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Abstract

This thesis is a novella in fragments set in contemporary Lesotho. It tells the story of a Mosotho woman in her 30s who has spent a long time living out of the country. She returns to search for a former lover who she hasn't seen for 15 years. The nonlinear narrative follows her journey, exploring a range of themes, including sexuality, gender and class relations, memory and time, relationship to place, non-conformity and defiance in the face of societal pressure and conformism. The style of writing is inspired by a diverse range of writers, including Sonallah Ibrahim for his understated, sparse and minimalist prose, Tina May Hall for her ability to tell a story in fragmented vignettes, Noy Holland for her understanding of time as synchronous and non-linear, and Ayi Kwei Armah for his skill in evoking the feelings, textures and specificities of a place.

The sun is low by the time I get to the border. I join the queue of cars and stare at the fields of dry grass on the side of the road. Next to the clearing agents' offices is a shop that sells wedding clothes. A mannequin stands on its roof, dressed in a flowing bridal gown, ready for her wedding day. She stands there and waits, in all weather, in all seasons, her head turned towards Maseru. She's stood there for years, through rain and wind and dust storms. Her dress is faded and tattered now, a dull brown climbing up its torn edges.

I follow her eyes and look out at Maseru, half-hidden, cradled by hills. Buildings and office blocks peeking out from between the trees. I haven't told Mama that I'm coming home. I've told no one. I roll my window down and light a cigarette, the early evening air cold against my cheek and my arm as I smoke and edge forward in the queue. There are taxis parked to my right, waiting. A guy is washing one of them, bent over with a bucket in his hand, the water trickling through the dirt. Smoke rising from grills. Women selling eggs, coffee, liphaphatha, russians. A group of men stand by the road, wrapped in blankets, their long shadows stretched out across the tar.

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I haven't seen you for fifteen years, but as soon as I cross you're there, waiting for me, wherever I look. A taxi ahead pulls over to the side of the road and I watch us climb into it. I stop at the traffic lights and see you, walking along the pavement with someone. I blink, the light changes and when I turn around you're gone. It's getting darker now. The hills around the city are hazy, their colours washed out. A thin blanket of smoke hangs over everything. As I'm driving up Mpilo I look out at the cliffs of Lancer's Gap, the outlines of the trees and rocks on top of it only just visible.

In the lights from the cars I watch a street vendor standing behind his piles of apples, bananas, bags of makikip. He's pulled his hood up over his cap, the tip of his cigarette burning red. You're there too, reaching into your pockets to look for coins, bending forward to ask the guy for a light.

And here you are, standing at the corner where I turn up the road to Mama's house. Looking down at your phone, calling me even though it's late. 'I'm at your place. Please come, I need to see you. I can't be alone right now.' Your voice low, urgent. You always say that – 'I'm at

your place...’ – when what you really mean is that you’re standing all the way down the road, because I’ve told you to never come up to the house.

Mama’s house in my headlights. The burglar door already locked. Windows closed, curtains drawn. I turn off the engine and sit there in the dark. The curtains open and Mama’s face appears in the window, frowning, trying to see who’s outside. She moves away. I don’t know if she recognised my car. I sigh, undo my seatbelt.

Mama half-smiling, her eyes wide open as she stands at the door and watches me lock the car and walk up to her. We stand and look at each other. She shakes her head and pulls me into a hug. ‘Hai uena, how can you just arrive like this?’

‘Are you here just for the weekend? Just for one night? Is there something special happening? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?’

Our conversation standing in the kitchen feels like our conversations on the phone. Mama asks a question and I give a short answer, telling her what I know she wants to hear. Then silence, until she asks the next question. She moves around the kitchen quickly, saying again and again that I came just in time, that she was just about to start cooking. She puts water to boil, finds an onion, pulls chicken pieces out of the freezer.

I eat quickly, surprised at how hungry I am, until I remember that this is the first time I’ve eaten today. Mama sits on the edge of her armchair, legs pressed together, her plate balanced on her knees. Her back straight, pushing small pieces of food carefully onto her fork. When she runs out of questions she starts talking about how cold the winter has been, and then she moves on to people I know. Cousins. Some of my high school friends. The ladies in her church group. I put my plate down and lean my head back. I make sounds of surprise, disapproval, agreement. After a while I close my eyes. I still feel like I’m driving, the sensation of movement, the road in front of me. Mama goes quiet and I hear her sighing and moving around. She switches the TV on.

I stand up and take our plates into the kitchen. I fill the sink with hot water and look out the window at the empty street. The neighbours’ outside light illuminates only the bricks below it, the door, a small patch of cement paving.

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The quiet of the house after Mama's gone to sleep. I close the front door carefully behind me. No one else around at this time. I walk fast, down the street to the corner where you're waiting. Standing with your hands in your pockets, looking out towards the main road. You turn when you hear me. In the light from the streetlamp I can see that your face has started to heal. The swelling has gone down. The bruises around your eye aren't as dark as they were. One side of your upper lip is still slightly raised. A scab has formed there.

'Hey... ' My voice is flat. I don't move towards you. After how you were the other day I'm watching myself.

You look away, shake your head. Your lips pressed together, like you're trying to hold something in. 'Look, I'm sorry OK? Please can I stay with you tonight? Please. I can't be alone.'

'Are you crazy? My Mum...'

'Please. I'll be so quiet. I'll leave before she wakes up. Please.'

I look behind my shoulder, then quickly from left to right. 'How did you get here?'

'I got a lift. Please, Nthati...'

A car drives past us. I watch its red brake lights getting smaller. Nothing else moving. The billboard on the side of the road stands over us silently. I look at you again, then I turn and start to walk back up the street. You follow me.

We sit outside, at the other end of the house, away from the light and Mama's window. A blanket wrapped around us, leaning against the brick wall. For a while we both say nothing. I look at the silhouette of the tree at the bottom of the garden, how its shape rises up, its back and shoulders curving. Faces form in the gaps between its leaves, eyes missing and mouths wide-open, all of them watching us. Your arm brushes against mine. I twitch. You put your hand out to give me something and my fingers close around a small glass bottle. I twist it

open. The smell of brandy, its sharp burning sliding down to my stomach. The sound of you striking a match, the quick glow as you light a cigarette. Silence again.

Your hand moves up and down my thigh. I turn to look at you but I can't see your face. You're a dark shape, the outline of your head merged with the wall and the blanket.

'I'm sorry...' Your voice is just above a whisper.

I wait for you to keep talking. I don't want to ask you again, but when the silence stretches I can't hold it any longer. 'Will you tell me what happened now?'

You shift, take your hand off my thigh, reach for the brandy. 'Look...it was just a stupid fight. It was nothing.'

'It didn't look like nothing. It looked like...'

'I'm fine. I just want to forget about it.'

You rest your head against my shoulder. I clench my teeth. I can feel your slow breathing. Both of us quiet again.

We squat in the dark under the tree so that we don't have to use the bathroom inside. The lights of other houses in the distance, the sky above us wide open. We take off our shoes and slip into the house. When we lie down you move closer and hold onto me, gripping tight, your chest pressed against my back. I lie there for a long time, unable to fall asleep. My mind racing, but I don't move because I don't want to wake you up. Your body is curled around mine, your left arm locked around me. Your face right up close to the back of my head, my hair brushing against your forehead and your nose and your eyelashes and it's as if you're trying to get even closer, trying to hold on even tighter.

At the first hint of light I shake you awake and we walk to the door, both of us moving as quietly as we can. I'm barefoot and you're in your socks, carrying your shoes in one hand. I turn the key slowly, holding my breath. You pull me towards you just as you're about to leave. Your hands gentle around my face, your forehead pressed to mine, your skin warm.

You kiss me quickly, our lips moving silently. You squeeze my hand, step outside and start to walk down the street. Taking long strides, your head bent and your eyes on the ground. Hands in pockets, shoulders stiff and raised, elbows squeezed in to your sides. You don't turn to look back at me. You grow smaller as you walk down the hill and soon I can't see you anymore. The early morning sky so pale it's almost white. Soft lines of pink and blue on the horizon.

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I want to find you.

Sunday morning. The sound of taps opening and closing. The kettle boiling. Mama's shuffling footsteps. Still in her slippers, singing to herself as she moves from room to room.

I keep my eyes closed. I lay awake for a long time last night. When I finally fell asleep you were there, in my dreams. I woke up with the feeling of you in my skin and a strong, clear thought in my mind.

I want to find you.

I must have known this yesterday without thinking it. I must have felt it, this must have been what made me decide to pack my bag, get into my car and drive home.

Mama knocks on my door, pushes it open. I sit up. She stands there in her dressing gown and headwrap, her hands cupped around a mug. Her morning face looks old, tired. Shadows under her eyes, lines that didn't used to be there.

'Nthathi, it would be so nice if you came to church with me...'

The old feeling of anger as soon as she says the words, burning up through my chest. She keeps talking. 'There are so many people there who would be so happy to see you, who haven't seen you in so many years. And I think...I think it would be good for you.'

I take a deep breath, keep my eyes down.

‘Nthati...’

‘No, Ma.’ I look up at her. My voice comes out louder than I meant it to. Her eyebrows lift and her face grows harder. I swallow. ‘I’m...I already told Neo I’d go see her today.’

She keeps looking at me, frowning now. ‘What time are you driving back? After lunch?’

I think of the drive ahead of me this afternoon. I have two meetings tomorrow. I’m supposed to have my presentation ready. I think of my work files, sitting on the table in my flat where I left them.

I want to find you.

‘Nthati?’

‘I’m not sure.’

She sighs, shakes her head and walks away, leaving the door open.

We move around the house in silence. Not looking at each other, not talking to each other. Mama’s stopped singing. I make coffee and stand in the kitchen, looking out the window, while she takes a bath. After she’s left I go outside to have a smoke. I look down at my bare toes, at the cracks in the soil. The morning sun warm against my neck. I take a drag, hold it in, and there, suddenly, a memory of you.

We’re sitting at our spot, on the mountain behind your place. Just the two of us. Sharing a quart, watching the sun go down. I reach my hand out for your cigarette. You pass it to me, catch my eye and smile. You watch me, then shake your head and pull the cigarette out of my fingers.

‘Look. This is what you’re doing.’ You take a quick pull and blow the smoke out immediately. ‘You can’t smoke like that. You have to pull it inside first.’ You push your fingers against your chest, take a longer drag, inhale. Wait for a moment, eyes still on me. Exhale slowly.

I hold the memory, turn it around. I can feel you more than I can see you. I can feel your eyes, your smile. I can feel what mood you're in. You're there, but when I try to look closer you move, you change.

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You could be anywhere. I don't know how to begin, who to talk to, where to look. If today was a day fifteen years ago where would I go? Down this road to the circle, into the stream of hooting cars and trucks and taxis and 4+1s. Past the old sand stone cathedral with its two spires. To my left the side streets that take me down to stopong, past all the street vendors selling sweets and fruit and moroho and shoes and clothes, past the wholesale and furniture stores that blast music from speakers at their doors, to sit and wait in a taxi until it's full enough to leave. But not today, today I'm driving, up this main road past my old high school, and here is where I used to cross the road in my school uniform, and there is the place where we'd all go and buy makoonya and russians and chips that we'd soak in salt and vinegar. Up now past shops and butcheries, past yards full of imported cars, to the traffic lights by Lakeside.

Maqalika Dam on both sides of me, the water stretching out into the distance with sunlight dancing on it and houses all along its edges. Cows on the side of the road and people walking and cars being washed and mekh'ukh'u painted in bright colours. Newspaper headlines on lampposts, stacks of tyres piled high and a man selling bags of oranges from the back of his car. To my right an area of grass and rocks and pine trees that opens up and then is gone. Up round a bend and when I see the petrol station at Khubetsoana I pull over and stop and turn my engine off.

My palms are sweaty when I take them off the steering wheel. I can feel my heartbeat in my throat. I stare out the car window, not moving. I don't remember the last time I came all the way out here. Over the years the Maseru I know has shrunk, my rare visits confined to just a few days, a few roads. The road that takes me from the border to Mama's house and back out again. The road that takes us to the mall when Mama asks that we go grocery shopping and she piles the trolley high because she knows that at the till I'll pull out my card and pay. The road to Neo's house. The roads that take us to visit a cousin or an aunt or an old friend that Mama insists we have to go see.

And yet here I am, parked in front of a shop next to this petrol station in Khubetsoana because the feeling of you is still in my skin and the thought from this morning is still in my head.

I want to find you.

I leave the car where it is and start to walk. This petrol station used to be my landmark. If I was in a taxi I'd get off somewhere here, then turn right straight afterwards, up this tar road. I walk past a church and then a school with its playground empty, goalposts standing still in the middle of a field. Sunday midday now and there's that slow, lazy feeling. The roads emptier than usual and no one moving around like they're in a rush. A lady standing at a mokh'ukh'u chatting and laughing. A small girl holding onto her skirt, watching me with big eyes as I walk past.

The police station to my left and then a shop that I think I remember but when I get to the crossroads I stop. I used to leave the main road somewhere here, onto a dirt road and then onto a footpath. I look around me for a landmark, a building that I would remember, but I find nothing. Did there used to be so many houses out here? Walls and fences and cars and vegetable plots everywhere I look, with dirt roads and footpaths leading off in all directions. The houses stretch out as far as I can see, all the way up the mountain.

I follow the dirt road in front of me, walking slowly, looking left to right, trying to remember. You're walking ahead of me and I'm hanging back, watching you from behind. I like how you walk, your neck and back held up straight, your shoulders moving gently from side to side. You're wearing a white T-shirt and brown, knee-length cargo shorts. My eyes move from your shoulders to your back to your ass, down to your legs and your worn down All Stars moving back and forth, your slow footsteps kicking up small clouds of dust.

A house with faded green walls. I stop. I know this house. I know its colour and its high windows and the way that it stands right by the road. A footpath that begins here, leading off to the left, winding between houses. My heartbeat rising again, my legs heavy. I follow the path, looking from house to house, feeling sure that I'm about to see you, standing outside talking to someone or filling a bucket at the tap or sitting on your doorstep.

The faces of strangers look back at me with a quiet curiosity. Two women outside a house, watching me. One of them frowns as I walk past and our eyes meet. A man coming from the opposite direction glances up at me before sweeping his eyes down the rest of my body. I know that I must look lost or crazy, but my focus is on walking, on searching, because I know that somewhere along this path...

