious time for the boy's soul, the time that would make his journey the easiest, the casket was reloaded into the hearse and driven to a crematorium.

All male and some female relatives followed in convoy. The rest of the women went back to the house to supervise lunch and ready the manja water.

At the crematorium, the casket was placed on a conveyer belt contraption, the lid reopened and aunts and sisters said their very last goodbyes.

After the boy's casket disappeared into the portal in the wall, a father, closest uncles and male cousins followed through the door into the furnace room.

There was a kerfuffle when a mother tried to go into the furnace room. A huddle of people tried to convince her she was not strong enough. She went through.

In the furnace room, they removed the inner box from the casket and placed it on a roller stand.

In front of the furnace, a father performed that last of last rights, lighting a camphor on his son's forehead.

Attendants closed the box, opened the furnace door and a father pushed the box in as all the uncles and cousins chanted Govinda Govinda Gooovindaaaa.

An aunty waited outside the crematorium for her sister and held her as she wept when she came out.

Two cousins stayed behind to receive the ashes. Everyone else went back to the house for food.

Everyone made sure to dip their fingers into the bucket waiting for them at the gate and sprinkle the manja water onto their heads.

A hungry toddler was outraged when a worried granny insisted that she have a bath first and she cried her way through it.

A harangued mother asked her son to make a roti wrap for his sister which she chomped on while her mother dressed her.

Roti roll still in hand, the toddler was led into the kitchen where the granny turned salt for her.

The braised cabbage was very tasty.

Empty Letters

I don't know what to say to you. Your loss is incredible. I'm staggered by the grace of it. I am envious of how clear and fluid your grief is. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not envious of your grief itself but of how you let me feel it through your words. I know that the pain I feel is a whisper of your own so I cannot understand how you are still breathing. It must be that call for dignity that you say our age requires. But, my dear, if you need to, let yourself be undignified just in your room. Or even just on a page.

I am overwhelmed by how you echo me. How can I deal with your grief? How do you expect me to absorb your sorrow? As I read your letter and even now as I write to you, your wound threatens to shred me. Your words tear at my also fragile soul. What can I say to you to mend those gashes when your words worry my own—making fresh jagged edges? Is this suffering living? Do all feel this? Is the trick to life, to let our wounds fester together in community? I don't know. I don't think I can carry your burden, however much I want to.

I'm sorry to hear of your loss. It must be devastating. I haven't lost as you have. I can't imagine the depths of your feeling, but you must pull yourself together. You can't let yourself shatter. You have too much life left to live. I say this but I think in your place I'd want to weep and never stop. I would want to sleep and never wake. But you and I are stronger than that. This loss is one of many that we will have, and you must get used to it. I feel for you, but you simply cannot fall apart every time something sad happens. After all, you are not the only one who suffers so.

Dead People's Prayers

Amma? When we pulling the leaf? Pull the leaf. Please pull the leaf.

Not yet

Mooommmy.

Just wait man! Give them a chance to taste the food.

The camphor went out. They tasted the food!

What is wrong with you?

I'm so hungry Amma. Pull the leaf.

I told you. Wait.

Fine…From where they got the joint?

How must I know?

Who's going to smoke it?

One of your cousins probably. Why you want some?

I'm only asking. Nice to ask.

Mmmm.

Who's it for? The weed. Thatha? Periya Thatha?

Chi. Not for our side you bloody nonsense.

You're such a snob Amma! And the cigarette? Thatha didn't smoke. Is it for Aiya?

Do you want a hiding?

What about the cane? Is that also for their side? Thatha used to drink isn't?

Mmm but not cane. That's for Pathi.

EH!

Like a fish she was.

For true?

Can’t blame her but.

Five Rand

At my sister's school fete, someone brought an old Volkswagen Caravel and put it on the soccer field. There was no glass in the windshield or in the windows. There were no tyres. One headlight was missing and the other was dangling out of the socket. The grey paint was peeling off and it had orange rusty spots. Its face was bashed in and its back was bashed in and its sides was bashed in even its top was bashed in. A skinny boy gave five rand to the teacher and the teacher gave the skinny boy a cricket bat. It wasn't a little one that the gradies use, it was a big chunky strong one that the grade sevens use. The boy had to hold it in both hands when he hit the Caravel. He whomped and whacked and thumped and smashed and his hair was all flying and eyes were so crinkled and his face was so red and he laughed and he chortled and he giggled and he snorted. And that's how it feels inside. Like the boy, the cricket bat and the Caravel.

Not All Hindus Are Vegetarian

When Daddy had a heart attack, he changed his lifestyle completely. He would wake up at three in the morning to do yoga before work, he would spend over an hour meditating and would have cold water only showers, even in winter. The most drastic change was that he became a vegetarian.

During the next school holidays, we visited my Aiya in her one room pensioner's flat and she made us some lunch. My mom, sister and I squashed on the sofa and ate a lovely, dressed chicken curry with guthra beans (and dhal and rice because there's always dhal and rice). But Mommy had warned Aiya that Daddy had turned vegetarian. So, she made him tin fish curry and boiled eggs instead.

I asked Daddy why he didn't just eat the dhal and rice—why he had eaten the tin fish. He said it was because Aiya made it specially.

Ordinary Love

Love looks like bowls of vanilla ice-cream when you don't understand your math homework; like getting a phone call to ask if you need the pads with the wings or without; tickled feet that get you out of bed on weekends; cheese omelettes for breakfast on a busy weekday morning—just because; hysterical laughter when you're not blinded by an exploding light bulb; chocolates to celebrate that you're exactly double your sister's age and you won't ever be that again; being yelled at to cut your toenails before you hurt someone; putting a pillow on the passenger seat so that you're tall enough to see over the dashboard; tapping the beat to Cecilia on the steering wheel as you belt out the words; getting birthday cake smashed into your face; a smack to your brother's head for stealing your cup of morning tea because some things are sacred; veggie pizzas from Mimmo's because it's Friday; your little sister waking up scared late at night and climbing into your bed but then tapping 'choo, choo baba' on your back because now you can't sleep.

Weekday Supper

Mommy! What’s for supper?

Pig shit and onions.

Mommy! What we having for dessert?

Wind pudding and air sauce.

Mommy! The tea's finished! Where’s the new box?

On my head.

Beige

There was once a man who cooked only beige food. Not nuggets and slap chips or cutlets and mash. He cooked wholesome food like dhal and rice but instead of braised spinach he would pair it with cauliflower. He would make yellow rice with biryani dhal and serve it not with carrot salad or pachutney but with sauteed potato rounds. The man didn't like cooking for other people, and no one wanted him to make their meals because they looked like meals a prison would serve, pale and colourless. The man was wily though, for his food didn't taste beige. He would tint the rice with saffron and would spice the cauliflower with manja and jeera seeds. His potatoes would be studded with mustard seeds and spiked with a slit green chilli.

Happy Birthdays

In other households, your birthday might mean getting some extra sleep—making your siblings wake up first to give you a bit of a lie in. Not in this one. It's your birthday? Wake up wake up wake ^{U}Uup! You have to wake up extra early. Go and brush your teeth. Go quickly have a bath. Get dressed neatly. Your Mother already lit the lamp so go and pray. Not the usual morning prayer with just a chumbu of water. There's fruit and milk, incense and camphor lit in the deepakulsum. Give God a quick thanks as you turn the camphor—you know your Mother's prayed for you properly. Put an ash dot on your forehead. Go to the kitchen and give your Dad a hug—he's come to sing happy birthday and watch you blow out the candles on your cake even though he doesn't live here anymore. Cut the tiniest piece of cake. Struggle to breathe as your sister jams cake into your face and up your nose, smearing it all around your cheeks as you choke laugh (don't swear because, birthday or not, your Mother will kick your backside). Go blow your nose and rewash your face. Fetch the milk from the Godlamp after the camphor goes out so Mommy can make tea. Cake and tea for breakfast before school.

My Dad's Stronger than Your Dad

I've only seen him cry three times in my whole life. The last time was when my mother died. The time before that, was when his mother died.

The first time was because I said something mean to him.

Good Night

One year after a man jumps off her balcony and runs away; nine months after she buys a house; two months after she returns to her country; a day after she moves into her new home, she lies on the sofa in her new living room and her father knows not to say a thing when she asks him not to switch off the lights.

Trojan Horse

I know it’s rude, but considering what happened to the Trojans, I think we should all be allowed to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Seeing Rird

On a sweltering day, in a hall in Durban somewhere, a woman in glittering red, with roses in her hair, sits on a stage, sweating next to the man who will become her husband. Both their hands pinch samagri into a blazing havan in time to ancient chants. She tries to feel happy and excited about her future but is instead silently fuming at her soon to be mother-in-law who stands in glittering red with roses in her hair.

A mother stands near her son and watches as he pours samagri into a blazing fire in tandem with the woman who will become his wife. She tries to be happy at the prospect of grandchildren but silently the mother is fuming at her future daughter-in-law and her family for ruining her son's wedding with bland biryani and undercooked potatoes.

New Bride Handbook

Don’t go by your husband. Mother is God.

Don’t go by your in-laws. Son is life.

Don’t go by your parents. Not their problem.

Don’t feel shy to take when they open the bottle. Not the first time but.

Don’t forget to get your own bottle. Don’t say anybody.

Spoilt

Let's all go beach. Daddy got a truck. Let's pile in. Don't forget the unda—must have puli sadham for the beach. No screaming – unless you want the belt. You're never too old for the belt, just ask your Mother. Don't sulk. You just have to talk to him. It's just one picnic, whatchu want? No you must go. We all going.

Look at your sisters. Water soaking their hems. Don't go any further it's indecent. Look at your brothers stripped to their briefs diving in the waves. So shiny. So slippery.

Therewa he's coming. Go for a walk. It's just one walk. Go man. Such a nice boy he is. One naice long walk. Go go.

Go quickly and come.

*

Uncles planned it I heard.

So sweet girl.

She didn't want. Didn't want.

But what to do.

Immaculate Conception

Here was no night dark mare, with limbs immobile and suffocating blindness. Here was no ghoulish talon pinching and sharp. Here was writhing light and ripples of golden undulation. Here was leonine grace and the drowning beats of a thousand doves' wings. Here was the whisper of butterflies and the cool slip of scales into untried depths. Here was scorching tremors. Here was conflagration. Here was shame.

Phoenix Unit Two

If you're going to steal from widowed grannies in Phoenix, take your time. Learn a little bit about the place. Don't choose the Aunty that lives next to the big fancy kind house. The locks on her doors and windows are old, she lives by herself, and no one visits her. When she collects her pension, she keeps the cash money in her handbag there by the bedside table. She's easy pickings. But if you chose that Aunty, you're going to find yourself chased by a clatch of bush knife wielding harridans from next door. And when they catch you no one's going to help. Because that's the main ou's wife, mother, mother-in-law, and sisters.

Mothers Wake Up Early

A wail rises with the sun, waking a two room, seven child household. A wail makes a toddling girl peek around a half shut door to see her mother sitting cross-legged in her nightclothes on an unmade bed, her braided hair falling into wisps, her face tucked into a blanket-wrapped bundle that she clutches as she rocks and rocks and rocks.

Ascension

Once upon a time there was a girl who became a deity. She grew up and when she got married, she wore peach and gold Kanjeevaram. Not red. Because she married a Govender not a Naidoo—I'm not sure this kind of thing matters anymore, but the Aunties would want it known.

She wore a standard gown and nursing bra when she gave birth for the first time because you know—modern modern must go hospital. It didn't matter though because she wasn't a deity yet.

A few months later, she wore a plain white blouse and a grey skirt when Jukskei called her (not Yamuna—although that would have been more poetic).

Boring attire for becoming an Asura but I don't think she cared.

At the Doctor's Office

One of my aunties was raped so she had to marry the man who raped her.

Another of my aunties got married to a man who beat her so badly that she lost her baby.

I know because my Mommy told me.

Someone hurt my Mommy too.

I don't know who. I don't know when. I don't know how.

Because my Mommy didn't tell me.

I left the room when the doctor asked the question.

ShankaraNarayana

Sing to me the song we used to sing before we were born.

The one that made the wind laugh.

Play for me the flute that you played before we were born.

The melody that made the cows giggle.

Dance with me the dance we danced before we were born.

The one that broke the world into being.

Open your mouth and show me all that I knew and have forgotten.

Over the Wall

There was once an ordinary house with an ordinary garden and an ordinary family living inside it. One perfectly ordinary day, the children of this house were playing in its garden—just kicking a ball around in an ordinary way. Then as is the wont of little children, the littlest kicked the ball just a bit too hard at just the wrong angle and the ball soared over the wall into the not so ordinary garden of their neighbours. This garden was not so very extraordinary. It's just whereas its ordinary neighbours preferred a lawn bordered with flowering shrubs and standards, this garden liked tall, expansive trees. The tallest child peered over the wall but couldn't spot the red orb through the foliage. Still, balls didn't just disappear. It must be there somewhere. Privacy trumped sunlight.

"Go ask if you can fetch it."

"No way. I'm not going there."

"You kicked it over!"

"I don't care! I'm not going."

"It's fine. I'll go."

An ordinary preteen figure went through a perpetually open gateway and clocked the ball at the far end of the garden nestled in a dense cushion of giant ferns. Walking up the short driveway to the front door the figure paused about halfway across the stoep. She stared at the intricate dew-jewelled web adorning the doorway. Each strand of its geometry distinct, each exquisitely delicate. The figure tried to not look at the solid black mass that lay in the middle of the symmetry but the bright orange on its back drew attention. The figure made a decision and stepped back, a flicker to the left catching her attention. A metre away a furry midnight shadow sat in the canopy twilight gazing with fluorescent amusement at the figure.

"No one's home my dear. But I don't think they'd mind if you get your ball."

"Thank you, Ma'am. I'll be quick."

Hoodies

Jyoti thinks Kel and I were brothers in our past lives. We're too close. Too tough. Too honest. Too true to just be sisters.

The Mother-in-Law Eater

My sister said it was mine but I swear it was hers. Either way it was awful. It was a raging, stomping, snorting mess of nostrils and horns and eyeballs that chased and bellowed and snarled. They told us to run because it was dangerous but now looking back I wonder why we were scared. I wonder why *we* had to run. It wouldn't have eaten us. Neither of us was a mother-in-law and neither of us had plans to be one—she was too young and I was old enough to know better. I wonder whose mind it ran through first? Because it charged so long ago and we told our dreams so true that our memories got tangled.

Fireflies

A boy gazes out the window of an Airbnb on the South Coast. It's night time and the bush is sparkling. It's sparkling brighter than the stars. If he wasn't old enough to know better, he'd think it was magic, that maybe there were fairies playing outside.

"Mommy, see outside."

"It's beautiful hey."

"Can I go outside to see it better."

"No no mustn't go. It's not good."

"Amma please man."

"Amma please what? This is a bad place must be, to have so many."

"Whatchu mean Aiya?"

"No. Amma don't give him any ideas please." The mother leaves the living room to go unpack.

And the boy takes his chance and plops down on the sofa, misjudging the softness and sinking backwards before righting himself next to his grandmother. Playing with the wrinkly skin on the back of her hand, he asks:

"Whatchu meant Aiya?"

"Your Mother said I mustn't say anything."

"I won't tell her. Comon Aiya. Puhleese."

"Awright fine. You know, in the before times there were loooot fireflies because it was hard. Very hard it was. Lot people used to leave their lives before it was their time. They had to stay like that till it was their time. Then they would go way."

"What then, the fireflies are spirits? So then? Do they do anything?

"No No. They don't hurt people or what all. But it's not nice to play with dead things, you know?"

The boy nodded his head. He was old enough to know about the environment and how urbanisation killed off habitats and stuff. They learnt about it in Social Sciences at school. He wondered why all his Aiya's stories were so sad, even about beautiful things.

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The next mornings were sandy and wet, which the boy spent traipsing over rocks with his mother, looking at crabs hidden in crevices, digging up sand lice with his father, and assuring his granny that he wouldn't drown in the waves while making sure he was purple enough with sunscreen. Days that were the perfect set up for glorious nights of sleep.

One evening, he was so tired and had spent so much time in the water that, when he lay down to sleep, he felt as if he was still gently bobbing along the waves. He was lulled into dreamland by a mind-made waterbed. The boy slept deeply but woke softly, stretching his arms into the dark of late night. Someone was still awake though. He could hear the faint bang-a-clang of an action movie—probably Aiya. The boy flung his duvet away in sleepy disgust turning onto his side to try and find a cool patch of bedsheet. He opened his eyes facing the window.

And there he saw a fairy. No not really. It was only a firefly, flickering just outside the windowpane. It was the closest he'd ever seen one. He got up and padded closer to have a look. Slowly, slowly he opened the window, pushed his head out and peered. He reached out his hand and the firefly landed in his palm, tickling it for a second before dancing around and between his fingers, turning the boy into a wizard with sorcerous hands. Then the lightning bug flitted around his head in an ephemeral coronet and soared away. The boy smiled in pure delight, and quickly clambered through the window to follow the bug. Boy and bug whished through the night towards some insect friends near the boundary bush of the property. The boy stood watching the light symphony with soft glee but somehow kept his eye on his guide bug. After an age he saw that his special buggy buddy began to glow more brightly. Its incandescence drowning out its friends, filling the boy's eyes with luminescent green.

Now the boy was not in awe. Now the boy just stared.

Abruptly he turned away and sprinted back to the house, leaving the light hovering in the distance. Banging on the door. His voice bloody, over and over he shouted.

"Ana! Ana! Ana!"

In the doorway stood a shocked Aiya and in the background his father rushed out of the bedroom on high alert, struggling to pull on a T-shirt.

“What happened boy?” His father stooped to put his hands on his son’s shoulders.

“Ana. Daddy, Ana! Oh God Oh God.”

The man looked at his mother-in-law as the boy slid to his knees, the heels of his hands pressing hard against his eyes. The boy’s mouth stretched wide open in heart shattering silence as he bent to rest his forehead against the floor, his whole body convulsing.

From his parent’s room came the urgent wailing of his mother’s cell phone.

Childhood

Once a girl in a canoe rode through a waterfall in the sky. Stars waved at each other across eons. Flowers complained to the clouds about rude wasps and handsy bees. Hadedas wailed over a fallen brother and a butterfly whispered comfort to a dying tree. Now it's just my knees that warn of the coming rain.

Stanger Uncle

There is a place in KZN where God spilled a little bit of heaven onto earth. There is a man with magic in his soul that tends this garden of wonder. He would take all who visited his abode on a tour of the lands. In each season he had something to give. As his tours wandered the many footpaths, past bathtubs leaking geraniums and fridges exploding with chrysanthemums, he would encourage stealing from his abundance. In winter, he would pull mother-in-law's tongue, strawberries and mint, from the root and press them into hands. He would break stems off this plant and that shrub and insist that they were pick and poke—just pick a stem and poke them in the ground and they would thrive. No matter how many people told him that not everyone was blessed with magic hands he would insist, that half the plants in his garden were easy to grow. If you were there at the right time in winter, he'd hand out armfuls of strawberries, and bomblymush as big your head. In summer, there would be litchis and round mango and long mango and grandilla and white guava and china guava and pawpaw and avos. In spring there would be sour herb buds and matchekota and averkah and while murunkeere was around pretty much all year round, murunkeere flowers and later murunkah were a seasonal treat. Most abundant of the year-round treats were the bananas, he would hand out bunches of long bananas and butter bananas, sweet and sour bananas and Stella Hill bananas to all who came to visit and to all who even walked past his house. Because of this he was a great favourite of the children walking home from school, who would peer into his garden and seeing him through the foliage would shout "Hello Mkhulu!" and though all of his neighbours' houses were robbed at some point or the other no one ever thought to filch anything from him because why steal when you can just ask.

Davor

Mrs Rademeyer was the first teacher I had after my family moved from Lenasia South to Kensington. She was a stern, steel bunned woman who didn't wear glasses and believed in doing things properly. Sitting properly, walking properly, colouring in properly and speaking properly. One day a slightly pink boy transferred in, and Mrs Rademeyer asked him to introduce himself.

"My name is Davor."

"Davor."

"Yes."

"No. Davor."

"Davor."

"I dislike it when people pronounce their names incorrectly. It is Davor."

"Davor?"

"Much better."

I was baffled by three things.

That there was a difference in the name she was saying and the name that he was.

That anyone, even a teacher, could correct how someone pronounced their own name.

That if she was so concerned with the pronunciation of names, why didn't she pronounce mine correctly.

Mid Year Trials

Imagine if you will a school hall full of students sat silently at desks arranged in neat rows.

The facebrick walls are barren of any decoration, but the high windows are crosshatching the room with sunlight, turning the scuffed floorboards a vivid pale yellow and deifying students caught in its boundaries.

There are at least two classfulls' worth of students present. They are of both sexes and a variety of heights, girths, shades and textures.

One of the students seated at a desk is a girl.

She's not lucky enough to be caught in a block of light. She sits in the shadowed cold.

She is in grade 7.

She is writing her midyear English creative writing exam.

Let us say she has put her pen down, leaned back and is staring blankly ahead of her—thinking.

Let us then say that she takes one minute to register what she is seeing, another minute to comprehend it and then another thirty seconds to put her plan into action.

It takes our girl two minutes and thirty seconds to raise her hand and catch the attention of an invigilator to inform him that the girl, who is seated three rows ahead of her—well her hair is on fire.

Our girl watches as the teacher whispers in the student's ear. The teacher smoothly shifts the desk out of the sunlight as the student calmly pats her smoking hair and resumes her exam.

Our girl then writes a story about a heroine who must hide the fact that she is part dragon but is hampered by the fact that she starts flaming when she's stressed.

Aiya

An old woman who didn't know how to speak love went shopping with her daughter and her granddaughter. The little girl saw a pink, plastic tea set for children. She wanted it. She asked her mother for it. Then she begged her mother for it. Then she cried her mother for it. Her grandmother watched and listened to her grandchild's tantrum. Then she saved. She put aside a tiny bit of her tiny pension. And years later when she had enough money, she gave to her granddaughter a birthday present of a pretty set of white teacups and saucers. They had a rim of blue flowers and were not fine and dainty but solid and dishwasher proof. The bemused teenager took the gift, admired the cups and handed them to her mother. Her mother put them away in a tall cupboard out of sight never to be used.

An old woman who didn't know how to speak love heard her granddaughter ask her parents for Barbie clothes. Her granddaughter begged for the clothes. Then the granddaughter sulked for them. The old woman asked her daughter for some thread and scrap fabric. She was given some cotton thread and two old pillowcases, one white, one green. When the little girl came home from school, she found an ugly, frayed dress with a white bodice and green skirt waiting for her Barbie. She sighed to herself and thanked her grandmother, knowing that this was the best she was going to get. She put the dress on her Barbie and was happy that it was a long dress, and she could pretend that it was an evening gown and that her Barbie was a princess. The little girl's sister was more interested in cricket balls than Barbies, so the doll and the dress were sent to the Salvation Army after just a year or two.

An old woman who didn't know how to speak love got a phone call from her daughter. They talked about their days and her daughter asked about the people that she'd left behind and they gossiped about people the daughter no longer cared about. The daughter then told her older daughter to speak to her grandmother and they spoke about high school. Then the daughter asked her younger daughter to speak to her grandmother and they spoke about primary school. Then the younger daughter forgot herself and just before saying goodbye told her grandmother that she loved her. Startled by her mother's shocked face and her sister's gasp, the younger daughter quickly said her farewell and put down the phone.

"Oh my God! What did she say?"

"Thank you. She said thank you."

A Deep Dive

Dive into the water. Misjudge and instead of a shallow race dive, dive a deep, try to touch the bottom of the world dive. Turn yourself around once the momentum stops and know that you didn't breathe enough air for the dive you just did. Swim for where the light dances with water as fast as you can. Get just a bit more than halfway and feel your heart trying to thump right out of your throat. Kick harder. Get a bit further and realize you won't break the surface. Just before you give up, feel a surge of current pushing hard against your soles. Wake up.

Voices

It happened from the first night she'd ever spent in that house. But she'd been too tiny to care and she couldn't walk yet even if she had noticed and wanted to do something about it. Then when she was old enough to notice and to walk, she wasn't tall enough to reach the bedroom door handle. When she was finally tall enough to do both, well—she was a kid at her grandparent's house. She had to thrash her cousins at guli ganda and she had cry into her Ma's lap when the neighbour's son won all of her marbles. She had to crouch beside her Thatha with screwdrivers and nails to help him turn an old bathtub and some pipes into a rainwater irrigation system. She had to be scolded by her Mommy for climbing the Mango tree in a dress and flashing everyone her panties. She had to be scolded again (this time by her Dad) when she went with her brother to go cut a few stalks of sugar cane from the plantation down the road. She had to sit under the shade of the litchi tree covered in sticky juice chewing and chewing and chewing. She had to play hide and seek when it was bath time. When she finally could be coaxed to bed, she stayed there and couldn't be bothered to drag herself out. Besides the grownups were just gossiping away late into the night. Nothing interesting to see there.

