

RHODES UNIVERSITY MASTERS IN CREATIVE WRITING

PART A: Thesis

THE MYSTERY OF MY FATHERS & OTHER SHORT STORIES

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Thesis Abstract

My thesis comprises a collection of short stories that take a leaf out of Jose Saramago's great literary works, particularly *Blindness*, where the power of the human spirit triumphs in the face of adversity. Novelists like Yuri Herrera who tactically bring together the scattered fragments of Makina's life in the novel, *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, so superbly have also inspired the construction of the pieces. In *Cain*, Saramago demonstrates that a conversation with a "super being" is possible, the same is done here. I challenge traditional norms and institutions such as the church and government. Through personal reflections, I also explore themes of love for one another, as well as the self. My short stories offer a series of perspectives across pertinent discussion points within the socio-political sphere.

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The Church on the Way to Hell

“Greetings to you all, in the holy name of the Almighty. Hallelujah! Amen,” Father Sabelo said on Sunday morning. The man of God was tall and dark in complexion. He took pride in his work and knew all the verses for different occasions. He could find a verse that talked about tithes, offerings, and death. He exuded a regal look in his crimson pastoral gown and long cream scarf. He constantly wiped his brow with a white, neatly pressed handkerchief.

I had known Father Sabela for a long time. As a young boy in the village I used to follow my mother on the path to the local church. She adored him while I abhorred his private life. He was weak with the skirts. I do not know why the women of all ages loved him.

The church was not very far for a young person to walk. Taxis on Sundays were scarce in the morning; the village was sparsely populated. We arrived shortly before the service started, I prayed for it not to be long. The man of God lived in the church so the service always started on time.

The rhetoric continued, “Brothers and sisters, we live in the end of times. Signs predicting the end of times are everywhere. Look around and see; immorality; corruption; and the blood of innocent people flowing in our streets. The house of God, Men, and Women of God are attacked and insulted daily. The Devil – with his unquenchable thirst for anarchy has taken over. Women and children suffer tremendously. The God-anointed providers and protectors are no longer able to perform their duties. They are castrated and powerless. I stand here to remind you that the God of yesterday is the same as the God of Moses and the God of Jacob. Men, I proclaim that you stand up and honour God, lest you want women and children to say enough is enough, and defend themselves. The truth is, you will not survive the wrath of God. You must forget politics. The politicians who pass laws in parliament visit us only during the elections. The truth shall be spoken. Amen! Tithes and offerings are no longer honoured. Why, Brethren, Why!?” His brow was foaming with sweat.

I looked at Father Sabela with pity, he was bleating. I was not going to offer him a cent. I knew him as a good-looking gentleman who was always smiling. Privately I called him the 'little devil'. I had heard that he had been seen in questionable places in Durban, far away from the village.

Father Sabela shouted: "You must soften your heart and pay, even if it is painful, but you must tithe because the bible says so!"

I wore a stern face and remained resolute. He knew that I was employed and had money. My mother never stopped bragging about her children's wealth even though I had enormous financial commitments. She was a 70-year-old grade four dropout who loved her church.

I saw my mother's elongated neck searching and turning in my direction. It was clear that she wanted me to make a financial offer. She made a subtle sign with her head and eyes, but I would not budge. I gave a long side eye. I could feel her disappointment. She would not be able to brag "Did you see my son?"

Oh! I recalled that I had recently gifted her with a large sum of money. To save face she had offered almost half of what I gave her to the church. She even 'lied' that it was on behalf of her family. It was meant for her.

My grandmother always cried if she missed renewing her church membership. She claimed that Father Sabela would forsake her at death, and not bury her. The elderly was threatened easily. The frail, old folk knew very well their transgressions with God. The end is nearer. They knew very well who they had swindled of their money, swore, fucked, and even killed. No one dared to question Father Sabela.

My grandmother and mother supported the church with my hard-earned money. My mother trusted Sabela with family secrets too. She had told him about my shoplifting as a child. The thought of the drama my mother would cause after the service lingered in the air. The threat of end-times had always been a thorny issue. I knew that I was going to be labeled demonic and possessed. I dreaded everything but vowed never to honour my mother's request to

visit her church again.

While everybody's eyes were closed, the congregation was sprinkled with holy water, and the smell of incense was choking me. That is how they closed the service. I was happy that it was the end of the arduous five-hour service.

There was no drama after the service; my mother was the first to enter the car. I followed her. It was strange of her to be the first on the way home. We did not speak in the car; she was not irritated by my action but deep in a pensive mood.

When she opened her eyes she said, "My son, I am not supposed to tell you this, so listen carefully. Father Sabela is the only man on earth that I know who has repented unreservedly for sinning against God. I know the gist of all the innuendos you have alluded to the Father. As the seniors in the church we know, and have dealt with it in a godly way."

I just listened and felt numb.

She continued, "The turbulence and emotional storms in my life have been quelled by the church. The church that prayed for you to graduate and be the light for us all."

Tears rolled down my cheeks.

Her last words nearly took my breath away, "You never asked where the money I sent you came from and I shall never tell you."

Bathroom

I have not been kind to my bathroom, not since 2006, the first time our union was sealed. I have been ungrateful to my bathroom. I abused its inability to communicate in the language I speak. I should have treated it better.

Just one fresh coat of paint in two decades. So stingy. The dull and dumb walls watched me every day with a stone face, now fading and peeling. Shame on me for selfishness. The bathing, shaving, and lathering of my dry skin happened in the neglected and dejected bathroom. What a stony heart. The bathroom reminded me of a filthy kitchen owned by a great cook.

The first door on the left of the kitchen is my bathroom, next to the restroom. A smart bathroom is birthed by a clean heart that knows the meaning of beauty. I always return a favour. Why not with the bathroom?

I used to think that your cousins were more important than you. I was wrong. My bathroom held the secrets of the family. It knows all the contours of our bodies.

It has never been an issue with me to share a bathroom with family and friends. I should have given it first-class treatment. It is a mirror to an unhealthy attitude turning into a nasty habit.

You never shared the secrets. Surely you have seen a lot, heard a lot, but remained loyal to your secret code of not telling. I wish I had such a level of tolerance and a code.

Through the tiny mirror on the wall I have seen my transformation from a boy into a man. I used to visit a barbershop, but I no longer go there. I lock myself in the bathroom and leisurely cut my hair till I finish. Thanks to you, I have saved a lot of money. Fear will always be there in case I fail to cut my hair skillfully. People whisper and chuckle. Lest I forget, thanks to the mirror for saving me from huge embarrassment when I could not shave the back of my head perfectly.

I once had an idea of renovating you, but the idea slipped to the back of my head.

Writing about you opens a window and brings light to my dark soul. This exercise

disgraces me. My clumsiness is laid bare. In silence, the walls are crying, the tiny mirror remains the same. I have grown up in you, just to leave you in tatters.

I do not want to talk about the bathtub, I found it there when I bought the house. It has seen a lot over twenty years. I would not like to hear its story even if it could talk. The bathtub reminds me of a phrase that says what you do not know does not hurt.

In the bathroom, I have had a warm bath and have soaked myself in a foam bath and given birth to wonderful ideas. I have had super ideas but still shun away from renovating the bathroom.

The bathtub offered me a space and wonderful moments to dream – escaping to a wonderland. I never thought that you were as important as the kitchen yet we enter the bathroom dirty and exhausted and come out fresh and clean.

The bathroom has contributed tremendously to my sanity. What have I offered in return? I have been indifferent. I am afraid that traces of how I treat my bathroom are prevalent in other spheres of my life.

The lone mosaic window has been generous with fresh air, and also a portal for a little spying exercise. When slightly opened, I can hear my neighbour gossip on the phone at the back of his house which is adjacent to the front of mine. The high-pitched inflexions in his voice pierce through his hugely expanded, vascular muscles. He speaks this way only when the wife is away.

My wife.

A Risk Worth Taking

Finally, it's a wedding, Thami Zondi reminisced about the song by Brenda Fassie. The flashbacks kept fading in and out. He tried to ignore them but failed. It all started as a risk when he meddled in the life of a girl he barely knew. He was anxious about everything being in order. Choosing the countryside was a marvelous choice. Everything looked fresh and new. The beauty of nature calmed his thoughts. It was a beautiful spring Saturday. The mustard wedding venue stood out against a lush green field. The quietness of the surrounding game farm put Thami in a solemn state of mind.

He was exiting the Human Resources office when his eyes were caught by the beauty and angelic look of Lisa. She was walking in the direction of the human resources department. The heart of Thami melted. He politely greeted her, "Hi, can I help you, where do you want to go?"

Lisa had a radiant complexion, a spark of light in her eyes and a graceful posture. The sudden urge to hear her voice developed as she sauntered on the walkway towards the offices. Thami looked her straight in the eyes to check if she was a city girl. Girls from the rural areas normally avoided direct eye contact. When their eyes met, Thami was smitten.

Lisa spoke politely, "Hello Bhuti, I am looking for the Human Resources office".

Before he showed Lisa where to go, he politely told her that he was going to wait for her. Thami was a handsome young man. The older guys used to call him Cheese Boy. He was lucky to find a job at a young age. He had graduated from high school and found a job at an aluminium factory in Pietermaritzburg. His family lived in an old, apartheid red-brick, matchbox house in Imbali township. The factory operated twenty-four-seven. People said it was the leading factory in the midland with appetizing salaries.

The time on the invitation cards read 11 am. Thami and the groomsmen had arrived ten minutes earlier. He remained in the car waiting for the bride to arrive with her entourage. Seeing that Thami was becoming restless with the possibility of starting late Muzi spoke to him. He said,

“I hope you are aware that these folks are seldom on time. This is her important day to shine.”

The best man and the maid of honour were in constant communication but it did not help much. The bride was going to be late, for over thirty minutes at least. Reels of flashbacks were anchored in his mind and started to mess with his mood.

Lisa had lost both of her parents. They were mauled down by COVID-19. She was seventeen years old when her parents fell ill and quickly died. Her parents had not secured their own property when they met death. Their untimely death forced her to live with her aunt who took custody of her. She lived in the Slangspruit informal settlement which is on the outskirts of Imbali township. Her father had a short service, therefore the money was not going to sustain her for long and her aunt was going to demand a large share.

Aunt Gugu failed to protect her niece from the sexual predators. The aunt’s boyfriend made jokes and performed a lewd act. Instead of behaving like an uncle, he was always undressing Lisa with his teary, smoky eyes. One of Lisa's cousins pretended to be drunk and got into the bedroom Lisa shared with her aunt’s last-born girl. Lisa threatened to scream. He backed off and apologised. She was unsure of what her aunt would do if she reported the incident. Lisa felt that it was not going to take long for her to be sexually assaulted.

The groomsmen started to talk a bit louder. The two guys had been permitted only a shot of whiskey each, just to ease pre-ceremony jitters. Thami turned his head and called Muzi, “Hey Muzi, I sincerely hope that you did not bring your hip flask along. It shouldn’t be what I’m suspecting.”

Muzi calmed him down, he knew that Thami was a perfectionist and had forgotten that it was common for a wedding ceremony to start late. “Relax my brother everything is going to be fine. Trust me boy *nja ye* game. *Siyabangena* today.”

Muzi had to wait till the right time to indulge himself with his favourite drink. His mouth had no filter. It was important that Thami kept an eye on Muzi. There was a time when there was no update, and the thirty minutes the maid of honour had requested lapsed. How would he handle

the embarrassment if Lisa had changed her mind? The thought quickly dissipated, Lisa had been a dedicated partner throughout.

After he had chosen to rent a room with her after her aunt had ill-treated her they forged a strong bond. The journey had been long and difficult at times. Thami had asked Lisa about her future plans. She'd said, "Thami I would like to graduate from high school and further my studies. But why are you asking, knowing very well that I have nothing."

Thami had continued, "My love, I am willing to help you finish your high school studies. Maybe you can get financial assistance on completion of your studies. Let us put our trust in God." Thami did not want Lisa to use her inheritance money. He was afraid that should something happen to him Lisa would be stranded.

Lisa had looked Thami in the eyes and said, "Pray for me Thami. I plead with God not to allow me to do anything that will break your heart. I know that you have sacrificed a lot for me."

She achieved a university pass and enrolled for a degree in pharmacy. Afterwards a large pharmaceutical company offered her a job and her life changed dramatically for the better. They moved to the upper suburban area, Clarendon, in Pietermaritzburg. Gentle and persuasive, Lisa convinced Thami to enroll for a qualification in Human Resources Management full-time. She would support him.

Thami recalled a fight that nearly broke out when Muzi discredited Lisa as a troubled girl who only came with baggage. Thami knew his friend well and appreciated that he was not afraid to speak his mind although he was bad at judging character. Often off the mark as it happened with Lisa.

He'd said: "Thami you have made a mistake by getting too much involved in this girl's family issues. You will burn. Love blinded you. Maybe you need to eat the meat of a crocodile, make sure that you get the fatty piece of steak". The crocodile's meat was believed to have medicinal powers to cure love potion sickness.

His thoughts were cut off by the best man confirming that the bride had arrived. The

guests sat quietly, with their eyes glued to the direction from which the bride and groom would emerge. The master of ceremonies serenaded the guests with a collection of music. The music was played on a finely-tuned sound system. Finally, Thami appeared, walking in moderate strides towards the brightly coloured stage. He arrived on stage and stood still, waiting for Lisa who would be brought to him by her uncle, a symbolic gesture of a handover.

The silhouette of Lisa's light blue wedding gown caught the attention of guests. It was a right fit for Lisa while Thami stood out in his Italian-inspired olive green suit. The uncle delivered Lisa to Thami, marking the beginning of the holy matrimony. The pastor did not waste time; it was a normal, marriage officiating routine: prayer, verification of identity documents, witnesses and signing of documents. The MC informed the guests about each step of the process. The speeches and all other functions were reserved for the dining hall. The garden court ceremony just took forty-five minutes.

The lunch came at the right time; at thirteen hundred hours in the afternoon. Choosing the countryside venue limited the number of guests to the invitees only. In townships, gate-crashers are never chased away. The MC did not prolong the programme. The groom's family, who were the hosts at the wedding, gave the first speech. Thami's father welcomed the guests and proposed a toast.

He said, "If I start talking about my daughter-in-law, the event will end late at night. Ever since my son met her, I noticed that Thami became a responsible young man, a better version of himself. May God bless them as they begin their long, winding journey of life, filled with love and grace."

Lisa's distant uncle followed, "On behalf of the late parents of my niece, I wish to extend my gratitude to the Zondi family for loving and trusting Lisa, our child, as wife to their son. We know and appreciate all the sacrifices that our son-in-law went through. But this is the day of celebration; I shall not bring those memories"

Most of the guests were aware of the hardship Lisa went through after the untimely death

of her parents. The couple was in disbelief that this day had finally arrived. They both listened attentively while waiting their turn. Both had gained confidence to face the guests. The joy overwhelmed Thami as his eyes panned over the guests, noticing each of them. He could feel the joy in their eyes.

Thami knew that Lisa would have loved to see her close relatives at her wedding. She pondered how her parents would have celebrated the day with her. Tears rolled down her cheeks nearly ruining her make up. Her aunt and her family did not attend the wedding although they were invited.

Thami had promised himself not to be emotional but he failed. He had no choice but to man up. He started by thanking the Almighty for making it happen, it was fate.

He said, "... everything about us has been a risk worth taking. We trusted each other with our lives, even though we were strangers. I did not know you well, but I believed your story. I could feel the trauma that besieged you. You trusted me when I suggested that we find a safe place to stay. We could have destroyed each other's chances of prosperity. Today I have a post-matric qualification and I am doing well at work. To my parents, I say thank you for trusting and supporting us. To leave a warm home to rent a cottage was not an easy decision for you to allow me to make. But you did because you trusted me. Thank you again."

Surprisingly Lisa was the strongest, to quote some of her words, "...my beloved husband you taught selflessness, to trust and to put the family first. You proved yourself to be a worthy future husband. You came with a suggestion that I further my education. I am grateful for the world that you have created for me to live in. With you in my arms, I am complete. You gave me life, a family again.

The Rift

The relocation from the rural settlement to the suburbs started with joy. I can still recall the excitement I experienced at the news that we were moving. It was the year 2003. My elder sister Noma had called and said, “Your sister bought a house in Pietermaritzburg.”

Pietermaritzburg is fifty kilometres away from Swayimane tribal authority. The new home was in Westgate. I was not familiar with the area, but I was consoled by its proximity to the city, six kilometres from the CBD. The house had a swimming pool. I imagined it in the afternoon of a hot summer day. At home I used to swim in the dirty pools in the streams during rainy seasons.

Mama Gcumisa, our mother, could not wait to share the good news with her village neighbours. “I’m going to live with the white people.”

Her joy made her exaggerate her daughter’s acquisition. She did not know that less than five percent of the whites had remained in Westgate. Our mother had survived on menial labour for most of her working life. She was a pensioner but her body did not show signs of fatigue after so many hardships.

The day of departure came, and all the goods had already been arranged and placed in the yard. A truck arrived in the afternoon and parked at the neighbour’s yard because there was no driveway to my home. We quickly loaded the furniture onto the truck. The neighbours watched and others came to assist. Late in the afternoon the truck slowly hit the road and it took longer to get to Pietermaritzburg.

I had been studying in Durban at the University of Durban-Westville. I wanted to be a teacher after I had tried in vain to secure a job in the print media industry. I had a Bachelor of Arts degree and experience as an editor in the student magazine. I spent two years searching for a job and later realized that I had to change course. I then registered for a teaching diploma; at least there was still a shortage of teachers.

The village looked beautiful as I sailed away, leaving behind all my childhood memories. In the village, we had been living in mud houses roofed with zinc sheets or thatched with grass. The prospect of living in a brick house with tiles and ceiling boards was exciting. We were going to have electricity for the first time. We never had a television set before. The swimming pool was a bonus, I longed to see it.

I had already been exposed to urban life and loved it. I commended Zama for putting us first. We had not lived together as a family for a long time. Zama had been with her father while Noma was in self-imposed exile, living with a man. I had remained at home with our mother.

It felt perfect for us to live in the suburb of Westgate, it had status. The family thanked Zama for being considerate. But we never thanked her directly. The appreciation was in conversations with friends and relatives. She had a choice to live alone but she opted to bring the family along. Zama worked as a teacher in Harding, one hundred and fifty kilometres away from Pietermaritzburg.

Barely a year after we started living together the pile of dirt under the carpet was bulging. Zama recalled the chilling morning when she was put on a bus to Ixopo. She had a one-way ticket, and was made aware of the journey only a day before her departure. She remembered how the suitcase balanced over our mother's head. There was no conversation, a quarter of a kilometre walk turned into a minute.

A lot of questions clouded her mind. "I could not even ask why I was taken away," she said. It was clear that it was not a visit, but a send-away. "I could not fathom what would happen if my stepmother was like our mother." But her father was caring and supportive. He knew that he had another child to support.

After she moved the communication between us broke for a long time. There were few visits during the school holidays. But Zama was received well by her step-mother and got the opportunity to enroll at a teachers' college. Moving us from a rural to an urban environment should have been applauded.

One morning Zama's stepmother came to see and appreciate what her stepdaughter had achieved. Buying a house was a huge achievement. She greeted and was lively, in high spirits. Unfortunately, the conversation ended between her and Zama. It was incomprehensible that a stepmother who had taken care of a child who came to live with her without notice, should suffer insinuations associated with witchcraft.

The embarrassment was written all over Zama's face: "I don't know if I made a mistake in buying a house. Because instead of it bringing joy, everything has turned sour."

Shortly after the stepmother left, there was a traditional ceremony. My mother wanted to introduce the house to the ancestors as the new home. On paper, the house belonged to Zama, but to the ancestors it belonged to my mother. There is a saying that a child builds, or buys, a house for a parent. By being a parent our mother assumed matriarchy. That tradition was archaic. Our mother tried in vain to be in charge. Zama could not be silenced; she assumed the role of leadership as the breadwinner. But her voice was always a fart against thunder.

Our mother was a traditionalist and Zama had adopted a modern view of life and was educated. Our mother believed in slaughtering animals to appease the ancestors. Occasionally we had to slaughter a chicken, goat, or cow. Zama was against unexplained cultural practices and rituals. The consultation was minimal but she hid her feelings. Zama would confide everything to me, the youngest of them all and the only male figure at home.

One day I received a call from Noma summoning me home. Our mother was sick and needed urgent medical attention. I drove home and the ambulance took our mother to the Edendale hospital where she was diagnosed with TB and later cancer. Her illness ravaged her quickly and she died a painful death. The rift remained tall as a giraffe, ugly as a muddied warthog. Our mother received a send-off fit for a matriarch. The rift temporarily buried its head.

I have no doubt that my mother wanted the best for us. But how had the beast, monster, feisty woman developed? Was it tough love? I don't know. But still I would have chosen her. In the mist of all the clutter I would connect with the vulnerable soft part of her soul. I guess we all

loved her but did not know how to express it. I knew my mother as an industrious woman who tilled the soil and worked hard to feed us. She never had the luxury of being pampered with love and joy like other women who had supportive husbands. She spent years on a timber plantation, peeling the bark of trees. The trauma of life toughened her to the extreme. She was known for her neatness. She was also a great cook from her early years of working as a domestic worker. She was a fiery woman who would protect her children to the last drop.

Later I received a call from Noma. She was crying hysterically. Zama had left her property. She woke up and told Noma that she was going to live somewhere. She took some of her furniture and left.

The flashback of a lullaby from the river and the melody of birds singing in the morning remind me of the village. Like mill salt dissolves in water, the rift too dissolved my family.

Number One a dilemma

i eagerly waited for president mbeki to act on the judge's ruling in the arms deal case. indeed, he acted swiftly. presenting himself as an incorruptible statesman. on 14 june 2005 the whip cracked, president mbeki released a media statement. i have come to the conclusion that the circumstances dictate that in the interest of the honourable deputy president, the government, our young democratic system and our country it would be best to release honourable jacob zuma from his responsibilities as deputy president of the republic and member of the cabinet. the president was at the height of his political career. cherished by many as a great pan-africanist of note while the masses were ravaged by hiv/aids and he appointed the worst minister of health the country ever had. if mbeki knew that he had touched a beehive he would have dealt with the mongrel another way. i could imagine mbeki relieved that the scandal ridden mongrel barked far away from the union building. at least he could tolerate the smell of beetroot, garlic, african potato. dr. beetroot was no stranger to thieving. i know stories of alcoholic beverages in the hospital ward for the minister to indulge. the cunning, dismissed number one together with mbeki and manto tshabalala were of the same cloth. their personal interests mattered the most. the dismissed number one had his eyes already set on the throne. mbeki did not see the torpedo coming. indeed, mbeki was recalled, it sounds like a euphemism for being fired or dismissed like the rape-accused one. the scandalous number one crisscrossed the country, telling people that he was being victimised. they believed him. he garnered enough support to plunge the country into oblivion. soiling all the state organs. appointing imbeciles to bring down and reverse all the gains the country had achieved. the master of deception could play dumb when necessary. the dumb double head tarzan who couldn't even be trusted with the daughters of his friends. in barely five months number one was accused of rape. the man in charge of the moral fabric of our society. didn't he know that kwezi had a disease. may her soul rest in peace. i thought he was finished

and will rot in jail. even though his name stunk like a skunk, he remained will remain a victim to many people.

south africans 'love' the underdog. the golden boy, the good man with large promises. who said mandela and mbeki are exonerated. he was close to the people on the ground. unlike his predecessor. the sussex graduate who was aloof and philosophical. the dismissed number one presidency speedily rolled out arv medication. many lives were saved. but one act of goodness did not make him good. it was his duty. his hands got busy with bikinis for the sake of the country. he took a shower. the backbone of the country eskom, transnet, treasury, and mining were brought to its knees. the corruption accused, rape accused, morphed into an enigma so sophisticated and power-hungry he brought the national airways to its knees.

the buffalo had a large mouth on eradicating corruption. did you get news on phalaphala. the puss from the phalaphala scandal oozing through the gigantic sore of corruption will always be the legacy of the buffalo. true leaders do not hide money in a mattress. the buffalo's new dawn is stuck in my throat. maybe it is a new dog. we made a mistake, we should have asked how the buffalo became a billionaire. when the rape accused number one was arrested for the crime of contempt of court, turmoil engulfed the country. widespread looting and anarchy nearly brought the government into a comatose state. everything was decaying in the new dawn. we were thirsty we were hungry for freedom. we did not breathe. but the dismissed number one and the buffalo both fooled the nation. corruption never dropped. the minister of correctional services released the dismissed number one from jail under a scheme to ease overcrowding in jails. in south africa the deputy becomes the next president. now we have the cat in the line-up. another enigma.

another skunk is on the way from willowfontein to mahlamandlovu. we have yet to taste real freedom. if total freedom ever existed. who said mandela and mbeki did us good?

AMANDLA! AMANGA!

awabo.

The Pests

Mazwi and Thulani were en route to the East Street Hostel. The hostels are known as emzini wezinsizwa, a home of men. The apartheid government built them to provide accommodation to African men who were employed in the cities. They paid a nominal fee for a bed to sleep. The law forbade women to visit or stay in the men's hostels.

There was a veil of secrecy about other businesses that operated in the hostels. The taxi owners lived in the hostels, the cash-in-transit heists were planned in the hostels, political killings, etc. Well-respected people also lived in hostels. There will never be one experience to describe the hostels.

Mazwi and Thulani were on a mission. Mazwi started to rant about the decay of his home city, Pietermaritzburg, also known as uMgungundlovu Ondongazibomvu (red walls). He walked briskly while frowning at the thought that the Pests were all over and had taken over the city. Mazwi shouted that there was no one without a home. Thulani kept quiet, hoping that Mazwi would shut up. Mazwi was not clean, but he thought that it was only his secret. He had forgotten that even the grass has ears.

Thulani looked at his bosom friend and asked, "How dare you judge other people? What makes you think you are better?"

Mazwi remained resolute that the Pests had usurped the city. Thulani glowered at Mazwi and said nothing. The two reached the traffic lights in Berg Street, waiting for the green light to cross further down and turn into East Street, where the hostel was immediately on the left side.

"I must warn you, Mazwi, judging people at face value is foolish. You are not sure of the circumstances behind their predicaments," said a worried Thulani. He continued to rub salt in the wound, "I know that you have been smoking weed, but I never judged you. If you don't stop, that weed of yours is a gateway to other drugs. Don't say I didn't warn you." Mazwi was perturbed and lost interest in the subject.