Here. Facing me, just like that, are the malaene where you used to stay. Five rooms standing in a line, sharing walls. Five windows. Five doors, all closed except for the one on the far right that's been left slightly open. An old barbed wire fence runs around the property, but there's no gate. I could walk right over and knock on your door.

It's the same place, it's a different place. The corrugated iron roof held down by bricks. The cement grey walls. The tap where I remember it being, off to the left. The toilet at the back. Rocks piled up around a small vegetable bed.

Places have no memory. Buildings have no memory. I – we – walked up and down this path so many times, but the soil's forgotten. I stare at your room with its closed door, the second one from the left. It's forgotten. Its floor has forgotten the mattress that was pushed up against the wall. The small table with your two-plate stove. The one chair. The paraffin heater. The empty quarts that stood in the corner. Its walls have forgotten everything that happened within them. Everything we did. Everything we said. Our laughter, our crying, our shouting.

The door opens. A man walks out of your room, shirtless, his stomach hanging over his trousers. We stare at each other. He frowns at me, his mouth open. It's too late for me to break eye contact.

'M'e? Can I help you?' His voice carries over to where I'm standing.

I stutter as I apologise, saying that I must have come to the wrong place. I start to walk away. He stays where he is, not moving, still watching me.

I keep walking up the path, with no destination now. What if I had told him the truth? 'I'm looking for a woman called Lebo. She lived in the room you're staying in, fifteen years ago. Have you seen her anywhere?'

How many people have moved in and out of those rooms in fifteen years? Do any of your old neighbours still live there? The woman who lived right next to you, who shared a wall with you. The looks she'd give us. The way she'd watch when I knocked on your door in the evenings, when we left together in the mornings. I'd greet her and she'd reply in a high, stiff voice. She never smiled at me. I used to wonder, sometimes, if she noticed the small things. A hand resting on a shoulder, around a waist. The way our fingers would brush against each other when we walked. I used to wonder if she could hear us at night.

I stop walking once I've lost sight of your room. The mountain in front of me. The houses in the distance not so close together. The path I'm on leads through an open field.

We're walking, late at night, somewhere around here. Taking a shortcut, making our way back to your room. There's a full moon out and in the soft blue light I can see everything around me. The path. The tall grass. The outlines of rocks and buildings and trees. The cliffs on top of the mountain.

Your friends are some distance ahead of us, moving in and out of view in the half darkness. We fall behind. Holding hands, our fingers interlaced. You're helping to keep me steady. My legs are far away and I can't stop laughing because walking feels so difficult. You stop, your hands moving to my waist as you pull me closer. For a second I'm afraid that one of your friends will look back and see our silhouettes pressed together, but the night around us is still, empty, waiting. I kiss you back, softly at first, then harder. The feeling of wanting more, pushing myself against you, moving my hands over your face, your head, the back of your neck.

Where were we coming from? There was a tavern somewhere around here that you always went to. Pieces come back to me. I don't remember the building or where it stood. I remember the feeling of being inside when it was crowded, pushed up against other bodies. The smell of sweat and the dirtied, yellowish walls. Watching you play pool with the guys. Having to shout over the noise to be heard. The relief of stepping outside. Standing around a

fire in winter, for hours sometimes. Toes frozen, hands outstretched. You pulling me aside to say something. Being able to see your breath in the cold night air. The way the light from the tavern's windows fell across the side of your face.

I keep walking, across the open field, then back onto the path that squeezes itself between fences and buildings. Moving closer to the mountain. I come to a dirt road and watch an old white bakkie loaded with beer crates drive past me. I follow it until it's out of sight, keeping to the road, and after about ten minutes I think I see the place I'm looking for.

A large building in a wide, empty yard. Branded signs with pictures of beer bottles, the price of quarts in bold white numbers. Sunday afternoon and the place is full. Men moving in and out of the front door, some standing or sitting outside in the sun. Famo music pulsing from inside.

Faces turn as soon as I step into the yard. Eyes follow me through the door. I keep my back straight, my expression blank. Not meeting the eyes of any of the men I walk past. The barman looks at me in surprise when I ask for a quart and three loose cigarettes, but says nothing as he takes my money and opens the fridge. I stand at the counter and look down at my phone, pretending to be busy with something.

The taste of beer. The mingled sounds of famo and deep voices talking and laughing. You could almost be here. I lift my quart and as I take a drink I glance around the room. The pool table, the beer posters on the wall, the crates stacked in the corner. An old jukebox next to the door that I don't remember.

Even a quick look tells me that I'm the only woman in here. I meet the eyes of a guy leaning against the wall on the other side of the room, staring straight at me. I look down again. We used to come here with a group of guys, and they treated you like one of them. I tagged along and no one seemed to mind. I felt left out sometimes, unsure of how to join the pool games or the conversations about soccer or the loud pushing and laughing. You'd notice this and come stand next to me, swinging an arm over my shoulder as you kept listening and laughing along to whatever the guys were talking about.

One guy was light skinned and quiet. I remember a jacket that he always wore. A faded blue. He was thin. I can see the drop of his shoulders, the bend of his back. Another guy had darker skin and was chubbier. A round face. A solid presence. He had a deep voice, was surer of himself, frowning, picking fights. A memory – I think – of him shouting, of him pushing another boy. A name comes to me. Moshe. I hold his name in my mind and something about the look in his eyes becomes clearer. I can see the set of his eyebrows, thick. The shadows under them.

I stare at my phone and notice the time. 14:20. I should have crossed the border by now. I should be on the road back to Jo'burg.

‘Hau baby, why are you sitting here alone?’

A slurring voice, right next to me. I look up into a face I've never seen. Standing over me, smiling, eyes glazed. So close that I can smell the alcohol on his breath. The irritation rises through me, fast and sharp. I raise my eyebrows at him. He looks quite a bit younger than me. I stand up. Slide my phone and car keys into the pockets of my jeans. Pick up my half empty quart and my three cigarettes. Begin to walk towards the door.

‘Hey, wait, no, I just want to talk to you!’ He stumbles after me. The other guys are watching. Their shouts and laughter follow us outside.

I look around for a place to sit. He sees this and hurries back inside, walks out again with two empty crates. A silly smile on his face. The guys outside are also laughing now. Faces turned to us. He puts the crates down and signals to me, looking very happy with himself. Something in me loosens and I go over and sit next to him. I light a cigarette and when I see how he's looking at it I hand him one.

‘You know,’ he says slowly, ‘you know, I've never seen you around here.’ He lifts one hand in the air and makes a kind of circle movement. ‘Never,’ he repeats, shaking his head.

I look back at him. ‘I stay in Gauteng.’

He nods. 'So why are you here? I mean...here...' He pushes both his hands down towards the soil. 'Here in Naleli.' The hand holding the cigarette gestures at the tavern, the yard we're sitting in, the dirt road.

I drink and let a few seconds of silence pass. The words jolt in my mouth, but I say them anyway. 'I'm looking for someone...someone who used to stay around here.'

His eyes open wide. He replies eagerly, pushes his hand against his chest. 'I'm from here. This place is my home. I'm sure I can help you. Who are you looking for? I'm sure I know them.'

'Her name's Lebo...'

'Lebo...Lebo mang?'

'Lebo Hlalele.'

It feels so weird to say your full name out loud like that. To tell a stranger that I'm trying to find you. I look down at my feet, at all the cigarette butts scattered in the soil. Too many to count. The bottle caps that have been pressed into the ground, the metal rusted and flattened into new shapes. They're everywhere I look. I think of all the feet that have walked up and down here in fifteen years. Into the tavern and back outside. Of all the times that someone's flicked away the end of a cigarette, or opened a quart and thrown a bottle cap onto the ground to join the others.

'Eish...no...I don't know any Lebo Hlalele. What does she look like?'

We were more or less the same height. As soon as your hair started to grow you'd shave it off. You said you felt better like that, more like yourself. You were slim, you liked to keep fit. You used to do push-ups and sit-ups alone in your room. You always wore guys' clothes. Beanies and caps. Loose T-shirts and button up shirts. Shorts and jeans that were a size too big for you. Sometimes people would call you Abuti or Ntate, mistaking you for a guy. You never corrected them, but when I was with you I didn't feel like I was with a guy at all. There

was something so soft about you, something in the way you talked and listened and cried. In the feeling of your hands, your skin.

I shake my head. 'It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago. And she was just renting here. She wasn't from here.'

He makes a noise and takes a long drink from his quart. He's sitting bent forward, his elbows resting on his knees. Swaying from side to side.

I look up at the mountain. My eyes moving along the line of cliffs at the top. Our spot was somewhere below that line, but now I forget exactly where. A rock that we used to sit on, for hours sometimes.

'So tell me...'

The sound of his voice interrupts my thoughts. I turn back to him.

'Tell me...' he repeats. His eyes are red, his eyelids drooping. He pulls twice on his chin at an imaginary beard. I look back at him in silence. He raises his eyebrows. I continue to say nothing.

'Are you married?' he asks finally. 'Where's your man?' He's watching me with a smile, waiting for some kind of a reaction.

I sigh as I put out my cigarette, finish my quart and stand up. I walk back into the tavern without looking at him, without turning when he starts to shout again.

I hand the barman my empty quart and ask for two more cigarettes, then decide that I might as well say it. That it's worth trying. 'I'm looking for someone called Lebo Hlalele?'

He stares back at me, his face blank.

'What about someone called Moshe? He used to live somewhere around here.'

‘Moshe Radebe?’

‘I’m not sure. I don’t remember his surname.’

He shrugs. ‘I know Moshe Radebe. We’re friends. He comes here all the time. I don’t know any other Moshe who lives around here.’

‘OK. Can I ask you a favour? Can I leave my number with you? Could you ask him to call me?’

The barman laughs out in surprise, his laughter a deep rumble. ‘You’re very forward,’ he says, his eyes resting on me.

I shake my head, trying to keep my irritation and impatience down. ‘No. It’s not like that. He’s an old friend. I haven’t seen him in a long time. We lost touch.’

He nods and smiles, says nothing.

‘Do you have a pen? A piece of paper?’

He finds a newspaper and rips out a piece of it from the bottom of a page. Disappears into a room at the back and comes out with a pen. I write my name and number down. He laughs again, pockets the piece of paper and moves away to serve another customer.

I walk out of the tavern, across the yard. Ignoring the shouts of ‘Hey baby, wait!’ that drift down the road after me.

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15.30 by the time I get back to my car. The beer hasn’t calmed me. I feel angry, dizzy, restless. Sweat running down the back of my neck. I don’t know where to go. I can’t see Mama right now. Can’t face her questions, her eyes.

I can’t drive back to Jo’burg today.

From a liquor store next to the petrol station I buy a bottle of gin and two cartons of juice. I drive back the way I came. I turn the volume of the radio right up. It's shitty music, but I want the sound to fill the whole car, to surround me, to drown out the noise in my head. The pavement is too close, the lampposts swooping down towards me. I'm flying along the curves and turns and hills of the road.

Back into town. Out past Thetsane, out to Masowe where Neo and her husband are renting a house. I'm not sure that I want to see Neo right now, but it's somewhere to go. Somewhere that's better than being at Mama's.

Masowe. Construction happening everywhere I look. Tall, double-storied houses in the middle of dusty, open land. Complexes with rows of smaller houses, surrounded by walls and metal gates. I stop outside one of these and call Neo. She answers with a slow, sleepy voice, not recognising my number. When I tell her I'm outside the gate she lets out a long shriek and hangs up.

I roll the window down while I wait and stare at the bare ground around me. The patches of dry grass. A half-finished house some distance away. Four jagged brick walls, still climbing, holding no roof. Empty dark squares where the windows should be. I turn when I hear the clanking sound of the gate being pushed open. Neo stands aside to let me in, her hands swaying above her head in a kind of dance. A smile across her face.

Her four-year-old son Thuso looks up at me, open-mouthed, as we walk into the house. Her husband Sello is slouched across the couch. He stands up to greet me, straightening his sweater. I sit down, placing the gin and juice cartons and cigarettes onto the coffee table as I try to keep up with the long string of questions coming from Neo.

The TV is on. The inside of the small house is warm and stuffy. The smell of food hangs in the air and there are dirty plates on the floor. Neo disappears into the kitchen. Sello sits back down and tries to make conversation, his eyes moving back and forth between the TV and me. His one leg is jumping up and down, the bottom of his slipper making a soft tapping noise as it hits the floor. I wonder if he realises that he's doing that. Thuso has climbed onto the couch and squeezed himself next to his father. I can see one of his eyes watching me from behind Sello's shoulder.

Neo comes out with three glasses. Her voice is high-pitched and she's smiling too widely. The stuffy house, the combined sounds of the TV and Neo's voice, the uncomfortable look on Sello's face and the way the back of his slipper keeps tap-tap-tapping on the floor. This four-year-old staring at me. Everything feels too close, too crowded. I shouldn't have come here. I'm finding it hard to breathe, the feeling of dizziness getting worse.

I reach over and pour three glasses of gin and juice. Thuso immediately starts to whine about also wanting juice. Neo stands up again and goes into the kitchen to get another glass. I stare at the TV and drink fast. Taking long, deep gulps.

I last saw Neo at Christmas. We repeat the same things we said then. She wants to know what life in Jo'burg is like. How things are at work. I tell her that everything's great. She tells me what she always tells me.

'You're so lucky.'

I nod. Pour myself a second drink.

She asks if I've seen any of our other friends. I shake my head. She should know that I haven't. She should know by now that she's the only one I keep in touch with. But it's an excuse for her to start telling me what everyone's up to. Who's just had a baby, who's got a new job, who's fighting with who and why.

Sello's staring silently at the TV now. Making no effort to look at us or to be part of the conversation. I pick up a cigarette and catch Neo's eye. 'Can we go sit outside for a bit?'

I pour myself a third drink.

We take two chairs outside and sit in the cement parking lot of the small complex. Six identical houses, facing each other. A brick wall around the property. The sun's about to disappear out of sight.

'So how long are you here for?'

‘A few days.’

‘That’s nice. You got time off work?’

‘Yeah.’

We keep quiet for a while. I feel better sitting out here, after this cigarette, breathing in the cold evening air.

‘So tell me about those Jozi guys. Are you seeing anyone right now?’

I shrug and look away from her. Take another gulp from my drink. ‘Well, you know. Nothing serious.’

She laughs, for no reason. Maybe because she doesn’t know what my answer means, what to say next. Maybe because she can see that I’m staring at the brick wall of the house in front of me. Refusing to look at her or to say anything else.

Silence falls between us again.