Passing time meant school and new friends and new things to do and places to visit and less overnight stays at her grandparents' house during the holidays. But sometimes she still did stay over. And when finally she was old enough to tell time and aware enough to know that everyone was in bed, she woke up into the red black of her closed eyelids and the stillness in her body lying on its side. She woke into the feeling of being watched. She slowly let the incomplete darkness of the room into her vision. Dim light from the municipal streetlamps crept over the boundary wall into the bedroom, shading everything in an old-fashioned monochrome and hardening the already stern gazes of her frame-bound relatives into sinister glares. She felt her ribs stiff and clinging to each other and carefully rolled onto her back, trying to gentle the thurum thurum in her chest. Quietly forcing air into her body and forcing her shoulders away from her sternum. Breathing through the unease she sent her ears out wide, funnelling sounds into her brain. She frowned—people were chattering downstairs. But who? It was so late. It was… It was after one. Ma and Thatha had gone to bed at eight. Mommy and Daddy had gone to bed at the same time as her and her sister. Her brother? Maybe he was watching TV. She was going to give him so much grief tomorrow. She was going to wake up extra early and go to his room… She closed her eyes and—

“Akka.”

“Akka. Akka!” She heard her sister’s clear trill calling her from downstairs.

She opened her eyes wide, flooding in every inch of her room. She held herself and her breath. Her body so tense her toes were pointed. Then slowly, so very slowly, she snuggled closer to her sister sleeping next to her and only closed her eyes again when the sun and her grandparents had woken up.

30 Seconds

Okaaay. Time staaarts…now!

Right. It's a place near Cape Town.

There's lots of places near Cape Town cuz.

It's between two mountains…They grow fritz there!

What?

Fritz. They grow fritz there.

What are fritz?

Fritz! Fritz! They grow on trees.

I donno know what fritz are.

They're fritz! Whatchu mean you donno what they are!

I don't know what they are! Describe them to me.

Fritz –

Times Up.

Sorry—

Fritz man. Apples, pears, oranges?

Wha…Oh…Ceres Valley?

The Sands of Time

5 o'clock on weekdays was a sacred time. I thought it was just in my house but no. Whenever I happened to be at a friend's house or visiting relatives, at 5pm the same thing that happened in my house happened in theirs. All chores were put on hold. Depending on the hierarchy in the house, the mother would take prime spot on the sofa or lean against the armrest nearest the door to dash into the kitchen every now and then to make sure supper didn't burn. Everyone would gather around the TV, settling in and getting comfortable as "Like sands through the hourglass so are the days of our lives" hummed into the air. In my house I would be outraged when my mother sent me to stir the pot just when Samantha's devious plans were about to be found out. I would race back to find out that she was pregnant with Lucas' baby. At my Aiya's house she would tut at Stefano Dimera's crooked schemes but assure me that "They're only acting—it isn't real." At my Ma's house there were so many of us that the cousins all had to sit on the floor. Can anyone forget yellow-eyed, demon-possessed Marlena floating off the bed? A time for us to sit united and shake our collective head at those kachras and their shenanigans.

Tuck Shop Corridor

There is a beautiful school with rosy lawns and stuffy traditions that has lined its corridors with black and white pictures of sports teams and matric classes. You can really only tell the difference between the photographs through the hairstyles—the finger curls of the early 1900s, the brush outs of the forties, the bouffants of the fifties, the perky ponies of the sixties, the wings of the seventies, the teased frizz of the eighties, the messy buns, corn rows and box braids of the nineties and early 2000s. The uniforms haven't changed much in over a hundred years—the summer still looks like a maid's uniform; the winter still looks like an apprentice nun's tunic. The corridor by the tuckshop has the oldest of these pictures. During break, that corridor is jammed full of girls gossiping, comparing test results, bemoaning their homework load and waiting for their turn at the crisps, pies and toasted cheese and tomatoes. You might think that some use the wait time to examine the frames lining the age-patinaed facebrick, but most try not to look too closely at the photographs. The girls are too blurred with time and inferior light-capturing technology. The pictures were all taken outside so their teeth are vivid lines and their eyes look like smudged demonic holes. In between classes no one uses that corridor alone. Only silly girls who mistimed a pee or sneezed a gush and need the nearest toilet scurry down that corridor. At night, after Parents' Evening or production rehearsal, not even the most desperate girl will walk that corridor alone no matter how well lit. All the girls in that corridor are long dead—and their smiles look envious.

Who's That

Hey look. Do you know who this is?

It's Ma and Thatha.

Yes. Well done.

They died before I was born.

That's right. They're your Grandma's parents…Who's this?

It's Grandpa. He died too.

Yes he did. Who's that sitting next to him?

…

It's your Grandma.

No.

Yes. Look. See it's your Grandma when she was young.

No.

Sunflowers

There is a woman who looks after me. She is tall and skinny and whenever I see her she wears a white eyelet blouse and a pink chiffon sari. She's always outside in the garden with her long fingertoes pressed into the soil—which is odd because she always wore navy stokies. She looks much younger than when I saw her when she was still alive.

Evening Stroll

When my Granny was a young girl she was walking home through the bush with one of her older sisters. It was dark already. My Granny never told me why two young girls were alone outside at night or where they were coming from. Maybe they stayed too late visiting a friend and the sun set on their way? Maybe they were coming back from the latrine? I don't know. But on the path back, they saw a big fat pig waiting. It had red eyes and its tusks curled up and out and its porky little feet faced backwards. My Granny's sister told her not to take her eyes off the pig. So she didn't. The two girls watched the pig as they walked past and kept their eyes on it, walking backwards until they got home. I've always wondered how my Great Aunt knew how to keep them safe. And I've always wondered if that pig was just a peyaar or if it was that other two-legged kind.

Sick Day

When my Dad was in primary school, he only had to walk three kilometres from his house in Kenville to his school in Greenwood Park. But it was up and down hills, through dongas and bush, and he carried a copper schoolbag that his Grandfather made. I can't understand why my Grandparents made a matchstick carry a metal briefcase. Maybe they thought the polished sheen would blind potential ruffians like some kind of rudimentary death ray. Whatever the reason, he carried it there and back until one day in standard three he got sick at school and the teacher sent him home early.

His friends found him passed out under a tree, hours later, on their way home after school. They ran to fetch my Granny and she carried him home on her back. After futile attempts to find someone with a car, my Thatha took my unconscious father to the nearest hospital on a local bus. Thatha took so long getting back home, that my Dad's sisters began to fret that their brother had died. But no. Thankfully, Thatha had just been mugged at the bus stop on his way home and had needed to bandage the wound above his eye where someone had tried to stab him. But I digress.

No one could figure out what was wrong with my Dad. After a month, my Granny took a vow on his behalf—her son's life in exchange for the next five years of him carrying Kavadi. Within a few weeks he was recovering at his Aunty's house.

He had a month and a bit off school. And you know he still came third in his standard at the end of the year.

Smallholding

My mama's farm has scarecrows that wear hard hats like the ones construction workers wear. He puts an old gallon bottle on the top of one of the bamboo fence posts along the border and some along his pathways. On top of that he sticks a helmet. Mama jams old trigger handle things from insecticide sprays between the posts and the fencing. From far, they look like rifles. My mama's scarecrows aren't meant for birds.

Same Same but Different

You know that story about the guy in the rural area that suddenly starts to make a lot of money and builds a brick house and gets indoor plumbing and electricity and then he buys a TV and his neighbours call the police because they're worried? This is not that story.

This is the story of a tiny Indian Aunty who lived in a quiet middle class neighbourhood who was kind enough to rent out her granny cottage to the young white guy from work, who got scared of the dushum dushum coming from Aunty's house and called the cops on Rajni Superstar beating up the village dacoits.

In the Shadow of Truths

In the forest was a settlement. Not a logging village. Maybe it started that way, but it turned into a leisure town funded by seasonal tourists and wealthy retirees. Living in that little settlement was a family. It had one father, one mother, one son and a daughter. They were a happy family as families go. The dad was a professional and the mom was a good cook. The son was smart and well… the daughter was too young to really be a person yet but was on her way to being a decent one. They all lived in a slightly too big house, but their bond only had a little bit left to be paid off so who cared.

But then as these types of stories seem to go, the dad died, and the mom had to get a job. Except the mom hadn't worked in years and didn't have great qualifications. But she managed to get herself a job as a receptionist at the local dentist's office. There shouldn't have been a problem—the son landed a scholarship at the private high school. But the mom was used to being a highflier and refused to get rid of the too big house with the too expensive rates and taxes because where would she put her stuff? She had to do the shopping at Woolies and not Checkers because, you know, the quality is so much better there, and we do really need organic raw cacao nibs for breakfast smoothies because, money is important, but so is health and happiness.

The son worked hard and smiled and ate his lunch alone and took refuge in rugby practice. He wasn't an outcast. He didn't have the newest phones. He couldn't contribute to conversations about the latest RPGs or weekends away in the city, but he was one of the best fly-halves the school had seen in its sad rugby history. He was a descent ou but a bit too good at English lit. He was cute enough to make the girls think, but poor enough to make the girls think twice. After a while the son realized that his mother wasn't going to cut back on R80 avocados, so he took a weekend/holiday job waiting a mid-range restaurant and got really good tips during peak season.

His sister followed him to high school without a scholarship, and his mother got a loan. And so, life went on, and if not rich, the family seemed ok. Except if you cared to look at the corners of the son's eyes. They were slightly strained from fights behind closed doors with his mother about overspending, and his sister about skipping Kumon sessions.

Then, a stroke of luck, an old friend of the father's joined the staff. An engaging and interested teacher who everyone enjoyed being around. He sent a smile and a wave to the son and daughter whenever he saw them on the grounds. A father himself, of two boys, he saw the faint lines in the corners of the son's eyes. For forty-five minutes a day, during his Business Studies class, the son didn't have to pretend to be at ease.

When the mother invited the teacher and his wife over for dinner, he would admire the daughter's mind and warn her mother to keep a cricket bat ready. He would applaud the son's skill and call him a lady killer. He would bring books for the girl and watch rugby with the boy. He would throw his arms around them both. He would gently scold sass and loudly praise achievements.

At school, he would laugh with the daughter—teasing her about a new haircut or her thick-rimmed glasses. He would speak half-truths to both children. Your mother is trying her best. Your sister will grow out of it. It's a stressful age for your brother. But he would speak full truths too. High school is hard but it'll be over quick quick. You probably won't get a sports scholarship. Apply for a bursary. You're smart. You'll get one of those no worries. You're too good for this place.

And a year or two later, about a month after the son's birthday, after digging around his home study for past prelim papers, the teacher would murmur those same truths, across the son's neck, up his thighs, spreading tingles through his fingertips, raising tremors across his belly.

Now, a decade or so later, and the son is still in school. Not the same one. A different one. One far from the damp darkness of the forest. One that stands in the dry heat of a desert city, bleached clean by a blazing, all seeing eye. The son sits, half zoned out through another Professional Development session filled with new buzzwords for old ideas. A guest presenter is speaking about herself—about when she was a schoolgirl. How a teacher spoke truths to lure her into false warmth. How he'd used those truths across her skin, up her thighs, to spread tingles through her fingertips and raise tremors across her belly. How he'd waited for years until he could hide behind her age. The son's lip beads. He gets to his feet—unsteady. Tea and glucose biscuits lump his throat, rising to climb back out.

Playing Games

I just wanted to play scrabble. Then I saw the message notification. Hello. Hello shouldn't make me nervous. Hello shouldn't make my stomach twist and my heart pound…Fuck…No no no. No. It's fine. Not every man is a creeper. So, I hello back. Maybe we'll chat about the game. Nope no. No. This is why. This is exactly why. This is why I change out of my shorts into baggy pants when I go to Bangladesh market. This is why I don't wear strappy tops to the Plaza in Fordsburg. This is why I don't go to the toilet by myself. This is why I look at the floor when I walk in public places. But you know what? Tell me. No. Tell me now. How're you going to make this my fault? Coz I know you're going to. Sita couldn't get away with it. She walked through fucking fire to prove that she didn't do anything wrong. Literally. Walked. Through. Fire. And it wasn't good enough. She still got sent back to her father's house. God – *actual* God said that if she made it through the fire then she wasn't to blame but people said fuck that she's a woman no matter what she did or didn't do she's at fault. So, he saw my pretty profile pic and decided to start a match with me. What!? Like actually. What? Don't say, well you shouldn't have used that pic in the first place, coz you couldn't see my clothes in that pic. You couldn't see my body—not that it should matter. You could only see my face. And my face is not my fault. Oh. I see. He was just being friendly… Really? He was being friendly. Oh. Ok. So, telling me that the only reason that he chose to play a match with me was coz I was pretty was being friendly. My mistake… Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I don't know that I looked like a twelve year old school kid in that pic? A smiling school kid. Yes. Smiling. I wasn't pulling duck face. I wasn't being seductive. Just my happy woman face. That shithead is a Yankee white jungle fevered paedophile so don't *tell* me he was just being fucking friendly. Hey baby, your ass looks fine. Is that also being friendly? I mean it's a compliment isn't it? Can I *please* just go buy milk without being someone's object? What did I do? I resigned the game and changed my pic to a boat. Can't fuck a boat. And I just want to play Scrabble.

Relax—This is Just One Story So Don't Come for Me

Once upon a time, there was a heist and thirty-one million rand got stolen from a cash holding facility. Everyone in Durban knows this story. Well in the Indian areas anyway. It happened in 1997. Legend has it that more than R31 million got stolen but no one can find it. As it stands the state only recovered R5 million of the thirty-one they knew about. They made a movie about the whole thing. I went to go watch it and it really wasn't my thing. It was so vulgar, and I thought to myself, do people talk like that there? And of course, they do, they just don't in my family. Or maybe they do but not in front of me for some reason. I suppose it's because I'm a 'good girl'. Or my family hasn't lived in neighbourhoods like that for a long time. Or because I'm a prude and a snob. Who knows?

Once upon a time there were also five brothers. The First was a good man, he worked in a low-level office job—some kind of clerk. The Second was a cop but he dies way before this story, so we'll leave him out of this. The Third was also a cop. The Fourth was a mechanic and a bit of a ruffian. The Fifth was a sweet, 'special' man who worked cutting fabric in a clothing factory and he didn't have anything to do with this story either, so we'll leave him alone too. They were all the sons of a hotel bartender, who in turn was the son of a low-level gangster. Their mom was typical of the times and was a housewife. For the record, I couldn't stand her. I thought she was the most childish person I'd ever met in my life, and I knew her when she pretty much had one foot in the grave already.

So, a heist and some brothers. If you're paying attention, you probably already know which of the brothers is involved in the heist. Right, if you haven't figured it out yet, this story is set in South Africa and the Third Brother was a cop and if you know anything about South Africa, it's that cops are corrupt. Sometimes big corrupt, mostly a little corrupt—no offence to that one honest cop out there and also no offence to the Second Brother, I don't know if you were straight or what. Ok, so the Third Brother got together some more corrupt cops and some other dodgy people—lawyers and such. He hatched a precision plan to steal the cash. I can't be bothered with the details of how they did it but if you want to know, go watch the movie or maybe ask someone in Chatsworth. The Third brother would have gotten away with it too. But no matter how smart you are, if your crew is dumb, you're screwed. The Third brother went to prison because his crew started spending the money. If your salary is R1500 a month then maybe don't buy an insurance policy that needs R5000 a month.

I have to say the first time I heard about the heist I was a bit proud. It's kind of cool you know. It takes brains and guts to pull that kind of job. But then I heard the rest that didn't make it into the movies and that maybe the rest of Chatsworth hasn't heard about. And that made me not so proud.

The First Brother and the Third Brother married sisters y'all. And the sisters were on good terms. If there's one thing that sisters on good terms do, it's talk to each other. About everything. So guess who spilled stories to her sister who spilled stories to her husband? Right. So the First Brother found out and like I told you before, he was a pretty decent guy. He tried to talk the Third Brother out of it. I don't know if he would have snitched on his brother. I don't know if he had any plans to tell anyone because being a decent guy doesn't always mean you do the right thing by the rules of the world you know. Sometimes it means doing the right thing by your family and sometimes that looks like doing the wrong thing.

Turns out it didn't matter what the First Brother was going to do because he was shot before he could say anything. He went to the spaza shop down the road to buy some cigarettes or something. He was standing outside chatting to the Shop Uncle's son, having a quick smoke when a white Polo pulled up next to them. He got five bullets in his chest. I don't think they even bothered to get an ambulance. I donno if the Shop Uncle's son saw who all it was or if he just hit the ground when the bullets were flying but he never told anyone nothing.

Their mother said it was the Third Brother. You know how you donno, but you know? That's how she said she knew. They say the Fourth Brother, the mechanic, found out about the hit and didn't warn the First. The Fourth Brother is a drugged up low-level enforcer for one of the local gangs now—a proper thug. They say he got hooked on the hard stuff because he couldn't deal with what he knew. I met him once and he scares the bejeezuz out of me. I won't go near him if my Dad's not around. Not that he did anything or that I think he'd ever hurt me, because you know I'm family like. But he's for sure cracked and flippin' hell, it's terrifying.

The Third Brother ended up going to prison—for stealing the money but not for murder. And you know he had a pretty good time hey. His cousin was a warder there or something. Whatever he was, that cousin was in a position to keep the Third Brother safe and comfortable and that's what he did. That ou did such a good job taking care of the Third Brother that when the Third was released from prison, he gave him a brand new BMW. That cousin is a pastor now by the way. So ja, the Third Brother is out now and he's living le good

life. He has some kind of business, and he has a nice big house in Unit XXX somewhere and his son is studying to be a doctor. I don't even think he's divorced. Ja he's still married to that sister.

I seen him once. My family were all shopping at Mall of Africa and my Dad introduced me and my sister to one of his cousins that he bumped into while waiting for us outside Clicks. Apparently he was visiting one of his kids that side. I said hello but didn't pay much attention at the time because my Dad has a lot of cousins, and my Dad only told me after, that he was the Third Brother. If you put him in a line up, I wouldn't be able to point him out. The only thing I remember is that he was wearing a pink Polo shirt and had grey hair. He looked like any other middle aged Indian man of a certain generation. He could be my Mama or the uncle from next door. He didn't look like a guy who could kill his brother but then again he didn't look like a guy who'd been in prison for armed robbery either.

I didn't like their mother. I always thought of her as a bit of a spoilt brat but I don't know what it does to a person to believe that someone you love killed someone else that you love, and that they were supposed to have loved as well. The Third Brother never went to his mother's funeral when she died. He went for his mother's sister's funeral but not his mother's. Just saying. I donno what I'm saying but I'm saying.

What Will People Say

There was once a Rajkumari who fell in love with a Stylish Munniamma.

Their families were perplexed but could not blame the devil white people.

The Maharani consulted with sages and close advisers about how to deal with the situation. Such alliances were allowed in their land but not common.

Some Gurus argued against their relationship citing the natural order of things.

Some Gurus argued for the couple, citing Ardhanarishvara and Mohini Devi.

After much contemplation of the physical and the spiritual (and of the potential future happiness of her child), the Maharani blessed the union and allowed the marriage.

Nevermind the Munniamma was half bread. At least she was also half porridge.

WeDIng Whispers

Shit

Kel!

Sorry Mommy. But look!

Oh God. What was she thinking?

Look at Aiya! She's going to kill her.

Shhh!

Are you seeing your sister-in-law Selvie?

What to do? What goes on in that woman's head I don't know.

Maybe it's the lights. We're a bit far so maybe it looks different up close.

What lights? What far? I saw her and asked. What she told? It's not rirrd—it's maroon. What maroon is? Dark rirrd! Now see!

Well who asked that girl not to wear a Benares? Such lovely Benares' there are and she wants that beady chiffon.

She's bread that's why.

Um. No, that's not fair. Even if she didn't wear a Benares, Aunty Corgi shouldn't have done that …Is that? Are…Are they serving food now?

Mmm. New Bollywood style. No more cinema seating and food after. Now it's fancy fancy bowls and tables. Serving in the middle of the ceremony. One big big show! See. They got dancers on the stage!

And mother-in-laws that look like cakes.

Oyo Gonum!

What? What I said? I'm wrong what Selvie?

No but how you can say like that?

Oh my God! What is this?

Why? Not nice? The girl's side did the catering.

Maybe it's a good thing Aunty Corgi wore that sari. Everyone will talk about that instead of the shit food.

Kel!

Sorry mommy. But did you taste…It's awf… The potatoes. They're not even…The potatoes aren't cooked Mommy! See here.

A Slap in the Face

I used to smack my sister all the time. On her bum or her leg or her arm. I never felt guilty. Not once. But never on her face. That was too much. Not even Mommy or Daddy ever slapped us, so I would never dare.

"Akka. Akka play with me."

"Not now. I'm doing homework."

"Akka what homework you doing? Akka Akka. Akka!"

"Science. Baba I need to think. Go watch some TV."

"There's nothing on TV. What you doing in Science? Akka?"

"See Mommy wants you in the kitchen."

"No she doesn't. Akka play with me. You can finish later. Please Akka."

"No baba I'm busy."

"Akka. Akka. Puhlees Akka."

"Oh my god! Please just FUCK OFF."

I look up at a slapped face.

I watch a tiny body lumber away.

I put my head into my hands as incomprehensible sobs ricochet off kitchen tiles.

Supper is late and my parents don't scold me.

Back to School

The ‘A’ word is forbidden in my home. It has been since I stood next to a Greyhound bus in a grimy Park Station, with my sister hanging around my neck, not wanting to let me go back to my second semester of varsity. Her face was muffled in my hair because that brat is taller than me and next to my ear, she murmured a sentence more precise than a surgeon’s scalpel more powerful than Teller’s H-bomb:

“You’re abandoning me.”

First Meal Back

Chicken curry with peas? Mutton curry with guthra beans? Lamb stew without turnips?

Dhal curry and porridge with kumquat pickle! Dhal and rice with carrot salad! Dhal curry with porridge and carrot salad! Dhal and rice with kumquat pickle!

You sure?

Ja why?

Poor people's food that. I can make something nice.

Final Exam

When I was in my first year of varsity, I was worried about my final Journalism exam. The course was tough, and we had to reapply to get into the second year of the course. I had worked hard on my assignments and submitted them on time—but so had most others. I had worked in a local newspaper over my holidays but so had most other applicants. Some had gone to big name publications and broadcasters like Carte Blanche and The Saturday Star. Passing my exam wasn't enough. I had to pass well. I stood outside the exam venue waiting for it to open, chatting with people to pass the time and ease the vomity feeling in my stomach. A white girl told me not to worry, that I just needed to pass. What do you mean? Well, you're Indian. Everyone knows there's a quota system. You'll definitely get in. There was no malice intended in her words. She meant to comfort me not undermine me. I get that. I still hate her.

Outside Andra Hall at Someone's Funeral

Hey man so long since I've seen you! How you been?

I'm good I'm good. How you?

Ay can't complain. So what? What you doing these days?

Oh I'm teaching overseas now.

But what you studied at varsity? Isn't you studied Journalism or something?

Ja.

But you teaching now?

Mmm.

So your father wasted all that money.

Inside Out

Sometimes I feel God sitting in the middle of my chest and He stretches out to fill all of me.

Sometimes He shrinks so small, He gets lost in my centre void and I forget that He's there at all.

At The Edge of the World

Once I decided to hike up a mountain. I'm not particularly outdoorsy nor am I ever really fit. It just seemed like something to do. I was maybe two hours into the hike when I came across a temple. It was unusual. Not the architecture. The wooden shape with sloped roof and elaborate eaves mirrored other temples in the country. The colours were nothing special either. No, the bright golds, reds, greens and blues were very common. It's just that it looked…old. The paint was weatherworn, and it looked…beautiful, in a way that its more perfectly restored and maintained relations could never be. I didn't go in—I didn't want to take off my hiking boots. I stood at the entrance gazing into the dim interior. It smelt lonely but it looked clean. There was no dust, no spiderwebs. There were no animal droppings or empty crisp packets. The three Buddhas were glossy and untarnished. They looked serenely dispassionate in their blessings for me. And then I heard drums. I followed the sound away from the doorway, back down the steps and around the back of the building where I found an extension had been built onto the back of the temple. Peeking in through the door, I saw an open plan modern space. A simple rectangle with pale wooden floors. On one side, a closed door, opposite that, an open rack with a couple sets of monochrome clothes with a pair of plain black flat soled shoes tucked beneath on the floor. Just beyond the rack the wall changed to glass, letting in the fluffy sky and the forest valley. At the far end corner of the room, abutting the glass, was a slightly raised platform and there was a young, bald man dressed in grey robes—the source of the noise. A Buddhist monk, rocking out on his drum kit. When he saw me, he jumped up, rushed to the door, and beckoned me to come in with a smile. I padded across the floor, my boots at the door, while he disappeared through the door. We sat on the floor, next to the world, sipping tiny cups of green tea.