A barefoot, dazed and confused African lad approached them. He was holding men's construction boots. They were for sale. Mazwi looked at Thulani with an oblique glance. It was written all over the boy's face that all he needed was a fix.

The boy politely greeted them, "Greetings, uncles. I found these boots, but they are oversized. Just fifty rands only. Strong boots, leather." The boy was still drowsy, and his speech was disoriented. It was cold in the morning.

Seeing a storm gathering in Mazwi's face, Thulani quickly rejected the offer and said "Siyabonga mfana (thank you, boy), move on."

Mazwi was perturbed by a sudden change of heart manifested in Thulani's attitude. He barked at Thulani: "Since when wena uthanda ama Phara (you like vagrants)?"

They were visiting the traditional doctor for backyard colon hydrotherapy. Mzimela had a special mixture that would keep the men's libido high. Once a month, they would visit the hostel for treatment with an enema. The visits were disguised as meetings so that their partners would not know.

The hostels were a one-stop-shop for all. Traditional doctors were specialists in men's diseases and were available twenty-four hours a day. The clients were not allowed to take home the mixture, lest they use it wrongly and suffer complications. All the administering had to be done in the presence of a seasoned traditional doctor. The herbalist called Mzimela had inherited the practice from his father.

Mzimela had never been to school nor done any other job besides treating men's diseases. Nobody knew how he got the permit to stay in the hostel. Their stomachs would be empty after the gruelling enema, a five-litre container with a tube that goes straight into the anus. Mzimela had seen it all, anyway it was the only job he could do.

This routine was incentivised by the open-flame braai feast. The meat was cheap. They would gobble the red meat with dry porridge. The men would take breaks to finish the mixture. After the heavy meal, Mazwi had a habit of disappearing into one of the many rooms in

the hostel.

On the way back to the township, Thulani shared a story of a man who was abusive toward the LGBTQ community. He was angry at himself for living a double life, but took it out on the honest people who were often ostracised.

Mazwi was no longer listening. He stopped, bending at the waist, and slumped forward in a rigid position with his head bowed. White foam appeared in the corner of his mouth. Thulani sat him down, drooling and he fell asleep. Thulani phoned a friend who lived in town to come and assist.

At the clinic, the nurses confirmed his suspicion. Mazwi displayed symptoms of marijuana and whoonga spells. Thulani thought, "This time his puff went too far."

Thulani realised the noise about the Pests emanated from the fear of what Mazwi saw coming.

Ntokozo

“It never crossed my mind that one day I would talk about Ntombezincane.”

The audience listened eagerly, some were happy to see Ntokozo Mlaba live, not on television or podcasts. The same Ntokozo Mlaba who once held the women’s African Cup of Nations trophy in her hands. Women’s rights dominated her agenda these days.

She continued, “Ntombezincane was a nobody but she stood up for a girl she barely knew. When the world celebrated the freedom to choose, a girl in Mlazana was not allowed to kick a ball like a boy. Somewhere in the world this may sound dumb, but what else is happening to a girl somewhere in the world.

“I feared Ntombezincane because of the rumours that circulated in the township. Ntombezincane Mzolo stood up for us, but we never defended her because we feared for our lives. ”

“Long live Ntombezincane. Long live!” the crowd roared in unison.

Ntokozo continued to read from her written speech. “What if Ntokozo had not been born, would Ntombezincane be alive today? Ntokozo was a beautiful young girl of ten living in an impoverished part of Mlazana township in a section called Seventeen. She was in grade two. Like all the young girls, friendship mattered. After finishing her errands at home, she would eagerly look for her friends to play. Like all the children in her neighbourhood, she played in the dirty streets.

“Her passion for soccer landed her in trouble with her friends. She received the news that her friends gossiped behind her back. It was the norm that they would not play with the boys. Ntokozo dishonoured that general rule in the community dominated by members of the church that had strict rules on the upbringing of girls and boys. The girls were scared that their parents would punish them for loitering with boys so they unanimously decided to teach Ntokozo a

lesson. They had enough time since it was a mid-term break.

“Ntokozo wanted to set the record straight, but when they approached her it frightened her. Gogo Nobantu, a well-known granny in the township shouted: ‘What have you done this time?’ Ntokozo did not stop to answer but accelerated and disappeared into the passages between the houses. ‘Children of today!’ exclaimed Gogo Nobantu.

“A short figure suddenly appeared. The girl Sphesihle, of Ntokozo's age, looked in the direction where Ntokozo had disappeared. Nobantu wagged her finger at Sphesihle, ‘Are you the one who's chasing Ntokozo?’ The young girl did not answer but stopped and shouted, ‘Sizokubamba wena, Mconjwana!’ (We will catch you, skinny legs).

“In a harsh tone, Gogo Nobantu asked again, ‘What did she do?’ The young girl answered, ‘Ntokozo now plays with the boys while her parents think she is with us. Our parents are angry as we were told not to play with them.’

“A hawker nearby could not contain her anger, and yelled, ‘Hey Nina, what's wrong if she likes football!?’ Sphesihle was startled to hear such a determined voice. ‘If Ntokozo likes football, it is none of your business. If you want to see the wrath of me, continue to harass her.’ Ntombezincane was known for being fearless, and she carried an okapi knife.

“She was of slender shape and tall. She had sharp eyes and wore pants like the men. Women were not allowed to wear pants in this hostel section of the township. Ntombezincane was one of the few women who dared to challenge that decision. Men tried to enforce it, but found her ready for a fight. The hot-headed men ended up ignoring her but warned the people not to come close to her because she was a bad influence.

“Ntokozo had not run straight home but hid among the shacks nearby. She appeared from her hideout and saw the other girls coming closer. Ntombezincane shouted, ‘Hey mantombazane, come here.’ They were hesitant but eventually heeded her call and approached her in a single file with their heads bowed.

“Disgusted, she looked at them with her eyes wide, moving her head when talking like a

mamba ready to strike. In a soft tone, her voice shaking in a whisper, she said, ‘This nonsense must stop now; you have no shame in harassing another girl.’ She pointed her finger at the ring leader Sphesihle, ‘you even used a derogatory word, Mconjwana! (Skinny legs).’

“Ntombezincane asked Ntokozo to tell the girls why she mingled with boys. Ntokozo took a deep breath and explained that she had watched Banyana Banyana playing on television and liked the game. She’d asked them if they could try playing soccer but they did not support the idea. Sphesihle’s father was a headman in a men's hostel and would not allow his daughter to play football. Siphesihle said that her mother told her that girls who played soccer sleep with other girls. Sphesihle further said that the community was planning to teach them a lesson if they introduced an unknown habit in their place.

“Ntombezincane thanked the young girls for lending her an ear. ‘I know that in this community I am treated like a pariah, and some of your parents hate me for living my life the way I want. I do not regret that I chose to wear what I am comfortable with. Even now, look around at people staring at us; they are watching me as if I will corrupt you. If you girls want to play football, go home and ask your parents politely to follow your wishes. It is just a sport; it does not affect your morals.’ Relieved, the girls spoke in one voice, ‘Thank you, Auntie’.”

Ntokoza looked at the audience.

“It has been five years since Ntombezincane was gang-raped and brutally murdered. May her soul rest in peace. It was alleged that Ntombezincane was planting seeds of poison in the minds of young girls. Siphesihle's father was found guilty and is now serving a life sentence without parole. Thank you for listening to my story. I thought you would learn one or two things about how we as females have struggled for simple things like playing...”

Ntokozo received a standing ovation.

She wanted to fulfil her deep-seated yearning, for connection, identity and belonging with her birthplace, Mlazana in Durban. The place was no longer the same. The streets and passages had lights and the municipality had created a park for children to play, and a sport facility. She

found the place where she had parked her Mini Cooper S and looked around with a thousand memories.

Ntombezincane did not live to see her lifting the Women's African Cup of Nations trophy. At school, she chose to play ladies' soccer and continued at a tertiary institution where a talent scouting agent landed her in the trials for the national team.

She saw shadows with new faces and realised that it was time to close a chapter.

A Fly

As I lay in my bed, a fly fluttered incessantly against the windowpane. I had nothing to do or any place to visit. I was thirty-six years old. The prospect of getting a job was dim.

It was better that the windows were closed. In summer the foul smell of the sewer down the outskirts of the settlement taunted. Durban is warm because of its proximity to the Indian Ocean, refuse collection was no longer a priority for our municipality, and packs of stray dogs roamed the streets. They fed on a trough full of rotten waste. This place was an eyesore to everyone but worse for the visitors.

The fly on the windowpane fluttered in vain. The buzz created a monotonous sound like music. I always hoped that a meaningful job would come up. We live in the buffer strip separating the sewerage site from the urban settlement.

I was one year above the government's age restriction on poverty alleviation job opportunities. I had a plumbing certificate and had worked on the house, building for a few months.

Everywhere in the township where businesses were thriving, flies were hovering non-stop. Flies were a common feature at open butcheries at taxi ranks. No one complained, the stewing beef was still selling like hotcakes. Those are different types of flies, who feast on meat.

I felt my soul trapped in a promise of a bright future in the new dawn. No one gets used to the foul smell we endure daily in this township. It pained me to see pickup trucks and small cars offloading tons of garbage in an open space not far from our houses. What made me different from a fly? We were both trapped.

We could not act against illegal dumping, lest they attacked us. We could not report them to the municipality. The law enforcement does not respond on time because of lack of resources to do their work. So they say.

It was better when there was power, a cooling fan assisted. But load shedding and load

reduction has made life unbearable. We are forced to open windows. I feel captured like a fly.

A commotion outside woke me up. On investigation I found my nephew in a sorry state. He had been at war with a fly and sadly he had lost. It never occurred to me that a fly could cause a drama of such magnitude. A stranger once said a horsefly is one of the most feared flies. My nephew Enzo had lost his front teeth.

He was standing near the refuse bin peeling his favourite fruit, a mango. A buzzing fly pounced on his face. It was a swift and fierce attack. He tilted his head back and sideways. He tried to evade the blows but all in vain. He had no time to put down his mango when a hot *klap* fell on his cheek. He hit himself so hard that his spectacles broke. The fly survived for another day.

But in no time the fly was back for a return bout. It was on steroids, attacking from all sides of his head. The buzz and flutter grew louder. Enzo tried to scream, but embarrassment stopped him.

Overwhelmed by fear and his mind dazed, eyes fuzzy, Enzo threw himself to the pillar of the veranda. His mouth was badly injured. It was a horrific encounter. The door frame also showed no mercy. His one flip-flop lay miserable in the dust. The other one was on the veranda. A twelve-year-old boy suffered the worst humiliation ever. A hot *klap* had landed on his cheek, his fat lips a result of kissing the pillar. The mango bit the dust. It was the only one. It was a sad day for Enzo.

What hurt Enzo the most was to tell the story a thousand times. If a relative or a friend of the family wanted to know how he got a scar Aunt Liz would summon Enzo to narrate the story as he had told them.

Enzo always questioned Aunt Liz's intentions. She made him not forget the painful encounter. Enzo barely knew his biological mother; she left him when he was a little baby. Liz discouraged Enzo to call her mother, and I don't know why.

Aunt Liz always insisted that Enzo should start from the beginning. She would drop

everything and come to listen. Her eyes would glow, battling to contain her laughter, and the kids would chuckle all the time. Nobody seemed to care about the pain Enzo endured.

“Whenever I relate the part where I decided to run, they all laugh,” he said. “That was the saddest part. I haven’t heard of anyone being defeated by a thing with a life span of fifteen to twenty-eight days.”

Even when Enzo wanted to say, enough, he couldn’t. He would be labelled an uncouth child. Losing teeth affected his pronunciation, swollen lips changed his look. A feeling of confinement engulfed his emotions. He was overwhelmed by the attitude of Aunt Liz.

I saw that he expected me to intervene but I had bigger issues. The poverty relief grant that I received was a drop in the ocean and could be terminated at the whim of the state. It was strange that the government had no issue with giving me a grant but I was not eligible for employment in special programmes. I suffered a double if not triple entrapment.

My nephew had a task to exonerate his name. What was strange to Enzo was why the family chose to listen to a tragic story over providing sympathy. Only his granny showed some care. His granny took him to the local clinic where his new spectacles were ordered.

Even today Aunt Liz loves to hear the story and she blames Enzo for everything. She said Enzo was not conscious of his strength: “A twelve-year-old boy at his own home should not be hounded by a small thing such as a fly. We all know that a fly never killed anyone, but you chose to cower at the expense of your reputation. A fly is an everyday annoyance. We learn to live with them. We laugh, so that you can learn to stand up and fight your own battles. It’s important that you feel the pain, so that you will never run away from minor hurdles.”

Aunt Liz was right. Enzo learned to think on his feet and act accordingly. His humiliation gave birth to reasoning that eventually transformed his character.

The Season of Condemnation

Ningi suffered from a mysterious disease. She had been to doctors but she was unable to find a cure. Pain was in every joint of her body. The empathy displayed by her mother drowned her soul. Her mother, MaZuma, suggested that they visit a traditional healer because Western medicine was of no help. However, Ningi was a staunch Christian and believed in the power of prayer. She had tried everything; she wanted the ailment to be cured so that she would live a normal life again. Ningi associated traditional healers with charlatans and voodoo.

In her quest to live she had prayed to the point where she would kneel and the words refused to come. She had read every script that is known to ward off bad spirits. She went on a three-day dry fasting and nearly died of hunger. She had been angry with God and later begged for mercy. The pain never stopped.

Ningi called her mother and cried, “Mama, I know that Job suffered for a lengthy period but he remained faithful to God. I wish I was so strong.”

MaZuma took her time to respond and later opened her mouth. “I know what I have taught all the years, but for you, I will do anything.” She paused and continued, “Our conscience is clean, and the only thing we want is your body to be set free.”

Reluctantly, Ningi consented to consult a well-known healer and witch doctor, Phondolwendlovu. There were whispers about his nefarious healing methods. The initiates had been sworn to secrecy but even the grass had ears. Ningi wondered if her mother knew all that was said about the healer. But her aching joints impaired her movements, she needed support all the time. They had to move quickly.

MaZuma was there to accompany her daughter. Early in the morning, they went to see the healer whose homestead was not far. They would have walked if Ningi was not frail. Upon their arrival outside the gate, the queue for consultation had already started, but there were less than ten people. MaZuma joined the queue and Ningi got a chance to eat her breakfast. Before

she could swallow a morsel an initiate cautioned her not to eat before consultation. She might be required to perform a ritual that required an empty stomach. The fetid smell remained after the initiate had long vanished.

At 7:30 the boy came to the gate and told them the rules: guns are not allowed as well as women on their monthlies; do not raise your voice; do not walk tall; you must show respect in everything you do or touch. When uBaba is walking in your direction you have to kneel and give him way. Shortly after the boy had finished, the gate was opened. Shoes were taken off at the gate, and people walked barefoot into the yard.

People gathered on the veranda, where Phondolwendlovu was already seated majestically. He looked serious, and ready to heal the nation. He started a song and led the hopefuls in the opening prayer session. He finished and told people about the power of God and the ancestors.

He praised God for knowledge, plants, and animals. People were healed because of what God provided. He said those who consult him for evil intentions must forget about it because he did not deal with witchcraft. Phondolwendlovu gave a brief history of Africanism and how the black nation was reawakening. MaZuma was relieved to hear that Phondolwendlovu was not an evil man. She shouted a resounding, "Amen!" and that caught the attention of Phondolwendlovu. She got the first spot to consult Phondolwendlovu, also known as Baba.

Phondolwendlovu told them that they had been to Western doctors but did not find a cure. He said, "You are the chosen ones, not everyone can visit my kraal. God bless you." MaZuma and her daughter entered the thatched consultation room where one had to kneel when entering.

He said, "I knew that you would visit us this morning. Consider your problem solved. But your daughter has to undergo an initiation process."

The consultation did not last ten minutes. He instructed one of his initiates to explain everything while he continued with his work. The initiate told them that since Ningi was employed she would not be living at the homestead. Ningi was to join the initiates on Fridays

after work and leave on Sundays, late in the afternoon.

MaZuma and her daughter went home. Ningi agreed to heed the calling. She left everything in God's hands. She prayed and let the Lord lead her, if he did not like it, there would be a sign. When she arrived at the healer's homestead, she was given a special room. The senior initiate gave her all the instructions as per the rules and she was sworn into secrecy.

On her first Saturday with the initiates, she took a bath in the river. The initiates bathe in the river for the entire period of initiation. It was hard but she accepted it. All day the initiates worked in the yard, and there was time for singing and dancing to appease the ancestors. She was warned not to ask so many questions lest the ancestors punish her.

That night she was visited by uBaba Phondo who claimed that he did not get the opportunity to talk to her and welcome her formally. There was a ritual to perform where Ningi had to kneel and Phondolwendlovu put his hand on her head and prayed. He had a casual talk that made Ningi feel uncomfortable. He told Ningi that his ancestors loved her. He said he only did what he was instructed to do and that he was a servant who feared the wrath of the ancestors. He instructed Ningi to sleep in a special room, used by initiates to receive a special message.

On a faithful night, Ningi was awoken by Phondolwendlovu claiming that his ancestors instructed him to share a blanket with Ningi. Her weak body jumped and leaned on the wall, shaking, and unable to speak. She had been warned about how to talk to Phondolwendlovu. Her fears had become real so soon that she could not believe her ears. Phondolwendlovu left and soon summoned all the initiates to the main room and warned them about proper behaviour and consequences. They had to sing and dance till the middle of the night, just to appease the ancestors.

The older initiates suspected that Ningi had refused the sexual advances of Phondolwendlovu. It was an open secret among the initiates that Phondolwendlovu had unique healing methods. Male initiates had been seen trying to sit on the side of their buttocks.

Later that night, Ningi had a dream where she had a steamy sex session with

Phondolwendlovu. She was enjoying it and even apologized, making promises that she was not leaving anymore. She suddenly woke up at 3:30 and checked the door but it appeared locked. She ended up not knowing what exactly happened and called her mother to come and fetch her.

MaZuma screamed and quickly realised that Phondo had sexually violated her daughter, but this would be difficult to prove. MaZuma cried and called Phondo a witch; that was all she could do. She concluded that Phondolwendlovu did not only rape her daughter but her soul as well. Ningi never recovered, she had had enough.

The Honourable

the title, honorabilis, onorable, honourable, imbeko, eerbare, call it any way you want, the meaning remains sacred. thugs in suits, some with armed struggle credentials don the title. thieves and swindlers who steal titty juice and sell it to the highest bidder are using this title. they have turned the national parliament sitting into a show worth watching by the jaded people. some are in red overalls but the worst are those in camouflage regalia. mandela saw it coming but let us lick the asses of these bum dividers who are called honourable. so eloquent and well-travelled sons and daughters of the soil have no shame in destroying the land of their forefathers. forefathers born in poverty, who lived in poverty and died in poverty. they have inherited a cursed and a useless seed of death. no wonder the country had witnessed so much cat fighting. play fighting, dominance, testing power dynamics. we have seen it all.

the narrative had changed to shield the new captain against the sharp criticism of turning our country into a banana republic. fist in the air, a cry for freedom, a song of hope kept rekindled. the fight for freedom. thieving as old as the human race but with a black face. yes, unashamedly rebuking a black face. the world fought against apartheid. corruption knows no racial polarisation, i was old enough to recognise the face for the liberation of south africa. the face was all over the media.

joe slovo, peter abrahams, ruth first, helen suzman, yusuf dadoo, beyers naude, bram fischer and many more risked everything for our country. but not dishonourable gangs of looters pursuing a self-serving agenda. the honourable thieves live in opulence but at the expense of the blood of the innocent and defenceless people. crime levels will remain high because the honourable ministers and police chiefs could not arrest themselves. the natives allowed themselves to be mounted by honourable. the scumbags in suits and looters of state coffers have raped our beloved country. instead of breaking the chains of poverty. mandela sold us too. he knew both evils, one from freedom fighters, and the other. but he chose to smoke a peace pipe

with the oppressive regime. we did not ask him to reach out to the enemy. the oppressive regime never asked for forgiveness. his stay on robben island made him timid and docile.

i would have washed the sea salt that corroded his true senses. he went to prison as a fierce critic of the apartheid regime. they released him with a heart that was too accommodating at the expense of the oppressed masses. the bastards faked hatred for the apartheid regime. in the process of building a modern army for south africa, the bastards muddied the process with corruption in the form of dubious discounts. wow, what a discount from the german automaker, hey; french men can be generous. the thieves had an appetite for a lavish lifestyle. the one is in and out of court for a mere bribe of protection that he could not provide. i can tell that our honourable thieves did not fight for the enslaved masses but for themselves. i have not seen sahara computers in a while, i have just forgotten the brains behind the brand. but i am sure if i can fly to dubai, i can find them languishing in opulence. we did not wake up in a failed state. the comrades engineered this mess for us. everything is losing value. look at our education system, anyone can be appointed as a minister. imagine the simpleton managing a hefty departmental budget, a hobo who has been loitering the streets in exile but is now shouting the loudest as a caring minister. do not tell me that he is not going to steal. all these squirrels are entitled to the honourable title. i have seen the squirrel thieving on birds' seeds.

cities have new dwellers who all live in the streets. rodents used to feast in the mounds of filth. the new dwellers, pariah, known as *amaphara*. politics is no longer a home for the disenfranchised. the youth is left with well-crafted slogans and rhetoric. kill the boer kill the farmer! they sing and dance while the descendants of the architects of the slogan play golf. they enjoy themselves in ibiza. there was nothing honourable when we elected the uneducated man into the number one office. it was a huge risk. Indeed, he ran our country like a spaza shop. the parliament is full of hobos, thieves, and liars. the arms deal, travel scam, and beetroot saga all show the gross negligence and poor thinking of these hobos. it looks like there is no retirement age in parliament.

i will write a script for a beautiful movie titled *banana republic in gondwana land*. give me one department that is functioning smoothly, not even one.

the zip of their trousers is always down, if i had time, i would have told more. once caught, these new honourable *what* can play dumb, and they are good at it. one said a shower after fornication can do wonders. the other spent time in a shebeen that did not exist. the stench is too much. on national television, a man was overwhelmed by the senseless theory on hiv and aids instead of releasing arv medication. the bastard never apologised. a grade twelve learner would have handled the situation much better and saved hundreds of souls who died. the other butcher of humans destroyed his country to a point of no return and died singing rhetoric that reduced his people to paupers. god bless zimbabwe. guess i do not feel pity for them. there is no honour among thieves. gauteng has been usurped by heavily armed gangs. murderers are in the holes, like mules, searching for gold dust. slowly our heartless thieves are scraping the last patches of goodies in a pan and sweet crumbs of cakes and bread. only now do i realise that i have been turned into a voting cow. the skin colour means nothing. i nearly forgot the

graduation ceremonies that i watched where graduates compete to steal the limelight. after all the drama, there is no prospect of employment. after so many years and demanding work, the super thief in the highest office wants companies and government departments to offer employment for a very limited duration at a meagre R4000 a month equivalent to 212 dollars. the government issued a freeze on posts, to 'save' money. the youth studied to be beggars, the educated paupers.

i remember the fists in the air and a loud war cry of amandla! they will shout awethu! mayibuye iafrika! certainly not in my lifetime.

The Smart Brave Fikile

In Estcourt, KwaZulu-Natal, I was a clerk at a nearby factory and shared the basement rooms with the landlord's housemaid, Fikile. She was tall and of dark complexion. She was beautiful, 'bootilicious' and curvy. We occasionally glanced at each other. Everyone called her Auntie. She had an older boyfriend who used to visit her once a fortnight. The man was old enough to be her father. I sensed that the bloke never liked seeing Fikile hanging around in my vicinity. There was something funny about how I felt when Fikile was around. But I always chased the thought away.

Her boyfriend wore clean and well-pressed clothes. The landlord knew him, and I had greeted him a couple of times. Our rooms were separated by a thin wall. One night, I was woken by a low sound of moaning and quickly realised that the couple was busy.

They knew that we were separated by the thin wall, and I took it as deliberate to provoke me. Her screams sounded like music in my ears, and my right hand clutched my tool for happiness. I could judge by the tempo of her moaning whether the bloke was slow or fast with his tool. There were no other sounds in the basement.

One night, they started shortly after I had started to pray. I had to abandon my prayer. It had been a long time since I had been in bed with a woman. Instead of being annoyed, I found myself tiptoeing close to the wall. I had no desire to act childish, but as the African proverb says, "An erected penis has no conscience." I hated the bloke but failed to come up with a plan to kick him out.

The fog cleared, and the funny feeling I had been avoiding was lust. I lived with Auntie; therefore, the old man had no right to touch her under my watch. It looked like the bloke had a family, sometimes he would leave late at night after he had satisfied himself. I felt like there was no reason to play nice with him.

It became a habit that they would start their game after 9 pm. They enjoyed watching the

drama Muvhango on SABC 2. The doing it would last for 25 minutes. They had developed a routine. I despised the bloke; he was not exemplary. I hated him; it felt like he was sleeping with my wife.

Days passed, weeks, and a couple of months without seeing the bloke. The house cleaner knew that I was eavesdropping. The walls were thin. She had worked for years for the Maharaja family. I thought the bloke was happy to spite me, causing me to drool with envy. They succeeded. My ear would be stuck on the wall, my mind gallivanting, trying to figure out what the man was doing to Auntie.

I knew that they were also experimenting with different sex positions. There would be a short but consistent soft scream as Auntie responded enthusiastically to a thrilling stimulus. Knowing their physical structures, I would imagine their joy in what they were doing. The veins had swollen in my long, fat, horny tool of joy.

I was panting like a dog during mating season. I was away from my girlfriend. I would visit home only once a month, sometimes she would visit. She was from Mgababa on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal, far from Escourt. I realised that men are not called dogs for nothing. They can be naughty.

I grabbed my car keys and drove off to town in search of the ladies of the night. It was late, but I found one. I prayed, "Forgive me, Lord, the sexual urge overwhelmed me." I was addicted to sexual fantasy. I saw a danger looming for the maid. I shuddered at the voice that said, "This is your kraal, uwena inkunzi la (and there is one bull)". The bloke was gate-crashing.

In town, my moral stance disappeared completely. I found a well-sculptured lady, quite fit. I was not her first customer for the night. She charged me fifty rand. I took her to the outskirts of town. During the day, the place was used as a park, but at night it was a den for illicit activity. I found the right spot to park the car, and we both got out. The lights from the city created shadows that danced with the wind.