*

After Neo and Sello have gone to bed I sit alone on the couch, staring at the TV. Sello said nothing when I asked if I could spend the night. Neo brought out blankets and pillows and kept asking if I was OK. I saw them exchanging looks.

I turn the main light off. I leave the TV on and mute the sound. The silent light from the screen flickers across my hands as I pour another drink.

I’m watching Lebo drink more and more and I wish she’d stop. She holds on to her quart, lifts it to her lips every few minutes. She’s in a strange mood today. Quiet, pulled into herself. As if she’s angry about something. When I ask her what’s wrong she shakes her head and looks away.

We're sitting in a circle with two or three guys who seem to come and go. She sits across from me. I wish she was next to me. I can't say anything to her without the others hearing, so I'm keeping quiet. The talking and laughing swirling around me, getting louder and louder. She said earlier this afternoon that it would be just one beer, but it's dark now. I want to go home. I keep trying to catch her eye but she avoids looking at me.

I watch her. The way she moves her hands when she's telling a story, cigarette between her fingers. The way she raises a fist to her mouth when she's laughing. The way she presses her lips together and looks around. Her eyes won't keep still, even when someone's talking to her. She looks past people, from side to side. Turns around to look behind her shoulder.

She stands up and comes over to me.

'Can I have 20 bucks? I'll pay you back.'

Her hand is stretched out, waiting. She says nothing else.

I reach into my pocket. 'When are we leaving?'

'After this beer.'

She turns around as soon as I give her the money. I watch the back of her jacket as she pushes past the guys at the door and disappears into the tavern.

We don't leave. She borrows money from someone else. A friend of hers buys us more quarts. We all move inside. Friday month-end and the place is full, nowhere to sit. I lean against the wall, say very little. I know now that we won't be leaving any time soon. I start to drink faster – trying to relax, to sink into everything around me. The smell of sweat and alcohol and smoke. The music thumping from the speakers by the bar. Flashes of faces laughing and shouting. The floor slippery from spilt beer – soil turned to mud. Shards of broken glass next to my feet.

I look up. A guy I don't recognise is standing right next to me. He's wearing a leather jacket and has broad shoulders, a thick neck. No smile under his moustache.

‘What are you drinking?’ He looks at the quart of beer in my hand, lifts his glass and nods towards the bar. ‘I can get you something much better than that. Anything you want.’

I shake my head and tell him that I’m fine. I take a drink from my quart and look around to see where Lebo is. She’s standing next to the pool table, her back turned to me. I feel the man in the leather jacket move closer.

‘You look very bored,’ he says. His voice is deep, rough. ‘I don’t see you talking to anyone. Where’s your boyfriend?’

I keep quiet. My eyes on the floor, on the mud and pieces of broken glass next to my feet. I can hear his breathing.

‘Come on, let me buy you a drink.’ His hand moves towards my waist.

I step away, look straight up at him. His mouth twitches, eyes narrowed. He tries again to reach for me and again I step back. I turn and squeeze my way through to where Lebo’s standing. I can feel him behind me, following me.

Lebo sees me and reads something in my face, because this time she doesn’t look away. Her eyes move to the guy behind me. I stop next to her. The guy looks at us, then makes a low, deep noise that turns into a laugh. He raises his glass and downs the rest of his drink. He looks amused now, his eyes skittering between Lebo and I.

‘So this is your boyfriend?’ He raises his eyebrows and laughs again. ‘Be serious, sweetie. You can do better than this. Let me buy you a drink.’ He moves faster this time. His fingers brush against my waist.

Lebo pushes him back. ‘Don’t touch her.’ Her voice is shaking. The guys next to us have gone quiet. Their faces turned, watching.

Lebo starts to shout. Something in her has broken out. An anger that has been there all night, just below the surface. Waiting. ‘Can’t you see that she doesn’t want to talk to you? That she doesn’t want you touching her? Just leave us the hell alone man!’

I grab her wrist and squeeze tight, wishing that she'd stop. The guy moves towards her and for a second I feel sure that he's about to hit her, but one of her friends steps forward, placing himself between them. Leather jacket guy sucks his tongue against his teeth. Frowning, his lips pushed up towards his nose. He points at Lebo, his voice raised – loud enough for everyone to hear.

‘Girls like you need to be careful. Girls who think they're men, who take our women away.’

He turns around, pushing roughly past the guys standing next to us.

My fingers are still closed around Lebo's wrist. She jerks her arm away, shaking me off. Her face hard. Lips pressed together. Jaw clenched, muscle twitching. The hand that isn't holding the quart is balled up into a fist.

I lean towards her. ‘Let's leave. Please. Now.’

The way the guy looked at me. The way he looked at her.

I see none of my cold, racing fear in Lebo's eyes. She stares straight ahead, not looking at any of us. Her eyes like stones. She keeps drinking and I see that her hand and arm are shaking.

The friend who stepped out in front of her speaks quietly. ‘You can't leave now. Those guys will follow you.’

I look around the room. The guy's standing across from us, with three or four others, looking straight at me. As if he's been waiting. He pushes his chin out towards me, raises his eyebrows. Makes a V with his fingers, licks the air between them, tongue jutting out rapidly. Something in me freezes. I can't look away. He repeats the same gestures. The quick movement with his chin. The V with his two fingers. The motion with his tongue. His eyes locked on me. His friends watching, laughing. I drop my eyes, shaken. My heart hammering. Lebo swears next to me, tries to push forward. Her friend puts out his hand to stop her.

‘Don’t look at them. That’s what they want. Just pretend you can’t see them.’ He keeps his head bent as he talks, his lips hardly moving. Takes a cigarette out of the pocket of his jacket, places it between his lips and starts to feel around for a lighter. His movements casual, like everything’s normal, like there’s nothing wrong.

The guys around us start to talk about something else. Voices rumbling, breaking into laughter. But between Lebo and I the silence stretches, long and thin. Lebo still staring straight ahead. I try to listen to what the others are saying. Earlier in the night I found myself laughing at some of the jokes that were being thrown around but now I can’t even smile.

In Neo’s bathroom my reflection stands and stares back at me. My braids loose, falling around my face and onto my shoulders. My skin looks heavy, dark circles under my eyes. The walls and the floor won’t keep still. A ringing in my ears. I open the tap, cup my hands to catch the cold water. Push my fingers up to my forehead, down to my cheeks, around to the back of my neck.

I lie down on the couch. Everything in the room is moving, swirling around me. It gets worse whenever I close my eyes. The light from the TV dancing against the walls. There’s a coat thrown over a chair that looks like a man. The shadows around him changing shape. Watching me, waiting for me to fall asleep.

Lebo’s hand is closed tight around mine, pulling me forward. We’re walking fast, almost running, in the wrong direction, away from the road that leads towards her room. I try to tell her to stop, that we’re going the wrong way, but she’s stronger than me and when I open my mouth I find I can’t speak.

It’s a clear night. Just enough light from the moon for us to see the road we’re on. The houses and trees and rocks are all still, silent. The tall, dark shape of the mountain. I have no control over my legs. I thought we were running, but now it feels like we’re moving too slow.

I keep looking behind my shoulder. It’s too dark for me to see into the distance, but I know that we’re being followed. There are moving shadows on the road. The guys from the tavern are behind us. They’re getting closer.

Lebo pulls us onto a narrow footpath. Still not letting go of my hand. I can hear my own breathing, our footsteps, neither of us saying anything. We're in somebody's yard now, standing under a tree. Moving deeper into shadow. No lights on in the two buildings next to us. Lebo's hand is on my back, pushing me down until we're both crouching, keeping still. The rough feeling of soil and stones under my hands.

I can feel the night moving around us. I'm conscious of every sound. Dogs barking. Loud shouts coming from somewhere close by. Silence again. My feet feel numb, lifeless. The muscles in my thighs and back are aching. How long have we been crouching here? I turn to look at Lebo. She's standing with her back turned to me. When did she stand up? I didn't feel her move. I get up slowly. Take a step towards her. Try to reach for her shoulder but she's faster than me. She turns around, smiles. She isn't Lebo. Broad shoulders and a leather jacket. His eyes fixed on me as he moves closer. He grabs my wrists, pushes me against the tree. My arms above my head and I can't move, can't scream.

*

Everything feels difficult the next morning. My mouth dry and a wave of nausea when I stand up and fold my blankets, pile them onto the couch. Thuso is crying as Neo tries to get him ready for school. Sello moves hurriedly around the living room, dressed in a shirt and tie, looking for something. My headache thudding to the same rhythm as Thuso's high-pitched cries. I follow the three of them out the front door.

A thick, hazy brown smog hangs over the city. Lampposts and telephone wires and bridges silhouetted against the bright morning sky. Smoke rises from the chimneys of the factories in Thetsane, from the fires of the street vendors that line the pavement.

I edge through the morning traffic and look at my phone. 07.53. I would normally just be getting to the office.

I drive all the way to the border, park next to the women who sell grass hats and brooms and T-shirts to tourists. I buy a Coke, sit down on a low brick wall and take out a cigarette. My movements slow. For a while I stare at my phone. My calendar's reminding me about the presentation I'm supposed to be giving this morning. I have unread emails.

I open the back of my phone and take out my Lesotho sim card. I want my boss to think that I'm in Jo'burg. I slide my South African sim in, turn the phone on, wait for it to start up. I watch as it searches unsuccessfully for a network. I should have turned my roaming on.

I get back into the car. For a while I just sit there, with the half empty can of Coke in my hand, staring at the way the sun falls across my thigh. I remember, I think, a place where the river runs, separating Lesotho from South Africa. When was I there? Brown water, a clump of willow trees, green hills in the distance, close by and out of reach, all at once. Or am I thinking of a different place?

I drive back to Lower Thetsane, unsure of where exactly it is that I'm going. Barbed wire runs along the top of tall brick walls with ornate metal gates. Through the fences I catch glimpses of shiny cars, two-story houses surrounded by gardens with rose bushes and immaculate lawns. The streets are mostly empty, but there's a man sitting on the pavement with his dog, watching over cows grazing on a small patch of grass.

The tarred road comes to an end and I pull over next to an empty plot of land. Pieces of concrete piled on top of each other, abandoned. An old, rusted truck. I lock the car and keep going on foot. There are no mansions here. The thatched roof of an old rondavel has caved in. Houses with corrugated iron roofs and outdoor latrines. A stone kraal, the soil around it dense with manure.

I find myself on the edge of a hill, the dirt road dropping steeply below me. There's an outcrop of rock on the side of the road. I climb up onto it, and in between the scattered litter and twisted shrubs I find a place to sit down. I look out onto the river and the bare hills of the Free State in the distance. On this side of the border the hills are crowded with houses and trees and rocks and aloes. Roads and footpaths and barbed wire fences held together by haphazard poles of metal and wood.

It takes me a while to remember what it is that led me to the river. I pull out my phone. The four bars display a signal and a South African network. I dial my boss's number, clear my throat. I'm so dazed and nauseous that it doesn't take much pretending to sound sick. I tell him I have the flu, that I'm not feeling well. He sounds unconvinced, his reply brisk and

offhand. He asks me to let him know when we can reschedule the presentation for and then he hangs up.

I close my eyes. There's a buzz of noise around me and I want to find a way to turn it off. The new intern in the office is bright-eyed, curious, enthusiastic. When she comes up to me with a question I find an excuse to cut the conversation short and stand up and walk away, as if I'm rushing off to do something urgent and important. I go to the toilet. I take a long time, folding small squares of toilet paper to wipe myself. Afterwards I stand and lean my head back against the cubicle wall, eyes closed.

Tshego looks at me with a frown when I get back to my desk. 'You OK?'

I sit down again. 'I'm fine.'

She watches me for a few seconds, then turns her head back to her computer and keeps typing. I stare at the brief that's sitting on my desk. I try to tell myself to stop looking at the time, but after what feels like an hour I can't resist it any longer and I glance up at the corner of my screen. Fifteen minutes have gone by.

Traffic is worse than usual on the way home. A long line of cars stretched out on the highway, not moving. The guy in front of me is holding his phone up to take a picture of the jam. I look at the people next to me. One lady's on her phone, looking impatient. Probably complaining to whoever she's talking to. Another guy has his arm out the window, drumming his fingers on the side of his car. Grey faces, all staring straight ahead.

I get home late, too tired to think, to move, to do anything. My flat is silent, empty. The sound of my own footsteps moving across the floor. I make toast, but I don't have the energy to finish eating it and the plate stays where it is, next to the pile of dirty dishes by the sink. I take a glass and a bottle of wine to my bedroom and climb into bed. I drink and scroll through Facebook, staring numbly at the never-ending stream of selfies and hashtags and links and statuses. Eventually I put my phone down and open my laptop to play a series. I pour another glass of wine, get up to look for a sleeping pill.

It's still dark when my alarm goes off. My head hurts and my whole body feels heavy, like I haven't slept at all. I sit up and think of the fact that it's only Tuesday, that I'll have to do this again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that.

From somewhere down below, the sound of a radio. Two people shouting out to one another. Laughter. I open my eyes. I watch a man walking up a winding footpath, carrying a tray of eggs and singing to himself. Laundry has been spread out on fences and for the first time I notice that there are pink blossoms on some of the peach trees. A herd boy ambles past me, walking behind his sheep. He turns and looks at me, says nothing. He's wearing a worn out sweater and a beanie, his gumboots kicking up the small stones on the steep, downhill road.

I walk back to the car. A little girl in a bright yellow T-shirt stands in the doorway of a house with sky blue walls. She waves shyly at me. I wave back, smile.

*

An old, faded STOP sign in the middle of the road. Policemen standing just beyond it. I stop and wait. Close by, two women sit together under a tree, talking. A soldier stands a few metres away from them. Immobile, his gun held in front of him.

After a few minutes one of the policemen raises his hand and gestures for me to come forward. He sticks his arm out to the right and I pull over.

He takes my license and walks around the car, then comes back to my window. His eyes move from my face to my hands to the other seats, empty. His blue jacket stretched tight over his belly. His hat askew. I can see the beads of sweat on his forehead.

'You're from Jo'burg? How long are you here for?'

He speaks slowly, his eyes staring straight into mine. I tell him I'm just visiting for a few days. I keep my sunglasses on.

He keeps looking at me.

‘So can I have your number?’

*

She stands at a table next to the grill, reaches for a stack of empty polystyrene containers and lines them up, side-by-side. Carefully scoops steaming hot papa into each one and then walks over to the grill with a pair of tongs.