Ramadan

I'm a lazy bum. Like super lazy. Not with everything. Not with work or anything but with cleaning and, a surprise to anyone who knows how much I like to eat, with cooking. I suck. I didn't live at home in varsity, but I did live in residence, so I ate in the dining hall. But when I moved to Sharjah to teach, I realized just how lazy I was. My friend at school would get me something if the Arabic staff decided to order in because I'd buy something from the canteen anyway. My mother scolded me every time we Skyped and even my sister despaired after she saw me eating baked beans straight out of the tin (not braising them with some onions and chillies *at least* is a sin in my house). I could have gotten take-out, but I didn't speak Arabic, Urdu or Hindi well enough to order on the phone and I was too lazy to walk and get some.

Then a blessing. A fast food takeaway opened up on the ground floor of my building and for months, not every day, but most days, I would walk in after school, place my order of every iteration of a chicken burger or sandwich that they had on the menu (I don't eat beef y'all). And when the food was ready, I would open my door to polite knocking to find the delivery boy silently judging me. I didn't care, the uncle downstairs was always happy to see me and always reminded me to order my Mirinda when I forgot. I'd like to think I single-handedly kept that place open, but the food was nice, and the prices were cheap, so they were pretty popular.

If you've lived in an Islamic country, you know what's coming. I knew what was coming too, so I got my act together and got into a regular routine of grocery shopping. I started cooking more—I made a pact with some friends in the building that each week one of us would cook a meal so that we all knew that at least once a week we all got one good, nourishing meal. So, on the first day of Ramadan, I was disappointed but not surprised that the fast food joint was closed during the day. I was ready. I had ingredients in my kitchen. About half an hour before sunset I gave up on grading my students' workbooks and was trying to decide if I should open a can of beans or actually try to cook something. I was surprised to hear a knock at my door. When I opened the door, I found the Fast-Food Uncle standing there with a container packed full of chicken biryani. It wasn't the best chicken biryani I've ever had but it was the best chicken biryani I've ever had.

Deepavali

Carefully detangling the hem of her skirt from around the legs of her chair, she stood up and walked over to the window. She watched her sister light the clay lamps in the front garden. They were all laid out already, along the footpath and the edges of the veranda, on the outside windowsills and along the top of the boundary wall. But the gusty wind that always seemed to plague this day was puffing out one lamp as soon as the next one was lit. A breath of stillness sent her sister flurrying to see all the lamps aglow in their splendour, even for a second, before the wind gusted them out.

She heard her mother call her from the kitchen. The kitchen table was covered with containers filled with vada, bhajia, gulgula, gulab jamun. The stove top was covered with pots of dhal, rice, spinach, pumpkin, sweet rice and kadhla. Her mother was probably putting together the last of the trays to be delivered to their neighbours.

She stood still, watching her dad place a tube in the middle of the tarmac road in front of their house, light the fuse and step away. She grimaced at the bang but admired the glittering flower constellation that exploded into being. She smiled as her mother brought out a tray of tea mugs and her father, with lamp light reflecting in his glasses, laughed at her sister who was twirling a sparkler halo above her head.

She heard her name called again. Turning from the window, she stepped away from home and walked to the student at the far end of the classroom, asking him a question to help him answer his.

Just off Ebed Khatim Street, Arkaweet, Khartoum

The walk home from the pharmacy was only 10 minutes but on most days it felt years long. She was stupid. She should have waited until the sun set to head out for her meds, but she had been desperate. She stepped out of the air-conditioned dimness onto the beige tarmac and followed the main street jammed full of javelin tyred tuk tuks, and bullying 4x4s – the shortest route. Dust and oily exhaust fumes clawed at her eyes and nose chasing her down a quieter side street. Limp foliage dripped over high walls, sending splinters of shadows across the hard packed sand. She passed an old man drinking from a plastic cup which was chained to an earthenware pot full of cool water – alms for the poor. She passed a younger man dressed in dark slacks and a buttoned shirt the colour of too many washes. She passed a woman in a blinding toub, envying her as the sun's rays ripped her own skin and turned her uncovered hair to embers. The parched air bled moisture from her, dripped it down her T-shirted spine until it pooled in the crevice between her breasts and stomach. She felt kinship with all the dusty, cracked feet as she walked on. Out of habit, she zigzagged from one shade fragment to another – although the shade did nothing to ease the heat's sting. She stumbled onwards, nodding a salaam to the flowery tea lady on the corner serving fragrant lava to clientele, took a seat on a melted plastic stool and leaned against the lukewarm mudbrick of the local mechanic shop. Trying to fight like with like, she took a sip of the mint tinctured tannin syrup and let beads of sweat flush her top lip. Squinting up through moringa leaves at an overexposed sky, she listened to the male babble around her before self-consciousness drove her to get up and mime her readiness to pay. Her chafing denim-clad thighs carried her back towards her villa, and she turned into her street. The neighbourhood square that usually sported an emaciated, boulder-tethered donkey, scraggly weeds, rubble and bags of rubbish was not its usual self. Instead, it was covered with rich red carpets. Real ones, not a pretty metaphor for flowers nor an ugly one for bloody bodies. The metal bones and canvas skin of a tent lay along one side of the square blocking the narrow street. The clotted pelt of a sheep hung from a low branch just outside her compound. A dark, fly-infested stain covered the spot where a car usually stood and as she walked closer a warm, stale, metallic taste smothered her, reaching down her throat to draw out acid. A wedding then.

Homesick

The azure sky slumps over buildings

sitting on my head—

cramping me. Crushing me.

I long for the other one.

The cobalt vastness pulling,

stretching me taut and tall—

infinite.

Staffroom Planning

It must be so hard when someone dies in another country. How does the family get the body back?

The embassy helps.

Really?

Ja. Well the South African embassy is supposed to anyway. There's all sorts of regulations and stuff—wrapping the body in plastic and sealing the coffin. I don't remember clearly but it's hectic. So the embassy gets involved.

Why? How do you know?

Mommy was scared when I first started teaching overseas and she kept asking what happens if I die, so I found out. I actually told her to let me be cremated and just repatriate the ashes. It's much much cheaper. But now I'm here. There's no crematorium so my family will have to shell out to fly my body back.

There is. There's one in Omdurman.

Yes. Lots of Indians live there so they have one. So we'll take you there.

I'm sure we can find a priest also. I have a lot of friends that live in Omdurman. They'll know someone.

Don't we need special wood? What is it called? Sandalwood? Where do we find that?

You guys—

In Omdurman you can find anything, but sandalwood is expensive. We'll have to get a collection together.

Nono. The school will surely—

You guys! I'm not going to die. Stop killing me off.

Youssef Islam

Cat Stevens said that he loved his dog more than he loved her but then he converted, so what happened to his dog?

Wobbles

The airport gives me runny tummy. Specifically, O.R Tambo International makes my stomach wobble. Every time. You would think I'd learn and bring some Immodium with me from home but whenever I'm there I have to rush off to the airport pharmacy and get some. JFK, Indira Ghandi, Hosea Kutako and Queen Alia don't have the same impact on my bowels.

Donation Bag

She finds a long-abandoned pair of white socks as she's cleaning out the cupboard.

Every day after school, she would shout at them to Take off those bloody socks! They would always call out Yes Mommy—and keep them on anyway.

They would glide and moonwalk around the lounge. They would spin and slide down the hallway. They would shimmy through the kitchen. Most often, they would skate away from the wooden spoon—until they scampered out of house and had to tiptoe around the garden waiting for her to forget. Then they would sail back through the house, polishing the floors as they went.

Some days she would laugh at them and smile with them and join in on their slippery waltzes. Every laundry day, she would groan and curse them as she tried to scrub-soak-bleach the socks clean.

She folds the old socks, puts them back in the cupboard. Takes them back out and puts them in the donation bag.

Different Families

When I was born, my parents were not fully ripe. They were sweet but still a bit sour and maybe a little bitter too. When I was small, I played with my teddies. I had a nanny—no not really. We had a domestic worker. Her job was to clean and iron—not to care for me. She fed me and made sure I didn't die. She was kind but not warm. I waited for my Mommy to come home from work. I would eat the last piece of a Peppermint Crisp that she'd saved for me while she cooked supper. I would fall asleep next to her in bed and wake up being walked to my room by my Daddy when he came home. On the days when we were all at home before bedtime, we would watch TV. Then I would catch it when I sulked about going to bed at 8 o'clock.

I caught it when I didn't want to go sleep. I caught it when I took too long to go have a bath. I caught it when I forgot to wash my feet before bed. I caught it when I was a bit too cheeky. I was a good kid. I only caught it from my Mommy. Sometimes Daddy asked me if I wanted the belt, but he never gave me.

By the time my sister came around, my parents were properly ripe. When she was little, she played with me. Or Mommy—Mommy left work to stay home. She even played with Daddy a lot—he mostly came home before the sun went down. She hardly ever caught it—not when she climbed on a kitchen stool, opened the fridge and threw eggs onto the floor one by one or even when she took all my Daddy's cigarettes and threw them in the bin. Sometimes Daddy asked her if she wanted the belt, but he never gave her.

When my brother was born, my parents were a bit soft and squidgy. When he was little he had one Mommy and one Daddy, one set of sisters but two sets of toys and two homes. He was adored. He was coddled. But at Easter he would play with his cousins and wish Daddy was there. And at Christmas he would annoy the neighbours and wish that Mommy was there. He never caught it from Mommy even when he threw the TV remote in a bucket of water or when he called next door Aunty a gulgula to her face. Daddy didn't even think to ask him if he wanted the belt.

Break Free Alt Me

There are rooms with mirrors reflecting mirrors. In movies they're usually in carnival funhouses but in real life they're usually bathrooms. The room is reflected in the mirror is reflected in the room is reflected in the mirror and goes on forever. When you enter, you're repeated and reflected into infinity. I always scrutinise the different me's to see if one of them does something a little different. Maybe she'll wink or push her glasses up her nose with her left hand instead of her right or maybe she'll smile instead of frown. It would creep me out if I ever saw her do that, but it seems like such a waste to have so many me's all doing the same thing. I like to think that the reflections whose backs I see or those in the furthest reflection of reflections are pulling a different face, are confronting their life in a different way. I'd hate to think they're all trapped by my decisions.

A Walk in Sunshine

A shabby, dim electronics shop. The displays and counter are clean and neat, gleaming in the dim light, but the floor near the door has dusty footprints.

Enter a flustered, befuddled young woman in a loose damp T-Shirt and beige filtered blue jeans. Heavy, bulging plastic bags hang from her arms. Her cheeks are bright red and there are beads on her top lip and in her hairline. As she enters cool air blows and her body visibly slacks.

A couple standing behind a counter look at her with faintly panicked expressions on their faces. The man wears tan trousers and a beige shirt. The woman wears a long pink strappy dress with a white long sleeve inner shirt and a pink and white swirly patterned hijab. They both look fresh and polished and dry.

Sweaty Girl: Salam Alaikum.

Electronics Man: Wa-Alaikum-asalam.

Sweaty Girl *setting down bags carefully:* I'm sorry to bother you but do you know where Foreign Khartoum School is?

Electronics Man: Sorry no English.

Sweaty Girl: Aaah… Ok… Foreign Khartoum Madresa? Where?

Electronics man shakes his head.

Sweaty Girl *miming walking and with hand gestures*: I Madresa walk how?

Electronics Man: Sorry I no English.

Sweaty girl looks like she's going to try again but decides it's futile. She nods and turns to leave.

The Counter Lady says something briefly in Arabic.

Electronics Man *comes out quickly from behind the counter:* No no. You*. Points at Sweaty Girl and gestures for her to wait*.

Electronics Man opens the door letting a waft of oven temperatures in and lets the door bang shut behind him.

Sweaty Girl turns to look at the Counter Woman, waves her hand in front of her cheeks, points at the AC outlet and gives the woman a thumbs up. The woman beams and gives her a thumbs up back.

The door swings warmly open again.

Electronics Man: You.

Points at her and gestures for her to follow him.

Sweaty Girls quickly picks up her shopping and hurries after him. Squinting against an overexposed sun reflecting off squat beige buildings and the beige covered tarred road. She crosses the road to where Counter Man is standing with another large and rather intimidating man.

Sweaty girl contemplates putting her shopping down but decides against it as the sand will get onto everything.

Intimidating Man: Hello. My name is Saood. You need help?

Sweaty Girl: Yes. Thank you. Do you know Foreign Khartoum School?

Saood: Yes yes. I know Foreign Khartoum School.

Sweaty Girl: Oh you do! Could you please tell me how to get there? I came shopping but then I got a bit lost on my way back.

Saood turns and shouts to a young man in Arabic.

Saood: My son Waleed will take you in the car.

Sweaty girl turns to look at the camera with a terrified expression.

Sweaty girl: No no. That's ok. I can walk. I just need to know how to get there.

Saood: No. He will drive you.

Sweaty Girl: No really. It's fine. I walked here. I can walk back.

Saood *gesturing with wide arms*: Sister, look at you! How can I let you walk?

Sweaty Girl gazes at a donkey nuzzling some desiccated rubbish nearby, feels the heavy bags cutting red stripes across her achy fingers, feels heat pulsing off her face, feels heat coating her body, feels heat smoking up her hair, feels the sweat sliding down into her butt crack.

She sweeps her eyes around. The street is busy.

Sweaty Girl: O. Ok. Thank You. You're very kind.

Saood leads her to a bruised Toyota Hilux with bus side mirrors taped on and opens the passenger side door.

Saood: This is my son Waleed.

Sweaty Girl nods at Waleed, places her bags on the floor of the bakkie and clambers in awkwardly. Saood slams the door closed.

Saood: Keep safe Sister.

Saood briefly addresses Waleed in Arabic and gives him a long stern look. Smacks the car twice and nods at Sweaty Girl grim faced.

The bakkie drives off.

Sweaty Girl sits stiff and doesn't buckle her seatbelt. Her ears listen intently but don't hear the click of the car door locks. Her eyes swish about and her eyebrows raise when she gets her bearings. How far had she walked? No wonder her knees and feet were angry with her.

Stay focused!

Waleed: You're hot.

Sweaty Girl turns to Waleed. He's looking at the road but glances at her and taps his cheek.

Sweaty Girl huffs a smile and slumps into her seat.

Sweaty Girl: Yes. I feel like I'm going to die.

Waleed: No. Not Today.

Workday Stress

When one becomes an international teacher, one doesn't expect that one of the requirements of the job is to sit worrying about your local colleagues and students being gunned down by government militia at a peaceful sit in, but here we are.

When one becomes an international teacher, one doesn't expect to find a jeep parked under a tree outside the entrance to your school, filled with lazing militiamen carrying AK47s, but here we are.

When one becomes an international teacher, one doesn't expect to drive home after a Parents' Evening and be directed around a blockade of burning tyres by pro-democracy protesters, but here we are.

When one becomes an international teacher, one doesn't expect to witness a dictatorship toppling after months of peaceful protest. One doesn't expect to defy school orders, to stand in the streets and watch university students hugging lawyers, tea ladies twirling with doctors, highschoolers high fiving accountants and policemen jiving with babies. One doesn't expect to see thirty years' worth of repressed freedom marching down the street in joy and in hope, but here we go.

Travel Bug

Sometimes I would feel sick on the R102 between Johannesburg and Durban—always on the way down to the coast. My dad used to pull up on the side of the road and I would vomit up my crisps and cola beside a clump of dried-up shrub, usually somewhere in the Free State.

One time I felt sick when we were driving on the SP 15 between Volterra and San Gimignano. The roads were narrow and bendy and full of psychotically fast drivers. In my child's eye, I thought the verges were wide enough to pull over, but my father thought otherwise, so instead I threw up crackers and pears onto my lap.

Every time I took a Greyhound, on the R67 just before Aliwal North, in the middle of the night, trying to hold closed the busted toilet door, I retched popcorn and TopDeck into the bus toilet. It only stopped when my parents felt sorry for me and paid instead for flights to and from varsity.

But then I went snorkelling in the Eritrean Red Sea in choppy weather and threw up my dodgy eggy breakfast over the side of the speedboat.

And then, in the fjords of Norway on an old ferry without stabilizers trying to eat in a dining room with the chairs chained down and the tables bolted to the floor, I finally realized that car sick is seasick is motion sick.

I was the last in my family to know.

Toblerone

Stand next to a pyramid of Giza. Notice that you are just a head taller than a single block of stone. Sweat in the sun for a picture to prove it.

Walk into one of the oldest tombs in the Valley of Kings. Peer through the protective glass panels at the bright, multicoloured, painted (not carved) hieroglyphs. Think of how neat and precise each icon looks. Think of how they remind you of a schoolgirl's colour-coded notebooks—perfectly crafted. Exquisitely restrained.

Look at the pyramids of Meroë rising from the sunset sand like rosy, terracotta Toblerone's—rich in hue unlike their washed-out Egyptian cousins.

Stand in a Toblerone tomb that's been opened for the first time in fifty years. Blink through the darkness. Half listen to a passionate archaeologist explain its significance. Be distracted by the yellow glowing off the walls. Freehand hieroglyphs illuminate your soul. Painted freedom in a room of death.

The Worm

The worm said, “Please let me go.”

The child said, “Look what I’ve found. I need to wash it.”

The teacher asked, “Why do you need to wash it?”

“I need it to be clean so I can keep it in my pocket.”

“I don’t think the worm wants to be in your pocket.”

“Why not?”

“Would you like to be stuffed into someone else’s pocket?”

“No.”

“Well then?”

“Where does the worm want to go?”

“Back where you found it, I imagine.”

“But it’s dirty there.”

Stop

Stop the sign said. So I stopped. Because it was faded and peeled and looked interesting against the cloudy sky. Like an artist had decided to mirror the sky in some sort of obscure message about greys and life. I took a picture of it because it looked pretty and posted it on Facebook and then made stuff up when people asked me what it meant.

Stop the sign said. So I stopped. Because there was something else written underneath it. But I couldn't see. So I disobeyed and went closer. "STOP worrying." You think I'm being metaphorical but I'm not. Hand painted. I took a picture of it and put it on Insta because it was sweet. No one asked me what it meant.

The Tale of a City

Once long ago, a fair young maiden was sent on a quest of learning. A most wise and learned sage of great renown had sent word to Centres of the Deep Arts across the known world, that she would host a summit. Each Centre was invited to send ambassadors to the summit to enhance their understanding of the Arts and in turn spread their gained wisdom amongst those in their own Centres.

The journey and stay at the summit would be costly and so the Grand Board voted that even for such an important event, only but one of their practitioners would be sent as ambassador. Having no hint at what the summit would entail, they sent their youngest and most likely to remember things. The maiden was excited by the quest but much perturbed. For the summit was to be held in a great city of the Land of Stars and Spangles. A city known to be cruel and unforgiving to outsiders. Still, she knew that those who attended the summit would be open and kind and as she would spend most of her time with them, her fear was tempered.

Her journey to the city was long and uncomfortable but largely uneventful. As she drew nearer the city gates her trepidation grew, she had heard tell of fearsome trolls who despised outlanders and so tricked them and held them captive for imagined slights. Prisoners were said to languish in gaol until forgotten or eaten by one of the trolls grown peckish in his duties. But she was met with no troll. Instead, she was met with a soldier of the city guard who asked about her business and, after being told, smiled and bid her welcome to enjoy the delights of the city. The maiden breathed her relief and passed through the Arches of Truth. She saw a bustle of people—people from her own land, people from the Land of SnowTipped Mountains, people from the Land of EverRaining Jungle, people from the TinderDry Veld and of course people from the Land of Stars and Spangles.

The maiden found herself a public carriage and commissioned it to take her to the Inn of the Guild of Practitioners. The driver noticed her manner of speech and asked from whence she came. She told him of her home, and he smiled. He said that when he had been but a young lad, he and his parents had gone to the Land of ClearGreen Sea to visit relatives and while playing cricket on the beach had met the maiden's king, who was on a state visit. The driver had great knowledge of her land and many others and so they passed the drive amiably until he dropped her at the door of her lodgings. There he bade her farewell and wished her safe and happy.

The summit would not start until the next morning and thus the maiden had a fair portion of the afternoon to her leisure. Having made herself comfortable in her rooms and being emboldened by the friendly carriage driver, the maiden was of a mind to explore the city. The city, despite its unfavourable reputation, was a hub of trade and so there was a preponderance of merchants peddling wares from, it seemed to the maiden, all the lands of the globe. There were eateries and carts serving up the beguiling aromas of flatbreads slathered in a red sauce covered in cheese, of an oblong bread roll stuffed with some sort of cylindrical meat stuff and topped with a fermented leafy relish. There were cobblers and apothecaries and public houses and—oh! The city's Archive of the Deep Arts was beautiful—bigger than any of her land and guarded by two Panthera Leo gazing at passers-by with aloof dignity. In the public pleasure garden, the bustle quieted somewhat. The verdant lawns were mottled with families chasing after a flat discus (a frizzed-bee?) and groups of friends kicking a ball about and one or two single folk enjoying a leisurely nap on the grass. Her encounters with the natives of the city told her that they were busy and brusque of word but kind. They did not suffer fools, but they were not cruel and were of the same treatment to each other as to outlanders. She returned to her rooms light and full of good cheer for the days to come.

The next morning saw the maiden waking early and enjoying sliced fruits mixed in curd and honey with toasted bread and a strong cup of tea for her morning meal. After confirming her directions with the innkeeper, she set off on a glorious sunlit walk to the summit. As she entered the vaulted summit hall, the maiden was perplexed to see that almost all the attendees were from the Land of Stars and Spangles. The expense of the event had proved too dear for most Outland Centres of the globe to send an ambassador and so the hall teemed with practitioners from other regions of the Land of Stars and Spangles—for them the expense was not nearly so costly. Of course it was no matter, the maiden's experience of the city the day before had heartened her. And so the summit began and my oh my! The classes were so exciting, and the instructors were so wise! The maiden learnt such of the Deep Arts that she thrilled to spread the wisdom to all she knew back in her homeland.

Every day she greeted her summit colleagues brightly. Every day in class she would hear her colleagues talk about the Wonders of the Deep Arts and how important it was to spread its joy to all and sundry. Every day she would hear her colleagues discuss how difficult it was to impart the knowledge of the Deep Arts to newly settled outlanders. She would hear how these local practitioners worked tirelessly to help these unfortunates. Every day she found herself

challenged to find a group to work with. Every day she found conversation dried up around her. Every day she found her opinions and knowledge left in the ether. Every day she found that outside of the classes she was seated alone. No evil word or foul action was taken against her but steadily, she was ignored into silence.

She began to see that though these practitioners were strangers to each other they were all of them cookie cutter people. No no no. They did not look the same. They were all of them different in size and shape and dress. But they were all of them of the same dough. Their speech did not match their hearts nor their actions, and what is worse they did not perceive it. They believed themselves true of their word. She saw that these practitioners sought not to spread the Deep Arts but to keep it for themselves to use it as a yoke for outlanders daring to live in their midst, and the maiden's heart ached. Not for herself—she would leave back to her own land of many peoples. She ached for the acolytes of the Land of Stars and Spangles. Those young apprentices who would be made to feel unworthy and abandon the study of the Deep Arts. And so grew in the maiden a profound despair.

Taj Mahal

The monument of love that is a mausoleum. Proof that death is more beautiful than life and that sons are rubbish.

I am waved through with my sister and mother, with a glance in our bags. My father is in a long line of men waiting to be felt up—like women can't hide guns or bombs up our skirts.

A policeman tries to bully us into moving on without my dad, but I intimidate him with my accent, and he leaves us alone.

I'm swirling, bored, around pearlescent sarcophagi, a baton swings past my nose to smash the spine of a man who breaks a rule.

His camera drops. The uniform smiles.

Mixed Messages

July 2021

Cousin 1

Hey. Is everyone ok? I heard that Phoenix is completely blocked off.

Cousin 2

The communities have all the roads blocked off from the looters. The community members are ready.

Cousin 1

Good. They must be scared of N—s.

Aunty

N—s and them are protecting us at the moment. All on the road by us.

You guys. You've shocked my sister-in-law with your language. All your talk of N—s.

Cousin 1

LMAO. Did you tell her? 

Sister-in-law

I have been schooled.

Cousin 1

LOL. N—s is a person

Cousin 2

It's not a racist remark. It's a name. He's a gangster this side.

Sister-in-law

> LOL. N—s is a person

I got that now. But if you people tell me there's someone called K—r, I'm calling bullshit.

Cousin 1

Even though you capitalized the K in that word. I'm still shocked 

Sister-in-law

OMG. I would never say it! I only typed it like that.

Cousin 2

We too, we only type N—s. We won't say it out loud. Don't know who will hear. Lots of people know him this side.

Chicken Tikka Masala

You used to call me coolie and expected me to be ashamed. There's nothing wrong with being a porter. Manual labour is honest work.

You used to call me charou and expected me to be ashamed. There's nothing wrong with cleaning up after other people if it puts food in your family's belly.

You used to call me curry muncher and expected me to be ashamed. Now there's competitions for the best bunny chow.

What else do you want to call me?