I made it clear that I wanted a good fuck. I did not resist a blow job. I had put aside

conscience. In my mind, Auntie and her bloke were still fucking hard. It did not take long for me to be on cloud nine. I ejaculated fast, in a large volume.

I wanted the second round, the girl said, "You pay for another round, each round costs fifty rand." I had only fifty rand and a few coins. I promised to pay on Friday. The girl frowned and answered, "I don't even know you, please take me back before I turn ugly!"

In a fit of rage, I nearly slapped her with the palm of my hand, but she looked fit. I was not sure if she carried a knife. I hurriedly zipped up my pants and shouted at her to get into the car. I tried to appear strong and dominant. I could not wait to drop her at her spot.

She stepped out of the car and in a deep voice said, "Call again, my darling." She blew me a kiss. I pressed the accelerator so hard that it disappeared. I am sure that voice was of a man. How could I be so naïve and stupid? A man sucked my dick, and I screamed. I arrived at the room, parked my car next to the window and remained inside for a couple of hours. I felt a deep hatred for Auntie. I blamed her and the bloke for messing with my life.

My cell phone was gone, and my wallet was also stolen. I didn't know why she stole my wallet, knowing that I had no money left. It was a cold night. I walked on my toes, slinking to the door. I took a long, hot bath and lathered every inch of my skin with scented soap. Rinsed and lathered my skin until I was satisfied that I was clean.

I was awoken by a morning glory. I nearly screamed and shouted, "Voetsek, go away!" I found myself wanting to fuck the maid too. I had no choice; she brought that to herself. I had to plan.

I heard Fikile moaning and screaming softly very early in the morning. The stupid thing between my legs was delighted to torment me. It was erect and firm like a thin, long sweet potato tuber. I longed for a good fuck, Lord, forgive me. I tiptoed to the bathroom, got a piece of sunlight bar soap, and lathered my tormentor. I had no choice. I fantasised seriously about Auntie while I was helping myself with my right hand. I wondered why it was always difficult to do it with the left hand. My hand was firm, wet, and slippery. In a few minutes, it was over.

Sheepishly, I prayed for forgiveness and reported to God that it was for the last time.

One Friday evening, I heard a knock on my door. It was Auntie, she said, "Could you please help me fix the light bulb?" I could not say no, although I thought she should have asked the landlord for help. I went to her room, leaving my beef stew simmering on the stove. She handed me a new light bulb, I climbed on the chair, and removed the burnt-out one. I finished screwing it inside the holder cup on the ceiling.

She switched on the light again. The joy in her face radiated throughout the whole room. I hid the shock in me. I had waited for an opportunity like that with Auntie. Her room was clean and had a fresh smell. I jumped out of the chair and accidentally strained my foot. It was small, but I had to exaggerate. She helped me to get up; her skin against mine sent shockwaves all over my body. I just said, "I love you."

She asked, "Why did it take you so long?"

I said, "I was afraid since you had a boyfriend. I did not want to cause trouble." She looked down, but when she lifted her eyes, I knew that I had won. I just knelt and sobbed like a baby, in total disbelief. She told me that the bloke felt cheap on realising that Fikile faked an orgasm. The bloke swore at her and left.

The Mystery of My Fathers

It was late in the afternoon when my father returned from work and called for the ox span to be ready. “Musa, we must go ploughing now, hurry up”. Knowing that he was a man of quick temper, I quickly organised the yokes, ropes, chains, and a plough. When he finished changing his clothes, the ox-span was ready to plough the fields. We never had a ploughing session so late in the day. It was strange, but we had to abide, taking his orders exactly the way he wanted. At times he was a bogeyman.

I was leading the ox span in the field, pulling them by the leather strap attached to the leading pair at the front. Sometimes the cows would misbehave as it happened on that fateful afternoon. I had a premonition of an imminent disaster. I could hear the span huffing and large hooves pounding the ground due to the strain of pulling a heavy plough, the chains pulling and the plough cutting through the soil.

Everything must be in sync, there must be a rhythm. If the leading boy was slow on his feet, a cow’s horn could gorge his back or he would fall to the ground and be trampled. My father was holding the plough and Vusi, the shepherd, was driving the span from behind with a long whip. While everything was going smoothly I felt a sharp pain in the torso, and in no time he landed another heavy beating. I jumped and dropped everything, running away as fast as possible.

I did not hear much but these words, “This is what will fight for the inheritance that does not belong to it.” The words might have been spoken out of anger, but they never faded. I no longer hold grudges, but the words are as audible as decades ago. He never married my mother. According to the Zulu tradition, I belonged to my maternal family. I had no role to play in my paternal family.

I was an uncle to the kids. If one can imagine what it was like to scream and run away in pain. It was an embarrassment to be whipped and chased away with a tail between the legs. That

horrendous incident pierced my soul, but it sharpened my focus. It was just luck that not so many people witnessed the embarrassment, my shame. My father made me to be aware that I did not belong to his family.

The shepherd Vusi enjoyed laughing at me and saying that I should have been a sprinter. Vusi would recall the ordeal and remind me how my father just dropped the plough, snatched the whip, and landed sharp blows, repeatedly. I did not know why he chuckled every time he recounted this incident.

As boys we used to chase away stray dogs, I guess I flee like them. It is a pity that I only discovered my running talent so late and through a painful experience. I was beaten for no good reason. I hid in the bush until my father left for the other homestead he shared with his younger wife. That is where he spent most of his nights. He had three wives, each with a compound of her own. I stayed with the first wife. He had concubines too. Before the whipping, I used to enjoy my father's presence while other children feared him. Things changed the day he beat me mercilessly.

Well-groomed children do not hold grudges; I easily put everything aside and moved on with my not-so-glorious life. I loved him as my father and my hero but living with him revealed a character I despised. When he died I buried him, the smell of his corpse still lingers in my brain. His niece fatally stabbed him and hid his body for three days. Everyone forgot where I belonged; nevertheless I do not regret giving him a proper burial.

My father's painful whipping preceded a bigger beating. I suffered at the hands of my mother at my maternal homestead. I left my mother after a heavy beating that happened early in the morning. My mother and two sisters had woken up early; no one had bothered to wake me up. They all left to till the soil in the garden, leaving me behind in deep sleep.

Just imagine the comfort of a warm blanket being snatched and suddenly a sharp stinging pain from a switch all over the body. Only a thief can be pounced on like that, not a child. I woke up mad and bolted out of the hut like a madman. In the yard there was a pile of mudstones. I do

not remember picking up the stones, but I did throw a few mudstones at my mother.

She was shocked, but not as I was. We were both shocked but in different ways. She called for my cousin to catch me. She hated her nephew and had even punished him for minor errors but this morning, she forgot the hatred. I realised what I had done and quickly disappeared into the bush. I was not an angel, but corporal punishment was meted out wrongly. It left not only physical scars but emotional ones as well.

My mother and my two siblings finished working in the garden and went to church for the service. I moved from the bush to the sugar cane field for a better view of the activities at home. I could see them moving and chatting freely as if nothing happened. I was hidden in the long grass at the periphery of the sugar plantation. My life changed in the blink of an eye; I was not even properly dressed.

I fell asleep and remember being awakened by the heavy steps of an old cousin who was patrolling in the sugar cane field. I woke up and started running again. It was Uncle Bhesu. He did not beat me. I guess he saw that I was not stealing his sugarcane. I decided to sneak into the house to collect my clothes. I disappeared quickly, hitting the road to my father's homestead a few kilometres away.

My mother was known for being hot-headed. I do not mean to be disrespectful; her beating caught me by surprise. I arrived at my paternal home unannounced. I relayed the whole unfortunate incident. I spent a year with my paternal family.

As a young boy in the village, I was known to be a coward and that label did not sit well with me. I remember when I was young my older, naughty cousin put me up in a fight with a boy who was an epileptic and crippled. I shall not forget the embarrassment I brought onto myself. The boy, holding his hand and dragging his leg, came running to beat me; his mouth was drooling with saliva and his eyes wide open. He was screaming too. The boy sent me packing.

I made a decision then that I would fight and defeat all the boys in my age group. That was a mammoth task but I started on a high note, I was ready to exonerate my name, to

maintain my dignity. Some of the boys beat the hell out of me. I managed to claim some resounding victories and saved my name. If I knew that the fight was not winnable, I was not afraid to accept defeat. I made a few enemies during that period, but boys do not cling to grudges. It was a stage that we went through. Only one relative swore that he will revenge himself. May his soul rest in peace. In high school, I took martial arts, and so my sense of security was upgraded.

After a year with my paternal family my mother sent a village traditional officer who carried a knobkerrie to fetch me. I never left my maternal family again, but she changed her ways of child-rearing, she got rid of the sjamboks. She had a good side too. When she worked as a house cleaner, she brought me beautiful toys. It felt great to own those toy cars. I did not even know that they were second-hands. I did not even care to ask if they were taken lawfully. I still remember those toys, Jeeps, Land Rovers, and a lot of old toys. She introduced me to finer things in life. Now I have a passion for beautiful cars. As an adult I look at my mother differently, I understand what it is like to raise a child.

I shall never condone her heavy hand; it was not necessary. She nearly destroyed us completely. At some point, I slept outside for the whole night. I remember the night when I saw a stray dog wandering in the yard. I was frightened. I yelled at the dog and swore to annihilate it. I heard my mother and two sisters chuckling in the rondavel that served as a kitchen. No one came to my rescue. My mother knew that I was shivering in the cold outside. Anything could have happened to me. I humbly thanked my guardian angel for keeping me safe on that night in the rural village of Sway Imana. I did not deserve to be left in the cold. I was an ordinary child, sometimes naughty like all the village boys.

I forgave my mother too, a long time ago.

I always try to understand what she went through in raising her children. She single-handedly looked after us. We never slept on empty stomachs, and she was a hard-working village woman. She wanted all of her children to be educated. She wanted me to study at a

university and it happened.

At school, I was not a bright boy but a bookworm. Studying helped to improve my grades at school. I graduated from high school with a university exemption, a basic requirement to enroll at a university in South Africa. The joy was short-lived because there was no money to further my studies. That was 1995.

There was no one to counsel me. I decided to till the soil in the garden. I used to wake up early in the morning and work in the garden when the children started to walk to school, passing by my home. I did not want to be the topic of discussion.

Working in the garden saved me from depression. In 1995, my mother worked as a labourer at a timber factory. She lived in a compound during the week. I considered myself a responsible young man. I was tall and skinny. I hated poverty. My mother tried to force my father to support my upkeep but failed. The maintenance court failed her. The travelling costs to the court were equal to the maintenance fee. Sometimes, she found no money and returned empty-handed.

My two siblings had grown up and left home. I never stopped sending application letters for admission to universities. The Durban-Westville University responded favourably. It was an honour to receive a university acceptance letter. However, there was no money for the registration. I remember well that I only had faith. We were poor at home. My mother had neither cash reserves nor assets to sell.

My late brother, John 'Bhoyi' Ngcobo, lent me the registration fee. My hopes were pinned on securing a student study grant. Faith gave me the courage to go alone to borrow the money. I came back with enough money for registration. It was a miracle.

I always tell people I was not walking alone but with my guardian angel. That was my real Father. My ever-loving guardian angel.

My mother did not believe it when I told her *bhuti*, Bhoyi lent me the money. It all happened on Friday. On the following Monday, I travelled to Durban for registration. I hid the

money in my shorts. I wore two pairs of pants to hide the money securely. I was prepared to die for an opportunity to study. I had former classmates waiting for me at the university. They offered me a place to stay while I was on the lookout for cheap student accommodation. It did not take long before I found accommodation. Mr. Singh offered me a place in the basement on the promise that I would be a good boy and would not smoke cigarettes. No deposit was required as Mr. Singh's student residence was registered with the university, so the grant covered all the living expenses.

Now I am employed and have more than I ever prayed for or dreamt of. I am not a genius but once I set my eyes on a task, I complete it. I have forgiven everyone including the sperm donor that put me into existence. He should have accepted his offspring and not called it a Mistake. A soul shall never be a Mistake. I am not a mistake. I shall never be a mistake. No one has a right to call me a mistake.

Madness!

All his children except one mysteriously passed away. The Mistake survived. The Mistake sacrificed everything to bury him.

I try to lead a meaningful life and forget the shameful past. I have four children who are taken care of, to prevent history from repeating itself. Looking back, I see that somebody has always been with me. He has spoken to me in dreams, just a few warnings. He never revealed himself. That is what true love is. I have always had a Father.

I remember a night when my guardian angel Father spoke in a dream. It was early in the morning. He commanded me not to use *umuthi* ever. The second time, he commanded me not to be romantically involved with the wrong people. I listened to the voice and I never disappointed him. I shall obey the heavenly voice which he represents. It would be an insult to cry for the biological father who neglected me whereas I have the heavenly Father who chose to love and protect me against all the adversaries of this world.

Treasure Under a Dark Cloud

When Mrs Mavis Mweli lost her beloved husband, Nomandla was the only soul she lived for. It was a sudden death, a hard blow. He died of a meat bolus that choked the airways, obstructing the passage of air into the lungs. Mrs Mweli and her daughter had gone to town when the tragedy struck. Raising a child alone was a challenge.

As a factory worker, Mr Mweli had built his wife a modest house at Imbali township. Death benefits were not enough to maintain herself and her daughter. She found employment at a local supermarket, Kasakazane Cash and Carry. Nomandla clung to her mother and resisted troubling her. She dreamt of studying and getting a job so that her mother would live comfortably.

Nomandla went to a top-achieving state school called Igugu Labasha Comprehensive, and she performed well and passed her matric with distinction. She enrolled for a Social Work degree at the University of South Africa. Nomandla loved to take care of the needy and frail people. It was not a surprise that she chose Social Work. Mrs Mweli was excited when she received the news that her daughter had passed her final year examination.

Mrs Mweli had a friend, Mrs Sabela, a retired school teacher who read newspapers and was a fountain of knowledge, yet so humble. She had just read in the newspaper that there was a freeze in posts for Social Workers. The provincial government did not have the budget. All departments had to implement austerity measures. She pondered how to tell Mrs Mweli such terrible news. It would be better to save money for the rainy days ahead. She decided that the best way to tell Mrs Mweli was to talk to her over a cup of tea. Her friend's excitement about the graduation party had to subside.

It was not long before Mrs Mweli jokingly asked her friend, "Why are you not ululating for me when I tell you about my daughter's achievement?"

The smart Mrs Shangase laughed and said, "Nomandla is my daughter too, don't you

know that? We just need to pray that it doesn't take long for her to get a job." Unaware of the political meddling in the running of the departments, Mrs Mveli kept her hopes up.

Nomandla arrived from the shops. She entered the house through the sitting room door and warmly greeted the elders. "Sanibonani, how are you, Auntie? I am so glad to see you."

Mrs Shangase quickly congratulated Nomandla on the completion of her studies, but noticed that she looked dejected. Nomandla left the adults to continue with their conversation.

Mrs Mveli was in a gay mood. She called from the kitchen, "Nomandla, please tell Mrs Shangase to find a dressmaker for her two-piece to wear at your graduation party."

Nomandla knew that Mrs Shangase was aware of the predicament facing Social Work graduates. When her mother had finished making tea, Nomandla joined them. She tried in vain to find something suitable to say to dispel the utopia that overwhelmed her mother. She eventually just dropped the bombshell. "Mama, I hope Mrs Shangase has shared with you the current position of the government about posts. The prospect of finding a job is gloomy at the moment."

The words stunned Mrs Mveli.

"There will be no party, Mama," she continued.

Mrs Mveli looked at her daughter in disbelief. She read her daughter's face and found answers. Nomandla passed her cell phone to her mother. "Mama, please look at this, these are graduates protesting at the Department of Social Welfare offices, I am supposed to join them too, but I am defeated. They are even wearing their gowns. Awukho umsebenzi, Mama. No jobs. I studied hard, and I deserve to celebrate. But after the party, I will still be a part of the furniture in the house."

Mrs Mveli turned into a wilted vegetable. Mrs Shangase finished her cup of tea and left for her house further down the street. Mrs Mveli felt the world tumbling on her. She had waited long for the graduation party at home. She remembered all the graduation parties she had attended. She could imagine the MC when he says, "Let me take this golden opportunity and give thanks to Mrs Mveli."

It hurt Nomandla to see her mother upset. The atmosphere was sour in the room; the television and radio were switched off. Nomandla and her mother avoided each other for a while. They did not know how to comfort each other.

In the middle of the night Nomandla had texted her friend Nokuzola, she just wanted to share her pain with a person she trusted. Now Nokuzola had replied with the news that Thokoza Unitrans was inviting women below the age of thirty-five to send their applications for training as long-haul drivers. The companies were heeding the call from the state to empower women. It came to the attention of the state that women were not adequately represented in the transport sector. The first time she read the message, it did not make sense to her.

Nomandla did not want to break down; her mind raced, trying to find a solution. A faint glimpse of hope flashed. She concluded that she would take the plunge. She quickly texted Nokuzola and confirmed that she was going to send her application.

She made a WhatsApp call, "Hello, my friend, let me thank you for sharing this valuable information with me, you are a true friend indeed. It is a career that I never dreamt of, even in my wildest dreams. I was afraid of huge and long trucks. But your message changed everything. I needed something completely different that would make me forget about Social Work."

Nokuzola later texted, "Tough times call for desperate measures. The truck industry is male-dominated; you must be ready for all sorts of things. Being a woman in such an industry can be a handful at times." Nomandla responded quickly, telling Nokuzola she was sure that the company had strong policies against discrimination and harassment.

Days passed without a word to her mother about the new development. Nomandla quickly filled in the forms, scanned them, and sent them via email. She tried to pray but failed; the only words she could whisper were, "Lord, let your will be done." Nomandla convinced herself to embrace the opportunity presented by the Thokoza long-haul driving programme; she was not going to be bitter if she was not accepted. A flashback of behemoth trucks wreaking havoc on the roads tried to disturb her, but she remained resolute.

She pondered how she was going to tell her mother. She was sure that it was going to fall on deaf ears. Mrs Mveli associated trucks with horrific accidents. Her mother always cried when she watched accidents on television. This was not a time for fear, Nomandla said to herself. She waited to break the news on the following day, after breakfast.

"Mama, I have something to tell you. My friend Nokuzola sent me a job advertisement. The job is in the transport sector. It is aimed at empowering women in this sector."

Mrs Mveli raised her eyebrows but remained silent. In her mind, she was trying to figure out if Nomandla was right in her mind. She enquired, "My child, what is it that you are going to do in trucks? I know that you have recently acquired your driver's licence, but I have never seen you behind a steering wheel. You know how I feel about the truck industry. Is this really what you want?"

Nomandla had no wish to argue; she nodded and kept quiet. She assured her mother that everything would be fine.

The cobwebs had disappeared in the eyes of Mrs Mveli. The scarcity of jobs was real, and the prospect of finding employment was low. She wished her daughter prosperity in all of her endeavours.

As the advertisement stipulated how the applicant would be informed of outcomes, Nomandla received a message. It carried good news. She was provisionally accepted until she passed the programme. It did not take long for the results to be released. Nomandla had made it. Looking at the joy in her daughter's face Mrs Mveli smiled and thanked her daughter for her bravery.

The truth settled in Mrs Mveli that one of the truck drivers that she feared on the roads slept in her womb. "My child, I never anticipated this development but thank you, for grabbing this opportunity" said Mrs Mveli.

If Fathers Know This

The friendship kept the boys motivated to go to school every day. They cherished each other's company at school. Themba approached Siphon and said, "Guess what my father is going to buy for me." He did not give Siphon a chance to answer. "I asked my father to buy me chips and sweets, and he will also give me pocket money."

Themba was extremely excited. "My father called my mom and said he will take me for a visit on Friday." Themba had learned to share the love for his biological father and the stepfather he lived with at home. Nobody told him not to talk about his biological father; it just happened that he was more comfortable doing it at school.

Siphon listened attentively and marvelled at the special weekend his friend would have with his father. Siphon had nothing to brag about. Themba was short and obese. He had a round face, small ears, Chinese eyes, and a small mouth. He had only one friend, Siphon. Children used to call him the Mayor. Siphon never teased him. There was no doubt that Themba was well fed. The voice of Themba squeaked when he spoke.

Siphon had the body of an athlete, and he preferred listening to talking. The conversation was usually dominated by Themba, so Siphon did not have to talk about a father that he never saw.

He had been surprised when Themba had told him, "Do you know that I have two fathers? Listen to me, there is the father who takes me to his home. That is my real father. There are aunts, uncles, children, and even my grandmother lives with him. All they say is, I look like him. I always visit them on school holidays. They all love me. They say I must come to live with them, permanently. The other father is the one who stays with me and my mom."

Failing to hide his surprise Siphon had asked, "You live with a stepfather?"

Themba answered quickly. "My mother told me to call him daddy, too. We do not use the word, stepfather. I address him as my dad. He buys me sweets. But he does not brush my head

and call me his son. Both are my fathers.”

Sipho had never met his father or heard anything about him. He was never mentioned. He was too young to be creative with the truth, so he had nothing to brag about. A spark to know something about his father occurred, but he kept everything within.

Themba enjoyed the attention "Do you know that my father buys a burger every time we go to the mall? Do you know that all the children in the neighbourhood roar like my father's Beemer when he comes to pick me up for a visit? It is a 3-series Sport, double exhaust. I will share some goodies with you because you are my friend. And you, Sipho, when is your father coming to visit you?"

Sipho replied sheepishly, "My uncle sometimes comes to take me to his home."

"Sipho, your uncle, is not your father", said Themba. I have an uncle too, but he is not my father. Do you mean that you do not have a father? I am sorry if he died."

Sipho had endured enough torment. Feeling agitated, he shouted, "Enough, Themba, I will ask my mom where my father is."

Themba was remorseful for causing the upset. Sipho, tired of hearing Themba bragging about his father, decided to ask his mother about his father. On Saturday morning, he started the conversation, "Mummy, my friend Themba has two fathers. Where is my father?"

There was a deafening silence in the room. His mother's face turned red. She switched off the television, assumed a comfortable posture on the sofa, cleared her throat and asked, "Sipho, did you ever sleep in this house without food? Mmh. Who is doing everything for you?" She shouted, "Answer me, Sipho! I am talking to you. You do not ask me anything about that man, ever. He does not even care that you eat or have clothes. I work hard for you to live comfortably, now you are breaking my heart." Her voice was shaking.

Sipho felt deeply sorry.

"Never again will you ask such nonsense in my house unless you want to see me dead".

His mother's reaction pierced Sipho's heart. He had no intention to resuscitate old

wounds. He slinked into his bedroom. He threw himself on his bed and lay awake. "What have I done wrong?" Siphso muttered softly to himself. He vowed never to break his mother's heart again. Nomusa worked as a clerk in one of the KwaZulu-Natal government departments in Pietermaritzburg. She lived for her only son, Siphso.

Themba always wanted to grow up and be like his father. Siphso knew everything about Themba and his father, but nothing about who fathered him. Worst of all, his mother nearly killed him when he enquired about his father. His mind wandered about his father.

On Monday, early in the morning, Themba greeted Siphso and gave him a piece of chocolate. Siphso devoured the delicious, sweet caramel-coated chocolate. They were in grade three but in separate classes. Themba promised to catch up with Siphso during break time with plenty of sweets and funny stories. When the bell rang, signalling break time, Themba reached for his school bag and took the small plastic bag with all the goodies to share with Siphso. Siphso expected another piece of chocolate, but to his surprise, the whole slab of chocolate had disappeared. Themba had a sweet tooth.

In a soft voice, Siphso just said, "You are so lucky to have two fathers. My mother was not happy when I asked about my own. She nearly killed me. Wena Themba, you have two fathers. I can see that you are well taken care of. Mina, I do not have stories to tell about my father or have toys like you."

Before he finished talking, Themba jumped in, "But Siphso, it would have been better if I lived with my real father and mother."

Siphso wanted to know more "Tell me, Themba, who do you love the most between your fathers?"

Themba replied, "It is obvious, my friend. The one that I live with makes my mother happy. I can hear them laughing in their bedroom. My real father loves me, but he does not stay with us. He only buys beautiful things for me. I wish could spend more time with him. But I love them both. My stepfather loves watching soccer on television and spending time in the bedroom.

We do not talk a lot."

Feeling sorry for himself, Siphso said, "Mina, I do not know what to do because my mother gave me a stern warning not to say a word about my father."

Themba tried to be smart and hatched a plan, "Siphso mnganami, I have a wonderful plan, but let us talk tomorrow."

Siphso wondered what the plan would be. The following day, Themba told Siphso to find a way to go through his mother's cell phone. Siphso was to find out if there was anything that could give a lead in an attempt to trace his father. Siphso had to ask for permission to use his mother's cell phone for a school project.

The thought of betraying his mother's trust did not sit well with him. Siphso felt the sweat running down his spine. He knew what would happen if his mother found out. Siphso hesitated and abandoned the ill advice of Themba. Instead, he chose to ask his grandmother. Siphso knew that his grandmother loved him.

At break time, he shared his second option with Themba. He said, "I am going to ask my grandmother, I am sure that she knows something."

His grandmother lived at the main family compound. On weekends, Siphso occasionally visited her. He asked his mother for permission to visit his grandma. Nomusa had no problem with Siphso visiting his grandma.

Siphso knew that his grandmother loved drinking tea. He waited for that moment. It eventually arrived. He looked at his grandma and smiled, then he politely asked, "Can I ask you something, Grandma?"

She replied, 'Ufunani my grandson kodwa?'

Siphso dropped the bombshell, "Granny, do you happen to know my father?"

The cup of tea that his grandmother was holding dropped and crashed on the tiled floor, shattering into pieces. His grandma cried, "You little devil, after so much that we have done for you..." followed by another deafening silence.

Sipho jumped to his feet and bolted outside. He cried hysterically. When he was about to go and check on his granny, his mother's car pulled up outside the gate. She did not say a word but grabbed him by the arm, shoved him into the car and drove off.

At school, Themba asked if the plan worked. Sipho just said, "Mngan'wami, the situation changed from bad to worse." He told Themba all that happened at home and with his grandma. "My mother said when the time is right; she will sit me down and explain everything. But for now, I am still very young to understand. She said she loved me and asked me for patience and understanding." Themba assured Sipho that he must trust the elders.

It was Friday and Sipho was dreading listening to Themba brag about his fun-filled weekend with his father. Themba was not as bubbly as usual. His eyes looked even smaller. He was squinting a lot. He said, "Today I feel bad, Sipho. My father decided to leave us all alone."