I’ve never spoken to her. I don’t know her name. I just watch her – quietly. Making sure that I don’t stare for too long. Hoping that nobody notices. She moves quickly from table to table, collecting empty cans and bottles, taking orders for food. She wipes surfaces after people have left, rearranges chairs, sweeps the floor. Her head nodding to the music, shoulders swaying.

There is something different about her. She wears a black cap. A loose button-up shirt. The frayed ends of her baggy jeans scrape against the floor. I watch how she greets the guys she knows. How she lifts her right arm, slaps her hand against theirs. She stands with them for a while and says something that makes them all laugh. Her back straight, feet slightly apart, hands in her pockets.

I overhear people talking about her – a laughing, biting edge to their voices.

‘Stabane.’

‘Is it a girl or a boy?’

‘Have you seen that tomboy at KB’s?’

She stacks the polystyrene containers, carries them over to a table. Lingers for a while as she waits for the money. Her head tilted to one side, lips pressed together. One of the guys hands her a few notes. She counts them out, nods briefly and turns around. She looks up and her eyes meet mine.

Later that night I walk to the toilets at the back. After I've gone I stand for a while and look at the lights and the shapes of people dancing and swaying and standing in groups around the cars parked outside with their boots open.

She stands alone, smoking. I see her before she sees me. I'm about to walk past but she calls out and I stop, turn around. She looks tired. One hand in her pocket. This is the first time she's spoken to me. I like the way she talks. The slightly hoarse sound of her voice. Something warm in it.

'You're a student? What are you studying?'

My words feel stuck when I answer her questions. I find it hard to make sentences, to think of the right things to say. A nervous feeling in my stomach. She's caught me watching her – more than once. I always look away. She smiles at me now, something unafraid in her eyes.

*

'You're speaking to Moshe.'

There's a lot of noise in the background. I imagine that around him there are men talking and bar stools scraping against the floor and a soccer match playing on the TV in the corner.

I hesitate. I can't think of what to say.

'This is Moshe,' he repeats. 'Are you the lady who left her number? Who am I speaking to?'

I pull myself together. 'My name's Nthati.'

'Nthati? Nthati who?'

'I used to be a friend of Lebo's. It's been many years since I saw you. I'm sure you don't remember me.'

He makes a rough, grunting sound at the other end of the line. He doesn't say anything.

‘Can I meet with you? There’s something I want to ask you.’

*

I watch the people in the taxi crawling alongside me. The figure of a tall man, head bent. A young girl in uniform, schoolbag on her lap. A woman with her head resting on her hand, looking out into the distance, eyes blank, face stone tired. The late afternoon light settles into corners, finds places to rest. A taxi window. The spokes of a bicycle. The side of a face. The noise around me becomes silence. I roll my window down. From pieces of card attached to lampposts the newspaper headlines shout out tales of corruption, of political infighting. I look at the gaping potholes that open up like wounds in the road. And yet, the city moves. Each person forging a path. The 4+1 driver who is cutting into the road ahead of me, head and hand stuck out of his window, shouting behind him. The airtime and cigarette vendor with a Mocha-o-Chele sign around his neck, walking up and down between the lanes of cars. The woman holding a small child’s hand. The two boys sitting on the pavement with their feet in the road, watching the traffic. These countless, intertwined lives.

*

I drive all the way this time, retracing the roads that I walked along on Sunday. The right turn after the petrol station, left at the T-junction at the end, then immediately right onto this stretch of dirt road. I park just outside the tavern.

The place isn’t as full as it was on Sunday. I sit down at the counter and glance around the room. There’s a group of guys standing by the pool table, some in the corner by the door and a few others sitting next to me. The man on my right wears a torn, faded cap and sits hunched over his quart. He nods and greets me in a low, slow voice. He keeps looking at me, even after I’ve turned away. I’m conscious – suddenly – of all the things in my hands. My handbag, my car keys, my sunglasses, my phone. I keep my eyes down, my hands busy as I fumble to unzip my bag, to put everything away.

The barman is arguing loudly with another guy and takes a while to notice me. He smiles when he does and walks over to me, the same amused look on his face.

‘So you’re back?’

He looks across at the guys in the corner, gives a long whistle and jerks his head to the side once, towards me. They turn to us. I search their faces, hoping to see one that looks familiar. It takes me a few seconds to realise that I’m looking for a man in his early twenties. As if the Moshe I remember would have stayed frozen in time, unchanging. I try to adjust the image in my mind.

One of them steps away from the group. The other guys whistle and shout out after him, laughing. He shakes his head, his hand gesturing as if to push them away. He sits down on the stool next to mine.

‘Eita,’ he smiles. He looks a few years older than me, and he’s not as chubby as I remember him being. He must have lost a lot of weight. Still, I feel like there’s something in his face that I recognise, something familiar in his eyes, in his expression.

‘You’re Moshe Radebe?’

He nods. He’s frowning now. ‘Why did you want to talk to me?’

My voice sounds nervous, my words tumbling into each other. Fear and anticipation pulsing through me again. ‘I used to be friends with Lebo...Lebo Hlalele. We used to all drink together, many years ago. I don’t know if you remember me?’

His eyebrows are raised now, his mouth open. He keeps quiet for a moment, then shakes his head. ‘I don’t remember you. And I don’t know who Lebo Hlalele is.’

He says it flatly, simply. Something in the room has shifted. I thought I recognised him. That I knew him, somehow. That he would be able to tell me something about Lebo, about where to start looking.

‘Are you sure? Lebo... She was a tomboy. All of her friends were boys. She used to drink and play pool and watch soccer with you guys. She was always in here. This was her favourite bar. She lived close by, just a short walk from here.’

His face is still blank. He shakes his head. 'I don't know any Lebo like that. And I don't know you either. We've never met. I'm sorry.'

I shift in my stool. An uneasy feeling creeping over me. I look over at the barman. He's standing close by, watching and listening. I ask him for two quarts of beer.

I catch the curious, surprised look on Moshe's face. He watches as I unzip my bag and take out my wallet. His eyes move quickly from my clothes to my shoes to the bracelets on my arms. I felt that I was dressed casually when I left the house but now I feel like I'm in the wrong clothes, in the wrong skin. I used to come here wearing old sneakers. Jeans that were faded and torn. On winter nights I would borrow one of Lebo's oversized hoodies.

'Do you want a cigarette?' He looks even more taken aback, but I stand up before he can answer. I need to get out.

Sunset has turned into early evening. I look down at our feet as I pull out my pack of cigarettes. His heavy boots, caked in dust, their edges worn. The thin straps of my leather sandals, my painted toe nails.

Moshe looks over at my car. 'That's yours?'

I nod as I offer him a cigarette. He accepts it quietly, keeping his eyes on my car. For a while he says nothing. I cup my hands around my cigarette and light it. I hand him the lighter. A few seconds later he speaks up, his words hesitant – a hint of disbelief in his voice.

'So... you used to know another Moshe Radebe?'

'Well...One of Lebo's friends was called Moshe. I don't actually remember what his surname was. I just...I thought it might be you.'

He raises his eyebrows again and laughs. He takes a drag, shakes his head.

'OK...' He looks amused now, as if he's playing a game. 'OK, so imagine that I'm this Moshe that you remember. What would you ask me?'

‘I’d ask... if you’re still friends with Lebo. If you’ve seen her lately. If you know where I could find her.’

He’s still smiling, but his mouth twitches and something moves across his eyes. It comes over me again – the feeling that I know him, that I recognise him from somewhere. I try to go back to my memories of Lebo’s friends, to the images that came to me the other day. The idea that one of them used to wear a blue jacket – where did that come from? I can’t see any of their faces now. They slip, melt into each other. None of their features are clear. I can’t hear their voices, can’t remember any of their names.

‘Why do you want to find her?’

His question echoes in the growing darkness, across the empty yard. We’re the only people sitting outside. I can’t see his face so clearly now in the half-light. I take a drink from my quart and stare at the shapes of the buildings closest to us, their roofs dark against the sky.

The feeling of your body against mine carries into the next day. I’m sitting in a lecture but my skin is electric and your lips have left a trail along my neck. When you’re close I want you closer and the aching is in my stomach and my knees and my palms. You’re lying on your side with your head leaning against my thigh. I run my hand down to your waist and back up again. Sometimes you make me laugh so hard that I start to cry, tears running down the side of my face as I struggle to catch my breath.

‘She’s an old friend. We lost touch. It would be good to see her again.’

Moshe makes a grunting noise like the one he made on the phone and says nothing. I finish my cigarette and put the stub out against a brick. I keep drinking. In the silence and the dark I forget that he’s sitting next to me. I fall back into thinking about you.

‘So you live in Jo’burg?’

His question breaks the silence. How does he know this? A cold disquiet slides over me, but then I realise that he – like the policeman – must have noticed my GP number plates.

‘Yes. I work there.’

‘OK. So you’re just visiting us then?’ His tone is light, almost teasing.

I keep quiet. I want to say that I’m from here, that this is home, but the words catch in my throat and I can’t seem to get them out.

*

She tells me about a song she likes, and then about how the owner of KB’s came in today and shouted at them. I start laughing when she imitates the sound of his voice and the look on his face. I talk about the things that have been happening on campus. The beauty pageant that’s coming up and the lecturer who’s dating a student and why there might be a strike soon.

Talking to her feels easy, silence with her feels easy. We can walk or sit or listen to music and say nothing for a long time and it doesn’t feel strange or uncomfortable.

She seems to know every path, every shortcut. She points to the top of the mountain and then laughs at the look on my face. She moves ahead of me, climbing with ease. I struggle to keep up, my shoes slipping on the rocky path, my legs aching. It’s a hot day and I’m sweating and thirsty and trying hard to not get irritable. We finally get to the rock she’s been wanting to show me, and when we sit down and catch our breaths my mood changes. Maseru lays spread out beneath us, its buildings and roads and trees suddenly small and far away. The breeze up here feels cool against my skin and there’s no noise around us, no people.

There’s a mirror leaning against the wall in her room. A tall pane of glass with a crack running down the middle of it. I watch how she glances at it from time to time, how she stands in front of it whenever we’re about to step outside. She smooths her eyebrows down, adjusts the angle of her cap, turns up the collar of her jacket. She pulls at her oversized shirt so that it hangs away from her chest. Her mouth closed, her lips pushed out slightly as her face changes to the expression that she wears when she’s at work, when she’s walking. A fuck you expression. A look that dares others to step closer, to say something. Her eyes move over people in a slow, unhurried way. I notice her jaw tightening when she thinks no one’s looking.

I've never watched someone this closely.

Her face relaxes when it's just the two of us. She smiles more, she laughs. I tell myself that we're just friends, but I can feel that she's watching me too. When she asks me a question her eyes stay looking at me while I talk.

We're sitting on the mattress in her room, our backs against the wall, our shoes off. The radio's on and we're laughing at something and when we stop she looks at me and leans forward. I feel the softness of her lips against mine and then I turn my head, pull away. She straightens up and takes her hand off my thigh. For a while neither of us says anything. I fight with my words, with how to explain the questions I've been struggling with.

'Do you think that it's normal...that it's right...?'

I don't know how to talk about everything that's been happening in my mind for the past few weeks. How I can't stop thinking about her. How the feeling in my stomach returns whenever I hear my phone beep or see my screen light up and I know it's a message from her. How the word stabane echoes in my head and how I keep seeing the look on people's faces when they talk about her.

How my body reaches for hers despite whatever it is that my mind's saying. Sometimes it feels like we have our own language, like we're talking without words. A warmth moves through me when she hugs me and there's something about how close she is and the feeling of her neck and shoulders and back under my palms that makes me grow wet. We hold hands when there's no one else around. It happens easily, on its own, without me thinking about it. I often rest my head against her shoulder.

She's looking down at her knees, her lips pressed together. She shrugs, doesn't say anything. I try a different question.

'Have you been with other girls...like this?'

She nods. 'I tried to date a guy once...it was terrible. I'll never do it again.' She makes a face, starts laughing. The tension between us eases slightly.

She's wearing cargo shorts and a soccer shirt and a cap. Her legs crossed in front of her, her hands in her lap. I wonder how she's always so comfortable in herself, so confident. She makes it look easy.

'You think too much, uena. It's because of all those books you read. It'll make you go crazy one day.' She taps her head and smiles. I wonder how to tell her that I don't know how to stop thinking. That the noise in my head feels endless. She reaches her hand out, runs two fingers down the side of my face.

*

The building still stands, in the same place. A five-minute walk from campus. But the front door is locked and the red letters on the wall have faded. The K, the B, the apostrophe, the s. The paint on the wall is peeling. I walk up to a window, bring my hands to the sides of my face, press my forehead to the glass. There are pieces of cardboard taped to some of the windows. In the dim light I can see a few tables and chairs stacked up against the walls, but the room is empty otherwise. Dirt on the cement floor. I can't make out the details of the shapes at the back of the room, where the bar used to be. I remember the long wooden counter. The kitchen behind it. The place where the fridges stood.

I walk slowly around the building to the wide empty space at the back. The pit latrines a few metres away. Rocks pushed against their corrugated iron doors to keep them closed. Chalk words and drawings scrawled across their walls.

At the front I notice the brick structure where the grill used to be. Ash and plastic bags and cans sitting at the bottom of it. The bricks old and blackened. The outdoor wooden tables and benches have all gone.

It's the end of term. We've just come out of our last exam. I'm still thinking about the question paper – about what I should have written, about the bits I left blank because I ran out of time. We're sitting at one of the tables outside, squeezed up against each other. The place is filling up quickly. House music playing from the boot of a car nearby. The sound of many voices – all talking and laughing at the same time. The smell of grilled meat. A feeling of lightness in the air, of relief.

We've pooled our money to buy quarts of cider that we pour out into glasses. Neo's sitting right across from me, flirting with one of the second year guys. I watch the way she pouts her lips, her eyes flicking up to his. She takes a drink from his glass, shifts closer when he puts an arm around her. I look away. I feel tired and dazed. I was up studying for most of the night, again.

'Nthathi, where've you been hiding? We haven't seen you here in so long.'

I look over at Khotso, who's sitting at the end of the table. He's watching me closely. A strange expression on his face, as if he's trying to not laugh. A few of the others go quiet and turn to look at me, waiting to hear my answer.

I keep my voice steady. Try to sound casual. 'I've just been busy. Just been studying.' I wish the others would go back to their conversations, would stop looking at me. I try to look away but Khotso speaks up again. Loud enough for everyone to hear.