Flight FA 347 PE to Johannesburg

A Black girl, an Indian girl and an Afrikaans woman board a plane. Sounds like the set up to a joke but the girl is sitting next to me and, on her other side, the woman is in the window seat. It's the first time that the woman has flown anywhere, and she asks the girl if she can hold her hand. The girl says sure and as we taxi, she starts to explain what to expect. We're going to go very fast and then the plane will start lifting off. Don't look out the window because it will scare you to see everything get left behind on the ground. The girl is rubbing her thumb across the back of the woman's hand. The plane leaves the ground and the woman's face is scrunched. The girl uses her other hand to rub the woman's arm and remind her that she's fine. I ask if the woman wants us to pull down the blinds, but she shakes her head no. The girl whispers for me to call a cabin attendant. She would press the button herself, but both her hands are busy comforting. I ask for a cup of sugar water. We tell the woman to sip it slowly. Her hands are so shaky and the girl steadies the cup for the woman as she drinks, while I listen to whispered instructions from the cabin attendant for what to do if the woman goes into a full-blown panic attack. He leaves and the woman finishes the cup and still shaking, she starts to cry. She keeps looking out the window. She's one of those who wants to look her fear in the face. We both try to distract her. Who is Tannie going to see in Johannesburg? Your sister? That's nice. Is she fetching Tannie from the airport? Ok. When was the last time that Tannie saw her? In February? That's not so long ago. Is Tannie just going for a visit? A funeral? Oh. No. Ok Tannie. You just cry then.

Teatime

I see red behind my closed eyelids. It is the bright, cold heat of the winter sun. My bum is numb with the icy bricks of the stoep. My hands are warm around a mug and my glasses are probably fogged with steam from the tea. The loquat tree that only bore once, is full of leathery leaves but the grass is crunching brownly under my socked feet. A moment to sit and worship Surya with you. No biscuits. Just butter bread.

Imaginary Friend

There was once a little girl who was very close to the Lord. Her family weren't the most pious. They didn't go to temple every week, they didn't know bhajans off by heart, but her mother lit lamp every morning and washed it every Friday. They did the big festivals like Deepavali, and they fasted for Purtassi.

But the little girl didn't see the link between those things and the Lord. She didn't even pray every day. She just chatted to Him all the time. She did ask for things sometimes—better grades in maths, daddy's farts to stop being so stinky, but mostly she just talked. She told Him about her day—gossiped about her friends, whined about her teachers, scolded Him for letting her have a bad dream.

She wasn't crazy. She didn't wander about muttering under her breath, and she never heard His voice answer back. She just… knew He was there. She was completely comfortable with Him, prattling away happily when she had a spare moment—on the toilet, while she was bathing, mindlessly cutting onions for her mother, waiting in line at the cinema with her father.

God was her best friend.

The thing is, like many childhood friendships do, the relationship shifted and grew distant as she grew older. What with homework and exams and varsity applications and period cramps, the girl had less time to chat and when she did, she found herself chatting to herself instead of to Him. She still felt Him, it was just like He was in another room instead of right next to her and then in another province and then another country. Eventually she forgot to even think to feel for Him.

The girl turned into a woman, and she starts to wander.

She follows a step behind her new friend Maria as they hustle through busy streets. It's not in deference, it's because Maria moves faster than she does. They're moving quickly but not racing because Maria wants her to feel all the vibrance of the market and so she tries to take snatches in—the boxes of bracken, bark and ginseng, vats of salted shrimp, soy sauce marinated crab, tanks of live squid, octopus and conch shells that give way to candy coloured plastic kids' chairs, feather dusters and angled brooms and everywhere voices calling and shouting and tempting, convincing, bargaining.

The two women cross an alley, turn a corner and another and go through a non-descript sheet metal gate and inside is… quiet. It's almost sorcery but it's just the trees on the property muffling the chaos of the outside.

They walk toward a building, and she notices three people in black business suits—two men and one woman, all standing with perfect posture, but heads slightly bowed with their palms pressing. The woman knows the expression behind their masks of control and her heart dips for them.

The woman stands at the door of the building in her socks and the three avatars of the temple glow in the dimness. They seem less real but more true than their giant embodiment nestled against a mountain next to Hwaseong Fortress—the one that you can see from the bus. She sits on the floor facing these three versions of one. Her back against the wall so she's in no one's way. Maria does three bows in front of each of the Buddhas, sits next to her for a while, and leaves her in the clean silence.

The woman feels the air around her settle onto her. It's as if a hole was cut out just for her in that particular part of existence and in which she fits perfectly. She breathes in deeply and out slowly. She lets herself soften into that space. And she cries. Quiet tears. This is a feeling she misses and will miss. It's a feeling she will chase for the rest of her life although she doesn't yet know it.

And she'll find it. Each instant will be years apart—on top of a mountain, exhausted after a hike, in the chanting voices of strangers in Bronkhorstspruit, in the quiet after an orchestra finishes its score, in the words of a book about an unbelieving saint. Each time she'll try to hold onto it and each time it will slip away and each time she will rage at Him "Why? Why won't you stay?"

Flash Bang

Guru's briefly rumpled brows and the quick flit down of his ever-smiling lips floods her with buzzing. Her panicked eyes flick from sister to aunt. Did anyone else see? Did anyone else hear? White buzzing swells, rising her bile.

Choking.

His uncle smile returns.

"Well ma. Mother is little bit weak but everyday must pour five teaspoons milk on one small Shiva Lingam in the garden and pray. Y'all can do it. No no y'all can do. But when Mother is better, she must carry on."

She stares at Durga Ma on the wall and feels her sister relax next to her. Her sister gives her a cautious smile.

She smiles back.

Turning back to Durga, she fills herself with red and gold and black.

Days of watching pale milk weep over fertile black and drip into dark soil. Days of watching red strength seep back into a frail body. Then months of laughter, frustration, hugs, annoyance, fights, forgetting.

Then white.

Then the world washed out.

Blankness

filling my gaze with nothingness,

echoing that expands my skull,

that shrinks my soul

mocking me with infinity,

daring me to something

smothering me

numbing me

all I can do is scrawl over scrawl,

mar and defile

space and sound

with nothing.

Legemat

In some movies, when a person dies, the people that loved them the most, feel something wrong. Sometimes, they feel a sense of unease or discomfort. In the most dramatic scenes, they know—they feel the loss and dissolve or explode into their grief.

I was timing sprints on the sports field. I was cheering students—congratulating those that won and praising those that didn't. I was gasping at those that made the high jump and wincing at those that smashed into the pole. I was trying to find shade because I forgot my hat and my hair was starting to fry. I was gossiping with colleagues. I was trying not to laugh at the pompous Science teacher who tripped over his laces.

At the exact moment when my mother was scared and alone or maybe just tired and fed up; when my mother decided that she was done, I was walking to the staffroom, trying to decide how much legemat to buy from the tea ladies after school.

What Am I Supposed to Do Now

1. Go back inside and supervise the last fifteen minutes of class.
2. Give thanks that the students are on task and not running rampant; and use the quiet to check and polish the next two weeks of lesson plans.
3. When the bell rings, dismiss your students with a good luck for their science test next period.
4. Go down to the principal's office to let him know that he needs to arrange cover for a week— until the end of term.
5. Dissolve into a gulping, snotty mess when you tell him why.
6. Go back to your classroom and hate yourself for breaking down in front of that absolute s o b.
7. Book a one-way flight home and forget to cancel the ticket for next Friday. (This will come back and bite you in the backside when it's time to go back to school.)
8. Collate the handouts for tomorrow's lessons, label them with Post-Its and pile them on the desk for the subs.
9. Edit your email out of office reply so that parents and students don't get offended by your silence.
10. Go downstairs and interrupt a conversation between the HOD and your teaching partner.
11. Tell your partner you've put together next week's test for the Year 7s and ask her to please photocopy and collate next week's tests because—
12. Watch her face arrange itself into irritation and let her interrupt you with how busy she is and how it is your turn—
13. Watch the HOD's face arrange itself into concern as he listens in and asks if everything's ok.
14. Watch your partner reign in her annoyance as the HOD tells you not to worry about anything and to go home and pack for the flight.
15. Drive home.
16. Sit in your driveway and wonder how you got there.
17. Pack some random clothes in a carry-on suitcase.
18. Panic when you realise that you haven't arranged a lift to the airport.

19. Text your friend who agrees to give you a ride.
20. Get on a plane.
21. Stare at a departure board for eight hours.
22. Get on another plane.
23. Drive home with your sister and your Dad.
24. Start a new list.

Maharani

Once a queen was born. She was not royalty. She was a queen in the way many women are.

This queen did not rule countries. She did not consult on policy. She did not publish famous treaties. She was just a wife. Just a mother. Just a friend. Just a colleague. Just a—

Still, she lived her life as best she could. She did most things women are supposed to do and many things most queens want to do. Some thought her a dark queen because her sharp eyes and blunt mouth told truths they resented. Others saw a tsundere queen, subversively aiding her people—and other people's people.

So, when this queen embarked on her astral journey, a crowd of women gathered in defiance and in honour to see her off. When her daughters chose to perform her rites, when it was female hands that lit her flame—no man dared raise dissent.

Sitting Still

I think I was five when I went to my first funeral. My parents didn't rub death in my face, but they didn't hide it either. It's not something you think about a lot when you're busy living. Other people's parents die. Mine would slowly desiccate and stick around—like Perima. But now that Mommy died – I know. I know what's coming. Except it will be worse. Because when Daddy dies there'll be no one left. Mostly I make myself forget but sometimes it swirls around in the centre hollow of me and I have to sit very, very still until it stops because I can't let it touch any of my insides.

Saturday Lunch

Waking up to the smell of boiling shit isn't perhaps everyone's ideal morning but that smell made me get out of bed super quick even though I knew there was no school. Smells like that can't happen on weekdays. Smells like that need the time of a weekend without any chores.

When I smelt it in our house, I knew what it meant. At my Ma's house that smell wouldn't be allowed inside, it would have been outside on an open fire, only let back in the house once the faecal scent had mellowed to an earthy whiff. But I lived in a very middle-class suburb, so we had to make do with opening all the windows.

Mommy had bought the cleaned package (just one) when we went down to Durban one school holidays. She froze it at whichever aunty's house we were staying at and then just before we left, she wrapped it in newspaper so it wouldn't melt on the drive back to Joburg.

On a random Friday, when she was feeling particularly energetic, she took out that package and a Tupperware of preboiled gram dhal to thaw overnight. The next day she woke up extra early and lit a stick of agarbatti. Then she washed and washed and washed that thing like laundry, cut it into Big Corn Bite size pieces and boiled it with a few sticks of cinnamon, a teaspoon or so of manja and one or two cloves. Then we waited.

She coated the bottom of a big enough pot with oil and added

Chillies

Cinnamon sticks

Chopped onion

Curry leaf

Bay leaf

Jeera powder

Dhaniya powder

Chillie powder (masala)

Manja

Gingergarlic

(No I don’t know what the proportions were.)

(And no, Aunties, Mommy didn’t use tomatoes. My sister was allergic. Deal with it.)

Once the spices made our noses itchy, she added the boti and braised it till it was soft and then mixed in the gram dhal and sorted out the salt.

When she knew it was ready, she dished out and the next ten minutes were spent silently (nobody talks when the food is nice—duh) munching chewy, earthy lamb innards and slurping gram dhal and rice (yes Mommy scolded us for eating like heathens but we didn’t listen).

There’s only three aunties left that make it for me.

Don’t tell them, but theirs isn’t as good as that time my Mommy made it.

Small Victories

She gives up tugging at her jeans and sits on her bed with the waistband digging into her thighs. Stamps off the skinny denim and finds her mom's old skirt. She puts on some eyeliner and goes out for paneer dosa to celebrate the wraparound still fitting.

Lucky

When I was in high school, after too many nights hiding from rampaging Balthazars and crawling through human viscera, my mother banned me from watching *Charmed*. She thought that it would help. It didn't. So she let me watch it again.

When I was about twenty-two, I stopped dreaming and when I interviewed a Sangoma for a journalism project, he told me that I didn't have luck anymore.

When I was in my ninth year of teaching, I dreamt of a giant seashell floating down a river. It was one of those massive ones you get at Gold Reef City. Those ones that spin really fast. This one wasn't spinning. It was just pootling along gently with the current. Those seashell things can seat about seven or eight adults but this one only had two. There was a shurumunj woman with a really tight pulled back bun. I felt sorry for her because my mom had light pink cheeks and her skin was that caramel honey colour it went when she spent time in the sun and her hair was wavy and black down to her shoulders and she was wearing an eyelet lace dress that I'd never seen before and she was laughing. Her laugh was big and open and weightless and I tried really hard to hear it.

How to Make Mint Chutney

1. Ask your father to make some.
2. Whine at you father to make some.
3. When steps one and two fail, sulk at your father for not making some, but do it front of your aunties.

*Also works for nut chutney, dhania chutney and mixed veg pickle. Limited success with coconut chutney.

Love from Me

Hey Mommy

I got some news today.

I rushed to tell daddy and he said “Congratulations, my girl.”

I stood there looking at daddy and I saw.

Myself leaning against the kitchen counter in our old house. My head bowed, peering up at you. Your blank stare and then your smile. Your arms squeezing pride into my bones. You holding my face in your hands. You smacking my arm as you turned away.

I saw you both.

Daddy in this present. You in a different one.

I got good news today Mommy. But you weren’t here to hear.

Hey Mama

I wore your coat today. The one that you used to lend me. The one that fit when I was twelve. It still fits. Kind of.

I haven’t washed it. Don’t judge me – I had to throw out used tissues that you left in your pockets.

Don’t worry but. I’ll wash it. When it starts smelling like me.

Hey Mom

Paul the gardener phoned today Mommy. I had to tell him that you’re gone. He rang off pretty fast after that. But he phoned again, maybe an hour later. It’s been years since he worked for us—I think I was in high school. I thought maybe he’d lost his job and was looking for some work.

He phoned to tell you he’d finally managed to bring his wife and kid over from Malawi. He wanted to tell you about his daughter. She’s in grade eight now and she’s doing great. She got

a bursary from her school. His wife is pregnant again. He has a good job and they're all doing really well.

He just wanted you to know.

Hey Omma

I haven't felt you in a while. I hope you're okay.

I found a letter I wrote you. It said "Dear Mommy, Sorry for being a brat all the time. I do actually love you so much. Love Me."

I threw it away.

You deserved more letters.

Hey Amma

I tried to make your chickpea and butternut salad the other day. I found the recipe—with a pencilled in asterix and a note that said that this was the recipe to use if I asked for butternut salad.

I was so touched.

Then I remembered that I wrote that note.

Hey Mommom

Today, my sister smiled at me with your face.

I don't understand how she does it. It's only sometimes. You're not in all her smiles.

I remember when you had to go to work in the mornings and I would press my nostrils against the door glass and make piggy faces. You would stand there for a moment looking at me.

She doesn't smile *that* smile.

Hi Mommy

Sometimes I'll be sitting and drinking some tea and I'll notice your portrait on the wall, and I'll realize, "Shit. You're dead."

Clay Pots

Everyone is finally in the car. Suddenly, the aunt exclaims “Oh God!” Leaps out of the car. Running towards the front door she shouts back:

“We forgot your mother!”

A couple quick text messages to relatives in the area.

A carload of people with a clay pot are met at a graveyard by another carload of people bearing a small tray of fruit, camphor, a deepakulsum, a carton of milk, a coconut and a hoe.

A small crowd surrounds a single established grave. In the grave are the bones of a man, the ashes of his wife and the ashes of one of his sons.

The aunt takes the hoe and softens the ground near the headstone, and in the process cracks and briefly turns up a quickly resubmerged shard of old clay pot. Two girls notice it and look at each other in the slightly disturbed and slightly amused knowledge that their grandmother is now in pieces. Finally, there is a small hole. One of the girls places the clay pot in the hole and the aunty covers it up.

Now the grave contains the bones of a man, the ashes of his wife, the ashes of one of his sons and the ashes of his youngest daughter.

The fruit and the carton of milk are laid at the foot of the grave. A piece of camphor is placed on the coconut. An uncle turns the coconut three times, clockwise, over the grave and breaks it in half on a nearby rock. He places the two halves of the coconut next to the fruit.

After everyone has paid their respects, turning camphor three times over the grave, two girls remain staring at the grave. One of the girls feels nothing. She felt her mother leave ages ago—her mother isn’t really in that pot, and she knows it. The other girl thinks that if all her aunts and uncles choose the same resting place, the afterlife is going to be very crowded and hopes that her mother has enough space not to be annoyed for the rest of eternity.

Chorus

There are stories in the hum of the moon and the singing of the stars. They sing our songs. From their lofty vantage they see our what has been, what is, and what will be. All at once. They sing us our tales, but we've forgotten how to hear them.

Some Things You Might Want to Know

Agarbatti: Incense. Not 'to anger'. I just mean those sticks that you light, that give off highly fragranced smoke that gives you a headache unless the room is well ventilated.

Aiya: Google says that this means servant on the Indian subcontinent but in the South African Indian Community it means granny.

Akka: Older sister. An actual sister or a close family member who feels older sister like.

Amma: Mom.

Ana: Older brother. An actual brother or more rarely in South Africa, a close family member who feels older brother like. Pronounced Uh-na. Actually, romanised from Tamil (according to Google) as Anna but I was worried people would pronounce it like Elsa's sister.

Ardhanarishvara: A Hindu deity that is half Lord Shiva and half Goddess Parvati. The original bisexual icon. The gender spectrum isn't a new idea.

Asura: Often likened to the concept of devils or demons but this isn't really accurate. Think rather of a faction of the heavens that history maligned.

Aunty: Not necessarily your relative. A respectful term of address to any older Indian woman, or *any* older woman really.

Avarkah (also Sem): An edible pod thing. Not sure what they are in English. Top two contenders found during a Google search are hyacinth bean and runner bean.

Balthazar: It's just a name. But I first knew it as the name of a demon boyfriend from the TV show *Charmed.*

Benares: A thick, stiff, silk sari from Varanasi in India. It is often worn by Tamil brides on their wedding day.

Biryani: Variations of a spiced rice dish that originated in Pakistan, India or somewhere in Persia. YouTube a recipe and read the comments section to find out more about this debate.

Bhajan: Basically, a hymn. A praise or worship song. This is a Hindi word. I don't know what the Tamil word is and have never heard anyone around me use it.

Bomblymash: Romanised as bablimas. A type of pomelo.

Book: An Almanac Hindu priests use that has star placements and times and all sorts of things. Using it, priests can give a very rough approximation of your future. I don't really understand how it works so please feel free to contact your nearest friendly Hindu priests and ask them.

Boti: Sheep tripe. Not beef. Not pork. Only sheep.

Bhajia: A much loved deep fried chickpea flour, vegetable fritter thing—the staple of many a tea time and/or prayer.

Bread (also Roti): Hindi speaking people. Traditionally the starch of choice in the north of India was wheat breads, particularly roti.

Camphor: The solidified oil of the camphor plant but now made artificially, using turpentine, which makes me question its efficacy in its traditional application of spiritual cleansing. It has quite a distinct pungent smell.

Chicken Tikka Masala: Usurping fish and chips, this is now the national dish of the United Kingdom. A lesson in how to conquer without violence.

Chumbu: A brass vessel that is used to hold water.

D&C: Dilation and Curretage. This is a surgical procedure that involves scraping the uterus lining of excess tissue.

Dacoit: Used in India and Burma to describe a member of an armed gang. I have only ever seen this word used in the English subtitles for Tamil movies.

Dhal: If the dhal is preceded by another word as in toor dhal or biryani dhal then it is referring to specific types of lentil. If it's just dhal then it's split peas. Think of pea soup but far far superior in taste.

Datchna: Alms or payment of services rendered to a Hindu priest after performing a ritual or rite. Traditionally it consisted of a bit of rice, oil, lentils, an umbrella, a shirt and a tiny bit of money because both priest and believer were poor. Nowadays it is cash only and is generally as much as you can afford but some priests do charge a fixed price.

Dead People's Prayers: An annual ancestral prayer. It's basically when Tamil South Africans remember their dead relatives and give them some food (via prayer) to thank them for looking after and/or not haunting them. They also lay out other things that the deceased

used to enjoy such as cane spirits, cigarettes and weed. (Think about the latter when you read the definition of prasad—and the answer is yes.)

Deepakulsum: I don't know how to spell this word. This is my best guess based on how I've heard it said. (I tried Google. I can't find it.) A vessel that you put the camphor in to burn. It has a handle to hold so that you don't burn your hands when you do devarthane. The deepakulsum can be made of different materials but the most common are brass and clay.

Deepavali: The Tamil word for the Hindu Festival of Lights better known as Diwali. This is a day of deep religious and spiritual significance where Hindu's eat themselves into a sugary, oily coma and when non-Hindus feel the light of hope—keeping their fingers crossed that their colleagues will bring tasty treats into the office the next day.

Devarthane: Also known as Aarti. When you turn the burning camphor in a clockwise direction. It is an action of prayer. I couldn't find the spelling for this one either.

Dhoti: Scottish men have the kilt; South Indian men have the dhoti.

Dosa: A thin crispy South Indian savoury crêpe. I always thought that it was made with just fermented rice but apparently there are some lentils involved as well. Served plain with different chutneys or stuffed with paneer (paneer dosa) or potatoes (masala dosa). I'm sure you can find them stuffed with other things too.

Fly-Half: A rugby position. It's the equivalent (I think) of the quarterback in American Football who is always the star player in all those US teen movies.

Ghoul: An evil spirit that feeds on dead bodies.

Godlamp/Lamp: Generally, a brass oil lap that uses a cotton wool wick (although some people just stick a tea candle in it). It's lit at the start of all Hindu rituals. Every woman receives one from her mother on her wedding day to take to her new household. It's supposed to be lit everyday—sort of inviting light and Mother Luxmi (another Hindu deity) into the home.

Gulgula: A deep fried dough ball. The South African Indian donut. It looks a bit like legemat but this dough doesn't have yeast, it isn't served dusted in sugar, and it is usually only made on big prayer days—which I don't understand because it's so easy to make and really deserves to belong to every tea time.

Gulab Jamun: Another deep fried Indian dough ball except this one, in South Africa, is more finger shaped, dipped in rose syrup and coated in desiccated coconut. In India they are rounder, sweeter and soaked in syrup.

Guru: Teacher but is used to refer to Hindu priests.

Guthra/gadra beans: Fresh barlotti beans (I think). Whatever they're called, they're yumminess.

Harridan: A bossy or shrewish woman. Basically, a woman who will cut you if you piss her off.

Havan: A Hindi word. A fire prayer. There's a special vessel in which you put wood, ghee, samagri and sometimes other offerings like fruit, and the priest chants and the devotees sing, and it can be quite a big thing. Fire is a purifier.

Hector: A Trojan Prince whose brother Paris was challenged to a fight to the death by Achilles, and who took his brother's place.

Herbs: Not aromatics. Leaves that can be cooked like spinach, chard, watercress, etc.

Hongra: A middle class person who acts like they've never seen food before when the food is free. Or a person who is always hungry and/or eats a lot. Try and find my picture on the internet if you want to see one.

Jukskei: A dirty river that runs through parts of Johannesburg, South Africa. It is not any kind of deity in any religion.

Kachra: Rubbishy. Low-kind. The worst stereotype of 'ghetto' except you know… Indian.

Kadle: A hard dark brown type of chickpea. It must be used in a variety of delicious ways around the globe, but I have only ever munched it braised with onions, dried red chillies and mustard seeds, served as an accompaniment to sweet rice.

(K—r): This word means 'non-believer' in many Arabic speaking countries and is used to refer to people who do not follow Islam or other Abrahamic religions. It does not have racial connotations. I didn't Google this. I know it because I lived in the Middle East. I also didn't need to research how, in South Africa, this word is an extremely offensive derogatory slur towards black people. Don't use it.

Kanjeevaram: A thick, stiff silk sari from the Kanjeevaram region in India that is often used by Tamil brides. Apart from being made in a different region to the Benares sari, they look pretty similar to my eyes, but I have been assured, by those that know better, that they are indeed distinctly different from each other.

Kavadi: A Hindu religious festival where devotees carry a wooden arch (also called a kavadi) which is meant to represent burdens that we lay at Lord Muruga's feet. It's a wonderful experience but give it a pass if needles make you squeamish.

Koli: The person who does the last rites in a funeral and lights the funeral pyre. Traditionally, it was the son or otherwise the closest male relative—father, brother, cousin of the deceased.

Kuchipudi: Indian dance form. One of many. All of them beautiful.

Leonine: Lion like.

Legemat: A Middle Eastern/North African (again, look at YouTube for debates) iteration of the fried dough ball. In Sudan, it's dusted with icing-sugar and is like crack. Approach with caution.

Ma: Can be used for mother or grandmother. In these stories, it is used as grandmother unless spelled with a lower case 'm', in which case it is used as the equivalent of 'my dear' or 'dearie' with varying levels of affection attached to it depending on who says it.

Mama: In the South Indian community this word means an uncle that is actually related to you. Specifically, your mother's brother but not necessarily. Can also refer to any older man that you're somehow related to.