Sipho was surprised by how Themba relayed this disturbing news. "You mean the stepfather?" asked Sipho.

Themba nodded and said, "I heard them quarrelling in their bedroom. He was accusing my mother of having feelings for my real father. My stepfather left with two full suitcases."

Sipho enquired, "What about his furniture?"

Themba replied, "I do not remember him buying any furniture at home, only groceries and small things. But I do not know much; only my mother knows."

Sipho comforted his friend, "Sorry, mngan'wami, but at least you still have a real father."

Themba continued to share shocking news, "Sipho, I did not tell you, my real father, my hero, was arrested, but he will be released soon. He told my mother that it was a wrongful arrest. He knew nothing about the heists that the police accused him of being a mastermind of, nor was he part of a ferocious gang. They took his cars, everything ... absolutely everything he possessed."

Sipho sighed and said, "At least you had a chance with him, even if I want to trace my father, I don't know where to begin."

The Interview

Finally, I received the call I had been waiting for. The voice on the phone was inviting me to attend an interview at noon. The Principal had already encouraged all the qualifying staff members to apply for the Departmental Head post.

I sat down and carefully calculated my chances. I sniffed around and found that Mrs. Carol Duma had claimed that the post belonged to her. She was a local and was well-suited for the job. The only stumbling block was her inability to keep secrets. She was a blabbermouth.

The war for posts in government schools had turned nasty. Lives have been lost, and the few who have survived assassinations have been left with permanent scars.

Mrs. Duma whispered that I was new in the school. She was right; I had only joined the school fifteen months ago. However, she forgot that I was holding seventeen years of solid experience with quite a few achievements.

The former Departmental Head, Mr Silamba, had accepted a promotional post at another school. He had recommended Miss Pam Vimba. The retired Deputy Principal also recommended Miss Vimba. Pam had approached the Principal and declared her availability to head the department. I have never been a power monger but believed in playing fair. A promotion meant a raise and professional development. I wanted the post too.

On the day of the interview, we all arrived on time, the three of us. The fourth one, Mrs. Thuli Mveli, had withdrawn earlier. Her qualifications did not match the post; she did not meet the minimum requirements. She contested the decision with the help of the teachers' union, but it was all in vain. She came to greet us sarcastically and congratulated us. The interviews started after all of us had arrived. Miss Pam Vimba was called first so that no one would be scored above her. Her interview took seventeen minutes.

Mrs. Carol Duma was the second to be called and was dressed to kill. She spent some

time, much longer than Pam. I was the third and last to be called in. I was armed with vast experience and accolades. I had confidence that if they did their due diligence, the post was mine. The questions were not tough. I answered carefully and exhausted all the time that was allocated to each question. I spent approximately thirty minutes. The chairperson of the interviewing committee said the winning candidate would be notified by phone.

The following day, I heard Miss Pam Vimba confiding to a colleague who was an observer. She confided that she could not say anything of value because it was her first time. The observer told her never to lose hope; anything can happen.

The eavesdropping boosted my chances; Pam had already confessed her failure, and Mrs. Carol Duma was a huge risk to management. Days passed without a call, but it did not worry me because it looked like no one else received a call. Everyone tried to guess who the winning candidate was.

The school closed for the December holidays, and still there was no call. I suspected that Mrs. Carol Duma got the post. The company resumed work on the 15th of January, but still I did not know who got the post. I quickly counselled myself that I did not make it.

The Principal announced Pam as the new Departmental Head. The whole house remained silent, and later a single clap of hands was followed by a few. When the briefing was over, I wore a brave face and went to congratulate Miss Pam Vimba. The Principal configured my duties to work closely with Pam. I knew that they would need my experience. I knew that they counted on me for Pam to succeed, but I could not decipher why they denied me the post.

I realised that loyalty and trust meant everything to the management. Some school principals manage huge budgets. Anyone with an eye for detail can cause irreparable damage. As a former union branch secretary, I was considered a threat. Some shenanigans had to remain within the perimeters of the senior management offices. Only Miss Pam Vimba could be trusted. There was no room for jealousy but cooperation. Pam was an available tool to keep me at bay.

The Principal did not declare the results early because that would give me time to look

for employment elsewhere. Indeed, a school close to my home had a vacancy, and a former colleague recommended me. I felt vindicated, so I went to the Principal to ask for a transfer. He agreed to release me but changed his mind and frustrated the whole process. An official visited our school and threw a veiled attack at those who wanted to leave the school because of things that did not go their way.

I realised what a bad career choice I had made – a career that never incentivised its employees to study further to acquire more knowledge. I blamed myself for having low expectations of myself. I concluded that I did not deserve the post. I had contributed nothing to the creation of knowledge.

I decided to be a lifelong learner and sacrifice immediate pleasures for greater rewards in the future. I was not defeated but humbled.

The Unconditional Support

Johannesburg, a place of gold, used to be a shining jewel when it came to employment opportunities. It is far from the vastly rural KwaZulu-Natal. Thami's relatives who worked in Johannesburg visited their home once a year during the December holidays. The long distance, coupled with the transport costs, had a role to play. There was always a fanfare when they came home. They had money and wore fancy clothes. Thami wanted to work in Johannesburg. He knew that he was going to need support in this endeavour. He preferred a place where no one knew him, away from prying eyes.

Job opportunities were scarce in the year 2000. It was better for job seekers who lived close to the big cities. Thami had a school friend called Sibusiso who worked as a security guard in Johannesburg. He was the only person he could ask for accommodation in Johannesburg. Sibusiso did not object to sharing accommodation with Thami for a while.

Thami told his mother what he was planning. He said, "Mom, I am planning to try my luck in Johannesburg. It pains me to finish my studies, and remain a piece of furniture at home. We live deep in a rural area here. It is difficult even to find a newspaper where jobs are advertised."

His mother knew Sibusiso as a friend of her son, but did not like the idea of Thami relocating to another province. She replied, "Well, I know, but it is risky to travel so far just to live with a friend that you are not even related to."

It was a genuine concern from a caring parent. It was comforting to have her only son in a safe environment but Thami was adamant that Johannesburg would offer more chances, without looking at other crucial factors. He had never visited Sibusiso before to check whether the space was enough for both of them. It was a blind risk. She did not want to openly discourage her son but was sceptical. Thami relied on his mother's pension for financial support.

She contacted her cousin, Edward Zondi, and asked him to accommodate her son in

search of job opportunities in the media industry. Johannesburg was known for its high crime rates and that was a major concern for Thami's mother.

Uncle Edward was familiar with the requests of relatives who believed that Johannesburg had massive job opportunities. The notion was a fallacy; unemployment was also rife in Johannesburg. He warmly accepted the request, and a date was set for Thami to leave KwaZulu-Natal for Gauteng province.

The coach departed from Pietermaritzburg at 9 in the morning and arrived at Johannesburg Park Station at 5 in the afternoon. Thami had been in contact with Uncle Edward on the way. It was the era when cellular phones had no cameras. When he disembarked his uncle was already waiting for him. Uncle Edward used to work for a print media company in Johannesburg. He was dark, tall and soft spoken; he was warm and had a gentle heart.

On the way to Soweto where he lived he spoke about the fallacy that occupied people's minds about Johannesburg. "Nephew, I won't lie to you, while people from Johannesburg work in other cities, more people flock to Johannesburg. I am not discouraging you; it is a fact that you will work as hard as other job seekers anywhere in the world."

Thami had a postgraduate degree in English. He wanted to work in the media industry as a journalist or junior editor. He also wanted to be away from the nosy neighbours. Uncle Edward was a retiree, not because of age, but because he took an early retirement package. He took Thami to his unoccupied house in Soweto at Zola 3. The house remained in his family after everyone had prospered and secured other accommodation. He did not want to sell it.

The township, Soweto, was welcoming, and the people were friendly. Thami did not lie idle; he made sure that he bought newspapers and went through the classified section in search of work-related adverts. It did not take long to realise that it was a misconception that Johannesburg had plenty of job opportunities. Thami followed every lead, but nothing materialised. It consoled him that he was not in the village where people gossiped about everything. The family back home supported him financially.

Thami had a cousin who found a job in the Western Cape in Malmesbury township. Zamani offered an option: "Thami, if you do not mind, you can join me in the Western Cape. Maybe you can find a job here." Thami agreed and quickly relayed the message to his mother. Zamani was a trusted family relative and a friend. On the day of leaving Soweto, Uncle Edward had a braai to bid farewell to his nephew. They had developed a strong bond. After spending eight months in Johannesburg, Thami moved back home, where Zamani would meet him on the long journey to the Western Cape Province.

The Western Cape differed immensely from Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Malmesbury was a small town. Most of the people worked in Cape Town, which was 66 kilometres away. There was a train that departed at 5:30 in the morning to arrive at Cape Town train station at 7 a.m. Afrikaans and IsiXhosa were spoken. Thami could only speak IsiZulu and English. In Cape Town, English was spoken widely. The ticket was cheap, but the only challenge was that the train station was downtown and far. Thami had to wake up early to catch the train on time. There was one train per day. Zamani drove Thami to the labour department in Paarl to register as a job seeker. Thami received a call inviting him to an interview. Thami had also registered with the Department of Labour in Cape Town.

On the day of the interview, Thami went to the Cape Town labour department. But nobody had an idea of what he was talking about. He missed the only realistic chance of getting a job. On the following day, the Paarl Department of Labour called again and offered him another chance. There was no public transport to travel from Malmesbury to Paarl. He tried to call Zamani, but the phone rang in his bedroom. Thami could not believe what was happening to him. How could it happen to him? Malmesbury was in the Swartland, a region in the Western Cape Province known for wheat fields and vineyards. Public transport was scarce and unreliable.

In the following month, Thami got a volunteering job at the Roman Catholic institution that catered for the youth at risk. The institution offered shelter, education, and vocational training. Thami came knocking for a job, but there was only an opportunity to serve as a

volunteer. It was painful to travel every day for zero salary.

Eventually Thami got a grant to study film and video production. He left the institution and studied full-time at the Community Video Education Trust Institute. Thami did well in his studies and received a certificate. He left the Western Cape and returned home to start his video production company with help from the Youth Empowerment programme.

Peace at a Cost

Sadly, it has come to my attention that the love we shared was not genuine. Blacky was an eight-month-old. He was named Blacky because of the colour of his fur. His late brother was named Spotty because of the black and white spots all over his body. Spotty was a bully and always picked on Blacky, who was small in stature. Fighting was worse during mealtime. I had to be there physically till the food was finished. Spotty wanted all the food to himself.

Blacky and his brother were a gift from a friend. Blacky looked like a beagador. I did not ask the friend what type of breed Blacky was. I searched on the Internet and found a resemblance to a beagador. I would not be surprised if she did not know either.

I dreaded Blacky's potty training. It was a cause of major discomfort. I tried every trick to show him where to relieve himself but he never listened. He preferred to do it near the gate where everyone would see his mess. I put him on a leash in one spot and only released him after he had done his business. It worked for a while, but soon after, he would be back to his old habit.

Blacky was so playful and not messy with the rubbish bin. One evening he survived an accident when a car knocked him flat. He cheated death. Ever since the accident, he kept himself clear of moving vehicles. He never forgot to take cover every time a car was in motion. That means he had a traumatic memory.

Blacky would lie on his back in anticipation of a belly scratch, which I got tired of doing. He loved his belly scratch; that was the only thing he ever asked for. It surprised me that whenever I threw my eyes into his preferred potty spot, he would run for life into his kennel.

I thought he knew that he was naughty and deserved punishment. I used a twig to mete out corporal punishment. The punishment was meant to scare him, but it only worked temporarily.

I guess it was a sorry sight to see an old man punishing a defenceless animal for the crime of nature. It dawned on me that there was something that I was not doing right. I did not know

what to do. I thought of intensifying the punishment, but it felt horrible. Blacky was a loving little friend. He had two toys that I suspected he stole from a crèche behind my house.

Children love toys. Blacky was a child, too. He was innocent and quick to forgive and forget. I was becoming impatient with his inability to obey my command. In hindsight, I realised that I was the one who had a problem, not Blacky. I was not consistent with the potty training, and the dog was young and lonely.

One morning, I expected him to show up but he remained in his kennel. It felt weird, but I understood that he had feelings too after suffering. I realised that people lose valuable friendships sometimes.

In the afternoon, I parked at the gate and waited for a black shiny head with beady eyes to come and greet me. He never showed up; he chose peace, though at a cost.

No Easy Way

Ever since Lindani heard a social media content creator praising working smart over working hard, he was mesmerised by the idea. The content creator, Doctor Sami, dangled wads of cash just for selling concoctions and making people rich. He even called himself a Clever Witch. Doctor Sami would jokingly call his followers "Bathakathi bami", loosely translated as, my witches.

Lindani grew up as a good boy till he joined the gangs at school. Everybody liked him because of his bubbly personality. He wore his school uniform neatly and had good manners. He was street-wise and spoke only if it was necessary. He was not a smart learner but had potential for improvement.

In grade 11, he was at Bambanani Comprehensive, a school known for producing quality results. The school had a strict code of conduct. Parents loved the school, but some of their children despised it. The principal Mr Madlala had a gentle soul but was strict with the school rules. He was the first to arrive at school in the morning and the last one to leave in the afternoon.

The gang members gave the principal a name, Hitler. The learners were reluctant to report them to the teachers. Besides, the school was reluctant to start an open war with the gang. The children's behaviour reflected larger societal problems engulfing Sibusiwe's location.

The gang recruited Lindani and quickly turned him into a hooligan. They organised a girlfriend for him and he started smoking. Lindani had a skill in resolving disputes among gang members, they wanted to promote him but he refused. The gang controlled the lucrative illicit drugs and cigarette business. Petty thieving of branded school bags and other small items was left to a small number of naughty boys.

Lindani's performance dropped significantly; he performed poorly compared to his

classmates. To everyone's surprise, Lindani did not care. He behaved rudely to the teachers to the point of being expelled after the mid-year school holidays in July.

No public school wanted to take him. Private schools were expensive, and the prospect of hooking up with gangs was high. His mother decided to let him stay at home for the remainder of the year. She hoped that Lindani would come to his senses. It was a risk to leave him home all day, but his mother had no choice. The family had an uncapped network access to help him with his studies. He enjoyed watching programs on how to make money quickly. The list of high school dropouts was at the top of his head.

Linda revisited Doctor Sami's YouTube channel. He listened carefully and realised that you do not have to kill anyone for wealth. Doctor Sami mentioned Sgananda, who was a witchdoctor. Lindani heard some guys praising the magic powers of Sgananda to unlock wealth. Lindani pondered the decision he was about to take. The idea of continuing with school was no longer an option.

He mumbled, "What a fuss about schooling, even when many graduates are unemployed. Some are even unemployable, with irrelevant degrees. It's time for the boys to take over and bring real money to the boss." Lindani chuckled and prepared himself for a short trip to prosperity. His youthful look troubled him, but he soldiered on.

He secretly visited Sgananda who was in his 50s. There was a rumour circulating that a woman who lived with the witchdoctor had disappeared without a trace. Sgananda was assisted by three boys whose identities were not known. Each was dedicated to a particular task. Jambo was collecting herbs in the bush, Spikili looked after the livestock, and Shukela acted as a personal assistant. The boys avoided mingling with the people unless instructed by Sgananda to perform some duties. They had strange communication methods.

It was like the boys were competing to kowtow to Sgananda. Whenever he blew a whistle, they would sprint to kneel next to him. Sometimes Sgananda would not utter a word, but a boy would do exactly what Sgananda wanted. People whispered that Sgananda had turned the

boys into zombies. That was why Sgananda could communicate with them telepathically.

Lindani was lucky that day, as not so many people were queuing for consultation. He suffered a mild palpitation at the thought of meeting Sgananda. He did not see or hear the footsteps, but Shukela was on one knee on the floor "It's your turn. Take off your shoes and walk on your knees when you enter the rondavel"

There was no turning back. He sat on a cow shield and looked down. Nobody could look straight into the eyes of Sgananda. Lindani felt like turning back and disappearing.

Sgananda wasted no time, "Do you know what you want, wena mfana?"

Lindani said, "Yes, Baba Sgananda," while nodding. Sweat raced down his spine. This was the beginning.

Isiqalo. Jambo, with his busy, bulging eyes, was already behind Linda, waiting for instruction on what to do with this boy.

Sgananda thundered, "Good, you said you know what you want. It means you have decided. Remember this, you are the lucky one. I normally do not waste my time with boys of your age."

Lindani was relieved that Sgananda made an exception for him. Jambo signalled for Lindani to follow him to the thatched rondavel where Lindani was to be initiated. Jambo kept reminding Lindani that Sgananda does not deal with boys; this was a rare exception, meaning that the spirits were pleased with the move Lindani had taken.

"Can I ask a question, Lindani enquired. Jambo stopped what he was doing and looked at him. "Am I going to sacrifice something for the initiation?"

Jambo was perturbed by this stupid question and said, "We do not spill the blood here. Do not rush; everything will be explained to you succinctly. Wait mani, uyaphapha wena mfana"

The room was dim and scary. Lindani knew what he was looking for – he was adamant that he wanted to be rich. He did not believe in hard work but in working smart, and had a list of people who lived in opulence with little or no formal education. Those were his role models. He

believed school was designed by clever people who wanted educated slaves to work for them.

Lindani once said “Schools are an entrapment. Why do learners take subjects that will not help them in the future? Why did the learners have to wait for grade 10 before being allowed to choose the subjects of their choice? It's an entrapment.” His friends agreed with him, but continued with school. When he dropped out of school, it was with a promise to his friends that he would hire them on the completion of their studies. He knew that Sgananda had a way to make people rich instantly.

Jambo instructed him to take off his clothes and stand facing East. Jambo assisted with pointing East. Lindani did not expect things to happen so fast. He did not even know how much it will cost him. Jambo bathed him with a smelly concoction and told him not to wipe it, anyway there was no towel. Jambo instructed Lindani to buy meat to use at the cemetery and look for the tomb of a rich man, so that he could sleep the whole night. The meat will attract the ants that Jambo wanted. No one was to going to pay any attention because vagabonds sleep everywhere. Lindani nodded to everything. He was trembling.

"Tomorrow morning, before sunrise, you must be here with ants. That will be the start of your journey to wealth. Failure to do that will be the end of everything," cautioned Jambo. Lindani found himself alone, and he left.

He had a few hours left to prepare for the mission. The thought of the cemetery sent shockwaves down the spine. Where should he go, which cemetery should he choose? Before he figured out a plan, a taxi approached to take him home. The passengers stared at him, and he did not know why. Everything happened fast; he arrived in town and called a metered taxi. On arrival at home, he went to his room and locked himself in.

The cemeteries to choose from were, Ethembeni Memorial Park, Azalea Cemetery, and Mountain Rise Cemetery. Mountain Rise was better because of the location and had all the rich Indian families. Lindani took a nap and was woken by children coming from school. Suddenly, there was the courage to move forward. His plan was to quickly visit the cemetery and scout for

the tomb of a rich man. Names and dates of birth on a tombstone were all he had as information about the deceased. Passers-by were not going to notice because people often visited their loved ones.

He found ordinary people who owned no businesses. Then Lindani found one tombstone with a deceased who had close links to a wealthy family in Pietermaritzburg. He left for the butchery downtown to buy the meat. He also bought a nip of vodka. It consoled him that the departed trouble no one. Only the living people should be feared. He planned to return late at night. The weather was good, and he was going to be safe in thick clothes. Lindani was relieved when everything was ready in the late afternoon.

He was going to use a metered taxi from town to the filling station near the cemetery and then walk to the spot he had identified earlier to hide till it was safe to sleep next to the grave. The motivation was strong, and he felt good that he did not involve many people. Lindani avoided contact with his mother, who had an instinct to tell if Lindani was up to something.

That night Lindani used the app to hire a cab to a busy filling station next to the cemetery. He knew that his mother would be alarmed, but he took advantage of the fact that she barely talked to him because she was still annoyed about being let down. He did not spend much time at the filling station; he took a footpath crossing at the cemetery.

Lindani took this act as a test of his manhood; he carried a small hunting knife for defense. He quickly located the tombstone and hid behind the upright head slab. He was instructed to tell the spirit that he was a good friend who had come to take the spirit to work for him. He placed the piece of meat by the head as instructed and said, "My dear friend, this is what I brought here for you, and there is plenty where I come from. I command you to leave with me in the morning."

He fell asleep and woke up at 2 in the morning. The ants had bitten him all over his body. The ants are soldiers, and they have resilience but his motivation was strong, his mission would be accomplished. He was to leave the cemetery at 3 in the morning. He was relieved that nothing

bad had happened to him, not even a bad dream.

People always say there are ghosts at the cemetery but it was peaceful besides stray cats hunting rats. The hour arrived, and he collected his ant-infested meat into a small container and put it in his backpack. He planned to walk the two kilometres to the city, where he would get a taxi to the Sgananda compound. Lindani muttered to himself, "No one is going to accuse me of wrongdoing. I didn't kill a person."

He tried to suppress the guilt that he was on a mission to steal the spirit of a dead person. But still, he wanted to believe that he committed no crime. He was excited that he pulled off a brave act in a short space of time. He arrived early at the compound and waited outside the gate. Jambo came to fetch Lindani to the consulting room, where he took the meat and put it on the metal plate. Jambo knelt and bowed his head while reciting a prayer in a foreign language. After the prayer, he told Lindani to wait for the instructions from Sgananda at 7 when he had awoken.

Sgananda had money but adopted a poor man's lifestyle. His homestead was poorly maintained, and the yard was littered with filthy basins and bowls for feeding and drinking. His livestock was roaming everywhere. At the entrance, there was no gate but a wooden arch that everyone who came to consult him went through.

At 7, Jambo came and took Lindani to Sgananda, who looked at him, then in a mirror and said, "Listen carefully, when I look in this mirror I see that you brought here a poor man's spirit. That means for you to get what you want, the man you got must work harder. He will live in you. You will command him, but you must listen to him too. He never ate meat, so from today you will never eat meat."

Lindani was startled by this horrible instruction. Sgananda picked up a small bottle with a watery substance inside. Lindani would have to shake it before opening, whenever he wanted to use this man who was going to make him rich.

"Keep him safe; otherwise, you will suffer the ultimate loss. Boy, it's time to go. On the last day of the month, at 6 in the evening, go to the Umgeni River and throw my money there.

You will learn along the way how to live with him. His name is Fanifani."

The idea of a selective diet disturbed Lindani. How was he going to survive without eating meat? He arrived home at half past nine and hid the bottle in the wardrobe. He took a warm bath and quickly fell asleep. A voice said, "Hey, Wena, can you live in a wardrobe all day?" The voice was only audible to Lindani. "Tonight, get ready for fishing at uMngeni, there are plenty of fish".

Lindani recalled that he was supposed to be the one to give instructions to Fanifani. He opened the wardrobe, took the bottle, shook it, and spoke, "Fanifani, my man, listen carefully, I am the one to order you around, not vice versa."

Fanifani responded quickly, "We will see who is the boss soon enough." In a slow, hoarse voice, Fanifani grunted, "Tonight we go fishing." Lindani had never been a fan of fishing. "Fishing rods are already waiting for us at the riverbank," chuckled Fanifani.

Lindani was at the cemetery the whole night and here he was supposed to head to river to catch bass fish. Not even a minute to reflect on the whole initiation process! Why was everything so fast? What would be next, he asked himself. A sense of doubt, with guilt, struck his heart.

Lindani took his phone and watched promotional videos of Doctor Sami, who regularly posts wads of cash. One thing played on Lindani's mind. It was to find ways to control Fanifani; otherwise, the whole experience would be unbearable. He scrolled through the videos and found the one he wanted. Before he could open it to watch, he felt a sharp, rough sensation in both arms. It was Fanifani.

Lindani fell asleep without having supper. He woke up at 9:30 pm for the thirty-minute walk to the river. He remembered that there was a bottle to use for communication with Fanifani. He grabbed it and shook it violently, wanting to yell at Fanifani not to act as the boss. The voice would not come out. Instead something lifted him, and he was on the way to the river. Lindani fished the whole night and had plenty of bass.

The traditional doctor had portrayed the process as not dangerous yet there was nothing

worse than losing himself to something mysterious. On the way back home, Fanifani ordered Lindani to stop at beside the road and display his catch at a price determined by Fanifani. Within an hour, all the fish were gone. The customers were satisfied with everything, and the money was good. He went home feeling numb in the brain and body.

This routine took a toll on Lindani and he soon realised that this was not a life he wanted to live. He sold all of his stock every day before midday. He decided to cancel the deal and return the troublesome Fanifani.

Sgananda just looked at him and said, "I can't reverse the process unless I want to be punished, but not for boys who are wet behind the ears like you. Silly fool," Sgananda scoffed at Lindani, "Never set your foot here again, bloody idiot".

Loyalty

In the small suburban settlement called Grange Nelly lived with her son Sizwe, twenty-five years old. On Saturday midday they were in the lounge snacking and watching a movie. A waft of cool breeze would occasionally pat Sizwe gently on his face.

In a gay mood Ziswe said, “Mom, I am surprising my pop with a car”.

There was a deafening silence. Nelly sighed heavily and screamed “I never thought that a day like this would come. How can I sacrifice everything, for nothing?”

Nelly was a woman of short stature. Sizwe was tall, and he always tried not to make his mother feel disrespected by his height. His shoulders remained in a low position every time they had a tense conversation. He felt the need to explain, “Mom it’s just a second-hand pick-up truck, nothing serious.”

His father Peter had not been consistent with child maintenance. Nelly had pleaded with him until she decided to carry the burden alone. Peter would only offer financial support when he wanted but it would be a sizable chunk at times. If the factory where he worked met their targets for manufacturing and sales, they were rewarded handsomely, and Nelly would have relief for a long time. But when she needed him the most Peter would disappear. The thought of Peter always triggered attacks of high blood pressure. She always asked how Peter could be so careless with the wellbeing of his child.

Peter had approached Sizwe and had a man-to-man conversation. Peter was a married man who was committed to his family's needs. When Sizwe was born, Peter was starting a new family with the mother of his children. He loved all his four children, including Sizwe, who was older than the rest. His salary as a factory worker was never enough.

Sizwe did his homework and concluded that his father earned little. Sizwe realised that his father tried his best for his children. It was alleged that Nelly felt insecure in the relationship. She used to throw tantrums and some neighbours said Nelly used to lay a hand on him. That was

how she lost Peter, the only man she claimed to have truly loved.