'You've been studying...for months? You never have time to chill? I used to see you here all the time. What happened?'

I shrug. I can't think of what to say. I can feel my face getting hot. He doesn't sound curious or interested. He pronounces each word carefully, stretches his sentences out. His voice rises when he asks a question, his eyebrows raised. He's enjoying the fact that the others are watching and listening.

The silence hangs for a minute. I take a sip from my drink, hoping that someone will change the subject, will start a new conversation. I keep my eyes on the table.

'Where's your friend today? She's not at work?'

I look up at him. 'What friend?' My voice sounds strained, high-pitched. I swallow.

'You know, that tomboy who works here. I've seen you guys walking together. You guys are friends right?'

A few people snigger. I look over at Neo. She isn't smiling like the others, but she's also doing nothing to stop Khotso. She's watching me closely. A look of eager curiosity on her face. As if she's trying to read my reactions, my body language.

'Yeah, we're friends.' My voice sounds stronger this time.

'Just friends, Nthati? You should be careful of litabana, you know. People like that will make you do unnatural things.' Khotso is laughing openly now and he isn't the only one.

I stand up, my legs shaking. I find it hard to move, but I need to leave. I can feel everyone's eyes on me. I pick up my backpack and begin to walk away. The laughter at the table gets louder. Khotso shouts something else out. I walk faster so that I can't hear him. Neo doesn't follow me.

*

Mama's not at home. The house is empty, quiet. I pour myself a glass of water and fall back onto my bed. I feel restless, frustrated. I don't know where else to go to look for you, who else to talk to. My hand moves down between my legs and I absent-mindedly begin to rub the thick material of my jeans, my fingers moving in gentle circles. I undo my belt, my top button, my zip.

The first time. When I didn't tell you to stop, because it felt too good, too right. When you slowly lifted my shirt and kissed my stomach. When you reached higher up and undid my bra, helped me to slide it off. Brought your lips, your tongue, to my breasts. Slowly, softly.

When your hands started to move up and down my thighs. When you pressed against me, my underwear wet, soaked through.

When you sat up and took off your shirt, your shorts, everything. When you moved back down over me. When I felt you completely naked like that for the first time. Your warm, soft skin against me, your weight on top of me. The way your mouth worked down from breast to stomach to inner thigh.

My fingers move faster and eventually there is a rush of pleasure that comes with something else, a moving back to stillness. Pleasure with sadness, with emptiness. A feeling like guilt somewhere in my chest, like sickness in my stomach.

I lie alone on my bed in Mama's house. My jeans undone, rolled halfway down my legs.

*

A new life. A different way of being. Paths through the city that I didn't know existed. A neighbourhood away from Mama's house, away from campus. A tiny space enclosed by four walls. A kind of freedom, hidden. You give me a key to your room. After lectures I slip away without saying anything to anyone. I sit on the mattress on your floor. In the silence I read, work on my assignments. I take a nap, wait for you. Sometimes you work through the night and only get home after sunrise, when I'm waking up to get ready for class.

*

When I ask about your family you shake your head, throw your hand to the side.

'Ah, I can't talk to them. I can't live there.'

I want to ask what that means but you've already opened the door and walked out. When you come back in a few minutes later you're whistling, your hands in your pockets. You sigh and look around the room and ask if I want to go to the tavern. You don't look at me. We walk there in silence. You keep whistling. I look over at you and see that your eyes are far away. I don't try to talk about it again.

*

'How long is this leave of yours? How did you manage to get so much time off work?'

Mama stands in front of me, frowning.

'A week,' I tell her, because she's looking for an answer.

After I met with Moshe I turned my phone off. I looked at its dark and silent screen with relief and slipped it to the bottom of my bag of clothes. I don't know what emails lie unopened, what anyone in Jo'burg has been up to. I'm somewhere else, far away from the constant calls and messages and social media notifications. I couldn't sleep last night. I sat outside, wrapped in a blanket, in the same place where you and I once sat. I lit cigarettes in the empty silence. The wide endlessness of the stars, the quiet of the ground beneath.

'A week? So you're going back this weekend?'

I nod.

Mama is silent for a while longer, her eyes still on me, questioning. 'Fine,' she says finally. 'Then let's go visit Nkhono. Now.'

'Ma... ' I start, but she throws me a look. Stands firm, one hand on hip. Raises her chin, her eyes locked on me.

'When was the last time you saw your grandmother, Nthati?'

We stop at a shop to buy tea, sugar, maize meal. Cans of pilchards and chakalaka and a box of biscuits. Then we drive out of Maseru, heading south towards Mafeteng. Mama sits in the passenger's seat, looking straight ahead, her hands folded in her lap. She's wearing sunglasses and carefully applied makeup. Her hair is relaxed, flattened, combed down neatly.

Neither of us says anything. I feel heavy and tired, as if I'm floating through the moment, as if I'm only partly here. We leave the city and the landscape on either side of the road unfolds. I look out at the hazy dust blue of the mountains in the distance, at the different shades of brown in the hills that rise around us. The sharp, jagged edges of rock, the crumbling earth. The footpaths etched into the dips and rises on the side of the road. The dongas that split the earth open.

When was the last time you saw your grandmother, Nthati?

We come round a corner and I hit the brakes. There are cows crossing the road, just ahead of us. I watch them. They're only a few metres away, and yet something about them feels distant, out of reach. Something in the tips of their horns and the patterns on their hides and the way they move their heads. A herd boy wearing a balaclava and a bright red blanket runs behind them, his stick raised in the air.

*

'You remember where to turn?' Mama lifts her hand, gestures to the right.

I would have kept driving. I veer off the main road, onto a rocky, bumpy dirt road. I would have kept driving, but when we reach the tall old eucalyptus tree I find that I haven't forgotten. Everything is still in its place. This tree. This rock a few metres from it. This slope of grass that leads down to Nkhono's house, which looks smaller than it used to. Four walls of cement bricks, a corrugated iron roof. The rondavel a few metres to the side. The neat yard, carefully swept, with flowers growing just outside the house. The old kraal some distance away, its wall of stones still standing.

We make our way down the slope. There's cool grass under my bare feet. I'm sprinting up the slope, tumbling back down, falling and rolling, laughing with other children. I can't see their faces. My fingers reach and find a different type of grass, longer and tougher. I pull it out of the soil, braid pieces of it together. I can smell horses, cow dung, wet earth. I can taste Nkhono's lesheleshele, sweetened with brown sugar. We're stealing coins and racing to the shop to buy Chappies and packets of Drink-O-Pop, which we sprinkle carefully into our hands and lick from our palms, scrunching our faces at the sharp, tangy flavours. I'm standing in the middle of a circle, covering my face with my hands as everyone dances and chants around me. 'Orange boys, orange boys, orange boys, ooooooh! You have a boyfriend, a boyfriend, a boyfriend. His name is...'

A skinny dog is lying on the ground outside Nkhono's house, sprawled out in the midday sun. It raises its head when it hears us, stands up and walks away, its tail between its legs. I can see its ribs. There's no other movement around the house, nobody else in sight. There are other houses and rondavels some distance away, many more than I remember. They climb up the side of the mountain. The land stretches around us, dry and bare.

Mama knocks on the door, but doesn't wait for a reply before pushing it open. The inside of the house feels dark, the curtains closed. Nkhono is sitting alone at a table, a blanket folded over her knees. Gospel music is playing from a radio in the corner, and there's a steady, loud ticking coming from a clock on the wall. Below it hangs a picture of Jesus, blue-eyed and golden-locked, his fingertips resting against the glowing red heart on his chest. Nkhono's eyes dart up in surprise and she squints into the sunshine flooding in through the doorway.

'Lumela, Nkhono.' Mama walks over to the window and pulls the curtain open.

'Oh, I was just resting here...' Nkhono says softly, almost defensively. She's recognised Mama now and is smiling at her. She shifts in her seat.

'I brought a visitor to see you,' Mama says. Nkhono turns to me, her eyes resting on me for the first time. For a moment her expression remains blank, but then her eyes open wide and she lets out a cry. She brings her hands to her face, covers her mouth briefly, and then continues to exclaim.

'Nthati! My child! Is that really you? After such a long, long time!'

She gets up to her feet with difficulty, letting her blanket slip back onto her chair. She shuffles over to me and pulls me into a tight hug, then takes a small step back and lifts her shaking hands to my cheeks before kissing me firmly on the lips.

'God is good,' she whispers to me, her eyes glassy with tears. 'God is good. I thought that I'd never see you again. I thought that you'd forgotten us.'

A sudden sadness runs through me, catching me by surprise. Nkhono's hands have me in a vice grip. I raise my hands awkwardly and rest them on her thin shoulders.

Mama walks over to the radio and switches it off. 'Nthati,' she snaps. 'Don't you have anything to say to Nkhono?'

Nkhono smiles. 'You're still quiet, hey? You were always quiet, you never liked talking. You were always so clever, always asking for something to read. Always first position in your class.' She plants another kiss on my lips and releases her grip.

Mama is bustling around, lighting the gas stove and looking for cups. Nkhono sits down again, taking a long time to rearrange her blanket over her knees. I stand there for a while, watching the two of them, still feeling dazed and far away. I take a step towards Mama to help her, but she gives me another look and nods towards Nkhono. I pull a chair out and sit down.

'How have you been keeping, Nkhono? How's your health?' I don't know what else to say to her. I stretch my arms out and cup my hands around hers.

'I'm fine,' she smiles. 'It's just this arthritis that's killing me. Especially in winter.' She purses her lips, shakes her head. She's grown thinner. Her back is stooped and curved. I remember her working, always, bent low, sweeping the dirt out of the house with a grass broom, singing to herself. The skin on her hands feels soft and fragile, hanging loosely over her long, bony fingers. I can see every knuckle, every joint. Her face is etched with tiny, crisscrossing lines.

'How's life in Gauteng? Your mother always tells me about how well you're doing. We're so proud of you.'

Mama puts tea and sugar and biscuits in front of us. I smile at Nkhono and listen to myself answering her questions. Life in Jo'burg is great. Everything's going well at work. It's nice to be home for a few days. The feeling that I'm floating has returned and my voice sounds slow. I lean forward and reach for a cup.

'And I'm sure we're going to have a wedding very soon?' Nkhono smiles and winks at me. I smile back at her, but say nothing. They're both watching me, waiting for me to say something. I keep quiet and concentrate on stirring sugar into my tea.

Nkhono speaks up again. 'You know, you mustn't wait too long, Nthati. Don't wait for it to be too late. You mother needs some grandchildren.'

I lift my cup and take a sip from my tea, keeping my eyes down. Nkhono's gone quiet but I can still hear her speaking. Her words echo through my mind. I listen to the things she used to say to me. 'Nobody will marry you if you do that, Nthati. Don't sit like that. Why haven't you bathed? Why are you wearing that? You need to work, my child. You're going to help me right now. Nobody's going to marry a girl who can't cook or clean.'

Mama and Nkhono are with me, even when I'm in Jo'burg, hundreds of kilometres away. It's Nkhono who makes me clean, who tells me to scrub the bathtub, to mop the kitchen, to pick up the clothes that are lying on the floor. Mama stares disapprovingly whenever I open a beer or light a cigarette. 'What kind of Mosotho girl drinks and smokes?' She stands with me in front of the mirror when I pull on a mini-skirt or a pair of small, tight-fitting shorts. 'You can't wear that, Nthati. You're dressed like a whore, you're asking for trouble. No self-respecting girl would wear something like that.'

Their voices rise and fall around me. Nkhono has started on a story about something that happened at church. I stand up and tell them that I'm going to the toilet.

*

I walk for a few metres, away from the house. I follow a footpath into a bare field and sit down on a rock. I stare at the dried maize stalks lying on the ground, and then at the main road and the mountains that lie beyond it. Two men are approaching on the footpath, coming from the opposite direction. Their heads are bent and they're arguing about something, their voices raised. One of them is pushing a wheelbarrow.

'Bo-ntate,' I greet them as they get closer.

They look up at the same time and stop walking. One of them shades his eyes from the sun and stares at me intently. 'Nthati! Is that you?'

I look at his face, into his eyes. I follow the lines of his mouth, the shape of his nose. He's no older than me. I recognise nothing about his features. No name comes to mind, no memory.

He frowns, tries to smile. 'Nthati? Do you remember me?'

For a moment I think about lying to him, but then I decide against it. I shake my head.

‘You don’t remember me?’ he repeats. ‘You don’t know who I am?’ Hurt and disappointment ring in his voice, across his eyes.

I shake my head again. ‘I don’t... I’m sorry.’

‘It’s me, Moalosi.’ He brings a hand to his chest. Palm flat, fingers outstretched. He places a slow emphasis on his name, as if the intonation will bring a memory. ‘We grew up together. We were always playing together. You’re like my sister.’

There is an emptiness in me, a blank space, and suddenly I find that I can’t speak. I keep my eyes lowered, my gaze fixed on the dry soil and the scattered maize stalks. The two men talk amongst themselves. ‘She’s forgotten,’ Moalosi says to the other man. ‘Nthati’s forgotten.’

The silence sits and I look up again. He isn’t smiling now. His mouth holds his words and his eyes are still. He picks up his wheelbarrow and turns away from me. He shouts out without looking back. ‘You mustn’t forget us, OK? You mustn’t hide yourself.’

They continue to make their way up the narrow, winding footpath, past the eucalyptus tree where my car is parked, gradually growing smaller and smaller until they’re out of sight. I stare after them, not moving, the empty space in me widening.

*

We drive back to Maseru as it’s growing dark. Mama is angry, suddenly. Her voice fills the car, rises with impatience. ‘I don’t understand you, Nthati. What’s wrong with you? Why do you never have anything to say? We come to visit Nkhono and you go outside and sit in a field! You disappear during the day, you come home late at night. I don’t even know where you’ve been. What kind of behaviour is that?’

‘It’s nothing, Ma.’ I can still see the lines on Nkhono’s face and the look of disappointment in Moalosi’s eyes. ‘I’m fine. I’m just tired.’

‘Tired? Tired from what?’

I stare silently at the road. Mama makes a loud noise of impatience and turns away from me, too angry to say anything else. I drift away into the half darkness. I can still see the mountains around us, black shapes dotted with lights. People in the distance begin as shadows, as indistinct figures, but as we get closer they become clearer. A man standing still, the screen of his cell phone illuminated. High school students in their uniforms, the light catching the white of their shirts. Three men walking fast, their backs turned to us. The pattern on one of their blankets appears in my headlights, disappears. Ochre yellow with swirls of black lines. The door of a roadside shop is open. Inside are shelves lined with tins, bottles of cooking oil, packets of maize meal. A man is working with a soldering iron outside a mokh’ukh’u – the sparks throwing light onto his face, flashing off the corrugated iron. The outline of an ox-cart forms, vanishes. A car overtakes me with its brights on and the shadows crowd around my windows, filling the car with shapes that dance and reach for me, then settle back into quiet.