Manja: Turmeric. Used widely in cooking and it also has cleansing, disinfectant and anti-septic properties, making it a favourite in Hindu prayer rituals and global beauty and home remedy recipes.

Maharani: Queen.

Matchekote: Another springtime edible green pod seed. I don't know any other name for it, and I can't find it on Google.

Mohini Devi: A female avatar of the Lord Vishnu who got married. Again, fluid sexuality is not a new idea. Ask a homophobic, transphobic Hindu priest to explain Mohini Devi and watch him tie himself in knots—fun times.

Mundani: The part of the sari worn over the shoulder. It is beautifully patterned and/or embroidered. Also known in Hindi as the pallu.

Murunkah: Romanised as murunkai. Fruit of the moringa tree. It isn't sweet. Cook it up in some dhal or some tomato chutney. Chew it well and spit it out. It tastes good but you can't swallow those stringy bits.

Murunkeere: Moringa leaves. If watercress didn't exist, this would be the king of herbs—so yummy.

Murti: A statue or image of a Hindu deity. A murti is not the deity, just the image of it. My understanding is that a murti becomes a murti once certain rituals have been performed, before that, it's just like any other sculpture and that's why people think it's ok to use religious iconography as room décor without any respect or understanding of its significance. Yes, I'm throwing shade.

(N—r): I think most people know what this word means but I Googled anyway. This word is derived from the Spanish and/or Portuguese word negro which means black. Although when it was first listed as synonymous with negro in dictionary definitions in 1864, it was noted that it's use indicated 'derision or deprecation'. The word was 'invented' to insult and degrade.

Paneer: Google describes this as 'Indian cottage cheese.' I guess so. Except that it's firm and usually cooked—fried, braised or put into a curry, kind of like tofu. I suppose you could eat it raw but why would you want to?

Pathi: The 'th' sound is hard. Paternal grandmother.

Perima: Romanised as Peri Amma. Means big mother and is usually used to refer to your mom's oldest sister. Can also be used to refer to your granny's oldest sister.

Peyaar: Romanised as peyear. Ghost.

Pear: This depends on context. It can mean an actual pear, the sweet fruit, or it can mean an avocado. Generally, when Indian people say they have a pear tree, they're talking about an avocado tree.

Porridge: Tamil-speaking people. See Bread (also Roti). In India rice porridge was the preferred starch but in South Africa, due to the initial lack of rice, mealie meal porridge became the thing. Specifically sour porridge. If you want to try some, find out when

Mariamman Prayers (also known as… wait for it… Porridge Prayers) are held and then go to your nearest Tamil Hindu Temple and wait for prasad.

Prasad or Prasadum: Food and drink that is offered during a Hindu prayer ritual. After the prayer, the food is eaten. How much prasad is eaten depends on how many attendees there are and how much food had been prepared but everyone must at least get a bit of food or a sip of milk.

Puli Sadham: Pronounced pulley satho. Sour rice. A cold rice dish made with tamarind. It used to be a great favourite for picnics and beach trips because it didn't really spoil in the heat and was super nom nom.

Pull the leaf: A term used for when the camphor has burned out after a Hindu prayer, and it is acceptable to retrieve the prasad from the lamp. Often chanted by hongras two seconds after the prayers are done.

Purtassi: A month long fast. It is not a dry fast just an abstinence from meat and most people choose not to indulge in alcohol either. Also, a month when the price of vegetables and meat alternatives in South African supermarkets skyrocket.

Rajkumari: Princess.

Rajni Superstar: Rajinikanth, top Tamil movie actor, probably doesn't need to be explained but I need you to understand how much of a boss and legend this man is. He is the coolest ever. Mind it!

RPG: Role-Playing Game. No kinky stuff—literally just games. Think *Dungeons and Dragons* for in-person and *Final Fantasy* for online gaming.

SABC: As used in this collection, this does not refer to the South African Broadcasting Corporation but rather South African Born Chinese people, with numbers indicating generation. Therefore, SABC2 would refer to the second generation born in South Africa. I learnt of this term by eavesdropping when I was younger. When I Googled it to check, I found the term used in an academic journal about, and co-written by, a South African born Chinese person and so I assume that it is not offensive or derogatory. So, much love, my fellow Asians.

Sati: Named after the goddess Sati, wife of Shiva, the practice of a widow throwing herself onto the funeral pyre of her husband and burning together with his corpse. This practice has a

long and complex history, including women being forced to do the ritual. It is now, thankfully, banned in India. Sati is one of the lame reasons that I was given for why women are not allowed to go to the actual cremation in Hindu funerals. Women cannot control our grief apparently.

Samagri: A havan mix of some grains, herbs and ghee and I don't actually know what else is in it. As far as I understand, samagri is both fuel and offering to the fire. The smoke it generates is supposed to be cleansing and purifying. It smells like hugging a granny.

ShankaNarayana: A Hindu avatar that is both Shiva and Vishnu—the destroyer and the preserver.

Shurumunj: A sour person. Think of people who always look like they've just smelled something rotten.

Sita: The wife of Rama, the lord of Ayodhya in India. They are considered avatars of Lord Vishnu and Mother Luxmi. Sita is often lauded as the 'ideal woman'. After her marriage to Ram, she followed him into exile where she was kidnapped by Lord Ravana. Ram waged war, rescued Sita and returned from exile. But when they got back Sita had to go through a fire trial to prove her 'purity'. It sounds like she's a bit of a soft touch, but she is in fact the 'ideal woman'. She is a bad ass even by modern standards. Look her up.

Siva/ Shiva Lingam: A murti of the abstract essence of Shiva and universal energies. This murti is pretty much a phallus and it represents fertility and creation. You could even say… the origin of 'big dick energy'? I'm sorry God. Please don't end me.

Skinner: This is the word for gossip in Afrikaans. It just sounds juicier than plain old 'gossip'.

Stylish Munniama: A fashionista. Can be said with affection, condescension or, most commonly, a subtle mix of both.

Stokies: A specific type of bedroom slipper. They are, in my memory, always navy blue and always worn by grandparents, because they are comfortable and you can go outside in them.

Sugar Beans: Dried guthra beans. Sugar beans curry is a staple and is eaten every Monday in Hindu Tamil families in South Africa. We've been doing meatless Mondays for years before it became a thing.

Thatha: Grandfather.

Toub: The traditional garb of Sudanese women. It is a length of cloth (shorter than a sari) that is worn over other clothes but wrapped around the body and often over the head. They come in beautiful colours and patterns.

Tsundere: A Japanese word from anime culture that means, as I understand it, someone who looks and acts cold but is actually very caring. If you're familiar with BTS, think of Suga, if not then look them up. (To be clear, BTS is South Korean not Japanese, I just think Suga is a good example of tsundere.)

Uncle: An actual relative or a respectful term of address to any older Indian man.

Unda: A big old pot used for mass cooking—weddings, funerals and extended family outings.

Vada: Not the fluffy looking donut things from India although those are yummy. In South Africa, vada is made from roughly ground split peas, mixed with onions and chillies and herbs and spices, shaped into a flat disc and deep fried into crunchy munchy goodness. This is traditionally exclusively a prayer food—probably because, in my opinion, it's a pain to make. Aunties don't come for me—if it was easy to make, you all would make it more often, because it is the boss of all prayer day foods.

Voetsek: (rude) Afrikaans word for get out or leave.

Yagam: Pronounced yegyo. A Tamil or Telegu word, not sure which because of the romanisation of the languages, and I have both heritages. Also, Indian communities borrow words from each other a lot. Basically, it's a different word for havan.

Yamuna: The sister of the God of Death, Yama, and also the name of a river in India. Fun fact: many of the major rivers in India are named after Goddesses. Perhaps it is because they are life giving.

Part B: Portfolio

Contents

Introduction

This portfolio is a record of my reading and writing research as a full-time MACW student during 2022, and how this research influenced and shaped my creative writing thesis. Part One consists of extracts from the weekly reflective journals that I kept during the coursework semester from January to June. Part Two contains extracts from my journals while I was writing my thesis from July to October, including my response to the Reader Report on my draft thesis. Part Three contains essays and book reviews.

In many ways my writing journey has been circular. The issues I identified during orientation week are issues I have grappled with throughout the course – including voice and identity. Tackling them, even where they have not been fully resolved, has had a major impact on my writing.

Part One

Coursework Reflective Journals

Week 4

Orientation Week

I approached Orientation Week with trepidation. Would my degree in Journalism and Media Studies, and career as an international high school teacher—filled with popular fiction and YA books—enable me to recognize what texts are doing and how they work or not? However, the emphasis on experimentation and vulnerability assuaged my fears.

I want my writing to be good, but accessible. In the application portfolio feedback sessions, I heard, levelled at me, "This sounds like it belongs in a children's story" which feeds into questions of audience and validity.

I draw heavily from personal experience and so guard myself. In one piece I tried to show the muteness of initial grief. However, if readers aren't engaging with the story and it comes across as voiceless, I need to evaluate if I've over-sanitized the narrative. I recognize that my work has a lot of assumed understanding. I need to step away from my emotions so I can ascertain what I'm assuming, and as poet-teacher vangile gantsho suggested, I also need to inhabit those emotions rather than just saying what happened. After the portfolio feedback, to be more concise and economical with words, I examined my poetry and prose to see what I could edit or restructure to make them tighter and more impactful. I realize that I overexplain in my work.

Another critique was that my dialogue sounds stilted, and the way characters speak to each other is too polite. This is interesting because I had used real conversations almost verbatim. Almost, because as discussed in a free writing session, memory can be as imaginary as fiction. Possibly, the stilted conversations reflect my own awkward interactions. Whatever the reason, I need to work on dialogue to make sure it flows meaningfully. And, as I mostly inhabit the grey murkiness of a 'third-culture kid', I need to be careful that I don't make my characters sound like caricatures.

I found the introductory reading groups illuminating but also intimidating. An idea is clarified in the saying, so even if others don't get what I mean, I will have a better understanding of my thoughts through verbalising them. I need to work at contributing to discussions, so I can better articulate why my own writing is working or not.

Week 5

"Writing simply"

Henali Kuit's seminar spoke directly to my ruminations on accessibility: "Our work is contained in its own world. It is responsible for making meaning to no one but itself." And I find this to be well illustrated by Kuzhali Manickavel's "Items That Have Gone Missing Inside The Lucy Temerlin Institute For Broken Shapeshifters Containment Room" (2020). The story is full of cultural references and strange imagery. Her writing takes you on a ride where you're not sure what's happening, but you enjoy yourself. Her descriptions are vivid and vocabulary is specific but she explains none of it. She leaves the responsibility of interpretation and dissection up to the reader.

The seminar's challenge to use motif forced me to focus on the writing, not the reader. Henali said "Two Babies Were Born" used white space well, giving the story room and incorporating motif to carry through the themes and finish off the story in a satisfying way. She liked the flatness of my characters. I wanted the children to feel like an 'every child'. I wanted to leave room for detail to be filled in by the reader. I did this to wean myself off my tendency to overexplain.

Nathan Trantraal felt the story was fine but lacked a distinctive voice. I need to find a way to make my voice clearer. [In hindsight, while I've made adjustments and improvements, I think I had a distinctive voice, it just wasn't what people expected.]

My classmates' writing hones in on specific sensory details which makes their work visceral and almost tactile. Mbe Mbhele describes a jersey as smelling "of yesterday's fried chips." This is something I want to play with in my writing—focusing on small details to develop character and build meaning.

Week 6

"Meeting Poetry"

Mxolisi Nyezwa's seminar focussed on language. He referred to his own relationship with English and IsiXhosa and the growing dissociation with the IsiXhosa language in South Africa—which is important as language is intrinsically linked to culture. This made me think how disassociated I am from the Tamil language but how I still draw from the culture (specifically that of South African Tamil speakers) and how this impacts how I write in terms of both dialogue and symbolism.

Mxolisi mentioned the importance of "staying marginal, on the edge of life" and I think that staying on the outside of something makes it easier to see and speak about it.

We discussed how writing is "not just about knowing the story", that it actually comes from inquiry and how innovation in language comes through the process of questioning.

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Reading group impressions:

Taban Lo Liyong's "The Old Man of Usumbura and His Misery" (1969) achieves a chant-like effect through the use of short sentences and repetition. Each repetition is slightly different which works as a motif to keep the work contained and tight, gives some new knowledge to the reader but also propels the rhythm and keeps the reader moving forward and engaged. [This was one of the first stories where I was able to really see how rhythm adds to meaning in prose and helped me look for that musicality in my own writing.]

Jolyn Phillips' *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries and Other Short Stories* (2016), conveys authentic-sounding dialogue by mixing vernacular words with English. And—even outside dialogue—uses the idiosyncratic sentence structure and grammatical peculiarities of the community's speech patterns to keep the colloquial tone and feel of language. Kuzhali Manickavel only uses vernacular, conversational rhythm in her narration of one story, "The Importance of Having a Minty-Fresh Export-Quality Aadi Velli Special Non-Cola Cola" (2020), where she uses the repetition of the word madam and a back to front sentence structure that Tamil speakers use in English, to great humorous effect. I feel, keeping vernacular rhythm in dialogue and a more conventional narration fits my writing more.

*

Mxolisi said “Poetry must be music" but added that everyone’s music is different. For my assignment, I concentrated on what sounded good to my ear and how each word added weight, meaning and texture. I fidgeted with line breaks but mostly with word choice and sentence structure. Mxolisi said that my second poem in particular, had good musicality. I wonder how to sustain this in my prose writing.

My classmate Veronique Jephtas used spacing to emphasise certain words, creating an undulating rhythm that mimicked ocean swell. I want to experiment more with using line breaks, spacing, etc to add meaning even in my prose.

Mbe’s comment on Lelethu Sobekwa’s ability to stay within a very specific temporality in her writing made me want to try more consciously to stay within space or time.

Week 7

“Fierce Writing”

I wrote two pieces for Kerry Hammerton’s seminar.

“Ascension” perplexed people, because of the Hindu references and because of the reference to the Jukskei river, which isn’t Hindu, but everyone assumed it was. Some felt the “Once upon a time” beginning was too clichéd and that the story felt flat. Kerry felt that the beginning and the flatness worked in the kind of story that “Ascension” is. However, she thought that the three-paragraph form didn’t work and would have preferred a more fragmented form, which I found intriguing. I will play with the form and see if that adds layers or meaning to the overall piece. [I kept the three paragraph form. I felt the fragmented form didn’t really add to the piece.]

“Rejecting Sati” is a dialogue between two Aunties and uses the grammar and structural inconsistencies associated with South African Indian speech. It received comments like “we can really hear your voice” and “only you can write this because you’re writing from inside the community and if others did this it would be a parody” which annoyed me because I’m not. I am borrowing from a generation and culture that is dead or dying—Durban Indians from the 60s. I know what they sound like because they’re my aunties or my grannies but that doesn’t mean that I or people from my background sound like them or have the same stories. They are part of my voice but not all of it.

I am worried about being pigeon-holed by expectations and stereotypes. I'm aware that my writing voice may be weak and coupled with unfamiliar imagery and references, may make my writing less compelling to readers, I like Manickavel's writing because she doesn't rely on a vernacular style of dialogue. In fact, she uses it very sparingly. She uses culturally specific imagery and symbolism and doesn't care if the reader gets it. I will continue to experiment with my writing, but I'm suspicious that the piece that I worry is too 'caricaturish' was my most warmly received piece yet.

Is there another way I could have written "Rejecting Sati", keeping that sense of warmth and energy? In "A Flash Poetics of Illegibility", Lance Olsen questions "How do I read/write my experience of experience?" (2015). How do I do this without perpetuating a stereotype that I and others within that community find problematic?

What compelled me to write what I did? Because it is a part of my experience of the world. It's based on what I've heard and seen and who I've interacted with. It's also because I feel that the previous generation did a bad job in telling my generation their stories and the few that I have, I want to share, otherwise I'm afraid they'll get lost. So much is already lost because I didn't think to ask or listen before.

And I'm also interested in contemporary stories which is why I wrote "Ascension." This character is more modern. She's middle class and doesn't speak with irregular grammar or syntax. She has faulty understanding of her culture and community, but she feels it deeply. And her stories rarely get told because they don't fit into what people expect. Hers is a voice that doesn't get heard often and I want to make sure her story and others like it aren't lost just because they're not what people expect from a writer of my background**.**

Week 8

"Epistolary Writing"

Following the irritation that seeped into my reflective journal last week Paul Wessels gave me two readings:

Kate Bernheimer's "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale" discusses how fairy tales are "a critically underappreciated art" (63). Bernheimer mentions that the "absence of depth [characteristic of fairy tales] violates a technical rule writers are often taught…that a

character's psychological depth is crucial to a story" (67). I wonder if my tendency to produce work that is flat and abstract is a reaction to criticism that I overexplain myself? Perhaps in my aim to rid myself of that, I shifted to the other extreme. But then, if it works, I don't see a problem.

"Stop Pigeonholing African Writers" (2019) by Taiye Selasi comments that "The most scathing critique is not that she is insufficiently talented but that she is insufficiently African" (48). If we take this and put it in the South African context, because of the dearth of South African writers of Indian descent, am I to be the representative? I refuse. Selasi ends by quoting Henry James "A novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life" (53). which echoes something that Mxolisi told us: " Poetry is the awakening of oneself to name the world as you understand it." So, I'm going to name my world as I see it with my voice.

*

Stacy Hardy's seminar proved that epistolary writing is not as deceptively simple as it seems. Stacy's feedback for "Love from Me" was that while they were good letters to my mother, I needed to work on them as pieces of literature. Interestingly, the parts of the letters that were colloquial were considered superfluous (removing them makes the letter tighter and flow better but raises questions about authenticity). Other sentences were criticised for explaining things to the reader that my mother would already know. I find myself thinking 'Am I writing to my mother or for the reader?' or 'Am I writing to my mother or am I writing to the writing?'

Stacy recommended Qui Miaojin's *Last words from Montmartre* (2006). The reader is encouraged to read the letters out of order which is interesting in terms of building narrative but also in the idea that reading epistolary work is like someone stumbling across a pile of letters and so reading them out of order seems more 'realistic'. It's fascinating that this 'organic' way of reading can, in a way, be manufactured.

Week 9

"Writing Obliquely"

My favourite piece in Jo-Ann Bekker's seminar was "Inventory" by Carmen Maria Machado (2017). Machado lists her narrator's sexual encounters in vivid detail while the plague seems

just a backdrop, yet I'm able to feel this absolute sense of loss and sadness that permeates the story. It demonstrated that writers can write about difficult topics indirectly.

My writing thus far has been pretty oblique but when asked to do it deliberately, I was stumped. "What Will People Say" began as a two-line mock fairy tale to make my sister laugh. I liked the sound of the sentences and expanded and refined them. Once I started experimenting, I wrote six new pieces including "Spoilt," "New Bride Handbook," and "Donation Bag." Editing "New Bride Handbook", I used Nathan's advice to another student to be mindful of the internal rhythm of a poem.

In her feedback, Jo-Ann suggested I look at Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (2001) for writing shorter pieces with unfamiliar cultures without pandering or shutting out readers. I thought about this when editing "Juhu Beach." I added a footnote, but I might fiddle with adding a few more lines because the rhythm of it bothers me.

*

I'm attracted not only to shorter works but also those that make use of space and, as Stacy puts it, gaps. I think all good writing does this to a greater or lesser extent. I really enjoyed "A Smell of Wood and of Silence" by Pia Barros (1993). She uses ambiguity so intentionally and artfully.

Week 10

"Narrative Conventions"

Paul Mason's seminar examined narrative structure. We first wrote and shared a piece that followed a conventional narrative arc and then rewrote the narrative breaking those conventions.

For the assignment, we swapped prompts. I drew the challenge of writing about a Sangoma in Swaziland—I took the story as far as my research could get me and thankfully, I didn't cause any offence. I thought again about the debate about who should be allowed to write about what. There's the consideration of mockery of cultures not fully understood and/or respected and there's also the consideration of 'othering', and 'whitewashing' other cultures. I think these are all valid things for writers and readers to think about and be aware of (and something I worry about in terms of writing about the South African Indian community), but

I also think that there are vast tracts of the human experience that transcend cultural and racial boundaries. Writers of fiction must be allowed to write fiction and if we start policing who gets to write about what, it leads to self-censorship and narrow scopes for writers to express themselves.

*

"Talk" (1988) is an Ashanti folktale from Ghana. I liked the lively pace, the repetition of lines and how the characters are both astonished and so accepting of talking objects. It feels light and funny and still makes its point clearly and simply. [The light tone and humour influenced my "The Tale of a City."]

"Bride Price" by Mabel Segun (1988) isn't overt or direct. The poem's criticism of bride price is subtle and soft but still very clear. [This is something I've striven for in my work—a clear critique absent of a strident tone.]

Kim Addonizio's "A Brief History of Condoms" (2009) was funny and clever and light. The footnotes were a bit annoying, but it was a fun read. I liked how it played with the tension between the ridiculous content and the scientific form. [In retrospect it was this story that made me realize I don't like how footnotes break the rhythm of a piece and made me decide against using them.]

Week 11

"Poems From Poems"

In Marike Beyers' seminar we looked at a selection of poems and chose a few to riff off the technique, content, themes or lines.

There was a sense of nostalgia in Lelethu's pieces that I found appealing. Both poems were about a father caring for a child and it struck me that there are paternal figures that nurture in literature but not in such domestic ways— ironing clothes and making beds. A subject to explore in my own writing. [I explored this idea in a few stories including "Beige" and "How to Make Mint Chutney."]

My work is quite spare. When I try to fill it out with description, it becomes less impactful, but Mbe's work makes me want to play with a more meandering and detailed writing and Veronique's writing has me looking at experimenting with a grittier style.

“Homesick” and “Climbing Walls” were well received with a general consensus that I should rearrange the latter’s verses. Teacher and poet Mangaliso Buzani suggested that I cut out a few verses. Initially I was quite resistant to this as I felt that his suggestion changed the meaning of the poem. I know that the meaning changes with the reader, but I also know that every writer has an intended meaning. Frankensteining everyone’s suggestions, I ended up both rearranging and cutting the first draft. I think it made the poem stronger.

*

In reading group, we discussed the use of the second person in Matt Bell’s “Jumpman vs the Ape” (2011). Paul mentioned that ‘yous’ usually put him off but here they worked. I agree—yous can feel preachy and cringy. I think they work in this piece because the narrator is the Game and the ‘you’ isn’t the reader but the protagonist.

Week 12

“Voice”

For Masande Ntshanga’s seminar we were required to rework an older piece of writing, paying attention to voice. The feedback for both the original and revised versions of “Maharani” were that they were good and that I should try to incorporate the bits that worked in both. I did this. I concentrated my descriptions on the last rites rather than describing the queen as this was the crux of the story. But I don’t think the current revision is as punchy and effective as the first revision [and went back to the first revision.]

*

In *Short: An International Anthology of Five Centuries of Short-Short Stories, Prose Poems, Brief Essays and Other Short Prose Forms* (2014) my favourite pieces are on the extremely short side; distilled, concentrated narratives—Gary Lutz’s “Steep” and Augusto Monterroso’s “Errata and Final Notice.” And particularly Lydia Davis’ piece “The Cedar Trees.”

Week 13

[No Seminars]

In last week's seminar feedback, I was told to incorporate the best aspects of my first draft, the descriptions, into the minimalist style of the second draft. I didn't really understand how to do that, but Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (2001) has shown me a way. She uses description very judiciously. She doesn't paint everything in fine detail, but she gives the reader just enough for imagination and empathy to take flight. I flew through the collection and then read it again slowly to really absorb it. I love how Cisneros melds the innocence and clarity of childlike observation in the simple writing with adult understanding of the scenarios. Each story is very short but I found each one impactful in some way.

Looking at Bernheimer's anthology *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* (2010), I was interested to see that there was more than one reinterpretation of specific classical fairy tales, each wildly different from the other in tone and focus. I'm keen to see how they play within the parameters of fairy tale form.

In Joy Williams' "Baba Iaga and the Pelican Child" (2010) I love how the sentence structure and word choice feel very classical fairy tale-ish and then randomly the cat says, "I don't give a rat's ass…" (5) and it is completely jarring but still fits because it's the cat that says it.

Discussing some of my favourite Frederico Garcia Lorca poems with a Spanish teaching colleague, she pointed out that in the original Spanish, Lorca uses more classical language that is more elaborate and that the English translations were much more straightforward. This makes me wonder at what alternative meanings I'm creating when I borrow words from languages that I don't speak and whose nuances are lost on me.

Week 14 &15

"Poetics Of The Wor(l)ds We Live In"

In Paul Wessels' seminar we looked at forty-one essays in which writers examine how and why they write. We took it in turns to read aloud, without commenting**.** We then wrote an essay discussing what we'd gleaned and how it helps us understand how and why we write.

Apart from the content, the act of reading these texts aloud and listening to others read aloud was an experience that was quite rare and useful.