It was excruciating for Sizwe to see his mother heartbroken. He tried to plead with her, “Mama, I know how you feel about Dad but without his support I would not have graduated and got a job.”

Sizwe was a young and promising software engineer. He was well-groomed and caring. He worked for a multinational company. Sizwe wanted to buy a three-year-old bakkie for his father. It was his way to thank him for the role he played.

Sizwe comforted his mother, “Mama, I shall never let you suffer. You know how much I care about you. I have taken over the household expenses since my first salary. It was my initiative to ease the burden on your shoulders. I shall never complain. Relax Mom. The bakkie for dad will be a one-off purchase. Remember that you taught me to be good to other people.”

Nelly failed to have her eyes meet with that of her son. Sizwe continued, “You don’t have to remind me of the suffering we have been through Mom. It has been a struggle to make ends meet. I am grateful that you put me first. Your feelings mean a lot to me, I shall not hurt you.” Sizwe had never spoken to his mother like this.

Nelly responded, “I was not aware that you have improved so much in your articulation. I am glad that you are eloquent. You speak like an orator. What is the use of reassuring me of your love and support if you do not respect my wishes? Peter should have approached me and apologised for the cruelty he subjected us to. Talking to you behind my back was cowardice and an insult to me.”

“Mom, I know that my father was not consistent with child maintenance but he was there whenever he could. I choose to believe him. It pains my heart to have my loyalty put on the spot.”

Nelly was surprised to hear her son speaking in defense of a man he barely knew. Peter never had time to play a ball with Sizwe. In Zulu tradition, it was common for a boy to choose his paternal family. Sizwe’s words pierced Nelly’s heart. She protested “Sizwe I also want a car. The community will laugh at me for raising you so well but now you are deserting me? This will

bring shame to me. You want to make me a laughing stock. I still use taxis to go shopping and *wena* Sizwe you are buying a car for Peter, who left me for his loose morals woman. The woman who will never love you. Sizwe, you are not buying a car for Peter. How do you think I feel that another woman will take a front seat in a car bought by my son?"

Nelly remained adamant about her wishes irrespective of what Sizwe felt about her sudden change of character. "Do you want me to accept that Peter will have a car first? Never Sizwe, over my dead body."

Sizwe kept quiet and later excused himself and left for the gym to clear his head. He knew that his grandma could help to bring light. He decided to call her "Hello Gogo, how are you Gogo, it's been a long time since I last saw you. Gogo I need your favour. There is a second-hand bakkie that I want to buy for Peter but my mother is refusing to buy it. Am I doing the wrong thing?"

"My grandson, you took after your grandfather, he was generous like you. I know why Nelly behaves in this way. Peter was the only man she ever loved. By choosing the other woman Peter killed her heart. Your mother is still grieving. Don't worry, I will talk to her. I know that Peter tried his best to support you although he was not consistent."

"Thank you, Gogo. I am busy with other things in life. I just wanted to close a chapter with him. This bakkie was for him to use for his private tiling business."

Grandma assured Sizwe that everything would be alright.

Nelly revealed a behaviour that her son did not want to know. She was insecure and unforgiving. Sizwe had known his mother as a caring and loving woman. Nelly would do anything for her son. Sizwe attended a good local school The Grange Primary and finished his matriculation at Alexander High School. That was what a municipality clerk's salary could afford.

Sizwe wanted to move out of the house. How was he going to tell his already unsettled mother? His girlfriend loved Nelly as a future mother-in-law but preferred to be with her

boyfriend alone. She never complained but Sizwe noticed that underneath her civil courtesy there was uneasiness.

Sizwe's grandma called for Sizwe to fetch her. It was important for Sizwe to use his grandmother as a shield against Nelly who could be erratic at times. "Grandma, please, I need your favour again, I want to have a place of my own now. Privacy is important, I must respect my mother. I have already found a cosy apartment to occupy. I will show you on our way home."

His grandma just listened and kept quiet. It did not sit well with her that her grandchild was open to her more than to his mother. She wished that she could turn things around. She asked, "Is Nelly feeling the same about this bakkie of yours?"

Sizwe replied politely this trip would not have taken place if Nelly had changed her mind. The old lady kept quiet. Nelly was already at home when they arrived. Sizwe loved his grandmother and would do anything for her. He parked on the driveway because he was about to rush to Spar supermarket for his grandmother's favourite fruit and fish and chips.

Nelly came out to greet her mother and hugged her, she said, "I know you two have been gossiping about me, and you Sizwe I am chasing you out of my house." She laughed after saying that. Sizwe and his Grandma did not laugh.

"I hope your grandson has told you about his madness. Peter turned me into a joke; you know the tirade I endured even from you, Mother. One day you locked me outside the house because of Peter."

The old lady sighed and continued, "Don't do this to yourself, my child. You risk distancing your child further, away from you. There is nothing that you will lose, you should be happy that your child has Ubuntu. No matter how small a contribution Peter made, in the end, he tried, much better than most men. *Mntanami*, you must support your child, your anger will divide the family, leaving you devastated. When you joked about chasing Sizwe away, no one laughed because Sizwe is moving out. He is an adult now, he feels that he needs his space. How are you going to take that, scream and kick again? Sizwe was raised well, under difficult circumstances

and you never heard him complaining about anything. Show your love by supporting your child.”

Nelly seemed lost; Grandma had never spoken to her like this. The tea was already cold. Nelly made another cup of tea for her mother.

Sizwe took a long time to return from the Southgate Spar. He delayed coming back early on purpose. He came in with his hands holding plastic bags from the shop and unassumingly read the faces of his mother and grandmother. He quickly walked to the kitchen.

Nelly called her son and asked him to sit down. “Sizwe, it has always been the two of us here. I never imagined you making all these decisions that are so sudden. I will learn to accept your decisions as long as you do not forget about me. Since you started working, my life changed dramatically. I support you Sizwe because I love you. My mom told me that you spoke about the new apartment. I am with you all the way. You have never disappointed me.”

The Liar

"My name is Pat Mpungose from eMabheleni. I arrived in the city twenty years ago. I worked for the Smith family as a garden boy. Peter promoted me to work in his restaurant as a cleaner. He said he liked me because I could work without supervision. Peter offered a handsome increase, but with increased working hours. I did not mind because I was treated well.

"His wife, Hazel, was an angel; may her soul rest in peace. I lived in the servants' quarters and occasionally visited my aunt in the Swayimane tribal authority. The death of Hazel devastated Peter to the brink of total collapse. The family business took a hard blow. Thanks to his children, they dropped everything and came to their father's rescue.

"Peter never involved himself with a woman. He brought Lewis, who was his bosom friend. At first, it looked like Lewis was there for emotional support but I accidentally caught them in a compromising position by the pool. Lewis did not mind, but Peter got startled. I recalled that Lewis was always towering over Peter. Lewis snapped and charged at me like a young elephant bull. I don't know why Lewis reacted in that way because there was nothing wrong. Lewis yelled at me using my African name, 'Mzo, barging in like this, who do you think you are? Don't you know how to behave? Why did you not knock? It's time I fix you. Talk to me, bastard!' He was reeking of alcohol.

"I did not know what to do. Seeing my boss in a compromised position was weird. Lewis was a bully. I wish I had told him that what I saw was not for the public. I was entrusted with family secrets, but Lewis didn't know. Early in the morning on the following day, I was woken by repeated hard knocks on the door. Peter was standing tall. I opened the door. Peter instructed me to look him straight in the eyes. He said, 'I know that you have been sleeping with my wife behind my back. You venomous, slithering snake. Ask yourself why I did not punish you severely for the cardinal sin. Now you have seen why I did not kill you.' I remained silent.

“Peter then spoke softly, ‘Tell me if I am lying, Mzo. You are old enough to behave responsibly with what you saw.’ Peter turned his back and walked away. I did sleep with Hazel. Believe me, my brother. One day, Madam asked for my hand in the main bedroom. Peter was away on a hunting trip with his friends, Lewis included. The madam instructed me to take a bath and then made me do it. I tried to resist, but it was going to be her word against mine. Our secret meetings continued, and all that we did was strictly on her terms. Other than summoning me into her bed, she was an angel. She did not tell me why she committed adultery, but now I know.

“Lewis booked Peter into a rehabilitation centre for depression and substance abuse. Peter cut off all the communication he had with his children. Lewis put himself in charge of the family business. Barely a week after Peter had gone to rehab, Lewis cornered me. He pinned me down and tried to sodomise me. We wrestled heavily, and I managed to overpower him and escape. Lewis threatened to open a case of assault if I did not leave the servants' quarters. He created lies that I was hot-headed and fired me on the spot. That is how I lost my job.”

The Pacifier

It was a quiet Sunday morning in the Grange suburb when T-Bose bolted through the gate. Neighbours were awoken by the commotion and shouting. It was Mabaso chasing his lazy boy.

At a safe distance T-Bose stopped and hurled diabolical insults at his father. “If I had a choice I wouldn’t have chosen you as Papa even if you were the only soul on earth. I hate you. Loser! What have I done?” That was T-Bose spitting fire. He was shocked, angry, and disappointed in his father. Everyone in the neighbourhood was surprised to see a beloved, handsome neighbour causing a scene.

T-Bose had always been a good boy. He was known for always wearing his headphones and minding his business. Since he came back from college in Durban he was in hibernation. His father Mabaso remained mute at the gate, gob-smacked by T-Bose’s theatrics. Mabaso slowly locked the gate but his eyes were glued to his son.

The nosey neighbours were at their windows watching. Bra Zakes, a local Community Policing Forum member witnessed the commotion. In angst, he howled at T-Bose, *hey wena mfana woza lapha*. T-Bose ran to Zakes and spoke out of turn, “I’m sorry, Uncle Zakes I lost my cool. My father took his frustration out on me. Suddenly I am treated like a pariah, in my own home. I cannot even use a car and access to Wi-Fi is now heavily restricted. Why?”

Zakes noticed that T-Bose was not wearing shoes. He looked skinny and disoriented. He also walked like a zombie. Bra Zakes was also a family friend. “Hey boy, now you are setting an ugly trend in our peaceful streets. Get yourself into order. The circus that you are creating will come to haunt you soon. Your family's dirty linen will be on social media and you’ll be a laughing stock”. *Not a little sympathy*. T-Bose apologised to the ‘Grootman’ and slowly walked back to the house. He jumped over the gate.

T-Bose heard his parents arguing “I don’t want this boy ever in my house; you could see

the drama he caused outside”.

Thandi ignored the roaring of Mabaso. She could not hide her disappointment. As a social worker, she thought she had failed her family, and asked herself how she lost her grip. A close-knit family was turning into a warzone. “My love, I can see that our boy has changed but I thought it was wise to give Tsepo time to adapt to the adult world as he turns 18. You should have alerted me that you would confront him because we must act as one. We shall not ostracise the child but give guidance. My love, please don’t turn our child into a monster.”

A grimace crossed Mabaso’s face when he said “This boy is uncouth. Have you noticed how he avoids everyone? Maybe he told you what happened to his studies?”

Thandi felt it was time to remind her husband that she would not choose sides. “I love you both and you are the pillar of my strength. This war suffocates me entirely.”

T-Bose had heard enough and tiptoed to his bedroom. He opened the door very slowly, slinked in, closed it the same way and locked it. He wanted to gain enough courage to apologise.

Mabaso did not sleep well. He looked like a man who was starving. Thandi remembered what her mother had told her, “Put water in your mouth and hold it as long as it takes.” She prayed that the scuffle was not the beginning of consistent fights in her house. Her husband looked different, seated on the sofa and fuming.

Thandi left for the bedroom, leaving Mabaso dazed. She knew that the child did not do anything wrong. Tsepo was buckling under pressure. Like his father, he was not smart but a workaholic. His parents were breathing on his neck for a better performance.

Mabaso followed Thandi to the bedroom. The previous night Thandi had reprimanded him after she had noticed that Mabaso was slowly losing respect. She took a leaf from other women on how to teach a man a lesson. Men thought that once they had showered their families with gifts it was over. They start depicting unsavoury behaviour. It was time for Mabaso to get his share of punishment. Mabaso sat on the edge of the bed and watched Thandi getting ready to take a shower. Thandi took a jab at Mabaso with the corner of her eye. She found him drooling.

She pretended to forget what had happened and started humming her favourite song, *love me in a special way...*

Thandi pretended to have lost something. When she turned and looked at her husband she felt pity for the teary begging eyes. Mabaso wanted his wife that was all he wanted. The poor thing breathed heavily and muttered “I’m sorry Love, never again.”

Good Deeds Have a Voice

Everyone wished to be like Hazel, she was smiling all the time. She never complained. I wished I had an attitude like hers. She was friendly and considerate all the time.

One day I asked her, “How come you have such a thick skin?”

She smiled and replied, “It has been tough for me, brother. I no longer get scared easily. I have seen a lot and maybe done a lot too. What is the use of wasting time with worries if it does not bring positive outcomes?” She smiled again and continued with the paperwork that she was busy with.

Hazel kept herself occupied all the time, maybe that was a strategy not to pay attention to the negativity. Hazel loved money. She had a lot of financial commitments. At one point she was entrusted with the responsibility to collect money for birthdays. When it was time to submit the money to the committee, a major break-in happened. Hazel quickly pointed out that the thieves stole the money. She said it was hidden in the cupboard that was ransacked.

Passing behind her seat the Lunatic glanced at her phone and saw that she was busy with online gambling. The Lunatic whispered, “I have yet to see a government employee who survives the onslaught of online gambling.”

The Lunatic was into online gambling and had lost thousands. The Lunatic never told anyone, he suffered in silence, yet he judged Hazel for gambling. Hypocrisy built a false sense of pride. Hazel offered to teach the Lunatic online trading.

She was a hustler and friendly, she would rather share her small portion of food than let a colleague die of hunger. She served on the Sports Committee and played an active role as an organiser. Although I liked her, the break-in and disappearance of our money made me cautious of her.

Hazel had stopped drinking and mixing with the wrong crew. She’d abandoned her crooked ways and dedicated her time to her children. The Lunatic never weighed Hazel’s

selflessness against a wild accusation. She was always a source of inspiration for everyone who was level-headed. The children loved her dearly.

One day the Lunatic forgot his lunch box at home and there was no canteen at work. Hazel had enough food so she offered a large portion of her food to him. It was a juicy-barbequed beef. I watched him gobbling the food with guilt. The Lunatic whispered a sheepish thank you into her ear and disappeared into the corridor.

A close colleague once said, “Hazel prefers to suffer while helping a person”

The Lunatic always looked at people through his stained glasses. Hazel has never been boastful about all the good work she has done. Good people are hard to find.

There is no cure for the people who are angry at the world.

Corrupt by Default

The handsome, skinny Lazarus pondered about Jaco the pint-size foreman barely two months after securing a job for the first time. Getting a job for the first time at thirty-five meant he had to be smart with his goals, the ink was not dry on his wish list. The name, Jaco the mystery, juttred all over his mind. Due to hard work and dedication, the newly employed Lazarus moved from a packer to a stock control officer. His college diploma was useful for the first time. His slender body made him move fast when performing duties in the storeroom and inside the store. One could not fail to notice his presence. He was always eager to assist customers.

Managers always assigned him to duties where other employees would drag their feet. Lazarus had all the energy of an old, newly employed worker. Securing employment was a treasure in South Africa where unemployment figures were a dry bone. The word *snitch*, *impimpi*, started to be familiar in his ears. Innuendos like that in a workplace, if not attended to was catastrophic. The word *impimpi* had been used to send shivers down everyone's spine during the apartheid era. It was a call for a vicious attack and necklacing.

Lazarus dismissed the thought. He was new at work and had never ratted about anyone. Lazarus knew that his age meant that he had to be careful with everything. It was alleged that if Jaco did not like an employee an accident was on the way. The pale, soft-spoken, picanin type figure did not look threatening. He wore a navy jacket and jeans all the time. The small head and little hands fixed on a small, short torso looked strange if one knew the influence Jaco possessed. Jaco had connections all over the company.

When Lazarus thought about Jaco his mind cowardly frowned with contempt. He reassured himself that he was not employed through labour brokers like the rest, Jaco had no say over his employment. Lazarus reported directly to the junior manager, Nkululeko. Jaco was discretely aware of his surroundings and always kept a neutral face. He walked on silent feet. Lazarus noticed that Jaco was on everyone's lips but all would pretend not to be cosy with him.

There was something odd about Jaco. Lazarus noticed there were always items that would be unlawfully removed from the storeroom. It was a big area like a warehouse. Hoisters went up and down moving goods. Their drivers always complained, thinking that they were driving real cars. Lazarus alerted Nkululeko that a discrepancy existed in the stock list. Nkululeko promised to look into the matter. The manager always reiterated that the store had a zero policy on theft. She'd said it was grounds for an immediate dismissal.

Next to his locker in the storeroom Lazarus found a dead bird. Sometimes birds would sneak in for quick thieving and get away. But the storeroom was kept clean as a defensive mechanism against flying, crawling and four-legged unwanted visitors. The sparrow lay motionless for his eyes to see.

The employee Senzo first noticed the tiny carcass and laughed sarcastically. He said Lazarus should watch out. "Hey bro, it's a message. The Boss is not happy." Asked who the boss is, he laughed and continued with his business of repackaging the grain seeds. Lazarus suspected that the boss was Jaco.

Since he needed to get more information on Jaco, Lazarus had to get acquainted with Senzo. He had noticed that every Monday morning Senzo smelled of cheap alcohol and toyed with the idea of quenching his thirst on Friday. They knocked off at four-thirty and headed to the township shebeen for a few beers. It never crossed his mind that one day he would be concerned about a dead bird. It was a sickening concern, a potential threat to his dream to improve his life for the first time. Senzo appeared to be the only conduit to the secretive world of Jaco.

They took a taxi from their work at Makka Cash n' Carry to the shebeen in Imbali township. When they knocked off Senzo was already waiting outside the gate, he was greening in anticipation of free booze. Lazarus paid for the taxi too. Senzo's yellow-stained teeth and gold tooth irritated, Lazarus hated every moment with Senzo. Senzo was aware that Lazarus wanted something from him.

The sheeben was an old four-room house with an extended veranda. They sat on the sofa

in the corner and placed the order. The furniture was old but clean. The first round of booze was on Lazarus. He bought a six pack of beer and cheap vodka. Senzo wanted a premium beer but Lazarus refused. People opt for expensive beverages if someone else pays.

Lazarus had to buy enough so that he could suck out all the information he needed for his survival. He bought a cider and occasionally took meaningless sips. He knew people respond to free booze.

Senzo started to talk, “The Boss does not know you. Have you greased the palms of his hands?”

Lazarus shook his head sideways, playing dumb.

“If you haven’t, I suggest that you make some means before it is too late.”

Lazarus tried to protest that he did not get the job through Jaco.

Senzo finished his talk “Well Brother it is up to you; I am just giving you a warning. Makka Cash n’ Carry is Jaco’s territory, even the big bosses know that”.

Lazarus abhorred corruption to the last beat of his heart. He asked what the payment was for.

“Allegiance, Brother, and if you refuse, kiss your job a fat goodbye.”

“How much is paid?” Lazarus asked.

“It is equal to your first salary; you can pay it in installments for three months. After that, you wait for the instructions from his runners. You do not ask questions or anything. He gives clear instructions, once. You can give me the money and I will take it to the Boss”.

I wanted to know how Jaco ran his business.

“The Boss has ears and eyes everywhere. If you are a hot-headed rubberneck the guys will frame you, and you will lose the case. One thing you should know is that Jaco has a connection with the underworld. All the unsold stock due for expiration finds a way into the market downtown. Losses to the big bosses are minimised. He has his ways. If you decide against him, good luck, but no one has ever tried. He knows that I am here with you, too. Don’t

say I did not warn you”.

Lazarus had to leave and requested an Uber to take him home. Senzo asked for a second round. Lazarus told him it was his turn and he should drink his share too. Senzo said, “*Fokof, hamba, lenyoni*”.

Lazarus felt defeated. He worked hard and had solid plans for his money. If he chose to protest it was the end. He was not ready for an open defiance with an enigma. A wave of uncertainty engulfed him. He pondered why Nkululeko did not pay much attention to petty theft in the storeroom.

The store had a massive storeroom full of an assortment of goods. He guessed that petty theft was a small issue, empty packets of chips, empty boxes of this and that. He began to fear Jaco. He thought about feeding the corruption. Did he have a choice? It never occurred to him that a man was susceptible to corruption by default.

On Monday morning he saw this lonely figure alighting from the battered Toyota Corolla. Jaco walked briskly to his office stationed above the storeroom. Being sure that no one was watching, Lazarus secretly watched Jaco and spat on the floor. This Little Devil was in seriously corrupt deals.

Lazarus learnt later that the old stock was sold through a network of spaza shops in the townships. The spaza shop owners worked for the big bosses. That was the reason they had lower prizes all the time.

The local businesses suffered immensely. Jaco was the middleman. Lazarus realised his naivety in dropping Senzo like a hot potato on Friday. He freaked out, he needed a job. In his cubicle he found a note that said Nkululeko wanted to see him urgently.

Sour Love

“I am in the process of adopting a baby. It is a daunting process with a lot of interviews. They will also interview you, as my boyfriend.” That was Nonhle talking to her boyfriend Lethu.

She continued, “I have only been interviewed once and I am told that there is going to be a series of interviews before a child is released to my care as a new parent.” Nonhle was a nurse and she was aware that the prospect of having a child was slim. Her fallopian tubes were damaged and she had had a miscarriage a couple of times.

Lethu lived in Pietermaritzburg with his family and Nonhle had returned home when her childless marriage collapsed. Lethu had children from his previous relationships and he had no plans to father another child. His teacher's salary was not enough for the four children he already had with three different women. He was approaching fifty while Nonhle was ten years younger. They both came from failed relationships.

Lethu objected to the idea of raising another man's child. He therefore sold the idea of trying to make their own baby. Nonhle liked the idea, and the following week she booked an appointment with the gynaecologist, and invited Lethu to attend the first session. Lethu did not mean that they should start immediately. He was caught off guard by how quickly Nonhle booked a lab for a fertility test.

Lethu paid for the test, although it was not in his budget. The results were sent directly to the fertility specialist in Pinetown. The doctor called them both to analyse the results and explained to Lethu how the process would be conducted. It troubled Lethu that they had never talked about raising a family.

The day came for artificial insemination, and both confirmed the booking and the time. At 2 pm Lethu went to the lab across the street to have his sperm collected and prepared through a process called sperm washing. The sperm had to be kept at a certain temperature. Nonhle hid it in her cleavage. The whole process was new to Lethu, who had not yet decided if he truly wanted

another child. He did not want to disappoint Nonhle, but deep down in his heart he wanted the process to fail. He felt trapped by his own mistake of meddling in Nonhle's private affairs.

Lethu was even afraid to enter the doctor's private room with Nonhle to complete the process. He chose to remain in the waiting room. Nonhle was motivated by the fact that she had accumulated a sizable chunk of wealth. She wanted an heir or heiress after her uncouth younger brother had proclaimed that everything she owned belonged to him.

Her family was suspicious of Lethu. They did not want a man next to their golden egg-laying goose. But she loved them dearly. Even when Lethu tried to warn her to find her own place to stay, she remained home but never stopped complaining about how they drained her financially.

The first trial failed, which meant Lethu had to visit the lab again. The crack had started, Nonhle saw it, but she truly loved Lethu and believed that he would change his ways. Lethu started avoiding taking her calls. Nonhle was also not aware that Lethu was secretly dating his baby mama. When she found out Lethu did not deny it but instead said he wanted a polygamous relationship and if Nonhle did not like it she was free to leave for good.

Nonhle had never been treated that way; she did not know what to do. Lethu was everything to her but suddenly he had changed. She considered Lethu untrustworthy and selfish but the baby issue was close to Nonhle's heart after her miscarriages. There was no doubt that Nonhle truly loved Lethu. All the trips they went on were paid for by her. She never forgot to buy him beautiful gifts on his birthday and never complained that Lethu did not do the same.

The healing process was not easy but Nonhle survived: Lethu will never abuse her again, he had his time. She was flabbergasted by the thought of taking her partner on a holiday and getting dumped on return. What made things worse was the shocking words uttered about a week after the holiday in the beautiful mountains of Drakensberg, where Lethu had left her in the room to go to the mountains to have a secret prayer. Nobody knows what the prayer was all about

Nonhle had confessed her never-dying love for Lethu but it was over. She realised that

many a time Lethu showed her the door but she always refused to leave. She reminded Lethu how she felt when Lethu told her to her face that he had his baby mama and he was not prepared to lose her. His mouth spewed hurtful words worthy of a monster. The veil that blinded Nonhle lifted and she realised that Lethu was not meant for her.

Lethu paid lobola to the family of his fiancée for his baby mama sweetheart. However, after three months he reached out to Nonhle begging for forgiveness after he realised that his baby mama was a wolf in a sheep's skin.

Nonhle chose to focus on her property portfolio and the progress was good. The last time she talked to Lethu he said he was waiting for his gun license to get his firearm released from the shop. He said there was something to sort out.

The queen of Lethu had dumped him for another man after duping him to fork out seventy thousand rand as a gift to his bride's family before their marriage.

PART B: Portfolio

Patrick Lucky Msawenkosi Ngcobo

Supervisor: P. Wessels

Student Number: 22N4581

Note

This portfolio contains extracts from the reflective journals that I wrote throughout my course. It comprises my poetics essay, four book reviews, a community engagement report, and a reflection on the reader report.

Reflective Journals

21 February 2023

Writing Simply

On 10 February 2022, the Part-time (PT) students had their first online session via Zoom. We started with a poetry session with Manga. As much as I enjoyed the poetry reading exercise, I knew that there was another session with the Course Coordinator. It was later resolved that it was challenging for us PT students to have back-to-back sessions on the same evening.

The second session started well although I had issues with the connection but I managed to get through. The procedure to be followed throughout the year and timetable were dealt with successfully. I was the first to read an impressionistic prose titled *Girl* written by Jamaica Kincaid. She has an incredible and unique writing style. As a writer, you need the courage to deviate from the rest and not care much about the critics. Her prose piece looks like a set of long instructions with no options. Semicolons, hyphens, and question marks separate the lines. There is no full stop. Her writing style symbolises the relationship that existed between the masters and slaves in her home country (Antigua). The mother-daughter relationship was strained as a reflection of how the people lived under British colonial rule. The element of writing simply with unassuming language is incredible.

I think it is sometimes imperative to draft the story in the way you like. Edward found Kincaid's writing style unique. The text appeared as one long sentence.