The names of places flash past me. The signs illuminated one by one. I say the names silently in my head, turning the letters and sounds around in my mouth until I can taste them. Ha Mpo. Ha Mokhothu. Ha Selonyane. Ha Motheho. Ha Thaabe.

Light glints off electric wires. A thin dancing thread keeps up with us, just ahead of us, suspended in mid-air.

Outside a house on the side of the road a group of people stand around a fire. The flames rising tall, reaching up into the night sky. I split into two. Half of me stays in the car with Mama and drives past, watching the fire grow smaller in my rear-view mirror until it’s out of sight. The other half floats out of the window and flies up into the dark, higher and higher until I’m above the mountains, until the cars on the road are just tiny moving specks of light. I circle slowly back down to the fire, landing on bare earth, a few metres away from the flames. I draw closer to the blazing heat. I’m invisible, so nobody looks my way or asks me any questions. I stand still and watch the way light flickers against skin. The faces of young children lit up, open-mouthed as they stare into the flames. The face of an old man, silent, the fire moving across his eyes.

*

It's a cold morning. A soft, steady rain hits the roof above our heads. We're curled up on your mattress. I pull the blanket up over my ears, kiss you softly on the neck, put an arm around you and run my hand gently across your stomach. You shift to let me know that you're awake. Your hand reaches behind your back and pulls me closer.

*

I go back to the old KB's building. The door is still locked and there's nobody there. People walk past on the road nearby, talking and laughing, but none of them look in this direction. I watch a couple walking hand in hand towards campus, both carrying backpacks. I follow them. When I shout out they both stop and turn around. I greet them and point towards KB's.

'Do you guys know how long that place has been closed?'

They look past me, frowning, as if noticing the building for the first time. The girl shakes her head.

The guy shrugs. 'I've never seen that place open.'

'Are you sure? KB's? It used to be where all the students went. You could get drinks, food, everything. They had DJs playing there on the weekend.'

They stare at me. The guy raises his eyebrows and starts to laugh. 'Nah, I've never seen it open. I've never heard anyone talk about that place.'

He says the name of another bar and points in the opposite direction. 'That's where everyone goes now. You should check it out, it's like a chesa nyama spot. It's dope.'

I nod and smile. They keep walking towards campus. I can still hear the guy laughing.

*

You're walking on the pavement, just a few metres ahead of me, in a grey jacket and a maroon beanie. I don't have to see your face and it doesn't matter how many years have gone by. I know that it's you. You're walking fast, with your hands in your pockets and your head bent forward. It's a clear, sunny day but there's a cold wind blowing and everyone on the street is wrapped up in hats and coats and blankets. A 4+1 driver is hooting and shouting out at me. I ignore him and keep walking, straining my neck to look past the people in front of me, to make sure that I don't lose sight of you. I see you crossing the road up ahead but when I get to the edge of the pavement there's a long line of cars coming at me and I have to wait for a gap in the traffic to run over to the other side. What part of town is this? Why am I here? For a second I think I've lost you but then I spot you again, your maroon beanie weaving in and out of the crowd. Why are there so many people? If I could just get to you and grab hold of your hand, feel your fingers against mine. If we could just go somewhere quiet, away from people's eyes and ears. The two women in front of me are walking slowly, lost in their laughter and conversation. I can't get past them. One of them has a baby on her back and the baby's crying is drowning in the sound of engines rumbling and taxis hooting and gospel music playing from the car driving past us. I step out onto the road and then back onto the pavement but when I look up again I can't see you anywhere. No sign of your maroon beanie. I start to run, pushing past people, past a long line of stalls selling sneakers and hoodies and sunglasses. Past street vendors with wheelbarrows and trolleys piled high with apples and bananas. Past guys sitting on the pavement playing morabaraba. Past a man standing outside Fruit & Veg, singing into a microphone, his voice booming louder than any of the other noises on the street. I run, faster, but you're too far ahead and you've disappeared into the crowd and I can't catch up to you. I stop, my chest heaving. I look around me. Everyone on the street has stopped moving and there's no noise anywhere. Street vendors and passers-by and strangers and the man who was singing, all standing silent and motionless, their faces blank, watching me.

*

You come home from work just as it's getting dark. The smell of smoke and meat and the grease of the kitchen thick on you, clinging to your skin and your clothes.

You go outside and fill buckets from the tap in the yard. You boil kettles of water and empty them into your green plastic basin. The sound of the water hitting the plastic. Steam rising.

Standing up in the basin you wash slowly, bending to dip your facecloth into the water, wringing it, soaping and rinsing yourself. I watch you rub lotion into your skin and change into clean clothes. You empty the dirty water into the yard, rinse out the basin at the tap. You do all of this quietly, leaving everything clean and tidy. Your facecloth hung on the line outside, the basin leaning against a wall to dry. I find myself thinking of our bathroom at home. A geyser. Hot and cold water that flow out of taps. Pull a plug and the bathtub empties itself.

You chop moroho, stir maize meal into boiling water. I know that you'd normally have the radio on, but you're keeping quiet because I'm sitting on the mattress with my books open in front of me, studying for my exam tomorrow. You spoon coffee and sugar and cremora into a mug and bring it over to me. Without saying anything you crouch down and put the mug on the floor. Lean forward and kiss me. The smell of your soap. Your lips soft, your skin warm.

You lie down, exhausted from the day. I move to the end of the mattress and you lift your knees, fall asleep almost instantly. I study throughout the night, highlighting passages, writing out notes. I make more cups of coffee and walk across the silent, empty yard to the toilet at the back. I watch you sleep, turned on your side. Your mouth slightly open. Your arms bent, resting in front of your face.

*

'Where have you been?'

I sit down on my bed and let my backpack slide off my shoulder and onto the floor. I look up at Mama.

'I already told you, Ma. I've been staying in res, with Neo.'

'For three nights?'

'Yes. We had a lot of studying to do. It's easier when I'm on campus. I can stay at the Library late.'

‘Are you telling me the truth, Nthati?’

‘Yes, Ma.’

‘I just don’t understand how you can stay in that small res room for so long. Where do you even sleep? Doesn’t Neo mind that you’re always there? What do you guys even eat?’

‘Neo doesn’t mind. It’s not a problem. I study better when I’m there.’

Her arms are folded and her face is cold, searching. I stare back at her with a calm, steady expression until she finally lets it go and leaves the room.

I know that I’ll have to stay at home for the next few nights. I lie in bed and SMS you in the dark. I type out that I miss you, that this weekend I’ll find a way to spend the night with you.

*

I don’t have any pictures of you. The kind of pictures that I could hold or touch or show to someone else. Not even one. But when I think of you sometimes I see snapshots. Frozen images. As if I carry pictures of you around in my head.

Snapshot. You’re wearing one of my long skirts, but you’ve kept your shirt on. A guy’s shirt, with a collar and buttons. Your arms are just hanging, like you don’t know what to do with them, where to put them. Your eyes are closed and you’re laughing hard, your mouth open. You’re laughing because I’m laughing, and because you know you look ridiculous.

The skirt looks so strange on you, like nothing about it fits with who you are. You’re supposed to be going to a funeral this weekend, but you know you can’t wear trousers. You know that people will give you funny looks, say things about you. You’ll be told to stay in the house, to not go to the grave with everyone else. So you’ve asked to borrow one of my skirts. I’ve brought a few over to your place, but every time you try one on I start laughing. They just look so strange on you.

‘Show me how you’re gonna sit in that.’ I try to keep a straight face.

You go over to the chair and sit down on the edge of it, your knees wide apart, the material of the skirt all stretched out. You lean forward and rest your elbows on your knees. I can't stop laughing. You play along, making it worse. Push your lips up into an ugly face. Rub your fingers roughly against your nose.

You laugh at first but then something else takes over. You sigh, take off the skirt, throw it onto the mattress. You pull your jeans back on and slump down into the chair again. 'I can't wear those things. I'm so uncomfortable. I can't be me in them. I don't know how to move, how to sit, how to anything. Maybe I just shouldn't go.'

I move over to you, pull you close. You lean your head against my stomach. I run my hands over your scalp, up and down.

I try on some of your trousers, your shorts, your button-up shirts. I love how loose and comfortable they are. They make me feel like I could be someone different. Like there's another person in me, someone both new and familiar. As if wearing your clothes would free something in me, would let me be more than the person I am now.

*

Snapshot. You're sitting with your back to me, but you've turned your head around. Your face is all scrunched up because you're looking straight into the sun. Squinting your eyes. It's winter and you're wearing a beanie, a hoody, track pants. You're babalased. We both are. That could also be why you're not smiling. You're sitting just outside your place. The grey walls of the malaene in the background. The door to your room.

We've taken our chairs outside to sit with our backs to the sun, to try and warm up. The winter nights and mornings are so cold that it feels like something's biting my nose, my ears, my face. Even inside. My skin and my lips are cracked, dry. Your paraffin heater helps a bit, but we have to sit right next to it to feel warm, and when we turn it off to sleep the whole room gets cold again.

Your neighbour's outside doing her washing. The one who always gives me looks when I come to see you. She rinses her clothes, hangs them one by one on the barbed wire fence. I

glance up and catch her staring. Her face sour and serious, as if she disapproves of everything about us. The two of us just sitting there, not doing anything special. Her expression makes me want to laugh. I look over at you, but your head's down, leaning against your folded arms. I think your eyes are closed. For a long time I look at the clothes hanging on the fence. Reds and bright yellows and pinks. The clear blue winter sky, no clouds.

*

Snapshot. You're dancing. We've just woken up. You're in your boxers and the loose white vest that you sleep in. You're in such a good mood this morning. A house song that you love is playing on the radio and you've turned the volume up and you're singing along. Your feet slightly apart, shoulders and hips moving to the smooth melody and the rising beat, arms up over your head. You walk over to me and pull me towards you and I start dancing even though I never dance. Our hands around each other's waists, our bodies moving to the same rhythm.

*

I wish I could keep hold of the person you are when we're both sober and there's no one else around. When we're at your place, cooking or talking or curled up on your mattress. This Lebo is soft and quiet. She listens when I talk. She looks me straight in the eyes.

When we're with your friends you slide into a different skin. You harden. Your voice deepens. I find it easier to understand why so many people mistake you for a guy. You drink faster than me and soon you're two and then three drinks ahead of me.

I never know what skin comes next. I can't tell which way the alcohol will drag you. How it will colour your eyes, and whether the anger it brings will remain pulsing in your neck or will erupt, your voice raised and your body thrashing. Sometimes the new Lebo isn't angry. She's happy, laughing, distracted. I try to ask her a question but her eyes are somewhere else. She starts talking to the person next to her and when I turn to look again she's moved across the room, away from me.

*

You stand at the door, talking to your landlady. Your voice is low, pleading. Month end has come and gone and the owner of KB's still hasn't paid you. You've been quiet and withdrawn for the past few days. There's something restless in your body. I feel it at night in the way that you sigh and turn around and keep getting up. You throw the blanket off, pull it over you again a few minutes later. I put my hand on your back, move it up to your shoulder, but you don't respond. I don't know how to reach out to you through the dark, how to soothe you. I bought some groceries for us the other day. You watched me unpacking them and said nothing. You kept quiet for a long time after that.

Your landlady leaves and you come back in and sit down at the table. You close your eyes and sigh, rub your hand over your face. I was about to head to campus, but I go and stand next to you. I hesitate for a while, thinking of what to say, running my finger up and down the back of your neck.

'Lebo, you know I can lend you some money if...'

In one movement you stand up and push your chair back, so hard that it falls over. The sound of the metal crashing against the floor. Your face contorted with anger and frustration.

'I don't want your money, Nthati!'

You don't look at me. You turn around and walk out the door, leaving me standing there, the sound of your raised voice reverberating in the silence.

Your room is still empty when I get back in the afternoon. I take out my books and try to work, but my body is tense and waiting, listening out for the sound of you at the door. The hours slip by. I stand up and start cooking. At around 10 you finally walk in. I look up at you but don't say anything. You sit down on the mattress, your eyes closed, your head leaning against the wall. I go over and sit next to you. I can smell the alcohol on your breath and your skin. You always find a way to drink, even when you're broke. There's always someone who lends you money, someone who buys you a quart. I watch you silently, keeping my thoughts to myself. You don't look angry anymore. Your face folds and falls into your hands, your shoulders heaving as you start to cry.

I get up and go over to my bag to look for tissue. I kneel and put my arms around you, your face against my chest, until you've quietened down, until your back starts to rise and fall gently. You let out a sigh and straighten up. Your eyes reddened, downcast.

'I'm not good enough for you.' The words tumble out, the statement so direct, so clearly formed that I know you've been thinking about it for a long time, that this is what's been eating at you.

You keep talking, before I can say anything. I don't recognise you like this. Your head bent, your shoulders hunched forward. Your mouth heavy, tears rolling down your cheeks. Confident, carefree Lebo has left, is nowhere to be seen.

'I always fuck up. I always get too drunk. I'm always broke. So why are you with me? Why is a girl like you with me?'

I reach for your hand. You look up at me, your eyes piercing. I shift closer to you.

'Because you make me laugh. Because I like hanging out with you. Because I feel comfortable and free when I'm around you.'

You keep looking at me. I lift my hand to your face, brush a tear away with my thumb.

'Because you're sexy, because you make me feel good.' I smile. It's much more than that, but I don't know how to say it. I don't know how to tell you that I don't know anyone like you. You do whatever you want to do, whenever you want to do it. People talk about you behind your back, to your face, but still you dress the way you want, act the way you want. I don't know how to explain that I feel pulled towards you. That there's something in how we move together. That we have a way of understanding one another that has nothing to do with the things we say. That even when you're drunk and angry, even when you won't look at me or talk to me, I know that there's this thing between us that we can go back to, that I can hold on to.

You shake your head. I kiss your forehead, your cheeks, your nose. I can taste the salt of your tears.

*

I hand Mama my end-of-year results. She sits down and unfolds the piece of paper and for the first time in weeks something in her face changes. Her eyes and the lines around her mouth grow softer. She looks up at me, and it's as if she's forgotten how angry she was the other day. I sit down next to her. She laughs, puts an arm around me.