I became aware of the pronunciation and mispronunciation of words and names. It made me think how many times I've heard native English speakers correct non-native English speakers' English pronunciation and how few times I'd seen the reverse. [In September I explored this in my story "Davo."]

Week 16

"Overwriting"

In Henali's seminar we explored the idea of having enough confidence as a writer, not to overexplain, particularly in the context of culture and language.

We each chose a prior seminar submission and cut it by fifty percent. I chose "Love from Me." The feedback I got from the epistolary seminar was to describe more and to engage imagery more. But I think that the piece works better pared back. Having the courage not to overexplain or over describe is important generally. There were no cultural or language references in "Love from Me", but I think the lack of explanations for what the recipient of the letters would understand (but the reader might not) makes the piece better. For instance, Henali said she found the different salutations distracting as she didn't understand their purpose, but I think that readers with a playful relationship with their mothers would understand and relate. So, I decided to keep those salutations. Henali also found the sign off distracting and I agree. My intention was to create a refrain and I think it worked in the originals, but the cut letters are very short and the sign off makes the flow clumsy. Leaving them out creates a smoother read.

We also had to write about cultural references, inside jokes, etc. without explaining. I wrote "Dead People's Prayers." I'm still quite fluid with my stance about not explaining culturally specific references. As many of my pieces are so short that if I'm too obscure I shut out readers completely and, in my experience, people often won't bother looking things up, I've decided (for now) to footnote very obscure references that are difficult to find on Google.

*

Opening *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2010) randomly, I had to laugh at the one sentence story "Information from the North Concerning Ice", which reads: "Each seal uses many blowholes and each blowhole is used by many seals." The audacity of it.

Week 17

“Place”

Carol Leff’s seminar explored the idea of place and how it can contribute to the tone and mood of a piece, almost becoming a character in the story.

Although I was trying to write a denser piece, “Just off Ebid Khetim Street”, felt clunky. Looking at it again, I see that it is thick and molassesy to read, but that seems to add to the atmosphere that I was trying to create. I appreciate Carol’s feedback that I would have had to decrease the density of the writing if I chose to continue the piece, as it would be laborious to read if I carried on in the same vein. I think it's laborious to read now. It’s an interesting feeling having other people like a piece of your work that you don’t.

Week 18

“Dialogue”

For Chwayita Ngamlana’s seminar we looked at how dialogue can be used effectively and some stumbling blocks that can make dialogue ineffective. We looked at examples of how dialogue was used in both fast and slower-paced pieces. And how it can be a brief way to introduce a lot of context information about a character. Chwayita asked us who felt comfortable writing dialogue and used it effectively. I was surprised when both Mbe and Lelethu said that I did. I hadn’t been conscious of using dialogue in my work, apart from one or two dialogue heavy pieces. [In hindsight a fair number of my stories are dialogue. Rhythm and dialects communicate a lot about culture and relationships quickly without too much description.]

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Yasunari Kawabata’s “The Grasshopper and the Bell Cricket” (2006) takes a simple scene of children playing with lanterns and uses it to create such a melancholic study of human relationships. There was a contrast between the simplicity of the scene and the writing, and depth of feeling.

Similarly, Rayda Jacobs’ “You are the Daughter” (2003) is such a gentle but deeply moving story. The narrator remembering her abuse while dealing with her mother’s funeral preparations made sense. The loss of a mother can make a person feel vulnerable emotionally

and mentally. Jacobs reflected that sense of vulnerability, strength and tenderness in the grieving process really well. It was a quiet story. The type of story I would love to write.

Week 19

"Soliloquy, Monologues and rants"

For Paul Mason's seminar on the art of writing a rant, I wrote "Playing Games." I feel that it worked because of how I read it. I'm not convinced that it's as impactful just read on the page. [I refined this later in the punctuation seminar and am more confident with it on the page.]

I was struck by the complete lack of women authors in the seminar reader. There were no female characters, narrators or writers—just a bunch of angry, whiny men. Were there no good examples of women ranting? Or of women writing a male rant?

*

Gerry LaFemina's compelling "Fairy tale" (2006) created a feeling of uncertainty and unease. I felt it hinted at child abuse with the witch tickling children in their sleep until they wet their beds, but the end of the story is more ambiguous because the witch is present in both children's homes in separate locations. Is it magic? Is it abuse?

On my second reading of "Shhhh" by NoViolet Bulawayo (2015) I understood why the mother was called Mother of Bones and I noticed how some characters had 'traditional' names but most had names like Bastard and Godknows. This made me think about how seldom I name the characters in my stories. [This influenced how I chose the Arabic names in "A Walk in Sunshine."]

Week 20

Investigating book reviews, I see that not all book reviews seem to be aimed at getting readers to buy a book. "My Year Reading Lemmishly" (Lethem, 2022) is a comprehensive retrospective of the works of Stanislaw Lem. It tracks the shifts in Lem's writing style, places his works in a social and historical context, looking at what influenced the author and what effect the books have had on the Science Fiction genre, and other authors down the years and

on popular culture in general. Joyce Johnson does something similar in "Jack Kerouac's Journey" (2022) but in a less academic style. These reviews were more love letters to an author's entire body of work than a review for a single book.

Ant's review (2018) of Ursula K Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* tells the premise of the story, touches ever so slightly on themes that are covered, gives a quick but vague warning about what readers might not like about the book and sends them on their way. I prefer this type of review.

I finished reading James McClure's *The Steam Pig* (2010) and I will write my first book review on this novel.

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I've realized that there aren't any children's books on the MACW reading list. There are many fairy tales, but they are for adult readers. I read a lot of middle grade and YA books because I need to give students good recommendations and because I enjoy them. I like them for the same reason I like Diane Williams or Lydia Davis. There is a clarity in the writing and the essence of the stories is easy to get at. I just wonder if one can write critical fiction for children and be taken seriously. I don't think I want to write children's fiction, but I do think there might be things I can learn from it. I don't want to read—or write—dense, chewy types of novels that you have to struggle and fight with. I want stories that I fly through but that make me go back and reread a scene or a sentence that sits in my memory and slowly unravels.

Week 21

"Punctuation"

In Stacy's seminar we examined punctuation. The focus on the minutiae of the sentence was really evident in Mbe's work. His narrative was tight at the beginning but then the sentences loosen up towards the end to create an almost frantic energy. The musicality of Mbe's work is something that I've incorporated into my own. My writing doesn't have his obvious sense of rhythm and melody, but he has definitely helped me hear my own music better.

In "Pathi's Sister" I paid close attention to my use of punctuation, using dashes, semicolons and question marks to slow down the pace of the second paragraph creating a soft, almost

sticky movement. Stacy suggested the edit: "~~Isn't all I'm saying, is~~ I'd also have nightmares if someone threw my sister's dead body over the side of a ship." The first paragraph of the piece is colloquial while the middle paragraphs are more lyrical, and I wanted a shift back to that colloquial feel to end off the narrative and underscore the ugliness of the subject matter. However, that switch was too jarring. Lopping the first bit of the sentence, while losing that SA Indian essence, has enough of a shift without being grating.

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Rivka Galchen's "The Lost Order" (2015) uses punctuation to create ambiguity and a dreamlike feel to the narrative. Galchen uses standard quotation marks to indicate dialogue, so I thought it was quite clear when people were talking and when the narrator was imagining or thinking. "I'm looking for, I imagine myself saying to this man, a wedding ring. Oh, he says, You're all looking for rings" (647). She mimics how dialogue would be written but doesn't include the speech marks which indicates that there's a clear separation between real dialogue and what's going on in the narrator's head. However, Galchen also uses quotation marks in a remembered conversation "…I found myself saying to the managing partner 'I'm afraid I'll need to tender my resignation.'" (645) Then we find out at the end of the story that the narrator didn't resign but was fired. It's such a small, clever way of indicating that the narrator is not reliable and rereading the story I wondered how much of the dialogue was 'real'.

Week 22

Poetry "Prose Poetry"

Prose "Experimenting Through Sex"

I joined Kerry Hammerton's seminar on prose poetry because I find it difficult to differentiate between micro fiction or flash fiction and prose poetry and was heartened to hear that the distinctions can be fluid. Lydia Davis' piece "Agreement" (2003) has that signature sense of space that I get from her work. The sentences aren't lyrical and there is not much imagery but there is a melody to the piece. There is a sense that the narrative is cyclical—that it will repeat itself and there is no resolution to that narrative but the poem still feels complete.

"Some Fears" (2018) by Emily Berry, and prose poems in general, don't necessarily follow a narrative and circle around one point and so can fully tease out the essence of what a piece is about. What caught my attention is that the poem is essentially a list that theoretically could carry on and on. It was interesting to see how Berry subtly switched from fear, to fear of getting help, to the idea of help to reel the piece back in to a satisfying close. I tried to do something similar with "Ordinary Love," listing everyday things that show affection but book ending the list with "Love doesn't look like hugs and roses" to get a sense of closure. But I agree with Kerry—the lines were trite and superfluous because the title introduced the body of the poem already. I removed the lines, and I played around with a few things but I'm still not happy with how the poem closes.

In Chwayita's prose seminar, we looked at different ways of writing sex. I never thought I'd find myself sitting in a library, listening to a video about the history of ghost sex for my chosen topic of spectrophilia. Most of my research was about incubi and succubae. Historically there was a belief that incubi could impregnate human women which seemed like a get out of jail card for rape or adultery and reminded me of a movie called *Agnes of God* which got me thinking about the immaculate conception.

The feedback I got for "Immaculate Conception" was that the writing was good, but the sex was unclear. I was puzzled, because one way of writing about sex that we looked at in the seminar, was metaphorical. I referenced medieval European Christian imagery—flames, butterflies, gold, lions, fish—but was told to make the Christian imagery clearer and to make the piece longer because five lines was too short for readers to understand and that I was expecting too much from readers. I am baffled because in the prose poetry seminar, I submitted a two-line piece called "Sisters" that relied heavily on knowledge of Greek mythology (particularly Achilles, Hector and Paris). I expected it to crash hard, but it landed even though no one present knew the mythology reference. So, if two lines are enough why are five too short?

I feel the feedback that I got in the prose seminar was contradictory to the examples and discussions that we had in the seminar. The intention of the story was to be ambiguous in terms of consent and in terms of the partner. Is the partner spectral? Is it God himself? Or is it a corporeal partner and consent is absent or ambiguous? I was never going to write a blunt sex scene—it doesn't suite my writing style and we were encouraged to stay true to our style.

Week 23

“(Re)writing Children”

The final coursework seminar with Jo-Ann was about writing from the perspective of children. For me there’s a simplicity and concreteness to how young children experience the world but there is more nuance than I think many adults give them credit for. Children have an innate understanding of many things but lack the words to express themselves and so they use the tangible world around them to explain themselves which results in the humorous and poetic things that kids sometimes say. Bessie Head’s *A Question Of Power* (2018), illustrates how a child’s words and way of saying things can insert a profundity steeped in innocence. In “Five Rand” I didn’t specify age in the story and I tried to use concrete objects and actions to convey how a child might try to explain a mix of emotions that they don’t have a word for or don’t really understand.

With “Mother-in-Law Eater” I referenced stories like Mariana Enriquez’s “Adela’s House” (2017) and Prenesa Naidoo’s “Falling Down The Stairs” (2020) which had an adult narrator inhabiting their childhood memories and in so doing making even outlandish descriptions feel true. I played with the idea of memory, childlike logic and imagination. I tried to explore the idea of shared stories, but not necessarily shared experiences, becoming shared memories in a very real sense.

Part Two

Thesis Reflective Journals

July

Visiting my relatives in KwaZulu Natal, I did a lot of asking and listening. Sitting in my Aunty's kitchen and hearing "Is So and So's husband from down still a drug dealer?" is both jarring and expected. There were incidents and stories that I actively sought details about but there were also quite a few ideas that came just through chatting.

Debating class and privilege with my dad, I remembered my cousin saying my dad was the first person he knew who had electric windows on his car and that made me realize that to my cousins, my dad was *that* uncle, and I was *that* cousin that thinks she's too good for the rest of the family. I've never viewed myself that way which is how "Electric Windows" came about. Initially, I ended the story with "I would've gotten a hiding if I messed my best dress and y'all were arseholes who laughed at me because I was shy." I shortened it, but it still felt too earnest. I've decided, for now, to end it with "My dad was that uncle."

I've always known that I wanted to write about my uncle who lives in KwaDukuza-Stanger. His home was and still is magical to me. However, "Stanger Uncle" ended up being quite a sad story. It made me uneasy, so I asked if I could visit him. My four-year-old nephew accompanied me. It was interesting to view this place and this man through the lens of my memories, my present and through the perspective of a young child. I can imagine a fantasy tale set in the garden and a horror story in his house because though I find walls papered with photographs and magazine clippings charming, I've never been there at night and can't imagine sleeping with all those eyes looking at me. [In hindsight, this is what inspired "Voices" and "Tuckshop Corridor."]

*

In Lily Hoang's *The Bestiary* (2016), I found "on the Geography of Friendship" and "On My Birthday, Dragons and Intestines" difficult to navigate but I enjoyed the first lyric essay "On the Rat Race" which intersperses the events of the narrator's sister's death with the narrator's other relationships but works together to narrate the sister's death and the impact on the narrator.

I've been taught to differentiate between the author and the narrator because the views of the narrator aren't necessarily those of the author. In *The Bestiary* I found this line very blurred. In "Ciaccone" Hoang writes: "I contrast that Lily Hoang, teaching Women's Studies and Feminism…This is my favorite Lily" (106). She deliberately and obviously smudges the line between narrator and author at times, but this carries through to the other stories, so that I read even the most fantastical fairy tale as a rendering of Hoang's lived experience rather than something born solely from the creative imagination (I think my thesis may end up having this type of flavour). The introduction of the book is "Once upon a time—shh, shh—this is only a fairy tale" (9). I think that this is a very subtle, clever way to influence how the reader engages with the collection.

*

The July contact week, when full-time and part-time students and teachers met at Rhodes to give feedback on creative work, was useful.

Mellon writer in residence Jeremy Vearey gave an interesting talk and I found his views on identity and language particularly powerful. He spoke about how identity on both an individual and group level was made up of multiple elements and how in writing we shouldn't elevate one aspect of an identity at the expense of others. He spoke about making an effort to listen (read) in the language of the speaker (writer) and put as much responsibility on the reader as the writer. Vearey put a lot of emphasis on group identity and being respectful and aware of the dynamics of that identity when writing about it. His observation that the act of telling is as important as the content is akin to saying "Fairy tale is form. Form is fairy tale" (Bernheimer). In terms of form and in terms of group and individual identity as well as language, I suppose this is why many of my stories are dialogues. There is a respect for both the form and the subject, the story as well as the context and who the story is about that I found appealing, because that is something I want to show towards the communities and groups that I write about.

I attended some of the afternoon poetics sessions for the part-time students. Ideas of language, identity and accessibility popped out at me in the Amina Cain and Craig Santos Perez readings and cropped up again when I read my stories in the story feedback sessions. Most of the feedback that I received, positive and negative, was very constructive and helpful but if there was any unfamiliar terminology and, if it wasn't paired with the dialogue format of story that is the most popular form of my stories, amongst teachers and students alike, then

there was the muddy water of not understanding. A particular instance was in “Dead People’s Prayers” when the Tamil word Thatha (grandfather) was mistaken for the IsiXhosa word thatha (still/ be quiet). No one understood “Phoenix Unit 2” until Paul Mason pointed out the word harridan, which was the key to understanding the story and which no one else seemed to know the meaning of. I learnt the word from my granny who lived in Phoenix. This brings me back to the Cain and Perez discussions about accessibility.

When I floated the idea of a glossary, I was begged not to by most of the people of colour that I mentioned it to (I don’t want to do one because I know that generally, words like Aiya and Thatha would be included and words like harridan wouldn’t and that irks me) but then I remember my classmate Yenzokuhle Busakwe’s comment, in a book review, that she appreciated a glossary for Sepedi and Sotho words. I think I’m okay with some of my stories being impenetrable to those outside the culture but to quote Perez, (2015) “Sometimes I translate and sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I footnote/endnote cultural references and sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I activate indeterminacy and sometimes I share meaning freely” (251). That’s why I like Kuzhali Manickavel’s *What We Found During the Autopsy* (2020). Some of the stories make no sense to me at all and that’s fine because there are some other stories that are much easier to access. If I want to be an accessible writer it’s fine to have largely inaccessible stories but to balance them with accessible stories as well.

Critiques of “Phoenix Unit Two” concerned the flow and rhythm of some sentences, how some phrases sounded odd or that the language was too polite and should be changed to something like “And when they catch you—they’re going to fuck you up.” I said that I found it difficult to find the balance between taking on board criticism to make the melody of a story better and figuring out if terms and rhythm sound wrong because they’re foreign to the ear, i.e., they haven’t heard people speaking in a certain way, so it sounds off. It’s something I’ve noticed with Veronique’s Kaaps work as well. I don’t have anyone on this course to advocate for how Tamil South Africans speak, which is why I often read my work to my family because they will point out stereotypical language or will tell me if a phrase fits in a particular context. Sometimes I ignore feedback because it doesn’t take into account the different flows of language and once I pointed this out, I was encouraged by the teachers to disregard such critique.

August

It was the names in Selah Saterstrom's *The Pink Institution* (2004) that struck me first. The patriarchs' names were biblical, but most women had delicate names like Abella which means breath. Knowing the meaning of some of the names added a layer of depth to the narrative. This all made me think again of how intentional writers can be with names and about the lack of names in my own pieces. In my culture, naming is very important, and I think that has sunk into my subconscious. I wrote "Two Babies Were Born" which is all about the naming ceremony, but the characters aren't named in that story. I tend to use relationship signifiers like Thatha, Akka, Aiya, Pathi. For a few of the stories it's been a conscious decision not to name the characters as I wanted them to have an 'every person' feel, but for others it's definitely not been. [I still don't use names much and looking back, I see that I was doing something similar to what NoViolet Bulawayo does in "Shhh" but instead of using a character's traits to name them I used their societal or relationship titles which often times still gives the reader information about their traits.]

The structure of this novel is very intentional. Each section deals with a different era of this family's history but is also different in style and form. This had me thinking about how I could structure my thesis.

Saterstrom plays a lot with word spacing. I thought she was trying to convey the pace that Southern Americans talk—how they drawl. But on page 10 the only words are "A man enjoyed hunting a woman enjoyed." The sentence continues onto the opposite page to read "A man enjoyed hunting a woman enjoyed socializing and thinking about restoration projects" (10-11). I enjoyed how playing with form and punctuation influenced the rhythm and flow and how in turn that made meaning both fluid and more complex.

This had me examining how "Blankness" sat on the page and influenced how I read it and how the meaning was conveyed. I wrote it as one prose sentence and played with the spacing between words. I pushed the body of the piece to the left and justified it so that there was a block of space under the title, visually illustrating blankness. I tried spacing out words that referred to emptiness and decreased spaces with words like 'shrinking'. They all just felt a bit contrived and didn't aid in how the piece was read. The flow of words was better in the verse form. The piece elongates down the page into the word 'nothing'. The line breaks soften the pauses, so the piece feels fluid until the last line with the full stop that makes a dead end.

*

I am worried about meeting the requirements of the thesis as my stories are very short. Though I have written forty pieces I don't have even 10 000 words yet. I tried to write a longer piece with "Voices." I thought I would be adding to it but the more I look at it the more it seems a complete work and I quite like that the reader doesn't know what the voices are—maybe because I haven't figured out what the voices are.

*

To get access to a more diverse audience that includes some South African Indians, I held my Writing in Community public readings on Zoom. During my second reading, I found it interesting that someone from the Indian community mentioned needing a glossary. The discussions in MACW surrounding this have been in terms of understanding that writers can't control how a text is interpreted by the reader, and in terms of trusting the reader to look things up if they need to. There are also issues of othering cultures to think of. As a writer I found it liberating to move away from overexplaining 'foreign' or 'exotic' cultural terms. However, this person's comment made me think about *why* it is that I am so conflicted about glossaries. On one hand I want my writing to stand on its own and don't think it's my job as a writer to represent any culture or community. On the other hand, I am part of a small and very diverse culture that isn't well represented and as someone within that culture I am averse to that culture being misunderstood. Additionally, the language clarifications that some of the other attendees asked for reminded me to think of the glossary outside of a theoretical or academic arena. It reminded me that it isn't just western readers that need help understanding writings from different cultures and that it is often not easy to access information about smaller and less well-known cultures. A standout story in Henali Kuit's collection *The Incredible Beat of my Heart* (2021) is "Carel." It feels very seedy. When I first read it, the story felt like one of those 'let's take our son to a hooker to become a man' stories but I questioned the mother being present. It is about a boy who visits a woman who pummels him to get phlegm out of his chest. I went back to the beginning of the story to see if I was just a pervert or if there were some suggestions that made me suspicious. There's a fixation with the woman touching the boy's hand and with his shirt and the buttonhole of his shirt. The boy is told to take of his shirt and lay on a bed. It's all very ambiguous but the feeling of unease that the boy feels is palpable. When I figured out the situation that was being described it felt less of a twist and more of, Oh I misread the situation, while simultaneously feeling that I was led by the author to misread the situation, to convey that unease that the boy feels and which permeates the entire story. I tried to do something akin to this in "A Walk in Sunshine." A major difference is that in Kuit's "Carel"

the character knows what's going on. It's the reader that is kept in the grey. In my story I think the sequence of events is pretty clear for both the reader and the character Sweaty Girl. In real life, a young girl being offered a lift by a seemingly decent guy often ends well and it very often doesn't, and I wanted there to be the option of both endings.

Something else I played with in "A Walk in Sunshine" was form. I wanted to write a script and I was struggling to describe the setting. I can see the environment vividly in my head but when I put it down in other forms, it just sounded flat and generic. I was going to go with even less description because stage direction can be sparse but when I went too sparse, I felt that it lacked colour. Interestingly, when I read it, I realized that this story did not read well aloud. I find it lacks the rhythm and musicality that my other pieces have. It is quite clunky to read aloud but I think on the page it works.

*

I had a good time writing "The Story of a City." As Kate Bernheimer says, fairy tales always let you know that you're in one. The language and form carry you along, and I really enjoyed playing around with the fantasy epic conventions that I grew up reading. The story is based on my experience at a workshop in New York. Writing the story as a fairy tale allowed me to add an element of playfulness in the way I described common items like pizza and hotdogs that counterbalances the underlying point of the story.

I also used the fairy tale form to distance myself from the emotions of that memory. I find that if I'm too immersed in how I felt, I tend to overexplain what I'm feeling. With the last paragraph, I had initially distanced my emotions too much and I had to go back and be specific with what happened and how it made me feel and be very intentional with how I wove that into the story before I could make it work.

*

"Weekday Supper" was inspired by a conversation I had with my sister about two of my mother's sayings. I felt that I needed a third and remembered the way my mother would pull the skin under her eye down as if to say, 'Meh. Here look it's in my eye.' I puzzled about how to get that action onto paper because the story felt like it needed to be a dialogue and explaining the action didn't fit the rhythm and flow. It's a silly little story but I really puzzled over how to end it off. I wasn't married to the eye action, but I wanted a third element

because the piece felt truncated with just the two. [I remembered a third of my mother's sayings and used that instead. I lost the action, but the piece still retains that humour and motherly exasperation.]

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What is Not Yours Is Not Yours (2016) by Helen Oyeyemi is a collection I really like. In "'Sorry' Doesn't Sweeten Her Tea" there was a shift from more traditional type prose to bullet points at the end of the piece, where she's just listing outcomes of actions that happened earlier in the narrative. I've seen this done before but here I think it works because there isn't too drastic a shift in pace and density. I tried to do something similar in "A Handful of Salt." I had planned to write about the first two or three bullet points in paragraphs and then go into a list—alternating between paragraphs of present action with lists of future action. But I found the opening paragraph clunky, and it made the piece feel a bit top heavy, and once I got into the bullets, I liked the pace and how pithy they are. [I kept the list form but removed the bullets as I didn't feel that they added anything.]

Oyeyemi often weaves in incidents and details that are interesting and vivid enough to lead the reader on a false trail. I felt that a certain detail was going to be very important, but the narrative would only refer to it once or twice and never get back to it. In the book's first narrative "Books and Roses" I was left thinking 'what about this? and what about that?' whilst simultaneously feeling that the ending of the piece felt satisfactory. This set the tone for the rest of the stories in the book. The ending of "Drowning" weaves into the story beautifully but also feels like it came out of nowhere in a very humorous way. I tried to play with an unexpected or humorous ending in "Over the Wall", with a conversation with a cat, but would like to experiment more with vivid details which lead nowhere. [I think the deliberate misdirection I used in "In the Shadow of Truths" was also effective albeit not humorous.]