Edward read, *Eagle Swallowing Girl* by Kate Bernheimer. It took me a long time to figure out the gist of this story. I managed to decipher that the story was more about the imagination at play. It became clear later that this story made sense if I treated it as a tale. This piece transcended boundaries and could not be read once. Henali Kuit posted a document to help us write better and purposefully. The motif was clearly explained in the *Writing Simply*

(Transcript). The use of motif in the *Metal Bowl* made the story come to life again at the end, everything fell into place. The story became coherent. Previously I did not know the usefulness of the motif in shaping the story and keeping it on track. Although it was useful if it was overly used, the prose could sound like a poem.

I think the writer must also explore other literary devices to tell the story, not only relying on too many motifs.

The article on *Writing Simply* gave me the courage to write. It used to be difficult to write without imagining the reader. Henali emphasised that writing should be about itself. She denounced the sense of the imaginary audience.

On 17 February 2022, we had a wonderful reading session with the teacher. My short story was titled *Dead Dream*. The story had the potential to be beautiful, but it had discrepancies that needed urgent attention: the tense was one of them. It was a challenge to stick to one tense. I noticed that sometimes it was challenging to deal with the character development and times.

Esona noted too much explanation, there was repetition and too much explanation on flat characters. In the final copy, I tried to cut the unnecessary explanation. Edward found the motifs useful. I did not want motifs to be all over the text. The teacher noticed that the theme of complicated family relationships was there, but the text should have explored it fully. The end of the story was well crafted or rather promising. The teacher highlighted that Amanda did not sound like a teenager.

Edward shared with us his story: *Winning and yet feeling a loss*. The story flowed smoothly, the narrative was simple and typical of the South African lifestyles in the urban settlements. The idea of winning and losing was all over the text with an interesting twist at the end provided a lot of unnecessary explanations. The imagination of the reader will make his piece readable. He had carefully incorporated relevant themes in the context of South Africa.

Esona wrote: *Iqhina*.

My understanding of isiXhosa was not as good as I thought. I understood the theme of a

tie. The theme was used extensively to give symbolic meanings in different conditions. The prose writing was well-crafted; the only challenge was that it sounded like a poem. The theme of a tie was explicitly dealt with from the beginning to the end. I wished the text could explore inference instead of telling us everything.

6 March 2023: Meeting poetry

Accessing the material for Seminar 2 was easy. The audio file was audible and clear on the critical features of writing poems. There was a lot to learn and understand before one could embark on the actual writing. Experience is more than knowing, when I listened to the teacher certain features stood out.

I felt the vulnerability in my writing, it emanated from self-doubt. I felt the power of ordinary poems, they are not gibberish, in the third poem, the last line “You have to improve on the blank page”. At least we were taught the processes that one must employ to produce quality in writing.

Even though one can have his own style of writing the writer must be purposeful. The lack of imagination, inquisitive mind, and skill can never be associated with writing simply. I like the point that if one assumes the position of knowing little, he puts himself in a position to ask all types of questions. I found it truthful that knowledge is not static. We must ask questions that excite our imaginations. I believe that a writer must not be afraid of unknown territory. As a novice, a writer looks at the world from a vulnerable position in that way the old becomes fresh again.

It is dangerous to claim that we know much as knowledge is based on our limited experience. I will be limiting the scope of my work if I assume the position of knowing. The points that the teacher used to grade himself are useful in measuring the quality of the text. As much as the scores are subjective, I believe that some consensus can be achieved. I think the instrument of grading my piece of writing can help me to write intelligently and purposefully.

The assignment topic required a lot of imagination which I struggled to grasp. I would have loved to use all the literary devices to make it sound great. I think that the piece of writing that I chose must bring a balance between the beauty and the authenticity of the message it carries. I tried to resurrect my creative abilities.

When I read the second poem, I was not sure if the reader would establish the coherence. The timeline differed but I think the reader will be able to decipher the meaning. One thing I noticed was that with practice I could improve my writing. I guess that once you have written your piece you must not rush to publish it. You must keep it and reflect on it.

In the third poem, I had the idea to use it as a base for my poem. The challenge was to put everything together to produce a poem worth listening to.

13 March 2023: Fierce writing

The piece that I chose was titled *Deaf Republic* by Ilya Kaminsky (Russia). My emphasis was on the sound device which played a lesser role when we analysed the poem. The poem was packed with a lot of possible meanings. There was a potential war between the brothers who fancied the same girl.

Edward chose excerpts from **The Book of Embraces**.

The writer used metaphors to create imagery and explored the immense challenges that people deal with in love. This style of writing was not clear to me, there were too many contrasting elements. The piece was engaging and made more sense if all the excerpts were read as one piece. It did not help to analyse each separately.

I read two short stories by **Lily Hoang (America) Women & desire**

I chose this piece to read and had a completely different interpretation. My preconceived ideas confined me to one interpretation. If my mind was open enough, I would have easily got the gist of the text.

A Garden

I liked this piece of text because it resonated with my interpretation. The first stanza was nostalgic. It shows how we all visit our past experiences for different reasons. The garden gave the speaker a chance to be away from the then-husband. She had a garden again. I think the garden was used metaphorically. If she referred to herself as a failure I wondered, how she was going to nurture her new garden. History tends to repeat itself.

I noticed different styles of writing. I guess my style will be determined by what I will be writing.

18 April 2023: Writing Obliquely

The story *Schizophrenia* by Vangile Gantsho helped me to prepare myself for the complexities in our family that lead to depression and other mental illnesses. I like this form of writing because it opens a lot of possibilities. During the feedback session, we chose pieces. Edward thought that the piece was about the black tax. There was an element to it, he was right. There was a strong suggestion that I must use dialogue. I wanted to narrate the story the way I felt comfortable. Esona did not think that it was an oblique story. I was clear about the subject I wanted to write about but in a subtle way. I also liked the oblique writing by Esona, she used headings for her story development, and she addressed the issues of love, intimacy, and criminal elements in our societies. Her narrative was basic and easy to follow. Her story was short but full of details. It made me sad. She made it easy for everyone to understand.

Edward used the theme of black and white races. I thought the story was going to be full of drama and violence. The reader gets a picture of South Africa before democracy with a clever use of words to determine the era. When he mentioned Jan Smuts Airport, I knew that the setting was South Africa. I expected the kind of behaviour that matched the time. His characters behaved much better than the ones in the old South Africa. Apartheid was pinned on race.

Some couples in interracial relationships suffer a great deal of verbal and physical attacks. I wanted to know more about the Treasure but unfortunately, the writer silenced her

voice. I know her social status but that did not give a lot of information about her. The speaker managed to handle the attention she had, but I could not decipher how Treasure felt about it. To hear her voice would have been crucial.

Writing obliquely had an element of poetry. This type of writing provides a writer with a platform to write objectively. I would have loved to write like Lydia Davis, in *The Sock*, she beautifully and vividly narrated her encounter with her estranged husband. What was fascinating was the reminiscing about her former husband's socks. Something so small triggered good memories about the past. I liked the subtle way of telling a story. Although they separated, she missed him. The *Cactus* by Miljenko Jergovic was flattering but the introduction of the plant changed everything. The speaker did not expect such a present. He accepted it just to please his girlfriend. The plant taught him to have a caring attitude. It gave him a sense of responsibility. He started to be detailed and focused. There was something common that he shared with his girlfriend. That small plant strengthened the love he shared with his girlfriend.

In real-life situations we find ourselves fascinated by the minute character traits that are deemed insignificant while we have the luxury of the company of our loved ones. I found that reading was not the same as writing. Some stories had a clear concept but were difficult to emulate.

In my story, I found myself not sure if I was not throwing the reader away. The subject of mental illness is taken lightly in our communities. The signs develop slowly, and a person ends up committing suicide. It was important to me that no matter how the reader would interpret the text, the gist of the story would not be lost.

I learned that a story does not have to be long to make sense. I took a leaf from *The Wolf* by Margarita Karapanou. The story was short but gave clear details of what happened. The art of telling supersedes the length. After reading some stories like *Inventory* by Machado, I asked myself what I felt after reading this sex escapade. I was against promiscuity but as a reader, I felt that sex was used as a pacifier and was intertwined with human existence. I still needed to get

familiar with the other writings like *Chair* by Lidia Yuknavitch. The writer sounded philosophical and tried to be convincing. *Mr Gregory's Fly* was enjoyable to read. I liked the use of dialogue; it gave the story a real feeling. I liked the story for children too.

With my story, I felt exhilarated. The subject was close to my heart. Since the writer was also part of the story. What matters is how we fail to tackle issues while they are small. I wanted to paint a picture of a person with good intentions against bad circumstances. In the process, she was not the only one who suffered but a whole lot of other people. The story had to touch as many families as it could. I wanted the cause of illness to be the one that mattered, not a person. I wanted to show that the family does not have to be big for it to have a problem. Small families suffer the same. The teacher highlighted some of the unnecessary words and offered suggestions to restructure the assignment. In my final version, I tried to trim all the unnecessary words.

02 May 2023: Narrative Conventions

*“There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before” Willa Cather, in *O Pioneer!**

The theme of triumph over evil or vice versa is as old as humans. It was interesting to read about Joseph Campbell. In my draft for the assignment, I did not exploit Campbell's fool-proof tool to construct my story. His tool focused on gathering ideas together, recognising them, and articulating them. The article (**A Practical Guide**) gave us a glimpse of what was in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the myth of the hero. I grew up listening to stories with the same themes. Carl G Jung wrote about **archetypes**, constantly repeating characters and energies that occur in the dreams of people and the myths of all cultures. I agree with Jung in a way that I do not remember having a dream about aliens. The comparison of outlines and terminology between *Hero's Journey* and *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* made it easier to understand the common themes. ‘Every story bends the mythic pattern to his or her purpose or the needs of a particular culture.’

The stages of the hero's journey were proof of a 'good' story. If I followed these steps to the letter, I forgot that the quest for social justice must not undermine the essence of the course, which is Creative Writing. The material from the teacher had every tool that I needed.

In the seminar, we analysed the *Sanatorium* in which the inanimate is regularly made to seem alive, even self-aware. 'People and creatures don't quite die in Schulz's work, even when they do.' Schulz's writing defies logic. The story remained intact although it moved back and forth in terms of time. There was too much description of scenes in *The Sanatorium under the Hourglass*. These descriptions contributed immensely to the 'madness' that was going on. There was an anomaly in the way the speaker interacted with the doctor and staff. When the speaker asked, "Is Father alive?" The answer was absurd. The doctor's response lacked logic. It was like living in two worlds. The story is readable, and it reminds us that life is not artfully arranged for our enjoyment even if a day has a lot that goes wrong. In reading sometimes, we expect a neatness and coherence that does not exist in real life.

In the extract by Marechera, the speaker looked at the gloomy picture of blackness. There was hatred, murder, and all the vile things one can imagine. There was no love among the Black community. The voice sounded like self-criticism. I did not like that the speaker offered no workable solutions. Not everything had always been bad about Black people. I would have loved to see a flickering light of hope. The speaker did not criticise the masses for always voting for corrupt candidates. I did not like the use of crude language; I believed that some readers might find the language offensive.

I liked the story about the bannister from *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The strength of the wood and tenacity protect the bannister against all forms of interference. The wood will go through a natural process of decay. A person who has a strong will shall never be shaken or changed by external factors. I like that an object is used to relay a message with a strong moral. Some people change their cause in life because of the circumstances they find themselves in.

The Verdict (1982) is like a detective story for me. This story is best performed as a film because of its imagery and plot development. *The Verdict* gives a perfect opportunity to show the stages of THE HERO'S JOURNEY. After a long and arduous detective work the guilty verdict by the jury is common in the stories involving fraud, corruption, murder, etc.

It was not easy to write for Seminar 6, because I had to combine setting, characterisation, themes, and storytelling. My past experiences form the backbone of what I mostly write about. I wanted to create a scenario that showed how corrupt officials manipulated the system for their benefit at the expense of the poor communities. I tried to copy what the Hero's Journey emphasises, but I am yet to find out if it did work. The teacher talked about creating something new with an element of strangeness.

15 May 2023: Poem from poems

The notes from the teacher played a crucial role in drafting my poems. Other poems reminded me of the seminar we had on narrative conventions. I was looking forward to going through Neruda's poems and more. It is always enjoyable to confirm what you think the poem is about with the teacher. I was glad to hear positive feedback on my poem titled *Simple Comment*. I put some effort into writing it, and it paid off. Some lines were misplaced. The teacher helped me a lot with suggestions. A *Simple Compliment* was to be understood in the context of communal living where most members of the family live in a semi-compound family. You can bump into your brother's wife a couple of times a day. I did not give a hint about the dwelling space to the reader. I must find a way to add it so that one understands the poem in that context.

I am worried that when I am implementing changes from the feedback the assignment takes a different shape. The teacher once said it has changed and it is no longer the same. I got a feeling that the first one was original and from the soul. Changes are necessary for professional development, but as a writer, I needed the skill to apply these changes in my writing. I wish that one told us that drafting a poem is like sculpting. The process from an idea to the finished

piece of text is the same as the experience of a sculptor. This is my personal view. There were positive comments which helped to keep the fire burning. It was impressive that the teacher's comments were spot on, I could immediately feel the difference in the stanza.

In *The Time Between*, some changes need to be made if the poem could improve. The teacher commented about revisiting the text I wrote before. A poem needs time to be perfect, there is a lot that is involved. Some lines need to be rearranged or deleted. I am into protest literature; it resonates well with my inner voices. However, I must learn to change and adapt to other styles of writing. I run short of a natural voice if I must imagine beauty where it does not exist. It is because what I see daily requires a sense of urgency in addressing it. I will learn the art of writing about what is beautiful amid misery in our country. In the fifth stanza which is the last in *The Time Between* there are lines that do not belong to the poem. I drafted this poem with passion and strong conviction; people waste valuable time forgetting that we are in transit.

Edward's poem *Johannesburg: My Jozi* is similar in style to *Alexandra* by Mongane Serote, when he read it, I just imagined Mongane. The themes of love, hate, and despair are everywhere in the poem. It surprised me that he has yet to read anything by Mongane. The title should have been *My Jozi*; *this* goes well with the content of the poem.

I read a poem *Things I did not Know I Loved* written by Nazim Hikmet. The theme of love is everywhere in the poem but not directed to any person, but nature. As I read it, I got a sense of time as the speaker travels. Things look different if you change position, this gives an authentic experience because if a person is on a coach liner travelling, the beauty of all that the speaker talks about becomes real.

Pablo Neruda's poem *Ode To Tomatoes* is unique. I do not remember myself coming across such a style of writing. The lines are short. There are many commas, few exclamation marks, and three full stops. I wonder if this poem is not made up of three long sentences. The choice of words gives the poem a questionable tone. Tomato invades, the word is associated with force and annexation. This poem is meant to be understood metaphorically. The words like

murder it: the knife sinks into living flesh leave an idea of war. The shortness of the lines emanates from the words being broken into pieces. The structure of the poem does not change the meaning although it raises eyebrows. I remember the teacher telling Edward that a poet can use any structure that will add value to why he wants to share through poetry. Exposure to diverse kinds of writing helps the writer to know the unique styles that exist. It is not only the words that work, but the style of writing also plays a vital role.

‘Knowing how poems are made helps in knowing how to read them: the ideal experience of reading a poem is, in many respects, close to the experience of writing it.’ This quotation describes what I have been through, the tools that I use when I write are borrowed from the poems I have read before. I like the style of Neruda, especially the way that he uses his metaphors and carefully selects words for the reader to make meanings out of the poem.

I will not have a chance to read my poems to everyone once they have been published. I would like to write something that will have a universal appeal. I am subject to correction on this, but it is what I picked up. Seminar 7 was enjoyable and straight to the point, I am only hoping that the last version of my assignment will not divert much from the first original.

23 May 2023: Voice

The notes played a crucial role in deciphering the information about the author’s voice. The topic does not have a straight answer. To get some sense out of the explanations one needs to listen to a lot of views. At first, I thought the voice to use depends on the type of story the writer chooses to write. I thought that if it is not an autobiography the story can assume any voice that fits the purpose. The challenge comes in the fact that experienced writers have distinct character traits even when they write on different subjects. I agree with LaValle when he says a voice is a personality. That is, I think only a handful can assume different voices and be successful. When I write I tend to write about social justice and see myself on the side of the marginalised. My prose writing is boring because the focus is on what should have been done

and the tone is always accusatory.

The voice I have used puts me in a position that I do not deserve. It portrayed me as the champion of the people.

It becomes weird and mechanical if a writer chooses to write about a person that he claims to know. The story must be natural where not everything is arranged for a character. A happy story must have a vast human experience and possibilities, it can transcend the known boundaries. A distinct voice of the author will guide the reader. In a racially divided South Africa, a writer needs a thorough understanding and exposure to the issues about the other race or ethnic group. I have been in contact with people from diverse backgrounds and many have been good to me. A writer's voice should focus on the soul and forget the shell (body). I lived in Durban for a long time, I even met a gentleman whose ancestors originated in Asia who treated me like one of his people. It never occurred to him that I was an African child. The man demonstrated the universal values of *ubuntu*.

I noticed that people like something colourful, they like action. They can spend the full day watching television while they are sitting on their couches. My lack of enthusiasm about what happens in my world indirectly shapes the stories I write. I asked myself why I do not change and write about what I like to spend my time reading, listening to, or watching. I think that will mean a change in my voice because my perception has changed. A delightful story compensates for what a reader is lacking. In my childhood, as children, we liked to watch movies about karate. We all wished to be kickboxers for the wrong reasons though. We wanted what we did not have. My upbringing is full of bad and colourful stories, but I always find myself writing about my suffering as if I need sympathy. The voice I often use is depressing. I survived and now I am an adult who looks after himself. My voice is selfish and offers nothing that compensates a reader.

A writer's voice is like a blanket that the traditional Basotho men wear all the time. That is what they are, irrespective of where they are in the world. A personality is shaped from birth to

death. A voice can change with each step of the transformation a writer takes. I think of South Africa post-apartheid where there is a cacophony of voices of complaints about the lack of meaningful improvement in people's lives. These are the ordinary voices but with veiled truth about what to expect from writers. If I am not contradicting myself here, I mean the perception informs the voice. The voice and personality shall not be separated. In this case, the voices have changed but the personalities are the same. Lavalley is intrigued by the contrast that exists between the writer and his work. I think a writer's voice shall not remain hidden for long. Even when the writing is about an unfamiliar subject matter the distinct authorial voice should be evident in the text. To me, the voice deals with *how* and not *what*. How does a writer approach a particular subject? In different situations the *how* will be distinct from others.

Literature is the bedrock of the artists; they borrow a lot of phrases and give life to them. What Yassin Bey did is what Sean Carter has always done. The artists spend time reading. Ecstatic is given a fresh look and repurposed to fit into Yassin's narrative. The literature has lines that are carefully arranged; it makes it easier for the artists to remodel them. I liked the idea of expanding on a word, it is like keeping a spark in the text. It makes reading enjoyable, not a mundane exercise. Beautiful words of a writer who is committed to his craft make a beautiful story. It looks like writing is a slow, painstaking exercise. Besides joy and fulfillment, writing should provide an opportunity to gain and experience personal and professional growth... I worry a lot about the space for new writers, there is a lot of attention to the work of the seasoned writers.

27 June 2023: Overwriting

Condensing the content of the previously composed piece proved to be a challenging endeavour. This process of reducing words can be mistaken for paraphrasing. I am not sure if paraphrasing forms part of reducing the words. I felt consolation in knowing that sometimes writers give more than what is required. We leave no space for the reader to engage with the text critically. I tried to cut the words and scenes that I thought were unnecessary. What made it

challenging was that, initially I used the words purposefully. If I had to remove them, it felt like killing my babies. The process of removing the unnecessary words interfered with the syntax. In my reading and writing journey, I have read texts that take a long time to reach the point. It can be a painstaking exercise but with concrete results at the end.

I think that most readers can predict how the story will end, the trick is for the author to conclude in a manner that is interesting or shocking with the twist of events. I also believe that during the phase of cutting words, the writer is at liberty to be innovative. There is room for magic. My story (*My Father*) was cut short for the seminar. It must be long; I often revisit it in my writing because it is close to my heart as it resonates with my personal experiences. I realised that If I write about something that I know I am more likely to overwrite. I do not want to write from a position of bitterness. I want a well-balanced story, not a tirade or judgmental piece that sounds boring. I just want to create a story that is worth reading.

I wrote about the coming of age in traditional Zulu-speaking communities. The ceremony might differ from village to village but mostly it is done similarly. There is a lot that I did not include in the text. I only chose what I thought would give a picture of how the ceremony is carried through from an idea to the final day of traditional dance and feasting. Nations across the world have ceremonies dedicated to the young maidens. In some communities, there are sacred rituals that are performed as part of the ceremony. I did not want to go into details about what is done, some of the rituals are archaic or gross (to mention) but to leave it with the reader to dig for the practices in some cultures. There is a story behind each action that takes place; the Zulu regiment must walk in a single file across the open space where the ceremony is conducted; it is necessary in the rural villages. Ululating at the top of the women's voices is necessary. Nowadays even men sometimes ululate, but it is not cultural. It used to be strictly reserved for women. There is a chance for this story to be developed into a colourful story with mixed emotions and anticipation. It can be a journey worth taking with all the unpredictability of the weather on rough terrain.

I must always make up for the lost time, for instance, I had to find the extra reading on the topic of overwriting. There is no excuse for not pushing myself hard, a lot of writing and constant visits to my previous work will also assist me to hone my skills. As I was getting ready for a trip to Makhanda, I was hoping to meet some people and have discussions on certain issues with writing. In all the years of my life, before I enrolled for MACW, the notion of the intended audience has always been fundamental. The audience is indeed diverse and expansive to even try to think of what they want and how they need it. One of the questions that I wanted to ask pertained to the correlation between overwriting and editing. I know that there are people whose job is to do editing. I wanted to write a piece of text and start afresh, trimming it down as we were required to do in the seminar.

Since I am more into prose writing, choosing the words carefully will be vital for the creation of readable text pieces. It comes to my mind that the art of using language skillfully lies in poetry. I am thinking of 'all' the literary devices and their effect on the text. Poetry is rich in language usage, but it is enjoyed by a select few, the ones who appreciate the beauty of the language. I wonder if one can exploit the abundance of literary devices to get rid of unnecessary explanations. It might require time and skill to do it but, in the end, I only see a well-crafted piece of art. I am thinking of the beautiful sounds, colourful words, and all the senses being taken care of. I am looking forward to more practice in cutting unnecessary words. It gives a writer a second chance to work on the idea that had been entertained before. There might be an improvement in the second phase since the cutting of words is done after the completion of the text. In this case, the writer is not under pressure to finish. The emphasis is on relevance and aesthetics. The other benefit is that this process commands patience and an eye for attention to detail. I assume there is enough room for improvement that leads to satisfaction with the text that is written.

As I write this reflective journal, I am beginning to look at the topic differently in terms of what it contains. I enjoyed reading the supportive materials that provided a clear picture of what

was required of me.

21 August 2023: *Dialogue*

The reading material and the instruction made everything easier. Luckily there is a play by Athol Fugard that we read at school. I borrowed a lot from his style of writing. Some basic features of a dialogue are also taught at school. Besides school work, I have never written anything serious in a dialogue format. It was a challenge, but I consoled myself that at least I could recall the important features. Quickly I realised that the school experience offers little when it comes to creative writing. The reading material and the seminar outline helped draw a line between what to do and what not to do when writing a dialogue. The extracts presented different types of conversations in a dialogue format. When I wrote my dialogue, I was constantly tempted to give a narration. It is not a format that we encounter every day. However, the teacher allowed us to narrate if it was necessary. There was a condition that it had to be very brief because the seminar was strictly on *dialogue*. In a dialogue, my assumption is that imagery is compensated by the brief information in brackets. A reader does not take long to figure out what is happening. One of the important points from the teacher was that through the conversation a reader can get a sense of the scenario or additional information. There is no need to tell everything.

I noticed that in one of the excerpts, a narrative format is widely used, and it helped to give additional information. The narration resembled a master shot in a film. Whatever happens in the story, at least everyone knows the setting. I used a stage direction feature to tell the reader about the gestures the characters were making. There is an extract where the characters find an unknown sea creature (the stories in the extracts are not titled). Joey and Marko are on a mission to fill in their job applications. Their minds are preoccupied with the unknown sea creature. The entire conversation shall not be in dialogue. I noticed that their private thoughts are narrated. It worked well. That gave me a sense that there is nothing wrong with using a narration if it serves

a purpose.

I chose my story carefully titled *A Season of Condemnation*. I tried to apply most of the features of a dialogue. A teacher once said what does not belong in the washing line should not be there. The story had to be rich in content, so I avoided unnecessary words. I enjoyed writing the story, I am looking forward to the feedback. I noticed that when a writer uses dialogue format the text feels like a real conversation. I cannot wait to hear constructive feedback on whether I managed to switch the voices and thinking patterns of the characters. I do not like it if a reader can discern that all that is written came from one source. The text risks being labelled sloppy or monotonous.

When I compare the prose part of the assignment, I can tell that the success of the text depends heavily on the writer's ability to narrate. In a dialogue, there is a combination of features; the conversation is immediate, narration or stage direction. A soliloquy and monologues add value to the dialogue in a play. The conversation is livelier and demands immediate response. The reader is likely active throughout the reading experience. I ask myself how easy it is to be precise on the best format to tell a story. Is it about a writer being comfortable with a format or does the nature of the story dictate the format? That is what I will ask the teacher when we meet for feedback. This reminds me of Veronica when she commented that sometimes it is not the story that is enjoyable but the **HOW** it is narrated.

I had the pleasure of reading Edwards's dialogue. The storyline was easy to follow, I just wanted to know the percentage of dialogue that he used. The conversation lines seemed to be too long and I was not sure if Edward did it on purpose. I found only two short lines. In a normal conversation, I believe that there is a combination of short and long answers. Sometimes one makes a statement, long and short. I am yet to confirm my observation with the teacher. The prose provided details about the characters and why they acted weird. I could understand the characters failing to pronounce words clearly because they were foreigners. The instruction was to write prose that tells a story the same story presented in a dialogue format. I do not think that I am

unfairly judging Edward's piece of work.

I commend him for choosing his vocabulary well and for good sentence construction. The whole experience with the *dialogue* was challenging but enjoyable. This reflective journal is short of feedback from the teacher. I would have greatly appreciated hearing the feedback.