'I've been so worried about you. But look at this, look at how well you've done.'

All the hours spent in your room, bent over my books and papers and notes. I keep telling Mama that I've been staying with Neo, but I haven't seen Neo in forever. I spend all my free time with you and if you're working or out drinking I'm studying. The other day you said it again. 'Life is easy for you, you just get money from your mother.' You were laughing. I told you to stop saying that and you swung your arm around me and kissed me on the cheek and said you were just joking. When I was in high school Mama was obsessive about my studying, about my results. 'Education is the key, Nthati. This is the only way that you'll push forward.' She used to keep me inside on weekends, to come into my room and stand over me to make sure that my books were open, that I was working. She cried the day the COSC results were announced, when she saw my name at the top of the list. I'd never seen her so happy. I've imagined this moment. Handing her this piece of paper, seeing the look on her face.

'Let's pray, Nthati. Please. Let's pray together now.'

I don't fight her. She clasps her hands together, her fingers interlinked, her eyes closed. I keep mine open. I stare at the pattern of diamonds on the carpet and listen to her talking. Her voice changes. It goes warmer and deeper, and it's as if she's pushing down on every word. As if she wants to make sure that God won't miss any of what she's saying.

*

The sound of your key in the door, the clinking of metal waking me up, cutting through the night. You stumble once you're in and the table legs scrape and something smashes onto the floor. I lie still, my eyes closed. I don't turn around.

I hear you kicking off your shoes, undoing your belt. You swear out loud. You keep sniffing. You're moving around the room and I start to wonder what you're doing, then I feel the weight of your body as you lower yourself onto the mattress behind me. The smell of the tavern on you. A groan that seems to come from deep in your throat. It takes a long time for your breathing to slow down. I shift closer to the wall.

In the morning I wake up before you. When I come back in from the toilet I leave the door a crack open and it's then that I see your face. Dark bruises, the skin around your eye and upper lip inflated and swollen. Dry blood under your nose, on your lip. The irritation that I felt last night drains away immediately. I kneel down and run my hands over your shoulder, your arm. You murmur something and pull the blanket over your head.

Broken pieces of glass lie on the floor next to the table. I sit and stare at you. Scenarios racing through my mind. The dark figure of a man whose face I can't see. Tall, stronger than you. I watch him hitting you, his fist smashing against your face. I feel nauseated. I can't move. I want to hold you, to make it better somehow.

You get up slowly, your eyes scrunched against the light. You say nothing to me. You go outside and I hear you coughing and spitting. A while later you come back in, pick up a bucket and go out to the tap. I watch you standing there, waiting for it to fill, your hands clasped around the back of your head.

'What happened? Who did this to you?'

You wince when you wash around your mouth, your eye. Your movements careful, hesitant. Face cloth moving over skin. The lathering of soap and the splashing of water as you cup your hands to your face. You reach for the tub of Vaseline, dig out small scoops and dab them onto the wounds. I can see the broken skin at the top of your lip now. Your left eye is just a narrow slit – you can't open it properly. You lie back down, your eyes closed, face turned up to the ceiling. I sit down at the end of the mattress, rest my hand on your leg. I repeat my questions, my voice strained.

‘It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.’ This is the first time you speak. Your voice is soft and weak. I don’t recognise it. It isn’t your usual hoarse, morning babalas voice. Panic rushes through me.

‘It’s not nothing. We need to go see the Police...’ Something in me cracks and the tears start. I try to wipe them away quickly.

You shake your head, silent again. A shadow appears in the doorway and a deep voice calls out your name. I freeze and look over at you. You prop yourself up onto your elbows and when the voice says your name again you get up wordlessly and go outside. I stand close to the door so that I can watch you. I’ve never seen the guy before but you seem to know him. The two of you walk over to the fence and you stand there with your hands in your pockets, talking to him. I see you shaking your head, gesturing with your hands. I can’t hear what you’re saying. I wonder how it is that you’re able to talk to this guy but have nothing to say to me.

When you come back in you still won’t look at me. Your forehead is creased and I can see from the way you’re moving that you’re in pain.

‘Lebo, why can’t you just tell me what...’

You turn around and snap. You speak with difficulty, but your anger pushes through. ‘There are things you don’t need to know, Nthati. Why do I have to tell you everything?’

Your one open eye stares at me. Your lip is pushed up, almost defiantly. You look like someone different, someone I don’t recognise. A space has opened up between us and I don’t know how to close it. I don’t know how to cross over to where you are.

*

Our nights spent in your room, hidden. Our days spent moving carefully, making sure to not reach for each other’s hands when we’re sitting in a taxi or walking in town. Going our separate ways in silence – me to campus, you to work – without any sign of affection. Just a nod of the head or something said in a low voice. Making sure to not be seen standing too

close to each other. Wanting to reach for you, to put an arm around you or to kiss you on the cheek, but knowing that these things can only happen when the door is closed. Pulling you away from the window in your room, because I'm afraid that someone will see us through the gap in the curtain. Telling you to not come up to Mama's house, to stop at the corner and to turn around.

*

That night. You're standing under the streetlamp. Your eye looks a lot better, but your skin is still bruised, your lip still raised. When you ask if you can spend the night I can't say no, I can't leave you standing there, so I say nothing and we walk up to the house. We sit in the dark. I can't see you properly. There are twisted faces in the tree, watching us. I try again to ask you what happened but your answer only deepens your silence. We're drinking brandy, your head is on my shoulder. We squat under the tree, the night sky thrown open over us. You wrap your arms tightly around me as you sleep. I wake up early, just as it's getting light. I know that I have to get you out of the house. You hold me gently, kiss me quietly. I watch you walking down the street.

I can feel the noise in every movement. The creaking of the door. The thud as I push it closed, the click as I lock it. The floor tiles cold against my bare feet. I turn around.

Mama is standing right there.

*

You're behind the counter, taking orders for food. I join the queue of students. You see me and for a second our eyes meet, then you turn your head and keep working.

I ask for a quarter chicken and chips and you write the order down and shout it out to the kitchen, your eyes searching me. There are still thin traces of bruises on your skin.

'What time are you knocking off?' My voice sounds unsteady. I avoid looking straight at you.

I carry my polystyrene container to my afternoon lecture and the food sits in there and grows cold. I don't take any notes. I draw circles in the corner of my notebook. The lecturer's voice sounds far away.

At 5 you're already standing outside KB's with your hands in your pockets, shifting from one foot to the other. You look up at me and say nothing, but I know it's only because we're not alone.

'Can we go talk somewhere?' I stand in front of you, my hands clenched around the straps of my backpack.

You look as if you're about to say something, but then you turn and start to walk down the road, away from campus. You leave the pavement, stepping onto a footpath that takes us past a bottle store and a row of houses, until we reach the edge of an empty piece of land. We go and stand under a clump of trees, away from the path. You turn to look at me, your anger seeping out now, barely contained.

'What the hell is going on? Where have you been? Why has your phone been off?'

I stare at the bare ground around us. The hollowed out wreck of a car a few metres away. A skeleton of rusted metal, partly buried in the soil. Gaping spaces where there used be windows, tyres. There's an old tree stump next to me. I sit down on it, take my backpack off my shoulders.

'My Mum...' I try to start, fall silent again. I don't know how to say any of it. I don't know how to tell you about the past few days, because even in my own head the moments play soundlessly, as if I'm watching them from far away. The slap that burned across my face. The hours of Mama crying and screaming, pressing me for answers, raising her head and her hands to ask God what happened, what she did, where she went wrong. The priest who came to our house the next day and sat with us in the living room. His round face and double chin, his neck straining against his collar. The way he looked at me from under his glasses and the smell of him when he stood over me and put his hand on my head to ask God to forgive me, to cleanse me. His voice growing steadily louder until he was almost shouting the words. Mama right next to us, murmuring loudly in agreement with everything he said.

‘My Mum saw us. At the door. She saw you leaving.’

Your face drops. You swear under your breath, bring both your hands up to the back of your head. You swear again, louder this time, but you say nothing else.

‘She took my phone. She says I have to be home every night. She says that we...that I can’t...that I...’

I start crying, the tears fast and hot, burning at my throat. The sky is lit up now, orange flames tearing through it. I can hear the distant sound of traffic on the main road, the voices of people walking by on the path, the wind blowing in the trees that stretch out over us.

You squat down in front of me, your hand on my knee. Your eyes are wide open, looking straight up into mine. I want to reach for you and pull you closer but I can’t. Not out here, not after everything that’s happened.

‘You don’t need her...’

Your voice is shaking. Your hand closes tighter, your fingers pressing down into my knee.

‘Listen, you don’t need her... We can live together... We can take care of each other...’

I can still hear Mama shouting. ‘You are never to see that girl again! Never! Do you understand me?’ I look at you for a long time. At the fierce expression in your eyes and the way that your mouth has gone tight and the muscle in your jaw is twitching. I put my hand over yours and keep it there.

The sky is darkening, orange clinging to the edges of it. We head back up towards the main road, our feet moving from bare earth to hard pavement. I’m watching myself, telling myself to stop, but I keep walking behind you and when you climb into a taxi I follow you. We sit pushed up against other passengers in the back row. I stare out the window. The ride feels much longer than usual, an endless stream of lights from cars and shops and streetlamps, all blurring into each other.

We cook in silence. We've done this so many times, but tonight we're not listening to the radio or laughing or talking about what happened during the day. You keep looking at me, coming over to me. You run your fingers over my back, my neck, the sides of my face. You lean over to kiss me on the cheek. You stand behind me, wrap your arms around me. It feels strange to receive so much attention from you.

I look at my plate of food. I don't want any of it. We lie down and you start kissing me, your hands reaching up under my shirt. You push yourself up onto your elbow, leaning over me. When you start to undo my trousers I raise my hips to help you. You're above me, your skin against mine, your breathing getting heavier, but everything is just actions, no feeling. My whole body is numb, lifeless. I can see Mama's face and hear everything the fat priest said and when I open my eyes your face is so close to mine that I can see the scab on your lip and the bruises around your eye, still there. I start to cry again, the sobs wrenching painfully through me, twisting up from my stomach to my chest to my throat.

You stop. You stare at me open-eyed, your breathing slowing down. You lower yourself back onto the mattress, open your arms and pull me towards you, your hand moving up and down my back as I cry. We lie like that for a long time, until my neck and shoulder start to hurt and I shift and turn. You keep your arm around me. Our fingers interlink and I pull our hands up, close to my chest. You lift your legs to fit into the space behind mine.

From the sound of your breathing I can tell that you're also wide awake. Your leg twitches and you move your head away so that you can cough. A while later you turn onto your back, your fingertips tracing lines around my shoulders. Your room feels like a different place, somewhere far away. Even the darkness seems to have a new texture, a new weight. I wish you'd say something that would change all of this, but you remain silent. My thoughts circle faster, something twisting through me, refusing to quieten down. I stare at the dark until thin lines of light appear under the door, on the wall beneath the curtain.

When I feel you get up I lie still and keep my eyes closed. I listen to the familiar sounds of your footsteps, the kettle boiling, the door opening and closing, buckets of water being emptied into the basin. I listen to the gentle sloshing of water and a while later I feel your hand on my arm and open my eyes. You're crouching down in front of me.

‘Don’t you want to wash? The water’s still warm.’

I look at you and don’t move. ‘I think I’ll just stay here today.’

‘Don’t you have class?’

‘I don’t feel well.’

You frown, your hand still on my arm. You stand up slowly. I close my eyes again and listen to you emptying out the basin, boiling more water. The metal of your teaspoon clinking against your mug as you stir your coffee. Your feet stop moving and I know that you’re standing next to the mattress, hesitating.

‘I have to go to work.’

You bend down to kiss me once more, your lips soft against my cheek.

‘I’ll see you tonight? Will you be OK?’

I nod.

I watch you leave. You push the door closed and the silence in the room expands, until the noise in my head becomes deafening. I stand up. I go outside to the toilet. I come back in. I look at yesterday’s food but I still can’t eat. I think about washing but I don’t move. I open a book and stare at the page, reading the same sentence again and again until I can’t look at it any longer and I go back outside and sit on the doorstep. I listen to the shouts of neighbours a few houses away, to the fly that’s buzzing over my head. Silence otherwise.

I count out the money that I find in the pocket of my jeans. I have only just enough for the taxi fare to get back home.

I lock the door. I stand there for a while, then I bend down and push my key back in through the gap underneath it. I listen to the sound of the metal sliding across the floor, coming to a stop.

*

Three loud bangs against my window, the glass shaking with the noise. I jerk awake, fear racing down to my toes, to my fingertips. I can hear someone moving outside. I lie frozen, waiting. Three more bangs, louder than the last, and then I hear you shouting out my name, your voice echoing across the quiet house. I climb out of bed quickly, my heart pounding. I unlock the front door and in the dark I walk over to where you're standing, still shouting, still outside my window. You turn around when you hear me. The light in my room comes on and throws itself across your face. I know that Mama's also awake now.

You're swaying on the spot, your face tear stained. You stumble up to me and push me, hard.

'Am I not...good enough for you? Am I not fucking good enough?'

You start to cry, shaking your head. 'Why...? Why would you leave...like that? I thought...'

The door opens and Mama comes out. She walks over to you, screaming at you to leave me alone, to get away from her house, to never come back. You stare at her, your eyes bloodshot, your nostrils flaring, then you take a step back. You look at me, long and hard, then you turn and stumble down the road in silence, disappearing into the dark.

I want to follow you but I don't. I stay standing there, Mama's hand closed tight around my arm.

*

'This has gone too far.'

Mama says it again and again. That she doesn't know how to control me, how to discipline me, what to do with me. She refuses to let me out of the house. I stop going to campus, to lectures. And that's how Papa comes into our lives again, how he changes from being a distant shadow who sends money from time to time, a faraway memory who makes Mama's eyes go quiet, to someone who she starts to talk with on the phone, who she starts to talk about as if he were a real person.

An imaginary Jo'burg starts to grow in my mind when she tells me what the plan is. I build it from the memory of the one time that I went there as a child, from the images I've seen on TV. I start to see the dim outlines of its buildings and streets and roads, to visualise what Papa's house looks like. I listen to Mama talking to him on the phone about my results, about what university I could transfer to, about a student visa and application forms and tuition fees and transport costs. I stay silent and I don't fight her because I want all of this to end. I want to go somewhere else, anywhere else. I want to stop seeing the look on Mama's face, to crawl away from the hot feeling of shame that floods over me when I wake up every morning and remember everything that's happened. I want to stop living trapped with her in this house.