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I remember reading Lily Hoang's *A Bestiary* (2016) and thinking it was very clever how lists of seemingly disparate ideas on a page could weave a cohesive creative piece through tenuous links. However, every time I attempted one of these, I felt that it turned out vague and unconvincing. Then I read Sheila Heti's "From My Diaries (2006-10) in Alphabetical Order" which again is a list of seemingly disparate sentences and phrases grouped together alphabetically that creates a creative cohesive whole. The alphabetic nature of it got me

thinking about my glossary and how to provide some background context in a way that isn't distracting or boring. Many words that I use don't actually exist because I've spelled them from hearing and the way some words are pronounced in certain accents is completely different to how they're Romanised. For example, the word I hear as Bomblymush is spelled bablimas which is a pomelo but there are other words like deepakulsum that I have heard my whole life but have not found on Google, and I will just have to describe. "Some Things You Might Want To Know" is a happy fix. It lets me give the reader context in an interesting way and lets me just riff off a bunch of ideas and create a new piece.

September

Compiling all my stories into the first draft of the thesis was more daunting than I thought it would be. With the Writing in Community public readings, I only had to juggle thirteen stories. This first draft had 88 stories which was quite difficult to handle.

Conceptualising and writing 88 stories has been challenging, and to meet the word count of 30 000 words I have been trying to write longer pieces. It's difficult as I tend to pare back my stories even when they are quite spare to begin with. Sometimes I'd look at a sentence-long piece and wonder whether or not I should expand on it—whether it would lose its essence if it became a longer piece. At other times I'd write a lengthy piece and come back to it in a day and despair because I needed to cut it back to half, but this forced me to experiment and push myself to get both quality and quantity.

Thinking about how to collate all my stories into a coherent whole, I considered grouping the pieces according to theme, form or chronological order but, I knew I was going to try to create a loose narrative through the thesis. Even before I fell in love with *The House On Mango Street*, I loved creating photo essays when I studied journalism. Each photograph held a story that fit into the larger narrative of the essay. It was something that the audience noticed and appreciated in the Witing in Community readings. They liked that there was some kind of link from one story to the next—they felt that there wasn't really a piece that felt out of place or jarring.

In the end I went with a sort of narrative. There couldn't be a true chronology, but I wanted a sense of time passing. But even within that choice there were many decisions to make—I could have gone with a loose configuration like in *The House on Mango Street* or I could

have chosen something more obviously curated as in *The Pink Institution* where Saterstrom flows a chronology through time but breaks the collection up into sections determined by form. The latter was too fiddly with eighty plus stories. So, within the general timeline, I tried to group stories by theme and age of narrator. Within that, I tried to vary pace, tone and form. As I was putting the first few stories together, I noticed that my very short pieces could work as a subtle section break and used them more intentionally to corral themes. I ended up lumping all my dead mommy stories at the end and I worried that this would make the second half of the thesis a slog, but I think there is enough variety in tone and there is enough humour, even in the sad stories, that the collection doesn't become leaden.

After sending my supervisor Jo-Ann my initial compilation, and a note on my reservations, she sent me an extract from Tobias Carroll's interview with Matt Bell in *Volume 1 Brooklyn* where Bell says "People open a book up in the middle; they start in the middle of a middle story. The notion that you control what any reader does is folly." I found this reassuring. We've spent the year talking about how writers don't have any control over how readers approach texts, but this was a good reminder. A public reading is an auditory experience where the writer controls the order of the stories read aloud. But when readers read a collection, they can approach the text in any way they choose so perhaps it matters less if sections are clunky.

*

I chose to work with adults for the community writing workshop because I wanted to make sure I approached this as a writer and less as a teacher. I worked with a women's support group. They are women from corporate backgrounds who have suffered trauma and abuse.

In the workshop I had to balance the time and attention between writing and giving everyone space to feel and engage with their emotions. I was able to see how raw writing can be, if the writer opens up to their vulnerability and allows themselves to write honestly. However, the writing workshop was a safe space with an audience that was empathetic. I think the challenge for me, writing for a broader, general audience has been to tap into a similar vulnerability, with the understanding and acceptance that the reader won't necessarily have that same personal empathy and understanding. The workshop also helped me to be more nimble and less confined in thinking about my writing. It's easy to fall into general patterns and ways of writing but having to vary forms and tones during the free writing sessions was a

useful reminder that it's fine to follow where the writing is going, but also to actively thwart that and try to shape it into something different just to see what happens.

October

Authors and Collections that Most Influenced My Thesis

Almost every poem in Tariro Ndoro's *Agringada: Like A Gringa, Like a Foreigner* (2019) explores a different form. "Severing" gives the definitions of two similar words and lets the reader choose their level of sorrow to fill in. Ndoro's fierce and fearless experimentation reminds me of the profound effect poetry collections have had on my writing throughout this course. Pedro Salinas' "So Transparent Your Soul" (2005) had me dissecting how the poem moved across the page, to understand how words could feel so airy. Poems like Saadi Youssef's "The Bird's Last Flight" (2011) and Louis Simpson's "The Inner Part" (2012) taught me how a single word or punctuation mark can shift both meaning and rhythm and how rhythm is part of meaning making.

Short story collections and anthologies gave me a taste of different styles and forms. In *Wreckage of Reason: An Anthology of Contemporary XXperimental Prose by Women Writers*, I read metafictional writing in Suki Wessling's "Upon Finding a Knife" and experimented with it in my story "MidYear Trials." In *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* and Kate Bernheimer's *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me*, I saw how the flatness and abstraction of the fairy tale form worked to convey depth and subvert norms, and was inspired to use that form in stories like "Nanny" and "Picnic at Cape Point."

Diane Williams' "Flower" in *Forms at War: FC2 1999-2009* (2009) showed me what I'd learned from poetry also worked in prose. Sixty-three words held me captive. It isn't a gentle story and I felt like I had been sucker-punched. I remember how baffled and excited I was, at how such a short piece could be so complete and condensed a narrative and hold so much space and depth. But it was *PP/FF: an anthology* and works like Aimee Parkinson's "The Glass Girl", Ed Taylor's "The Pilgrim" and Jamey Dunham's "The Neighbor's Dog" that solidified my preference for micro and flash fiction. It was in this collection that I first encountered Lydia Davis.

I really enjoyed and was influenced by pieces like “The Mother” (2006) “Visit to Her Husband” (2006) and “Men” (2015) long before I read *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2010). Davis’ one sentence pieces definitely gave me the confidence to let my sentence length pieces stand, and not be tempted into lengthening them.

Throughout the MACW course it has been writers like Diane Williams, Lydia Davis and Sandra Cisneros, with their concise, deeply moving pieces, that have consistently drawn my attention and inspired my work.

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Reflections on my Reader’s Report

I’m not sure what I expected from the Reader’s Report, but I was overwhelmed by a feeling of being understood. It’s not that I’ve felt that my writing wasn’t appreciated in the course, it’s just that this feedback has come from a reader who doesn’t know me and who, more importantly, hasn’t heard me read these stories aloud. I’ve known that my stories sound good read aloud, but I’ve wondered if they would stand alone on the page.

It took me a while to reread the report and better grasp the nuance, because I didn’t want to break the spell. The first paragraph mentions the consistency of intention within my thesis and says that there is a “certain familiarity that embraces the reader.” This reassured me, as I have been concerned that the quantity of cultural references might alienate the reader.

I curbed my inclination to skip over the “What Works” section of the report and go straight to “What Doesn’t Work” because if there’s one thing that I’ve gathered this year, it is that there is as much to learn in writing from what we do well, as from mistakes that we make.

The report describes my stories as easy to read but impactful. I’m aware that sometimes shorter pieces that have so many cultural references can be obscure, so this view is validating.

It is clear that the Reader favoured my cultural pieces and stories that have a dreamier feel. The report describes the stories as having a “haunting effect,” “heartbreaking in the most beautiful sense of the word” and “hav[ing] a spell to them.” There are many stories like this in my thesis, but there are also a lot of stories that are more grounded.

It would be an impossible task to cover all eighty-eight stories, but the Reader’s preference for the ethereal might be a reason that “Relax—This is Just One Story So Don’t Come for

Me" was singled out as breaking the spell and potentially feeling a bit flat. There are other stories that have a grittier feel, like "Phoenix Unit 2," "Wobbles," or "Travel Bug" but these stories are significantly shorter. Perhaps the length and the extended feel of a 'rougher' narrative was grating for the Reader. Perhaps they didn't like any of these gritty stories.

The Reader also felt "The Tale of a City" broke the spell. I wish that the critique had been a bit more specific. I wondered if it might be that it uses fairy tale and fantasy language conventions more obviously. "Nanny" and "A Picnic at Cape Point" are mentioned in the report positively and both do something similar to "The Tale of a City" in terms of form but less so in terms of language convention.

I agree with the report that "I'm Sorry for Your Loss" ["Empty Letters"] is not the strongest piece in the thesis. But I'm not sure I agree with the comment that it should not appear after "A Handful of Salt" because the former is such a strong story that it will be a hard act to follow. What story could hold its own? Do I try to keep the thread going or choose a story that creates a complete tone or subject shift? If I place a strong story after "A Handful of Salt" might this story end up feeling flat by comparison? Perhaps it is better to keep a weaker story in that position to absorb this potential pitfall?

The comments about "A Handful of Salt" caught me off guard. I knew that the story was powerful, but I didn't view it as potentially "the most powerful in the collection." This made me go back and look at it with fresh eyes, and it is more intense that I initially realized. I think the list structure makes it feel relentless. This effect interests me because this piece was not difficult to write. It just flowed out and didn't require that much editing. There were definitely other stories, like "Love from Me", that were more emotionally harrowing for me to write and required more coddling but on the page they aren't as intense, or aren't intense in the same way.

My Draft Thesis included a number of possible titles, but the Reader's suggested *You're Abandoning Me and Other Stories*, because family ties and death are strong threads throughout the thesis. This suggestion is compelling, but I am concerned that it is a melancholic title, when there is quite a bit of humour in the collection that balances the sadness. I don't think my thesis is light and fluffy, but I don't think I've grasped how heavy a read it could be when taken as a whole.

It's evident to me that the Reader is familiar with, if not part of, the South African Indian community and well versed in Hindu mythology. The report mentioned witnessing similar

trance scenes to the one described in “Monkey Business.” Nevertheless, the Reader suggested that I be more descriptive in some stories to aid readers who are not part of this community. I received similar suggestions in my Writing in Community public readings—also from South African Indians. I have tried to address these concerns in “Some Things You Might Want to Know” and am disappointed that the report did not mention this story.

The Reader mentioned several stories where more description could be added. With “Who’s That”, I think this would create a nice texture to the story, but on the other hand I like the way the dialogue could be between any adult and child looking at an album or at pictures on a wall. I wonder if it needs to be put in a specific cultural context.

I’m open to the suggestion that I should describe the Lingam more in “Flash Bang” to make things clearer for non-Hindu readers, but I don’t agree with the suggestion that I “make it a character by itself, make it larger than life” I feel that then the Lingam will hijack the story. The story will become more about ritual than it will be about loss.

The overall tone of the report is positive. I expected a lot more criticism. I feel quite proud of my work, but also wary. The fact that the Reader felt that my thesis held together as a cohesive collection of stories is high praise and daunting—will my final stories disrupt the first draft’s sense of cohesion?

I’m reading *Fish in Exile* (Nao, 2016) and *Flights* (Tokarczuk, 2017*)* and the words continue to come. I’m inspired anew to push myself to experiment with language and play with form, tone and theme. My final thesis will have 108 stories and I am still writing my way through the issues of identity, culture and voice that have accompanied me throughout the course. The journey to refine and hone my story telling skills continues.

Part Three

Poetics Essay
Following and Questioning the Mind of the Text

I've wanted to be a writer since I was in primary school. Unlike Maths or Science, creative composition came easily to me. Which is perhaps why it left me so easily as well. Life happened and too many voices told me that writing wasn't a viable occupation, so I became a teacher instead and spent my time reading, critiquing and analysing other people's writing. Until life happened again. A friendly emailed question led to an email thread of essays from me. Writing became a way to cope and a way to process and a way to show people what was going on inside me. As I've since found out, writers write because they have questions, and it seems that I'd been ignoring all my questions. I don't know why I stopped writing but now that I've started again, it seems that my questions keep coming.

Exploring why and how writers write in the poetics essays, I find myself resisting bell hook's assertion in "Narratives of Struggle" that "Many new critical fictions disrupt conventional ways of thinking about the imagination and imaginative work, offering fictions that demand careful scrutiny, that resist passive readership. Consciously opposing the notion of literature as escapist entertainment, these fictions confront and challenge" (56). I'm not arguing against the idea that critical literature undermines and questions but that reading critical literature must necessarily be a confrontation. I don't oppose the notion of literature as escapist. I know many people need and use literature in that way. I feel that a full frontal challenge in that sense, would probably turn many readers away.

Rather, as a writer I would want to 'trick' the reader into thinking they're reading conventional mainstream literature. Brian Evenson's assertion in "The Crazy Party Guy, or, A Disruption of Smooth Surfaces"—that he wants to do "work that destabilizes the reader gradually but profoundly, in a way that he or she can neither prepare for in advance nor recuperate from afterward" (75) is more what I aspire to. This is the kind of work I enjoy reading the most—books like James McClure's *The Steam Pig* or Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* (I find the best children's books do this very well) or the books I've read by Sandra Cisneros. This is the kind of work that I myself wish to create—work that is simple and easy to read, but that unobtrusively asks questions or subtly challenges accepted societal

norms and behaviours. Clearly visible experimental writing sometimes puts me off; if I can see that a work is experimental in form, my mind signals hard work. As Evenson says "There is avant-garde fiction that experiments in a very visible way that you immediately see" (75) and that you can ready yourself for as a reader. However, if a text lures readers in because it seems like a good, light or fun, mainstream read and then subtly makes them pause, go back, ponder and question—that for me is a win.

Fairy tales are a great example of how something can seem to be too simplistic, fantastical or childish but can be the vehicle for profound thinking. In Kate Bernheimer's "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale," she tells us that a fairy tale "announces that it is a form and that you are inside the form" (66). I would argue that for some readers this form may be a signal to dismiss the substance of the narrative but for many other readers the form would be a signal to simply enjoy the narrative and in that openness to enjoyment it is possible to quietly plant seeds of questions and gently nudge readers to think about societal norms from a different stance. The 'flatness' of character that is typical of fairy tales bucks the tendency to develop and illustrate a character's psyche within a narrative. Instead, Bernheimer argues that with this space, "this flatness functions beautifully; it allows a depth of response in the reader" (67). The flatness of the character allows the reader to fill in the blanks—to people that character with someone that they know and can empathise with and so whatever befalls that character is more deeply felt and whatever theme or message is hidden in the narrative is made more personal.

I find that when I write, I'll intend to write something one way, but the subject tends to direct how it lies on paper. I'll try to write in a particular form and experiment with multiple ideas and there'll be one subject that fits really well in that form and the other ideas get discarded or transformed into a different form. This is why I found Tiff Holland's description of how her character Betty Superman insisted on being written in a particular way so compelling. In "Written in Stone: How Subject Dictates Narrative Form," Holland describes how she found herself "pulled in by Betty and her tales, often losing my initial plot completely to follow Betty wherever she wanted to take me" (7). The character rejected poetry forms, longer narrative pieces and insisted on developing as flash fiction.

Amina Caine says in "Slowness" that she "follows the mind of the text I'm working on" (30). For me, sometimes that path is quick and easy but sometimes I tend to go down a few dead ends before I figure out where it is my writing wants to take me. As Marina Tsvetaeva puts it

"I recognise the one I need by all the unrecognized ones (the right one by all the wrong ones)" (173). Sometimes, when I write, especially with my very short micro pieces, I'll get the words all down but as I'm writing a particular word, it will pull slightly in my gut or as I reread a sentence, it will get snagged on a word or phrase and I will sit and figure out what's wrong. I'll rearrange the structure. I'll scour thesauruses for the word that means and feels the closest to what I want it to. Or I'll look at a piece on the page and realize that it isn't quite right and adjust lines or paragraphs until the right version slots itself into place.

I don't feel that it should be my responsibility to represent any specific community I might be a part of but I also think that it's important to be aware of where my writing falls in a socio-political context. As a middle class, straight, South African Indian, cisgendered woman, there are a lot of sensitive issues that my work might touch on—gender, class, race, culture, religion—but I don't think that it's my responsibility as a writer to actively tackle any of those issues in my work. Rather, as Taiye Selasi writes about African writers, "No one novelist can bear the burden of representing a continent and no one novel should have to" (53).

As Bettina Judd puts it "I recognize that my writing is read through this body whether I like it or not" (266). Sometimes I don't like it but a lot of times I do, because as Judd also notes "It was fought for" (266). Judd is referring to the African American experience, but it still holds true for other groups. Writing voices from people like me haven't been heard or taken seriously for a long time and I won't squander this hard-fought opportunity to write through and from my whole self.

I don't think that Phillip Zhuwao's assertion that he is "much more interested in the self. I'm not interested in the ordinary man in the street" (1). is as selfish as it sounds. As a person living within society, I will experience things, and my interpretation of these experiences will be within that context and I need to be aware of how I deal with those social topics in my work and the effect that I want to have on the status quo. It's impossible to write in a vacuum nor would I choose to if given the choice.

One of the reasons I write is because I have questions and I think the way I explore my questions will resonate with some people. As Amina Cain notes "some of my stories are accessible to some people, and some of them aren't. I can't control that" (31). Or as Velimir Khlebnikov states in "On Poetry" "we must not reject a piece of writing simply because it is incomprehensible to a particular group of reader" (153).

Khlebnikov also asks a question about identity—if it's true that "poems about labor can be created only by people who work in factories" (153). I think that this is related to Selasi's questions, "Who is an African writer?" (47) and "What should the African writer write?" (49). She questions if writers living outside the continent can still be considered African. I consider myself African and think that I am as African as an Angolan is to a Moroccan or a Tanzanian is to a Namibian, but many would say that I'm not (the same is true for my identity as an Indian writer). Selasi also discusses how African writers are criticised for perpetuating stereotypes by writing about 'typical' African problems or scenarios, such as poverty or corruption but are also criticised for writing about 'atypical' African experiences such as being middle class university educated professionals. What subject matter is 'appropriate' for African literature?

Khlebnikov's example is class based and he answers his question when he says, "If we consider artistic creativity as the greatest possible deviation of the string of thought from the axis of the creator's life, as a flight from the self, then we have good reason for believing that even poems about an assembly line will be written not by someone who works on an assembly line, but by someone from beyond the factory walls" (154). For Khlebnikov then, writing involves the imagination and writing about or from a different experience than your own is permissible.

But given current debates around identity and who has the right to write from which perspective, I wonder if this holds true and if it does, how far does it hold? Is it permissible to write about experiences outside of your own in terms of gender, race, sexuality etc. Do I as an Indian woman have any right to be writing about the experiences of an old gay IsiXhosa man living in Makhanda? I personally don't think so but then I also think that fiction writing is a work of imagination and shouldn't be limited to personal experience. But then where do I draw the line?

I belong to the South African Indian community but don't know how to speak any of my mother tongues. I speak and think and feel in English, not Tamil or Telegu and so am cut off from understanding large tracts of my own culture. Craig Santos Perez discusses the notion of accessibility in "From Unincorporated Poetic Territories." He writes "I have been given access to the English language and the American poetic tradition, yet I do not have full access to my own native language and literature" (254). This mirrors my own experience. Perez goes on to say that "Writing *from* a colonized space means writing towards indigenous, national,

and international audiences. The plurality and unpredictability of these audiences means that there is no single trajectory of accessibility" (251). A South African Indian will access my work differently to a reader in Tamil Nadu, who will access it differently to a Fijian who will access it differently to a South African or international reader outside the Indian diaspora. And while I try, as Amina Cain says she does, to "start from an open place and trust that the elements that need to be in the story will find their way," (31) I do find myself, like Perez, trying to make sure that my writing has "multiple points of access and, in turn, walls of inaccessibility. Sometimes I translate and sometimes I don't…Sometimes I activate indeterminacy and sometimes I don't" (257).

In "A Voice Within A Voice," Raymond Federman discusses the complexities of writing as a bilingual person and translating his work from English to French and vice versa. He explores how translations are never direct copies of the original and how the different languages can diminish or enhance different aspects of a piece and how when works are self-translated by the original author, the works are "no longer an approximation of the original, nor a duplication, nor a substitute, but truly a continuation of the work" (81).

I'm not bilingual but I often borrow words and phrases from other languages and even from the English of other communities. My parents are Durban Indian of an older generation so to many people it makes sense if I borrow syntax from the way Durban Indians speak. I'm not South Korean or Sudanese, but I've lived and worked in these countries and sometimes use their phrases or words because they fit better—the meaning is closer to what I want than any word that I can find in English. Federman also talks about language and culture being the keys to each other and because I don't speak Hangul or Sudanese, I didn't inhabit or understand either the languages or the cultures. So then is it right to use these languages in my work where I'm not explicitly writing about those cultures? Where I use the words to express a feeling or concept within the context of my experience outside of those cultures? Do I know enough about the words to make sure I don't bastardise their meaning? Is it appropriate for me to use a language that I don't speak?

Federman also talks about not wanting to keep the purity of his languages, "On the contrary, I want to corrupt the French language in me, I want the two languages to corrupt each other" (83) and, though I still question whether I have the right to, this encourages me to 'corrupt' and mix and match words from the different languages that I have been so imperfectly

exposed to, to help me fully realize the meaning that I want to create in my work—to use those words in my writing to show how they have moulded me and my ideas and questions.

I started writing again in an effort to answer questions that I have about existence. But more and more I've come to realize that the act of writing requires me to ask questions about the act of writing itself—to scrutinize and analyse why and how I write. Immersing myself in a range of writers' and thinkers' reflections on their own writing processes and struggles has answered some of my own questions but, more importantly, has made me think of more questions to ask. Their words encourage me to keep interrogating my own writing and writing process.

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Book Reviews

***The Steam Pig* by James McClure (Soho Press, 2010)**

Considering what it's about, where it's set and when it was published, I approached James McClure's *The Steam Pig* with caution. And considering the ample dollops of k—s and c—s in the novel I'm glad I did. I can understand (but not agree with) those students and parents in America who wanted to ban Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from their high schools. If I, living in South Africa, had a racially oblivious or thinly veiled racist white teacher teaching me *The Steam Pig*, I can imagine that my rage and disdain at how the usage of those words might be brushed aside or made light of would overshadow my understanding of the novel. There are characters that are racist in it and the novel does have some, shall we say, 'ideas of the time', but given that it was first published in 1973, I feel it is quite forward thinking—which is another reason I was hesitant about reading it. I, like many people (bigots or not), don't like being lectured when I'm reading police procedurals for fun.

After finishing this book, I was a bit surprised that it wasn't banned during the apartheid regime. The only reason I can think of, is that whoever it was at The Publications Control Board that reviewed *The Steam Pig* couldn't understand or pick up its nuances and just enjoyed it as a light detective novel. I don't blame them. Growing up in a mixed and multi-cultural South Africa and with an anti-segregationist mindset myself, I found that message quite clear in the novel but if a reader isn't of that mindset, I think it might be easy to miss. The story doesn't overtly address apartheid. None of the characters wax lyrical about the system's evils and even though the crime committed in the story is particular to segregated societies, it is used as a plot point rather than as a moralistic opportunity to preach. Apartheid is, rather, the backdrop of the story—the power dynamics, rules and regulations, the language, are a part of the everyday lives of the characters.

The opening scene is a bit gross. The undertaker Mr. Abbot scrutinizing a dead young female is quite pervy but stick with it because the story is actually about a murder investigation. As it turns out, the pervy Mr Abbot sent the wrong body to be cremated in a Jane Doe funeral service. Fortunately, the undertaker's ineptitude uncovers a murder. The young Miss Le Roux was known to have heart problems and when she died of heart failure it didn't seem overly untoward but, as it turns out, she was instead stabbed in the heart with a bicycle poke, and all

are left wondering why a sweet, quiet private music tutor has been murdered in what the book refers to as a Bantu-gang style killing.

Enter Afrikaans detective Lieutenant Trompie Kramer and his assistant, Detective Sergeant Mickey Zondi. If you're rolling your eyes thinking that this is just another white hero with a POC side kick—you're right. Kind of. Kramer is definitely the main character of the story and, on the surface, the relationship between the two men seems like a typical Baas/Boy dynamic. But it's clear from fairly early on in the novel, that though their relationship is in no way equal (Kramer is clearly the one with the power) Zondi is the only person on the police force that Kramer trusts. Kramer trusts not only Zondi's loyalty, but his observations, his adaptability and his intelligence. Rightly so. Zondi is a boss—I mean, he starts a race riot in the town Market Square so that he can search the local gang boss' car for clues without a warrant. The clues he finds leads the investigating pair to some open veld (which in the manner of mystery novels) has specific soil and vegetation. There they find the bloated, decomposed corpse of a potential witness and former police informant. When the "meat wagon" finally pitches up to collect the corpse, the mortuary sergeant is too lazy and grossed out to move the body, so Zondi has to do it. Kramer asks the district surgeon for a tissue so that Zondi can wipe his hands and the doctor is surprised. Kramer justifies his request with "He's driving my car you see." At which Dr Strydom offers Zondi some TCP "And spirits to dry it off."