04 September 2023: *Soliloquies/ monologues/ inquisitions/ diatribes/ raves/ raps/ rants/ insults*

The Honourable

Not everything goes according to plan. Seminar 12 was supposed to be the one to enjoy but it turned out to be the opposite. I had the worst nightmare with the network. I felt helpless because Seminar 6 *Narrative Convention* with Dr Mason was short for me. This was a chance to listen and engage critically if I had to. The study material was useful and helped me enormously to get the feel of what it is like to rant. I had my time with Lesego on YouTube, his rant is 'pure' and unapologetic. There is anger and his choice of words cut to the bone. He is creative with rhyme schemes. When I read Thomas Bernhard's *Old Masters* (1985), I found humour in the way Reger tried to ridicule Heidegger. Lesego is angry and not shy of using explicit words. Lesego's rant is infused with music and motion pictures. I like his style because poetry is a work of art, it is creativity that people marvel at. People know and experience the hardship at the hands of governments and politicians. The art of telling the story Lesego employed makes his work unique and interesting to listen to.

I also like Bernhard's extract. Heidegger was a great man, he could not be influential if he was not great at his craft. Reger sounds like an ambivalent child. I will be glad to be proven right or even wrong.

Choose 2017 HD is a colourful and action-packed rant. The movie-like clip is engaging and well-choreographed. It commands attention. I associate this type of rant with the music of Kanye West. In this digital age, Lesego's work is well presented.

I watched Hamlet's soliloquy three times. I compared it to other pieces and found it good for people who enjoy drama and art. It is a good performance and well-executed in terms of acting. I saw a wolf, extreme weather, a man ranting in a state of hopelessness. Thomas Bernhard's *Extinction (1986)* Extract 2, Insulting Goethe, is a masterpiece. I like the way insults are coated with humour. I must read more of Bernhard. The extracts only provide a glimpse of what Bernhard has in store for readers and writers. Shakespeare's insult sounds like it is good for the learned persons. I can only imitate Shakespeare later in my writing career, only when I have acquired enough experience that build confidence.

My rant is titled *Honourable*, I do not think that I must vouch for its relevance or correctness. It pains me to see the thieves and morons wrecking our beautiful country. I tried not to be obvious with my intended targets. Many South Africans know the corrupt politicians. The ANC is in government and ordinary people now compare the current government with the previous regime. Some say it was better. The rest of the people can only relate to the rant as an attack on corrupt politicians.

I read Edward's first draft *How the Movement Became the Wolfment*; the piece addressed the same concerns as mine. The greedy politicians who live large and have ignored their constituency. The text draws a clear line of contrast between the rich and poor people's living experiences. The piece painted a clear picture of the past and a bleak future. Eaton is sympathetic to Cyril, the president is a conniving bastard whose only mission is to bring South Africa into order just to pacify the IMF and the World Bank. These institutions have tremendous influence on governments all over the world. They have been craving and salivating for a stooge like him. I do not like the piece, it is misinformation and a disservice. He is not better than his predecessor.

I liked the writing of Eaton on Bathabile Dlamini. The article is factual and tells exactly what the ANC has become. The ANC has a new breed of corrupt leaders. Bathabile is of the same cut as Jacob Zuma and the rest of the corrupt senior cadres of the movement. These leaders are unrepentant and stubborn. Oliver Reginald Tambo once said: "Let's tell the truth to ourselves

even if the truth coincides with what the enemy is saying. Let us tell the truth". The ANC of today sings a different tune. The text has everything on Bathabile as an unsuitable candidate for public office.

I regret not having a chance to chat with Dr Mason. I will take this as a blessing in disguise because I must see if I can follow the instructions to the latter. The seminar is one of the seminars to revisit in my leisure time. The visit will not be for enjoyment but to borrow a lot of the pieces. I have decided that, for the sake of my sanity, I must use my emotions sparingly and let the piece speak for itself.

18 September 2023: Place

There was one article that I could not find what the writer wanted us to know or do. That is *The Street* written by Bandele Biyi. The place made more sense than the spoken words. The rest of the pieces were clear on how the description of the places added value to the text. During the seminar, I had a dreadful network issue. As a result, I grabbed the lesson in small chunks and had limited input. The seminar session was helpful, it made me realise the importance of a good description of a place. I had only recognised a place to be important to establish the setting. I had not imagined a piece of writing where the emphasis was on the place.

The seminar was informative and practical. In my writing, I had never paid a particular focus to the place. But during Seminar 13, I could see the place taking on a character of its own. It shaped the story; the choice of words matched the place. In my story, it was the first time that I worried about appropriateness with the place as a centre of attention. The place ended up telling a story more than words would do. In the extract from *Blue white red*, written by Mabanckou Alain in 1998, I noticed that the immigrants carried their Africanism to Paris. Their place of origin in them. The seminar made me realise that a delightful story should incorporate all the necessary literary aspects.

Whenever I write about a political situation, I refrain from imposing my judgment. I found

out that it could be annoying to the reader. As a writer, I must give readers a chance to make their judgments.

Readers have to make up their minds whether they agree with me or not. Great writers expressed their thoughts and defended them successfully. I am not in their league, but I have my way of expressing my feelings and thoughts too. Why should I not? In Seminar 12, *Dialogue* came as a reminder that readers are intelligent. In the end, they will decide for themselves. I do not regret that I painted a gloomy picture of the city through Pietermaritz Street. At first, I regretted that I did not put enough effort into finding something that would bring hope.

In closing, I would say that I needed a writing exercise where I could use words to describe a place in my way. The challenge is for me to read more and practise writing creatively. The teacher returned the feedback timeously. The seminars offer a glimpse into what a writer can do to write a good piece. The challenge is time availability, there is never enough time to write to my satisfaction.

02 October 2023: Politics and Poetics of Punctuation

We read excerpts and discussed the effectiveness of the punctuation. The excerpt from *Zone* by Mathias Enard is a unique piece that forces a reader to read at a fast pace. It did not give me a chance to breathe. Enard did not want to be confined. I found the style not obstructive even though the piece resembled one long sentence. The excerpts I read showcased texts of different kinds and origins. I gained the courage to write the way I wanted but with a creative mind.

I realised that the use of short sentences is overly emphasised. I do not think that short sentences are a sure case to deliver a beautiful text. I observed that Thomas Bernhard has a penchant for long sentences. I know that mistakes are avoided with short sentences. When I read *Revulsion*, I was awestruck by the long sentences. I marvelled at the texture of the story; layered perfectly. I do not want to be overly conscious about short sentences anymore. I think that what counts would be to know when and where to use them in a text.

I may rather focus on how to hook a reader to the story; the art of telling a story even if the choice of words is vile. The title of the story that I submitted was called *The church on the way to Hell*. It was not the best piece. I spoiled it when I tried to be grammatically correct. It sounded alien to the way people speak. I only had to be natural and let the text speak for itself. I confined myself to something I wanted to do with political correctness.

Sometimes there is a challenge to separate spoken English from written English. I would have loved the words to appear on paper as they rolled out of my mind. Readers must know what my community speaks. I do not want to write to please anyone but to be relevant and able to explore other possibilities through words. When I read *Revulsion*, I rediscovered myself and confirmed that there is no turning back. This is the style I like and prefer to follow. I do not want to be a replica of Thomas Bernhard, I want to take a leaf from him. I have no intention of writing for the school children. Bernhard used a very strong language, of which I had no objection. Words communicate feelings, this was used to show how disgusted he felt with his country. He used long sentences deliberately without distorting the meaning. His rant did not sound monotonous. There were literary devices that I liked. He would make a point and repeat it or refer to the few lines that followed. My rant lacked crucial information to help a reader to create a complete picture. Stacy Hardy noticed that I would mention a character but not provide a sufficient description. For example, I mentioned my mother but did not describe her enough for the reader to visualise her. Bernhard would introduce a character and later share the description elaboration perfectly when I was already curious to know more. The teacher went through my piece and helped with constructive suggestions. After reading *Revulsion*, I felt compelled to revisit my piece to find a way to return it to its originality. It did not sound like the way people talk to one another. The teacher had already made the corrections. Making major changes in the text could render the corrections exercise futile. The colloquial language was necessary, it would have flavoured the text. Bernhard was not afraid to use it for the enrichment of his text. I decided to make changes to the areas that had been spotted

during the Zoom session; I elaborated on the scenario and characters. It was going to be risky to rewrite the whole text.

16 October 2023: (re)writing children

Seminar fifteen was one of the most challenging seminars I ever had. The challenge was to come down to the level of a child. I did not want to guess how children conduct their conversations. My own experience is outdated and irrelevant. I used the general observation of how young boys talk to each other. It was not difficult to choose the theme. I had to limit the setting to two places. Limiting the setting helped to keep the story compact. It will not be difficult for a reader to follow every action in the story. In the Zoom class, I benefited immensely from Edward and the teacher. Initially, I gave a lot of background before a dialogue. It transpired that can cause a reader to lose interest easily. The suggestions proved helpful. Once I had cut the long narration, the story breathed life again.

I tried to copy the style of dialogue in the *Question of Power* by Bessie Head. I managed to write it better in the second draft. I took the suggestions seriously and followed the latter. There was a recommendation to use some vernacular words if needed. I enjoyed throwing some isiZulu language words. I was careful that the context would assist a reader to understand the foreign words. I enjoyed writing dialogue because it was engaging. A conversation is filled with emotions. The punctuation in the dialogue helped the text to have a human touch. The boys had diverse family setups. I had to keep it on my mind that children are fragile. They have their own manner of communicating their feelings and concerns. I noticed the importance of consistency with the character throughout the story. Edward reminded me what I had been told before, that as writers, we do not have to disclose everything. Readers are smart, so we must give them space to use their imagination. Edward was telling the truth because, in the second draft, I deleted some paragraphs and the story did not lose its meaning. I found the importance of matching the words with the character's level of growth. There are words that I had to change for

the text to sound authentic.

It was the first time that the seminar dealt effectively with editing. It was great for me because it is always challenging. It is important to make a printout and get a lurid ballpoint or a highlighter to identify errors and not get bored. There are challenges in writing in a language that is not yours. Some words can mean the same thing but with varying degrees of intensity or clarity. I remember that I used the word eavesdropping. I had to change it because it was not compatible with the character's language acquisition.

I read and enjoyed *Master* by Mxolisi Sapeta. The position of a child is portrayed solidly. The character of a child can be seen, felt, and heard. The mixed emotions and anguish are laid bare. There is one character showing both internal and external conflict. The text is raw and violent. Mxolisi used punctuation marks skillfully to create different effects. He used repetition and puns. The poem is rich with poetic devices that make it great. I like the ambiguity in the poem because it raises questions.

In the beginning, I struggled with *Adela's House*, there was no coherence. I thought that the writer wanted to remind us of incoherence in the children's narrative. I was awestruck by the teacher when she made a hint about massive human rights violations and the disappearance of people. The seminar was a great experience for me because it is one of my projects to write children's stories.

30 October 2023: Experimenting with writing Sex

It was a mammoth task to openly tap into the subject that deals with sex acts. In my world, talking about sex in public has always been treated as taboo. I talk about sex in the company of a very close friend or with my partner. To write about it openly was a challenging task. I fully understand the importance of learning a proper way to write about sex scenes.

I wanted to write a story that had layers. Sex controls the world; it is a powerful tool. The challenge was to use ordinary people to portray sex as something of enormous potency. I created

an ordinary maid, Fikile. The maids are often exploited. Most of them work hard and are honest too. They are smart and resilient to abuse. The speaker could not see Fikile beyond her job description as a kitchen girl. Fikile knew what she wanted and devised a perfect plan to get it. She won at the end.

Men might have their egos but in general ‘they’ act like babies. When it comes to sex, men act weird. Like a bull or a male dog, they want it at all costs. Before Fikile was taken as wife material, she was first viewed as someone who could satisfy the clerk’s sexual demands. The clerk was foolish not to pick up the trick that Fikile was playing. The speaker risked his life at night just to satisfy the lust. I was trying to use what is called consensual voyeurism.

Men are always aroused by seeing sex scenes. That could be the reason so many are addicted to pornography. Now they even watch animals, especially the ones with large penises. As a male myself, it was easy to write about the clerk’s predicament. I am not sure if I portrayed Fikile correctly.

There is a part that I think I should have included; it deals with the role of concoctions in love relationships. Both males and females use all sorts of tricks to get attractive to the opposite sex. There is always an urgent demand to get him or her hooked quickly. The black magic business is lucrative. If I choose to continue with the story, I will include the part that deals with black magic.

As this was my first time to write about a sex scene, I am looking forward to improving. I also read and enjoyed *Kitchen Heat*. I liked the point that there is no direct mention of having sex. The choice of words and the way they are used only give a clue of what is happening. I remember the narrative that says writers must not give more information than necessary. There must be a space for the reader to make up his mind. I recall a conversation that stressed the importance of using the correct words to create the mood for the sex to be enjoyable. That is the power of the words as a sex stimulus. I liked the elaborate description of the sex act, but subtly.

The narrative worked well with me. I do not like it when it is too explicit as I believe that

sex should be private and intimate.

I read Edward's first draft *The Punishment of Pleasure*. I could feel the challenge he faced. Describing sex scenes was not easy. To me, it felt like the story came to life at the end. He has a good portrayal of Vanessa. It would have been more interesting if Vanessa had taken the lead as early as possible. I think the character of Vanessa was not exploited enough. She is wild and carefree. It was going to add some flavour to see or hear her commanding the speaker to satisfy her. I was going to laugh at the speaker running away. Men get embarrassed when they realise that they cannot satisfy their partners. With Vanessa, the speaker should have even been caught engaging in sex activity in a dim light corner, somewhere. I am aware that in the end, she wanted to do it in front of a tattooist. I am afraid that the tattoo artist must not be put off focus while working with the needle. The work of art requires concentration lest a mistake happen. I commend Edward's effort.

Poetics Essay

Poetics of the Wor(D)ds We Live

Writing in English has its limitations since it's the first additional language for me. Before I construct a meaningful sentence in English, I must first deal with dialect, syntax, and diction. Hence, crafting fiction in English demands a heightened level of awareness from me.

I take a leaf from Tiff Holland's *Written in Stone: How Subject Dictates Narrative Form* (2014). I have always had a passion for writing. The first piece was a disastrous autobiography. I like the courage and sheer determination to write the way she feels comfortable. Tiff Holland struggled to produce *Betty Superman*. She started with *Dragon Lady* as a narrative poem. It is important to be flexible. "I composed "Dragon Lady", as a character sketch. I thought I would write other poems that would turn into a book, but I found instead that there was an entire, complete narrative line within the piece."

She was immensely captivated by poetry until a famous poet told her that she had an instrument for fiction. This reminded me of the words of encouragement from the teacher,

Mxolisi Nyezwa. He used to encourage me to write about all the ideas that I shared with him. One day, we talked about the transformation of traditional music in KwaZulu-Natal and how the youth have popularised and monetised the music. Traditional music is still rich in content, grounded in Nguni culture.

This article taught me some valuable points: to engage continuously with literary activities and to take recommendations seriously, especially if they come from experienced writers. Poetry is my first love, even though I chose to write prose for my thesis. "I believe there is freedom in writing poetry," Holland said. "I embraced ambiguity in thinking and writing, and I believe that is one of the reasons I stayed away from traditional narrative and its demands for clarity for so long".

I like the journey and its demands. Holland seemed to embrace all the challenges that came her way. She did not resist change. As a writer I might not be aware of all my talents in writing. One of Holland's favourite poets is Carl Sandburg. I fell in love with his poem titled "Fog". I spent quite a bit of time trying to figure out what it was about. I shall not forget the joy I had when I found out the message that the poem carried.

Brian Evenson's "Afterword" to his collection of short stories *Altmann's Tongue* (2002) was challenging for me. He wrote, "Characteristic of one strand of writing that I had been doing both in France and after coming back to America was a neutrality of voice, in absence of authorial commentary, an attempt to present difficult situations without judgement." I have written pieces that appear to be against my culture and religion. If they are not read with an open mind, they can provoke intense hatred. My interpretation of Brian Evenson's main point in writing was that as writers we must allow the text to speak for itself. As a writer, it will always be a struggle to achieve complete neutrality. It did not take long for me to realise that Brian Evenson was ostracised for deviating from the norms of writing.

In my vernacular language, we use a lot of modal verbs to sound polite. This is something that some people are not aware of. Instead of saying 'Ngiyabonga' which simply means 'Thank

you', they say '*Ngiyathokoza*'. *Ngiyathokoza* is often said politely, bowing a head or putting hands together like praying. The rhythm and sound are also critical in isiZulu-speaking communities. I am absolutely happy with the position Brian Evenson took to protect his creative work and style. It is important to me that my pieces reflect my background and experiences as an African.

Linh Dinh's "What I Usually Say to My Students" emphasises the importance of being free to experiment as writers but she does not mince her words on the importance of quality: "Be as crazy and as perverse as possible, be inspired to the point of madness, but don't be glib."

The quality of the craft in writing should not be compromised. Linh Dinh's piece is practical in the sense that it talks about all that the creative writing course's teachers emphasise. It highlights the importance of revisiting a piece over and over again to capture everything that it wants to say.

Velimir Khlebnikov's "On Poetry" reminds me of Lorca's article on *Duende*[RU2]. I do not think that there is a universal agreement on the definition of *Duende*. There is a literature that once you have read the first line you are hooked forever. Even on completion of the reading, it stays forever. *Blindness* by Saramago is unique. It is a feeling, a universal language that touches the soul of a man. 'A mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained'. This is the only definition of *Duende* that gives clarity. A poem shall not be understood like a sign in the street, says Khlebiakov, and he goes on to say that "the magic in a word remains magic even if it is not understood, and loses none of its power," Poems may be understandable or they may not, but they must be good, they must be real."

Khlebnikov makes it clear that the quality of the text is not determined by the ability of a reader to decipher it. A text should not be rejected simply because a particular group of people cannot understand it.

So, even if the text is not understood by a particular group of people, if it is of great quality, it will exonerate itself. Its value will be preserved until it finds people who will

understand it. As opposed to simple words, “For sale”, for example, he says a poem is related to flight, in the shortest time possible its language must cover the greatest distance in images and thoughts.

Lara Glenum writes in a way that I had not thought of before, making me think of various ways someone can write a poem. Lara Glenum says, ‘Poetry has nothing to do with beauty, other than that the norms of each are artificially constructed (and then naturalised)’. I know well-written poems. I disagree with Lara Glenum when she says ‘Poetry has nothing to do with truth.’ The art of writing poetry can make it highly appreciated, that is beauty. The style, tone, and diction can help to relay a beautiful message or draw our attention.

Craig Santos Perez in *Unincorporated Poetic Territories* presents an article that deals with geopolitics with tentacles that go beyond the island of Guam. He presents the facts as best as he could write about them.

As a South African, I know what it was like to live under the apartheid regime. Perez’s article is multi-layered and was crafted flawlessly. The land occupation and dispossession of local inhabitants are crucial in his argument. I found two points of access; access denied and access granted. The locals were deprived of the freedom to practise their cultures the way they wanted. The United States of America force-feeds the locals with Western culture and civilisation. Perez said, “I try to write poems that have multiple points of access and, in turn, walls of inaccessibility”. I was fascinated by the concluding statement that he wrote “Access is power”. Poetry is a site of sharing, struggling, and recognising the coloniality and aesthetic of power. Perez did not try to fight against change. He pointed out the atrocities conducted by the oppressive regime. He kept a detailed narrative of pre- and post-colonisation. Furthermore, he continued writing and being conscious of accessibility.

Reading another piece by Brian Evenson proved to me that some articles require more time than others. The first and the last paragraphs of “Crazy party guy, or, a disruption of smooth surfaces” helped me to understand the text better. I think all the students, myself included, aspire

to be good writers one day. However, the concept of a good writer is defined in many ways. Brian Evenson had his concepts as I have mine. No matter what we want to believe, the truth is that there are good writers. The opening line, “I’ve always thought of good writing in general, and my writing in particular, as something meant to disrupt the smooth surface of things.” I concur with Evenson. In my opinion, good writing exists within a particular context and is determined by the effect it has on a reader[RU4]. What I get from Brian Evenson is the importance of writing for a purpose, to fulfil a mission. He paints a picture of four levels where he wants to see disruption.

In the last paragraph, Brian Evenson writes, “But there is also avant-garde work that mimics more conventional modes so that you realise how deftly it is taking apart the institutions you participate in only once it’s too late. For me the latter is unsettling ...”

I want to write unique stories, but every time I try, the results are not up to the standard I want them to be. It takes time to hone my writing skills.

I am always fascinated by stories of extra-terrestrial life. I felt that Jackie Wang (2015) was pro avant-garde. I wondered what gave the pundits a right to criticise what they did not know. As a new writer, I am unique. I like to present my stories in a way I best see fit. An example would be how people watch Star Wars and claim to have a sense of what an alien is. However, if I had an encounter with an alien and gave a written account of what the alien looked like, I wouldn’t need anyone to refute my claim because of the widely accepted image of what an alien should look like. If certain trees can communicate at night let it be; if rabbits and dogs play joyfully at night in the absence of the prying eyes of two-legged creatures, let it be. No one must deny that it happened.

Jackie Wang wrote about the creation space for imagination that will function as a container for the un-containing and unleashing of desire. I believe imagination precedes invention. Pieces of great stature are a result of profound imagination. I think of *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling and *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller. Without a space for imagination, these books would not

have achieved great success.

William Carlos Williams's essay, "The Practice", reminds me of the story of Dambudzo Marachera. I read that he even lived on the streets just to source stories from the people who were homeless. What comes to mind is that listening is a foundation for a good writer. In *The Practice*, the people are a fountain of information that the doctor uses when writing his pieces. In the last seminar of the course which I enjoyed tremendously, we had a writing session where our pieces were written in response to the sense of touch and smell. Besides listening to what troubled the patients, the doctor was exposed to all the senses. Some were invoked by his findings and advice. The patients also triggered some reactions and thinking. All that happened during the doctor's encounter with his patients, gave the doctor enough tools to write stories. It is important to be vigilant at all times because stories are everywhere. The patients' true feelings come in the form of words; often when the patient and the doctor are alone. That is where he carefully makes sense of what they have been trying to say for some time. These are true stories that have nothing to do with all the intricacies of writing. In this piece, I learned that you can be employed in any profession and continue to be a writer. Secondly, with a passion for writing, a writer can go very far.

Amina Cain's brief meditation titled, "Slowness", touches on the avant-garde. The questions like what is slowness in literature and how slow can a text get. I'm never sure about the exact point to end my pieces. There are pieces that I've written with a clear end in mind. Other stories found their way to a conclusion. Amina Cain wrote, "I start from an open place and trust that the elements that need to be in the story will find their way." I have tried to do the same but it does not happen with ease. All I do is to find out what kind of story I want to write and it finds its way to a conclusion. I also weigh the quality of the individual elements of the story.

Cain goes on to say, "I don't think, especially about accessibility or audience, some of my stories are accessible to some people, and some of them aren't. I can't control that. My

imagination gets everything, and it determines everything too: language, narrative, voice, character, setting, and so on. I believe that avant-garde literature can come from a place other than ideas about status quo.” Brian Evenson, on accessibility, says, “...I don’t think accessibility is the defining issue of the avant-garde...”

The picture that is created is that avant-garde does not promote sloppy writing. It promotes experimentation in writing but not as an excuse for half-baked ideas disguised as experimentation.

The last paragraph of Amina Cain’s piece validates that writing sometimes is a response to texts the writer has been reading and has been absorbed by. “My writing wants to talk to me. It wants to talk about novels like *The Apple in the Dark* by Clarice Lispector and *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* by Marguerite Duras. These novels have something to do with why I write in the first place.”

“Desperate and Beautiful Noise” by Tim Seibles put forth the sheer determination Jimi Hendrix had to play his guitar splendidly. The countless hours he spent practising to play skilfully are tantamount to a writer spending time reading and writing. Those hours made him discover new sounds that made him stand out among well-known guitar players. The music transcended boundaries as well-crafted literature does. It knows no race or colour. The opening quotation by Jimi Hendrix is an imagination. If the imagination is great, the effort is likely to be great too. To chop a mountain with the edge of a hand was symbolic. It was a strong ambition. I had an opportunity to listen to Jimi Hendrix’s music. I found that the voice of his guitar surpassed the human voice in the music. It would have been nice if it was only the voice of the guitar. He was the master of his art. The last paragraph of *Desperate and Beautiful Noise*, reads, “What we love about good music is exactly what we love about good poetry: the absence of trickery, the presence of honesty: every word intended to enliven, to enlighten, to carry what is sayable to the full extent that language allows.” There is no shortcut to good work, it is all about working hard to improve one’s performance, and one’s ability.

I agree with Taiye Selasi in “Stop Pigeonholing African Writers” that there will never be a consensus over what African literature is. Writers are free to identify themselves in any way they see fit. I do not think that is of significance. The quality of the work produced by writers will find its way into the hearts of the readers who are also free to give labels or not. I am an African who has never travelled the world. Even if I wish to, I shall not produce a resounding piece based on experiences I’ve never had. Most writers do not want to be classified and Africa does not exist in isolation. No one has a right to decide for another whether they are an African writer or not. I think it is a wasted opportunity to dwell so much on the question of identity. It works against the freedom that most writers endear. Whether writers write about anything that matters, they should be treated the same; there must not be pigeonholing of writers. The focus should be on the craft above all else. The discussion that ensued after that is a contextual factor.

In concluding this short essay on my poetics, I would like to offer a statement from Bell Hooks’, “Narratives of Struggle”

“I chose to be a writer in my girlhood because books rescued me. They were the places where I could bring the broken bits and pieces of myself and put them together again, the places where I could dream about alternative realities, possible futures.” Bell Hooks emphasises the power of imagination as a way to begin the process of transforming reality. This paragraph resonates well with the avant-garde. Imagination is clearly defined as a coping mechanism and also a tool to form a new reality.

The majority of the oppressed Black South Africans and a few liberals from other races were kept alive by a thread of hope. They all had an image of a free South Africa in their minds. New realities were forged out of the imagination of a free South Africa.

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15.

Book Review 1:

Blindness by Jose Saramago

Jose Saramago is a renowned novelist with a list of accolades. *Blindness* does not differ much from *Cain*. A theme of social injustice prevails in both novels. The doctor's wife was as brave as Cain facing God with serious accusations. In 1998, Jose Saramago was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. His work has enjoyed nominations in prestigious awards. I have noticed that he was not afraid to tackle disturbing issues. In one of his books, *Cain*, Saramago stands his ground against injustice perpetrated by God. In *Blindness*, the natural phenomenon, blindness becomes a pandemic. The people are in dire need of state intervention to find a cure. But their hopes are pinned on a collapsing system. Saramago acts like a lone ranger. He does not need confirmation from anyone to express his thoughts.