The Steam Pig is a bit like a time capsule. It's nice to read about brands and things that your parents and grandparents talk about but aren't so prevalent now or even don't exist anymore—like Vanilla Glories, The Yellow Pages or Texans (the cigarettes not the people). There's an amusing nod to South African patriotism and the country's international standing when during the course of the investigation, Kramer heads back to Mr Abbot's mortuary to find him sorting out an American cadaver, who died of a stroke on a tour ship and was due to leave via plane the next day and how "…extra care was taken with the sutures—it was a matter of national pride." But the detail I found most amusing is actually an important clue in the story. Kramer discovers that the victim wore coloured contact lenses. Beauty bloggers change their eye colour all the time to match their make-up look or general aesthetic. The lady was vain. So what? The so what, is that this story is set in the 70s. So unusual are colour contacts in South Africa at this time, that when the detective asks local opticians about them "…some had to have the whole thing explained twice to them. Cosmetic contacts were definitely still a thing of the future in Trekkersburg, if not the entire Republic, and most of

them doubted very much if they would ever catch on." I love how, though it wasn't intended to be, this detail is a reminder of how fast societies change and in so many different and unexpected ways.

Another time 'tell' is how the characters speak. Obviously, there is the casual and liberal use of racial slurs in general conversation, that I expected. But I was baffled by how some of the Indian characters spoke. Being Indian myself, my initial reaction was that McClure was basing his Indian characters' speech patterns on some old-school BBC caricatures but having spoken to some of my older relatives it seems that this is how their parents and grandparents used to speak English. I'm just too young to have ever heard people speak like that in real life.

One of my favourite things about this book is how it uses speech patterns and dialogue. About halfway through the novel when a sergeant says to Kramer, "I've just had an idea, sir…This expression, for want of a better word, is in English. Now I know there is an English saying 'pig iron'—do you think that 'steam pig' is another of these sayings?" It wasn't until then, that I realized, that though the book is written in English, all the characters are generally 'speaking' in Afrikaans. This explained why all the characters spoke so eloquently at some points in the book and devolved into stereotypical speech patterns at other points. Kramer speaks well with his fellow officers but sounds like a boor when he interviews the English speaking, doctor. Zondi is pretty well spoken all of the time but is at his most fluid and eloquent when he has a conversation with local gangster Gershwin Mkhize in Zulu. Police informant Moosa speaks well with his cousin Gogol but descends into 'a thousand apologies' with anyone else. McClure uses dialogue in such a subtle and clever way to question ideas of intelligence and communication across societal groups.

The novel is funny and doesn't sermonize, nor does it paint its main characters as morally perfect, and it doesn't shy away from violence either. South Africa is still a very violent society but during the apartheid regime, the police force was known for its brutality. After an evening of 'interrogating' a black suspect, Kramer needs to literally wash off his guilt. When Zondi asks Kramer if their Coloured acquaintance Katrina "has been cured of killing her babies yet?" Kramer replies "Hell, no. It's just that she hasn't been raped lately." It is shocking. It is shocking for me, and I live in modern South Africa. I can't imagine how disturbing this must have been to international readers in the 70s. But the cavalier and almost flippant way in which this is discussed does a few things—it moves the plot quickly, but it

also highlights the extreme violence that Black people experienced in apartheid South Africa and how that violence was normalized for the society as a whole.

The Steam Pig is bound to anger and annoy some readers with some of its outdated views, but if the novel is read with the understanding that it was written in a specific time and context, I think it's a really clever, interesting read.

***The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (Knopf, 2001, first published in 1983)**

Years ago, I read Sandra Cisneros' *Women Hollering Creek* and while I didn't love it, I remember enjoying it very much. I enjoyed the clean spare writing and the different perspectives each story had. I've come to *The House on Mango Street* a bit late and in wonky order as it is Cisneros' first book and came before *Women Hollering Creek* (1991). I feel a bit as if I was introduced to someone and then went and fell head over heels for their older sister. There is a familiar sense of space around each story but whereas *Women Hollering Creek* was comprised of different stories with different narrators and settings, the stories in the author's first book share the same narrator and are set on a single street.

Read together, the forty-four standalone stories in *The House on Mango Street* paint a poignant portrait of the lives on that street but also examine the narrator's experience of growing up and leaving that space. Some characters, like Rosa Vargas and her kids, appear once in a single story and that's it, we never see them again, but others like Nenny, Lucy and Marin appear again and again—a constant thread in the narrator's childhood and the fabric of Mango Street.

This isn't just a collection of anecdotes about times gone by. It deals with difficult issues like migrant labour, poverty, and gender-based violence with subtlety and nuance. The writing has a simplicity and clarity that mirrors the childlike observations of the narrator, but the stories are loaded with depth of meaning. In "Edna's Ruthie," the narrator describes how lovely and happy her neighbour Ruthie is and how "There were many things Ruthie could have been if she wanted to" and how Ruthie had "lots of job offers when she was young, but she never took them. She got married instead and moved to a pretty house outside of the city." The narrator can't understand why Ruthie stays in Mango Street if she has her own house and why it's taking Ruthie's husband so long to come fetch her from her visit. But the narrator also describes how glad she is that Ruthie doesn't leave Mango Street. It's great that Ruthie stays put, because the narrator likes spending time with her, but as the reader, we understand that poor Ruthie is a sweet lady whose marriage wasn't the escape it was supposed to be and whose life is frittering away. "Geraldo No Last Name" is about what happens after a young migrant labourer dies in a hit-and-run accident. This story broke my heart in just over three hundred words. The narrator's acceptance of Marin's refrain that she doesn't understand why Geraldo matters so much, really emphasises why he did matter and why he should.

Though there is a quietness and calm in all the stories, not all of them are painfully sad. In "The Earl of Tennessee" the narrator is confused about why her mother says that their neighbour Earl's wife is skinny and blonde but the boys across the road say that Earl's wife is a redhead and neither of these descriptions match the wife that the narrator has seen. The only thing that they all agree on, is that whenever Earl's wife visits "They walk fast into the apartment, lock the door behind them and never stay long." My adult understanding of the child narrator's observations and confusion, had me chuckling quietly. Some of the stories in the collection are delicate, beautiful reminders of how profound the ordinary can be, like "Darius and the Clouds" where the narrator recalls how a neighbourhood kid, "Darius, who chased girls with firecrackers or a stick that touched a rat," paused one day to point out God in the fluffy sky.

The House on Mango Street is a short collection of incredibly short stories. The stories are also deceptively simple. You could easily read this book in under an hour, but you'll want to go back and reread, and each read will uncover more and more layers of meaning. The narrator describes what she sees and hears. She doesn't try to explain or analyse. It is the reader that fills in those spaces in the stories with their understanding. Even if you think that you typically wouldn't enjoy stories like these, the collection is so short that you may as well give it a try.

***The Restless Supermarket* by Ivan Vladislavić (David Philip, 2001)**

Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* is a novel about transition. Set in late eighties'/early nineties' Hillbrow, the story follows Aubrey Tearle, a retired proofreader of the telephone directory. Tearle is a language aficionado (read snob) who feels called to ensure the maintenance of standards in decorum and the English language. He's a grumpy old white guy who's trying to find his way in life after retiring, and through an increasingly mixed and open South African society. If he sounds like a piece of work to you—he is. He's annoying, he's racist, he's classist and he's condescending. He's a very unlikable character in many ways and if he were a real person, I wouldn't give him two minutes of my time. So why keep reading? The book is funny. There is a lot of word play and dry humour. And the thing is—Aubrey Tearle is frustratingly human.

Although the book is set generally in the environs of Hillbrow (the opening description of Jumbo's pink elephant had me cackling), the majority of the novel is set specifically in Café Europa (the closure of which is imminent—read into that what you will). Fairly early on in the book, Tearle tells us about how he stumbled on this last bastion of European culture and sophistication. When he first encounters his mate Spilkin in the cafe, it's an endearingly familiar feeling of 'How do I converse with this stranger that I feel will have a lot in common with me and that I could get along with.' If you've ever had a recently retired old man of any description in your life, you will recognize the opening gambits of their friendship. They are two men who have lost a large purpose for their lives, trying to use the knowledge and skills of that old purpose to remain relevant—to remain important in their own lives.

The pace of the story is a bit slow as Aubrey loves words and the reader has to accompany him on his musings about the meanings of words, the origins of words, the correct usage of words and of course the correct pronunciation of words. Sometimes, though Aubrey would be loath to admit it, there is even a bit of playing around with words as well. Words are his life. Errors in words signify greater faults and must be rectified. In other words, fix the small insignificant things and the rest of the world will come right. Which is why he, annoyingly at times, endearingly at other times, seeks to correct shop signs and sometimes, unsuspecting, perplexed people's speech with varying degrees of success. His life's mission has been to collect and record all the corrigenda (printed errors) he can find.

At his friend Merle's suggestion—to make use of this information, rather than just researching for the sake of it—Tearle sets out to write the *The Proofreader's Derby*, a book incorporating all the corrigenda he has collected, so that the discerning eye can look over it, find the errors and correct them. This magnum opus is slotted into the middle of the main narrative. I really liked this additional narrative—firstly because the pace was a bit faster but more importantly, I loved the idea of this, dry-as-toast fogey, having such an incredibly vivid imagination and having the capacity to create such a fantastical story. A tale of the world gone awry in the land of Alibia, because the warnings and expertise of the keepers of typed out details, the Proofreaders' Society, have gone unheeded. Lands move and relocate themselves at random. Wetlands shift themselves into the middle of suburbs, "Then something crackled in the distance and a shanty town appeared on the horizon, just where the store had diminished to a speck, grew larger with frightening rapidity, and fell with a crash into the hole…The shanty town did not fit its new site at all well. On one side, it was jammed up against the wall of a bank." There is basically chaos in the order of the way things are supposed to be. It is then up to Fluxman and his brethren at the Society to right the world (and sometimes improve it) by doubling down on those details. It's fun. It's ridiculous. It's a great analogy illustrating the fear ridden psyche of white South Africa on the verge of transitioning into a multicultural society.

As I mentioned before, Aubrey is condescending to everyone, even the white folks he interacts with, who are a bit uninformed, a bit gauche. Aubrey loves the idea of Europe—the sophistication, the culture, the knowledge—but treats every Greek, Portuguese or any other European immigrant like they're a bit slow or unwashed. As Spilkin says in his confrontation with Tearle "Ah yes, Europeans, you're very big on them. But when you meet one in the flesh, like Bogey, you can't stand him." And while Aubrey isn't one of those openly vile individuals who beat, swear and (overtly) bully, he is definitely of the belief that black people are inferior. They aren't as smart, dignified, creative, polished as even the boorish Europeans that he comes across. He's one of those benevolent master types.

The story is narrated by Aubrey, and we get to see his thoughts, but Vladislavić is skillful in somehow presenting Aubrey's perspective of events and interactions as well as making it clear as to what actually happens. As readers, we're aware of the undertones that Aubrey is blind to. We wince as we realize just how poncy Aubrey is being while simultaneously being aware that Aubrey hasn't a clue—in fact he thinks he's being incredibly posh and intelligent.

When Spilkin jokes to Aubrey about his having feelings for Merle, we are aware that despite his puzzled denials, Aubrey does in fact harbour affectionate feelings for Merle. Through this almost dual perspective we get a more rounded view of some of the characters that Aubrey interacts with. We see that Mevrou Bonsma is a sweet, gentle soul who loves music and isn't nearly as dim as Aubrey makes out. Merle is a retired teacher who again is kind but also quite clever with a sense of fun that Aubrey doesn't quite understand. The reader becomes aware even before the major rift between Spilkin and Aubrey that Spilkin is generally a decent guy but not as genial towards Aubrey as he makes out. The reader picks up on the little digs and spiteful jokes that Spilkin makes at Aubrey's expense long before Aubrey does.

I'm going to give you a spoiler here. I don't think Aubrey learns his lesson. I think he stays exactly as he was—as annoying, as prejudiced, maybe a bit less oblivious. I actually don't mind that. I think it rings as more true—more authentic that way. But there is something I do mind. I kept waiting for it to shift, for a new character to be introduced or for some new narrative light to be shed on an existing character, but it never happens, and the end of the novel solidified the feelings of unease I experienced as I read this book. Towards the end of the novel, at the closure of the Europa, there is some surreal chaos that goes down and when Errol and the rest of the black riff raff that have made the café their leisure base, defend Aubrey against some outsider thugs (because "'You a puss, Churl – but you one of our boys. Leave it or lump it.'") a theme that has been a constant undercurrent in the book, is made obvious—racism is bad. Despite Aubrey being a condescending dunce these people who he views as lesser beings still have his back. Great. But there are no well-rounded people of colour that Aubrey encounters. Errol the honourable thug, Evaritus (Eveready) the invisible waiter that we never hear speak. They are written as good people, if a bit rough, but not a single character of colour is well educated, sophisticated or admirable…I don't just mean from Aubrey's perspective. I mean at all. I could understand if Aubrey interacts with a character that was all of these things, and it was Aubrey that just didn't recognise it because of his prejudice but as readers we would be aware. Aubrey interacts with Errol, his girlfriend Nomsa, Eveready(!) the waiter all the time—no inkling of them being educationally, morally, behaviourally equal to Aubrey and his silver-haired set at all. I had a bit of hope when Spilkin's mixed race girlfriend Darlene was introduced but despite being educated and having a good job, she comes off as a materialistic shrew, playing into racial and cultural stereotypes. Even that defence of Aubrey by his African thugmates tasted off to me. In fact, it tasted of the noble savage trope—these people of colour, they're a bit impetuous, a bit

violent; they're not very smart but they're kind and loyal so we should be nice to them and try to get along.

Despite the many things that I enjoyed about this book, the playing with words, the tongue in cheek humour, even the grumpy old man, it is this undercurrent that I detected that made me deeply uncomfortable. I won't say don't read *The Restless Supermarket*—maybe I'm overly sensitive or maybe you'll feel as I do. Read it. But be prepared and know you might leave annoyed, disappointed, and maybe a bit angry.

***Unclean Jobs For Women And Girls* by Alissa Nutting (Starcherone Books, 2010)**

The stories contained in Alissa Nutting's *Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls* range from a 'bit out there' to 'what the fuck'. They're a bit crude, a bit crass and funny but have such a sense of tenderness and affection to them. They feel incredibly 'honest'. Each story is narrated from a different woman's perspective and no matter how outlandish, vulgar or funny the stories seem, they discuss and explore different facets of being a woman and how women see themselves and each other within societies and relationships.

In "She-Man", a transgender woman is in a relationship with a pro-bowler who "doesn't know I'm really a man, but other than that we're completely honest with one another." The story discusses how women define themselves by their relationships— "He's the first and only decent man I've ever been with. And that makes me a decent woman." The descriptions of their life together sound lovely and healthy and domestic—the dream. But the reader knows that this is false because there is a huge issue that hasn't been discussed in the relationship and when it is, the questions of what makes a woman, what are the conditions of love and how does prejudice colour how we see and behave towards people we think we know, are poignantly examined. This is my favourite story in the collection. I found the relationship between the narrator and her boyfriend achingly, beautifully ordinary and it's that ordinariness with the understated calm tone of the ending that had me staring at the book for a good few minutes. The ending isn't the kind of sad that made me cry—it's the kind of sad that made me want to take my heart out and coddle it for a bit.

"The Ant Colony" also made me feel things. Initially I felt incredibly itchy. The idea of drilling holes in my bones so that ants can have a home within my body freaked me out. But once I got over that, and saw how the story moved on to describe how the ant colony's consciousness was melding with the woman's and then how, somehow, the woman, the ants and the male doctor responsible for implanting the ants, merge into some symbiotic (parasitic?) thing, I thought cool—"Once we had transferred I was pleased to realize that I could see through the doctor's eyes as well as my ants.'" Except that then we find that the narrator has so many of their thoughts that "It stills your own thoughts almost to a halt." It is such a colourful, evocative way of exploring how women can sometimes be trapped into relationships that slowly overwhelm their own identity and while such relationships can feed

their idea of what women are ‘supposed’ to be, they can never completely satiate the need for autonomous thought and being.

“Porn Star” follows a Valium-addicted porn star who is involved in a reality show eating competition. The men contestants do the eating and the winner gets to have sex with the woman porn star on the moon. The subtext about the commodification of sex and the female body are pretty clear but what is surprising is the commodification of the male contestants who are described as varying levels and types of disgusting. Interestingly it is the ‘hottie’ or the “one contestant who could be misconstrued, on a good day, as not completely repulsive” that is considered the most gross and creepy by the narrator. This story feels really dirty and vulgar but there is very little that is explicit—most of the uncomfortable feelings come from how commercial everything sounds. The only sex scene in the story is so clinical that even the earthbound TV execs think it looks like a documentary. The emphasis on the narrator’s internal experience almost disassociates the reader from the fact that she is mid coitus and highlights her dissociation from the act as well as enhancing the sense of transaction. It would be easy to assume that a story like this would be dark and dense but lines like “If James Earl Jones yodeled into the universe’s vagina, Guff’s voice is the noise that would echo back” had me snorting. Nutting deals with some heavy stuff in this collection but often she is able to inject some humour without detracting from the substance.

Nutting’s first collection of short stories is insane and gross and weird, and the imagery used is vivid and visceral. Despite all that I think that they are easily accessible, although not everyone’s cup of tea. Not everyone wants to feel a strange mix of dirty, itchy, sad, wondering and proud when they read a book. These stories explore a lot of what it is to be a woman and ask a lot of questions about that state of being. They make the reader sit in a very uncomfortable place and don’t give a satisfying ‘it gets better’ feeling. A few of Nutting’s endings were quite abrupt I felt, but intentionally so, as if to mimic the fact that life isn’t neat and squared off. *Unclean Jobs for Women And Girls* is a wild ride but a worthwhile one if you’re comfortable with feeling uncomfortable.

Writing in Community Report

The Writing in Community assignment involves giving a public reading and facilitating a writing workshop.

A: Public Readings

I chose to read online because I wanted a broader audience that included South African Indians. I was careful to choose stories that were dialogue based and rich in cultural imagery. I tried to include pieces with different forms, paces, themes and moods that stood on their own but also worked to create a cohesive thread and had a sense of movement. I managed to fit thirteen stories into the twenty minutes allocated, including "The Road Back Home," "Sati Revoked," "Pathi's Sister," "Evening Stroll," "Love From Me," "Phoenix Unit 2," "WeDIng Whispers," "My Dad's Stronger Than Your Dad" and "Five Rand."

I recorded myself reading aloud and did a trial run with my sister. Reading the stories out loud helped me polish the stories themselves. I paid attention to if the pauses and emphases were reflected in the punctuation and structure of the piece and whether the spelling of words mirrored my pronunciation.

I advertised my reading on a WhatsApp 'Book Lovers' group populated by SA Indians, most aged 50-70. The invitation, which included a link to the Zoom meeting, received a good response.

However, on the evening of the reading, only one member of the 'Book Lovers' group logged on. The other eleven attendees consisted of my friends and my family, which meant that a variety of nationalities, cultures and age groups were present but also meant that the reading consisted predominantly of people predisposed to be supportive. It was a lovely experience, and the one 'stranger' in attendance also indicated his enjoyment and support of the stories. However, I opted to hold another online reading.

I contacted friends and former colleagues and asked them to spread the word. I was a bit more assertive on the 'Book Lovers' WhatsApp group, explaining that the reading was a course requirement and urging them to attend. I held the reading a bit later to accommodate people living in other countries. And I chose Google Meets which permits longer meetings and would give more time for feedback and questions.

My efforts resulted in an audience of about 20 people. It was validating to see that people of various backgrounds found my stories relatable, entertaining or interesting. The extra time resulted in more questions and comments and a few requests to reread "Pathi's Sister." An attendee said that I had captured the speech of South African Indians of the 1960s and that he was happy that it was being remembered and recorded because it is a speech pattern that is dying. Another liked my use of cultural imagery but felt that I should include a glossary for non-Indian readers. A British woman of Bangladeshi descent contacted me after the reading to ask the meaning of certain words, because her language had similar words which had different meanings, and this had confused her. (I found this particularly interesting as I have been toying with including a glossary in my thesis and have had mixed views from students and teachers within the MACW course regarding this.)

The first public reading was less stressful for me. It was easier to record the session on Zoom and there were no connectivity issues. In the Google Meets session, a few came late, and a number of people had connectivity issues and had to re-join the meeting multiple times. This was quite distracting, and I had to work hard not to disrupt the flow of the reading as I let people into the meeting. I also had sound issues in the feedback session. Thankfully, the audience could hear me throughout the reading, but I was unable to hear them, so they had to type their questions. Despite this we were able to have some back and forth but as most attendees kept their cameras off for the duration of the reading, I was only able to gauge reactions during the feedback section.

Across both sessions, the audience liked the pacing, movement and diversity of the stories included in the reading and appreciated my reading abilities but this makes me wonder if the stories read on the page as well as they sound when I read them aloud.

B: Writing Workshop

For the writing workshop, I chose to work with a corporate women's support group which meets periodically. They are from different companies and have different professions and have faced trauma or abuse in the past.

I met four group members on a weekday evening for a 90 minute workshop. We sat around a member's dining table, writing on the pieces of paper I provided. Often, when people who don't think of themselves as creative are faced with too much freedom within a task, they

tend to feel overwhelmed, so some sort of guidance is required in the beginning. I was also aware that abusive backgrounds can hinder people's creative output and a sense of structure helps create a sense of safety.

Bearing this in mind I showed the participants a variety of short story extracts. I had folk tales, fairy stories, a dialogue etc. We read through the extracts, and I asked participants to point out what they noticed about each piece, guiding the discussion to how each piece was very different from the other. My intention was to break down any preconceptions of what creative writing was 'supposed' to be and also to give some of the more nervous participants a sort of scaffold to build their writing off.

I chose to do three, three-minute-long free writes in the workshop. I explained that I would give them a prompt and that they could use it as a sentence starter or as inspiration. I made it clear that if their writing drifted off topic that was ok as long as they kept writing for the allocated time. I told them I intended we share what we write, but that I would rather they write honestly and openly and not share their work than be constricted because they felt they had to read their pieces aloud.

For the first prompt, I wrote about how I felt silly running a workshop and not being able to write anything interesting. I did this to take the pressure off to 'perform' and make them feel freer to make mistakes and experiment with their writing. With another prompt, I started my piece one way but then switched forms to encourage the participants to play and experiment more.

When participants shared, we would look at what they'd expressed, as well as what they'd done in their writing. We looked at how writing about how we feel doesn't have to be a record of events and how we can write about experiences and feelings in a roundabout way. We discussed how the free write prompts led them to memories but also to wildly imaginative stories that still held themes and emotions that they could explore and question within themselves. The emphasis was to get the participants to use writing as a kind of creative catharsis. There were times when we needed to pause because participants were overcome by the emotions brought up by a story and needed space and time to cry. However, when one participant wrote a humorous story and felt a bit sheepish, I reassured her that it was good to write happy or funny stories because even those can be revealing—of personal truths or societal observations.

For my report, participants were reluctant to have me share their more traumatic or deeply personal stories, but gave me permission to include the following:

A smell of wood and silence

"She had everything ready. Hawan wood, agarbathi, 3 kinds fruit, camphor, coconut. The list went on. She followed the priest's instructions to a T. She knew it had to be perfect. It was the least she could do to make his journey to the next life safe and smooth. As soon as the ghee hit the hawan wood she knew. He's never coming back and she'd never get to say the things she'd thought she'd have forever to."

Here in the city lives a prince whose left arm

"Here in the city lives a prince whose left arm was clearly not as strong as his right. As he walked through his realm, all the maidens would laugh and giggle. Surely a prince could do better than that? Settle down, have a family, and someone else to help him out. I guess his face wasn't worth the trouble. All I know is that maybe he should try alternating or something."

There was a loud crash and a bang

"There was a loud crash and a bang, shouting, screaming and then nothing. Just an abyss of darkness. Where am I? What am I doing? I feel the answer can only come from me but I don't know how to find it. Flatline…Wait…"

Having opened up the participants to creative writing, I knew that free write prompts often work well in a workshop environment but not necessarily when writing by oneself without the 'peer pressure' and time crunch. To encourage participants to continue writing, give them a sense of independence with their writing and to help them to generate story ideas; I shared a technique that I sometimes use. I gave participants five minutes to draw and label a rough map of their childhood house or street. The participants then had to choose something from their map and write a three-minute story about that—again I made it clear that they could write the memory or write something totally made up. I did this so that they wouldn't feel reliant on external writing prompts or workshops.

The fact that the participants knew each other and knew each other's backgrounds, meant that there was a good level of trust within the workshop and while not all participants shared every free write, everyone did share at least one piece of their work.

Sharing and working with these participants was a lesson for me in being open and vulnerable with yourself and with your writing. Some of the pieces produced were harrowing, some were moving, and some were incredibly funny, and it was lovely to see the participants surprise themselves and each other with their creativity.

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