There is a double meaning in his quotation from the *Book of Exhortations*:

'If you can see, look. If you can look, observe.'

Exhort is defined as "strongly encouraging or urging someone to do something"

Saramago addresses a subject that not many people pay attention to. People shy away from subjects that pose a threat to humanity. Saramago has a peculiar way of expressing his deep thoughts. He does not force his ideas on anybody yet he has strong articulation of his view, often contrary to other beliefs.

The internees would not have survived if they did not take the matter into their own hands. Saramago does not tell the reader that the system is corrupt but shows what he means. He does not tell the people to stand up and defend themselves but creates a scenario that necessitates action. "The doctor's wife looked at the scissors, she tried to think why she could think of no

reason, frankly what reason could she hope to find in a simple pair of long scissors,?”
The doctor’s wife had no choice but to grab the scissors to save lives against armed murderers.

His writing is subtle. The title, *Blindness* is engaging and there is a pun. The ‘white sickness’ caused the suffering of a large proportion. People suffer blindness for the rest of their lives, especially when they are certain that they know and are in control. “I don’t think that we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see.” This is a bold statement. What is it that people do not see clearly? People might have eyes to see and remain blind if the distorted reality is their gospel truth.

Blindness can be metaphorical if one pays attention to the contentment of people with the status quo. Not all people question the nature of human existence. In Saramago’s world, when people lose their sense of sight they simply morph into savage animals.

The state and other institutions including schools subject people to certain beliefs that are detrimental to their lives. In *Cain*, Saramago challenges the portrayal of God as a saint and omnipotent. God errs and is insensitive and vindictive. In *Blindness*, the state fails to protect its people. The Ministry of Health’s quarantine zone is set up in an abandoned psychiatric hospital guarded by armed soldiers. The state issued a long list of oppressive laws that the inflicted must follow to protect the rest of the population from the ‘white sickness.’ Saramago distrusts authorities and institutions, he wants them to prove their worth. ‘...the Government regrets having been forced to exercise with all urgency what it considers to be its rightful duty, to protect the population by all possible means ...’ The government chooses words carefully to appear caring, but in true sense, is deceitful. People have the power to take a new course in their direction. They gained their freedom through their collective effort.

In *Cain*, there is law and order, but leaders are not held accountable, unlike the government in

Blindness where the blind are abandoned in an asylum hospital with little support and left to die. People are forced to make desperate decisions to ensure survival, making moral

choices they never thought they were capable of taking, such as being cruel or being a murderer. They turn into savages. Those who survived it were because of unity and order. This sounds like one of the messages Saramago wanted to portray. The pandemic forced the society to collapse. Saramago used the themes of violence, cruelty, and evil at a catastrophic level. He lived in the open for hope. The doctor's wife provides a glimpse of hope that not all is bad with the people. There is a manifestation of the human spirit bound by both weakness and strength. The big question is what he can turn into if he loses his vision. In the Bible, it is written that the attitude of Adam and Eve changed once they realised that they were naked. The question lingers. How does our appearance inform our prosocial behaviour and moral behaviour?

The allegory makes *Blindness* appeal to all the people. In times of pandemic, people make decisions that they never thought that they were capable of. The book questions the morality of people when there are scarce resources and the human race is on the verge of extinction. When the COVID-19 pandemic was ravaging the communities, some governments and people made weird decisions, some were even immoral. The availability of the drug to curb the pandemic was an issue. Pharmaceutical companies saw opportunities to maximise profit.

The plot is orchestrated by the misfortune of unnamed characters whose fate is sealed by the mysterious mass plague of blindness. The lack of names for the characters removes clutter. The apocalyptic vision comes into play when modern technology fails dismally to curb the spread of diseases. The focus remains on the main issue, the pandemic that has turned into an enigma. The disease turned into a pandemic. The first casualty is when the driver turns blind and is taken home. No one knows that the pandemic has started. A glimpse of hope diminishes when the ophthalmologist is also infected. His wife comes across a thread everyone relies on for survival. At first, it was confusing to read the book. The lack of punctuation; long sentences and no quotation marks around dialogues. But when we speak we do not put full stops. We pause a little and continue with a pace suitable to us. It is not time for a reader to get used to this writing style. The motif of blindness is all over the text, it helps to keep the content intact

and lends a correct perspective to the story.

Book Review 2:

***Signs Preceding the End of the World* by Yuri Herrera**

I liked the title, it is confusing. It commands attention. One can mistakenly assume that it is about the end of the world in the Holy Book. The signs preceding the end of the world draw a plethora of interpretations.

Yuri Herrera explores the changes that people go through during their travels and the translations people make in their minds and language as they move from one country to another. Makina knows how to survive in a violent environment, she knows what to do and who to talk to. Makina goes through what immigrants endure every day. She moves from certainty into uncharted territory with vulnerability. The author had a mammoth task to map out the path she had to follow. I do not recall her stumbling on the same obstacle. Makina's ability to communicate in English plays a crucial role in surviving the trip. The underworld is controlled by strange rules that have no appeal. Crossing a line could mean death.

The text depicts two worlds with their laws: Mexico and the United States. The underworld has footprints everywhere. Crossing the border into the United States is precarious. The border police have a fair share of corrupt dealings in the illegal border crossing. It did not take long for me to get hooked on Makina, the switchboard operator's distressing attempt to reach the border between Mexico and the United States. I liked the sense of urgency in the story. Makina springs into action from the first page. A man, a car, and a dog, and the screams of passers-by all perished in a sinkhole. Danger is lurking, she lives amid death. A violent death that could be triggered by both neglect of infrastructure and nature. It was hard not to side with Makina throughout the journey to find her brother. I commend Herrera for such a wonderful, multi-layered story. The conditions in Mexico helped me to conclude why Makina and her brother changed their minds. It was not easy to expect Makina to arrive in a foreign country and quickly find her brother and bring him home.

I liked the suspense, first, it was about Makina surviving the arduous trip. Then it was to see if she would find her brother. Many had tried to cross but died before reaching their destination. I did not expect Makina to cross the border easily. I had my expectations. Indeed, she was assaulted, badgered, and chased but she survived a lot of the underworld traps. I did not expect Makina to survive the whole ordeal as this was her first illegal trip across the border. I am fascinated by how the fragments of the story are woven. The underworld is feared because of atrocious cruelties. Makina's upbringing and closeness with gangsters helped her to absorb the pain and be toughened. Herrera shows a side of the gangsters that few people know about; gangsters are loyal to those who helped them in difficult times.

Herrera did not waste time trying to paint the picture of the underworld's ways of surviving. As I walked with Makina, I was introduced to the inner workings of the underworld. Even though the book is translated from Spanish into English, it is intact and flows smoothly. The storyline is coherent, and the writer does not leave readers hanging. I noticed that there are a lot of flat characters who are instrumental in her endeavour to find her brother. I know that the nature of her journey necessitated that she encountered a horde of strangers. Yuri Herrera carefully planned how each character would play their role and disappear. Writers are the best in their craft. To put together all the details requires enormous effort and determination. The minute details about everyday life gave life to the story. Herrera brought the readers close to them. Herrera researched the dealings of the underworld. The barriers of communication did not impede the mission. Makina soldiered on, she was resilient and determined to find her brother. The family has already lost a valuable member. In the quest to bring Makina's brother home, they risk losing her. Danger has always been with Makina from the beginning. Yuri Herrera has been good in gauging the level of threat Makina was facing at a given time. I like that Makina remains resolute throughout the journey even in an unfamiliar territory. She is still tough all the way but she is aware of her vulnerability.

The intricate nature of the journey required some form of fate. Yuri Herrera did not

excessively use fate to cushion Makina. It was going to spoil the plot. The novel has an interesting twist. There were no signs that Makina was not going to return home. Anything was expected of her brother because not so much was known about him. Even death would have been accepted.

The reader sees the world through Makina. It is a long journey full of hurdles associated with the underworld. I like the combination of the first and third-person narration. Sentences vary in length to suit the purpose. Punctuation marks are not necessarily used for direct speech like on page 58 when Makina wanted to pass a package to the driver. It was not difficult to follow the conversation. I liked the compact size of the novel. I finished reading while I was yearning for more. I was eager to know how Makina was going to return home.

The chapters summarise the whole story; *The earth, The water crossing, The place where the hills meet, The obsidian mound, The Place where the wind cut like a knife, The place where flags wave, The place where people's hearts are eaten, The snake that lies in wait, The obsidian place with no windows or holes for the smoke.* Under the aforementioned chapters, there is hardship, a battle for survival. Some characters are only mentioned by a single letter. The operations in the underworld are vividly portrayed in the grueling journey of a single character. The title can be mistaken for the end times in the Bible. However, a correlation exists if one looks at lawlessness and anarchy as it is written in the 'holy' book. Not so many Spanish words are used in the text. It would have been more interesting to spice up the text with it. Just to get a real taste of how the actual spoken. There is a term that is used frequently, *to verse*, I struggled to put it into context only to find out later that the translator used it as a bridge between cultures and languages. Makina had to overcome barriers of languages and cultures.

It seemed Makina was walking under the radar of the underworld. The decision not to return home by both Makina and her brother signalled the end of the old world, Mexico. The prospect of a better life for Makina was imminent.

The tiny novel addresses a variety of themes through the epic journey of Makina. I am

trying to figure out how can I put together these topics and still have a compact story.

Book Review 3:

***Fever Dream*: A novel** by Samanta Schweblin and translated by Megan McDowell

The third book, *Fever Dream*, was written by Samanta Schweblin. The book has its roots in Spanish literature. It is not the kind of book I enjoy reading. I do not like horror. But it is one of the best novels. It messed with my spirit, it was drowning my soul. Samanta Schweblin carefully used the timeline to move freely between the present and the recent past. Carla relates to Amanda that David got sick six years ago. Amanda shares the story with David. I felt like Schweblin managed to compress time. She managed to avoid confusion with the dialogue. The dialogue between Amanda and David is set in the present whereas the dialogue between Amanda and Carla is set in the recent past.

What made *Fever Dream* the novel to read was the craft. The structure of the conversation; David was searching for meaning in the conversation between Amanda and his mother. Carla tried to explain what turned David into the ‘monster’ that he turned out to be. David thought Amanda could have answers.

I liked the subtleness in the way Schweblin addressed the plight of the poor people in the hands of powerful landowners. David was poisoned by the water in the stream. Why?

What Carla did to seek help for her child still happens in other parts of the world, especially in poverty-stricken communities who still believe in witchdoctors and psychic powers. Samanta Schweblin skilfully painted the horror of the violation of David's soul by the healing process that is infused with elements of witchcraft. The psychic splits his spirit and migrates part of it to a healthy body, allowing an unknown spirit to enter David's body. After the process of transmigration, David starts behaving weirdly. During the narration, David becomes uncomfortable and tells Amanda that this story is irrelevant.

Amanda's stories did not fascinate David. David made it clear to Amanda that he wanted to hear stories about worms. Any narrative that was not about worms seemed to make David

bored. This was consistent with his tendency to kill poisoned animals. Since he was transmigrated, David had been killing animals and burying them while mourning. The mourning indicated that he was emotionally attached to animals.

Fever Dream is short and creepy. After the healer replaced half of David's soul, his parents locked him in his room every night. He devoted himself to killing poisoned animals and burying them in the yard. The dialogue is written well with the first speaker in italics. There was no obstruction to the meaning.

Reading *Fever Dream* was a mind-boggling exercise. There was no character or incident that I found interesting. To me, it was a question of how Samanta Schweblin put together all the pieces of information into a beautiful tapestry. I commend Megan McDowell for a stellar translation of such a powerful work of art from Spanish to English.

Book Review 4:

Cain by Jose Saramago

The cover page shows a savage image of a brutal fight, probably the killing of Abel by his brother Cain. The story is narrated through the eyes of Cain as he recounts all the events that led to his intense hatred of God. Not so many writers dare to question the omnipotence of God. Cain asks questions and exposes the cruel side of God. The acts of God lack logical explanation.

The avant-garde will be thrilled at how Saramago approaches the protected terrain of God. Brian Evenson wrote, 'I was interested in giving readers an experience devoid of conventional mediation, and I saw the story as a catalyst whose effect and whose success would be determined by the reader's ability to interact with it.' This was his idea behind writing *Altmann's Tongue*. Saramago leapt outside the confines of literature and caused enormous upset to the religious communities. Nobody knows God and His ways; anyone who is against Saramago's views lacks conclusive evidence for a successful argument.

If I did not read the novel *Blindness* prior, I would have found it difficult to read and understand the novel, *Cain*. The dialogue in *Cain* is written in long, run paragraphs, and only the most basic of capitalisation. I am no longer confused by Saramago's style of writing. Long sentences often create confusion but with Saramago not a single thread or pacing of a dialogue is lost. I enjoyed reading *Blindness*, but to my surprise, I was not sure of what I liked. There was a lot that was unique: style, punctuation marks, and long paragraphs. Later I realised that even though the sentences were long, they were beautiful lines. The style differs from what we are taught at schools, that is, writing creatively. What is common in both novels is his ability to create suspense early and keep it to the end. In *Blindness*, it was difficult to stop reading after the pandemic. In *Cain*, I wanted to know how Cain was going to survive in the wilderness and how God was going to deal with him at the end.

Saramago gives us a new way to explore our relationship with God. Saramago uses

sarcasm to show the misunderstanding existing between God and his subjects. He shows us that God is autocratic and cannot be trusted all the time. After reading *Cain* I realised that most of what we know about God is a figment of our imagination.

Cain is Saramago's genius work of his imaginative journey embedded in biblical episodes. I like the urgency in this novel. After a few lines, we know about the imperfection of God in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve could not utter a word. Cain blames God for the killing of Abel, God should have prevented it. God chose Abel's sacrifice of cattle over Cain's sacrifice of fruits.

Saramago was uncanny, he accused God of being clumsy with his thinking. Secondly, the lord showed a lamentable lack of foresight because if he didn't want them to eat that fruit, it would have been easy enough simply not to have planted the tree... Saramago provokes the readers. Some of the questions Cain asks are valid but biblically wrong. They are considered an act of defiance against God. It is easy to leave all the blame to Saramago. I commend him for being brave to lift the veil and cobweb that we have comfortably accepted as gospel truth.

This is against the notion that God is to be trusted all the time because he is a caring God.

Saramago skilfully managed to criticise discrepancies in God's ways using modern times' knowledge and understanding.

I always write the word God as a proper noun, but Saramago chose a small letter. This is symbolic of Cain's attitude toward God, a disdain for the omnipotent, cruel God.

Cain does not only paint a bad image of God; he shows us by asking relevant questions that are triggered by horrific events. Why inflicting pain? Why test those you say you love? Cain is angry with God for testing Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. It looked like Isaac was saved by Cain.

Teachers have always emphasised the importance of showing. Cain shows us his moral standing against God, making his case credible.

These are valid questions.

The destruction of the city of Sodom after he declared that he found not a single person who was innocent living there. “What about the children,” he asks. “Surely the children were innocent”.

Innocent children in countries at war like Ukraine, Palestine, Israel, Syria, and many more are killed mercilessly as God did.

Saramago used Cain's precarious position as an exploration of human conditions under God's command. I think Samantha Schweblin in *Fever Dream* employed the same writing technique when she exposed the suffering of poor people at the hands of powerful landowners.

We expect God to give brilliant answers that are beyond human comprehension.

Saramago did a wonderful job of reducing God to the level of an ordinary human being. The conversation flows smoothly. Cain's defiance does not mean that he has lost his powers. Cain is still a wanderer and the mark on his forehead still exists and no man has the power to kill him.

God's ways are said to be prudent but we find him killing thousands of people to the point where Cain says, “That our God, the creator of heaven and earth, is completely mad”. At Mount Sinai, thousands of Israelites were killed by Moses at God's command, for worshipping a Golden Calf, an act that Cain thinks was worse than killing his brother Abel. The forgiving nature of God comes into question again when the defeated Midianites are massacred and virgins are treated as loot. Where is mercy that everyone talks about in the holy book?

Cain as a vagabond treats his donkey well and can act reasonably and justly against the omnipotent God who unleashes catastrophic wrath on his subjects who are said to have been created in his image.

The reward for total obedience that Job received from God raises questions about the possibility of replacing children who died with new ones. Cain asks, “What is Satan doing in the Council of God in the first place?” Cain thinks Satan is just God himself, a disguise used when he wants to do something particularly nasty without taking responsibility. This act of God is the same as the incident in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Dr

Jekyll is kind, well-respected, and well-liked but he is violent, cruel, and aggressive, he has no conscience, and he kills without it bothering his feelings.

Saramago draws a comparison between God and Satan, and there is no difference. There is a question that lingers on the selection of Noah to build the ark and save the chosen animals and his family. Cain again emerges in the ark and God allows him to wreak havoc, raping women and killing all the people. Cain remains immortal as the curse continues. There is an element of fantasy that invokes bitter hatred for the author. The reading enjoyment of Cain will be determined by readers' ability to interact with it as Brian Evenson alluded in his writing.

Writing in Community Report

This is how I plan to conduct the workshop. The workshop will start by describing creative writing and its role in our communities. There are vital questions that I want to address; What is in the process of writing? How does intensive reading benefit writing? Can anyone be a writer? How consistent is the voice that tells a story, throughout the text?

I will pick stories from Reader 1 and Reader 2. They must tell me what they like or dislike about the stories. One of the stories will be *Girl* by Jamaica Kincaid. That is how they will experience what creative writing is.

The last part will be to write short paragraphs using our senses. We will all read our pieces and make comments.

There will be an open question-and-answer session about writing creatively.

In the last seminar, there was a session where we had to use the sense of smell and the sense of touch. I have to find a way to incorporate this exercise in my workshop for writing in the community. I feel compelled to lay a foundation first. Creative writing differs completely from the books which are read by children in schools. A definition from *Oxford Languages* says, it is a writing, typically fiction or poetry, which displays imagination or invention (often contrasted with academic or journalistic writing).

In the blink of an eye, I was exposed to the realities of creative writing. I remember it being mentioned that if we expected to be journalists or academics we were in the wrong place. My students of the day needs to understand what creative writing is.

One of the activities in my workshop was free writing. I simply told them that it is to write without worry and without stopping. All of the participants were literate and one candidate,

Sboniso Ndlovu is also my colleague. At first, I was worried about finding a suitable venue. A friend said I must try the art gallery. Luckily Tatham Art Gallery has a beautiful coffee

shop with a quiet balcony. I went there and the staff allowed me to use their space provided we were going to pay for the meals and drinks. I had a small budget to use. I chose the balcony and we finished without being disturbed. We started at 11 a.m. Saturday, 11 November 2023, was a hot and sunny day. We started with free writing, the whole process lasted for two minutes.

We started to write by using our sense of sight. The Art Gallery is on a busy commercial street in the CBD, opposite the City Hall. I was pleased with the level of cooperation. The success of the workshop was solely based on my ability to explain succinctly what was expected of my students. The rule was to write without lifting a pen for two minutes. I was the first to read my two-minute piece. The experience kicked in, I was relaxed. I found out they wrote beautiful short pieces. They enjoyed the writing session. It helped to lay the foundation. Sboniso in his writing, commented about the weather that was scorching at 40 degrees and continued to the traffic. Ndumiso chose to start with the cars.

We moved on to the three-minute second writing session. This time the writing was based on sound. At this time, they were relaxed and their writing was coherent. The sounds were synonymous with the environment. The city centre on weekends is abuzz with noise from cars and occasionally from people. I found out that it was their first time at Tatham Art Gallery. The writing was about their experience in the gallery. I noticed that although the writing was rushed, the content was rich with information from observation. Everyone read their piece, this was the last exercise. Ndumiso improved a lot in his piece.

I allowed them to read the reading material which I brought as a sample. I asked them to be free to ask questions whenever they needed clarity. It was a touching experience.

The second was for reading. I selected four short stories to read with my group: *Bathroom*, *Church on the Way to Hell*, *Number One*, and *Treasure under the Dark Cloud*.

I read the *Bathroom* piece, and Mr. Ndlovu made a positive comment concerning the description. He said it helps to put a reader inside the house. Miss Ndawo said the description worked well to create imagery. I noticed that when I read for the audience the pieces sounded

real. It could be because I was not reading for the teachers or students who know what makes a good piece. For the first time, I took pride in my work. Sboniso picked up a theme of neglect. Ndumiso agreed with him. He thought the piece ends when a reader expects more. He thought I should have given a hint of what I was going to do hence the neglect.

The second piece was a rant, *Number One*, on completion of reading Mr. Ndlovu found it strange that the piece is written in small letters. I asked him if it was going to be different if I used the general grammatical rules. They all agreed that the piece is typically South African. The pattern of presidents and empty p can be identified with South Africa. A gloomy picture is painted because of political scandals.

The *Church on the Way to Hell* piece was well received and the character of the pastor was described in many ways. The audience moved the focus from the church as a corrupt institution. They found it easier to attack the pastor than to look at the role played by the church in turning people into conniving thieves and liars. I thought they would pay attention to the source of the rot which I think starts from inside. It proved that once the piece is in public hands, the audience will interpret it, how they see fit. Mr. Ndlovu commented on the anger as represented in the style of writing.

Treasure under the Dark Cloud does not feature among my favourite pieces, but the audience liked this piece. Miss Ndawo said it was a story of hope, not all is lost. Mr. Ndlovu agreed with her. He further highlighted that the story emphasised a second chance opportunity. I could see that the audience was exhausted when I finished reading but they honoured my request to participate.

It was the first time I read my work out in the writing community. It felt good. I made it clear that the audience was free to critique my work since I do not write for myself but for the public.

Commentary on the Anonymous Reader's Report

I waited eagerly for the anonymous reader's report. I knew my work was far from perfect but I had put in an enormous effort. I had little confidence that my effort was going to be recognised. I remember the first piece I submitted with the application form to enrol for a Master's in Creative Writing. It was a long piece narrating the root cause of my sour relationship with my father. I knew that Rhodes University offered the best course in creative writing. It was not the first time my work was subjected to scrutiny. I have asked colleagues to read my pieces and make comments. In the seminars, I learnt and gained confidence in how the teachers dissect pieces. I never doubted the brutal honesty and expertise of the teachers.

When I received the anonymous reader's report email, I dreaded to open the email. I do not handle disappointments well. I counseled myself that creative writing is a difficult and rigorous process. Finally, I opened the email and carefully read it. I took note of the two aspects; objectivity and honesty. That was what I wanted; numerous pieces matched the standard but other pieces needed attention. Interestingly, the anonymous reader pinpointed areas to fine-tune and offered suggestions. My favourite piece; *A Church on the Way to Hell* had the potential to be great. Some discrepancies were highlighted, and the piece had more telling than showing. I revisited the study notes. I found a piece titled *Condition of Creation*. It was a lone piece with no additional information. I had to go through tons of papers to look for references. "The condition of creation is a condition of entrancement. Till you begin – *obsession*; till you finish- *possession*. Something, someone, lodges in you; your hand is the fulfiller not of you but of *it*." I chose to write against my Christian belief knowing very well what a tirade and scepticism I was inviting. I had an urge to express my opinion against the vile nature of religion. "The condition of creation is a condition of dreaming, when suddenly, obeying an unknown necessity, you set fire to a house or push your friend off a mountain top." Writing this piece gave me the freedom I never had. I

went over the piece and found other grey areas. I slowly initiated changes and watched the piece take shape. Father Sabela could only use fake accounts on social media platforms to live a double life. I did not mention this earlier. To my surprise, the revised piece became bold and controversial. The anonymous reader wanted synergy in *Church on the Way to Hell*. The long service is best described by the boredom and anguish the narrator went through.

The jump to the royal depicts the narrator's attitude towards the church in broader terms. The criticism was not limited to Father Sabela.

The *Bathroom* piece gave me a hard time to write. It surprised me that it received a warm welcome from most readers who had an opportunity to read it. The anonymous reader made a positive comment. I wrote this piece from a position of confinement. I relied on my raw experience with the bathroom.

It was challenging to write *The Rift* piece because I am part of all that is happening in the family. The story will always be subjective. This piece provided some form of therapy. I do not think I have mastered the art of using the minute details to craft a personal story. The Reader suggested that I cut the story short. There is a lot of telling and not enough showing.

It is a welcome coincidence that the former president is in the news again with the new party. Number One is meant to be sarcastic. It is a rant. *Number One* and *Church on the Way to Hell* have the same tone and attitude. That is my voice. As I write this reflective journal I realise the influence of Jose Saramago in my pieces. He was fearless. These pieces instilled hope in me and invigorated the desire to write more.

Treasure Under the Dark Cloud was hard to mould this story into something believable. In a country like South Africa, it is common to find graduates taking any job available. Scores of graduates roam the streets, and a lot resort to low-paying jobs for survival. Everyone needs to

come to terms with the reality of rampant unemployment. Nomandla was smart to grab the opportunity that came with new challenges. The celebration was necessary in an environment where it is difficult even to find a job as a street sweeper. Nomandla's reaction depicted the real-life experience. The Reader says, "One doesn't go from a broken dream to be elated at a lesser option". Nomandla's first option became a dead dream, the lesser option is realistic and practical to sustain her hopes and livelihood.

No Easy Way touches on using dark forces to mitigate challenges faced by the youth and lazy people. The story was indeed written hastily. I tried to rearrange it as per the recommendations. Tough economic times came with opportunities for the charlatans and unreliable healers to rob the unsuspecting people. In my community, I know people who have tried shortcuts to move from the rags to the riches. In most cases, it is a fraud. If by chance it happens to be true, they suffer serious consequences. Lindani was very young to consider this path to create wealth. Like all boys his age who do not like education, they become victims of unscrupulous traditional doctors.

I replaced *The Human Fountain* piece with *Sour Love*. I revered Mbongeni Ngema because of his immense talent and vast experience in literature. The piece was flagged down. It does not belong to the portfolio. *Sour Love* is based on real-life experience. The challenge in writing this piece was objectivity.

The supervisor has been professional and helpful throughout the writing process. I made her the first choice because of her brutal honesty and 'feisty' attitude towards literature. During seminars, I noticed how she paid attention to minute details. I did not want sympathy I wanted someone who would show mercy to me. I knew that I would emerge victorious.