I want to stop thinking about you, to escape this numbness, this emptiness. I want to stop seeing your face every time I close my eyes, to stop feeling like something has been dug out of me.

Mama comes to the taxi at the border with me. We walk across Maseru Bridge together, carrying my suitcase and my bags between us. I watch her through the window as I climb in, standing with her arms folded, her mouth tight. It takes a long time for the taxi to fill and she hardly moves, her face turned away from me. When we start to pull away she looks up and raises one hand to give me a short, stiff wave. She doesn't smile.

*

Friday, early afternoon. The first really warm day since I've been here. I park the car at the tavern near your place, in the same spot as last time. Breathe deep, exhale, begin to walk, finding relief in these steps, in the feeling of being outside, the sun on my skin. I keep my headphones in even though I have no music playing. I don't look at the people I walk past. I move towards the mountain, approach it carefully. I don't know if it will recognise me, if it will remember me. I keep lifting my eyes to look up into its face but I can't read its expression. It seems to change every time I look at it.

I stay on the dirt road as far as it goes, then I begin to follow the footpaths that appear, thin trails of earth worn bare, zigzags that lead across fields and edge up the mountain, showing me the way. I start to climb, pushing myself until the muscles in my calves are straining and my chest is heaving, breathless. I'm chasing the feeling that I remember. Getting up there

tired, covered in sweat. The stillness. The cool breeze. Sitting at our spot and feeling like we were alone, like we were somewhere else. The quiet that we were always able to find.

Houses keep emerging. Their bricks the colour of the soil and the sandstone, rocks holding their flat roofs in place. From a distance they seem to be a part of the mountain, but as I get closer they reveal themselves and I'm able to see their sunken wooden doors and darkened windows. They stand silent in the afternoon sun. There's no one else up here.

I keep my eyes on my feet, on the path ahead that refuses to stay still, turning from left to right as it winds between rocks and lifts itself up across steep sections that force me to stop to catch my breath. A loud barking breaks the stillness, so close that I stop walking and look up. A large dog is standing in front of a house that's appeared to my right, its walls only just visible in the shadows of the rocks. Another dog, lying in the shade, looks up. It sees me and gets to its feet. They both stand barking, their heads and tails raised.

I've seen this before. Young Nthati and a group of other children are walking along a road, somewhere close to Nkhono's house. They hear barking and turn around to see a huge brown dog running down the hill, coming straight at them. Nthati is paralysed, watching the dog getting closer, its barking getting louder. Next to her an older boy moves fast, bends down to pick up a stone, hurls it at the dog. It lets out a whimper, moves away, its tail between its legs. Nthati feels her muscles relax, her breath return. She laughs and copies the older boy, her fingers closing around a small hard stone, her arm bent and raised over her head as she gets ready to throw.

I look at the two dogs. They stand tall, leaning forward, their ears pointed. They're much bigger than any dogs I've ever seen, with thick brown fur streaked with black and dark, shining eyes. Their barking getting angrier now, their fur raised, their front legs stiff. I bend down slowly to feel for a stone, keeping my eyes on them but my hand only brushes against thin soil that runs through my fingers. The dog closest to me takes a step forward, the edges of its lips curling as it barks, its pink gums showing, its sharp white teeth bared.

I straighten up with no stone in my hand and start to walk backwards, looking behind me to watch the path, but always turning around again to keep an eye on the dogs. The barking stops when I can no longer see them and the mountain falls silent once again. I stare at the

path, at how it leads back up towards the dogs, stubbornly refusing to take me anywhere else. I turn away from it and start to climb alone.

I scramble up the steep slope, the soil under my feet loose, small stones coming dislodged and flying down the hillside. Bushes and dry grass scratching against my ankles and the backs of my legs. I stop to look up at the line of cliffs at the top, trying again to remember where our spot was, but the shapes of the rocks seem new and strange. They stare back down at me, the face of the mountain closed, revealing nothing.

A towering rock waits for me. I climb it carefully, my feet finding holes to step into and my fingers clinging to edges. For a moment I see young Nthati up ahead of me, tall for her age with long skinny arms and legs, her hair blown around by the wind. She climbs faster than me, moving easily up the rock and soon she's gone.

The top of the rock is sharp and jagged with nowhere to sit. I lower myself into an uncomfortable seat, my legs and arms stiff as I struggle to keep my balance. Again I raise my eyes to the cliffs at the top. My eyes travel along them. The sides and edges that catch the light, the bushes that poke out from between their cracks, the sections that lie in shadow. The thick dark lines. I see something move, disappear. I look away.

We watch the sun sink, the clouds moving towards us, the sky endless. Even the early evening air feels warm today and you're in a T-shirt and there's enough light still for me to see my legs hanging off the rock and to turn my head and see your sleeves and arms. The lights below us start to come on, some of them moving dots on the roads. Your hand runs down my back and you put your cigarette out against the rock and say that we should go. The thin light is stretching itself out, staying just a while longer for us. You move easily down the path, your feet light. You're right in front of me, so close that I can reach out for your arm and close my hand around yours for a minute. The sky stays light, a pale yellow, but around us the ground grows darker and soon I can't see my feet or my arms. The mountains around us are turning into solid black shapes and I know that the mountain we're on is joining them and that it's steadily rising, growing taller as we grow smaller.

I can feel the mountain's eyes fixed on the back of my head as I climb down alone. I move slowly, my feet struggling to find a grip, my legs weakened. The path stays hidden, showing itself only at the end when the steep slope begins to flatten out.

I'm nearly back at the tavern when I hear a whistle behind me. I ignore it the first time, but when it comes again I turn around. It takes me a while to recognise the man walking towards me. Moshe, taking long strides, his hands in his pockets. Wearing loose trousers and a black T-shirt. I stop and he catches up to me.

'Hey, ho joang?' His face is open, smiling, relaxed.

When I give him a one-word answer I realise that he's the first person I've spoken to today and that I can't bring myself to smile back at him. We keep walking. He nods towards the tavern.

'I saw your car when I passed by earlier. I thought I'd find you there. Where are you coming from?'

'Oh...I just went for a walk.'

I know that he's looking at me now but he says nothing. My shirt is sticking to my back and there's dirt all over my shoes and jeans. I don't want to go near the groups of men who are standing outside the tavern or the loud music that's coming from inside so I start to walk towards the car, reaching into my pocket for my keys. I feel light-headed, my legs still weak and shaky from the mountain.

'Wait, where are you going? At least have one beer!'

He's smiling again, his head tilted to one side. 'Come on, it's Friday! I'll buy you one?'

I want to say no but the words won't come out, so I stand and look at him and find that I still can't smile. I open the driver's door and lean in to reach for my sweater and my pack of cigarettes. I close and lock it again, and he makes a noise that's somewhere between a shout and a laugh. He disappears inside.

The quart is cold and I drink fast. The other guys sitting outside shout out to Moshe, talking shit about his girlfriend being back. He laughs, tells them to fuck off, turns to me. ‘Don’t worry about those guys.’

I shrug and keep drinking. I can still feel the cliffs above me, the dark shadows under them. On the mountain the houses with no people have disappeared back into the soil and rocks. The dogs are stretched out on the ground but their ears are pricked, listening for the sound of footsteps. We’re still climbing down and we’re a long way from your room and I can see the figures of men against the windows of the tavern without having to turn my head to look that way. I can feel all of it happening without having to see any of it.

‘So are you still looking for your friend?’

He asks the question and, in the quiet that follows, the late afternoon grows empty and I know suddenly that you’re nowhere nearby. That it isn’t really you and I walking down in the dark. The two tiny figures float away and the mountainside is left bare again.

I nod and take a long drag. I blow the smoke out slowly and look down at the cigarette that rests between my fingers and the sunset that’s trapped in the green glass of my quart. The sweat on my skin is drying and I’m starting to feel cold. I pull my sweater on. The light begins to fade away and I listen to the sound of the crickets, the voices of men, the thumping house music, the cars that rumble past on the dirt road. Moshe’s gone quiet. He doesn’t ask any more questions. I feel him next to me, shifting in his seat and moving his legs. The sound of him swallowing when he lifts his quart, the gentle thud on the ground when he puts it down. Now and again he makes a short noise or lets out a chuckle and I know that he’s half-listening to what the guys nearby are saying, but that he’s keeping most of himself here, next to me. His body is listening to mine, his neck and shoulders and back alert as he tries to tune into my movements, as he waits for me to do or say something that he can respond to.

We go inside to buy more beer. The music feels louder than usual, the beat pounding up through my shoes and my legs. The old-school jukebox that I still don’t recognise and the dirty walls and the fluorescent lightbulbs turned on and flickering. A row of empty quarts lined up on a windowsill. I squeeze past men to get to the counter, using my elbows and my shoulders, keeping my eyes straight ahead. Men wearing caps and hats and beanies. Men with

dreadlocks and shaved heads and beards. Men in T-shirts and hoodies and blankets. I ignore the comments about me that are passed from one guy to the next. I pretend not to hear the shouts directed straight at me. Moshe is behind me. He rests his hand on my back when he leans forward to try and get the barman's attention. I can feel the warmth and closeness of him, the thick musk smell of his deodorant. I don't move away.

By the third quart his hand is moving up and down my back, the touch of his fingers light and hesitant. We're sitting outside again. It's dark now and there's too much noise and activity for anyone to be paying attention to us. The front door's open, guys moving in and out, the light from inside spilling onto the ground. I look over at him, his face half lit. His eyes are already on me.

His hand moves down and circles around my waist. I drink until I finish my quart, let it drop and listen to the sound of the empty bottle hitting the cement brick. I stand up without saying anything and walk over to where the car stands in the dark. I feel him getting up behind me. Away from the light and noise he reaches for me, pulls me to him.

He kisses me hard, urgently, pushing me up against the car. My hands close around his shirt. I kiss him back, his stubble rough against my skin. For a while I let it happen, but in the feeling of his body pressed to mine and the movement of his lips and tongue, I find the beginning of a story I already know. The wanting it is there, but there's only just enough to carry me through. When it's over I'll feel sickened, hollow. I'll pull my clothes back on. I'll leave. The feeling will carry for days. The sense that something has come dislodged, slipped out of place. If he tries to call I'll stare at my phone and let it ring. If I see him again I'll look away. If he comes up to talk to me I'll say as little as I can, my face hard and unsmiling, before I turn and walk off.

I break the kiss, lift my hands, palms flat against his chest. He keeps his arms around me and tries to pull me close again. His breath is warm and moist against my neck.

'What's wrong?'

I shake my head, push against him, the words finally forming. 'I can't, I have to go...'

‘Why?’

His hands close in tighter and again he tries to pull me towards him, his face brushing against mine. I push harder, a shout escaping from my lips. He lets go and I step away, reaching into my pocket for my keys.

‘What the hell...? Wait!’

I climb into the car, slam the door shut and start the engine.

He bangs his hand against the window but when I start to reverse he backs away and stands in my headlights, his arms hanging at his sides. His face caught in the light. At first, I see confusion in his wide eyes and half open mouth but then something in his features changes as his forehead creases and the shadows around his eyes darken. He jerks his chin forward and shouts out something as he raises an arm. I swing the car around and keep my eyes on the road because a cold feeling has come over me now and I don’t want to look into my mirror and see him standing there.

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On the road everything is far away. This feeling that the beer has brought – a pounding in my head, a surging forward in no direction. Anything could happen and it wouldn’t matter because it would be somewhere else and I wouldn’t feel it.

A place with lights of many colours and cars parked outside with their boots open like they used to do at KB’s. I know that there must be music playing but inside me everything’s gone quiet and I watch it all in silence. A girl in a short black dress with her arms around a tall guy’s neck and other people standing and laughing and dancing. I wonder how it’s so easy for everyone else but then I’ve already driven past and the road and the lights are moving towards me again through darkness and I let the question go and return to not feeling.

When I walk through the front door the living room is wide and clean and bright. There are too many frills on the cushions on the couch and the light on the porcelain dogs makes it look like they’re staring at me and waiting for something. I close the door behind me and stand

and look at Mama, who's also staring at me and waiting. For a while I wonder why she isn't moving, how it is that she can sit completely still like that, her feet pulled up under her legs, a blanket over her knees. The TV's on and she must have been watching it but now she isn't, she's just looking at me.

'Where have you been?'

I see her mouth move and a while later I hear her words, and even though she says them slowly I feel how they charge across the room and bite, sharp at the edges. How they carry more than the question she's asked. I know that she's been sitting on them for hours, shifting restlessly on the couch. Waiting, looking up at the clock on the wall. Trying to call me but only getting my voicemail because it's been days now since I turned my phone off.

I should say something but there's only this blank silence in me and the light all around and the TV flashing and I can't think of any words. Mama's shining eyes are fixed on me and I can't stand here by the door any longer. I start to walk towards my room, towards darkness.

I hear her behind me, her voice lifted, louder than before – 'Nthati, don't you dare walk away from me!' – but I keep walking.

The quiet dark of my room but then the light is switched on and Mama's standing there and I've seen this before. I've seen her face in this shape, her eyebrows thickened, lines bunched up in the centre of her forehead, the lines around her mouth and nose and cheeks moving fast, changing shape as she shouts. Her hands on her hips and she's standing too close, leaning towards me.

'How dare you walk away from me when I'm trying to talk to you! How dare you show me no respect! Where have you been? You stink of alcohol. I don't know if this is how you behave when you're in Jo'burg but you're still my child and this is my house and when you're staying here you will show me some respect.'

The room is growing smaller and something else is moving in me now – roaring across the silence. I can't be here anymore. I start to walk around, to pick up my clothes from the bed

and the chair. I throw them into my open bag. At first Mama says nothing and the room falls quiet but then she starts to shout again, her voice stretched and rising at the end of her words.

‘Where are you going? What are you doing?’

She follows me to the front door, outside, to the car. Out in the night on the dark street with the way the light from the streetlamp falls onto the road and the walls of the house I feel again that I’ve seen this before. That you must be close by. Somewhere around the corner or in the shadow of the tree where the light can’t reach you. Mama’s hand is on my arm and she’s pulling and shouting again, the words streaming out of her, grating and panicked.

‘You can’t leave now – like this – at this time! And you’re drunk – I know that you’re drunk!’

I push her away with a strength that surprises me and I feel afraid of what will come out if I open my mouth. The roaring is in my ears now, a hot pulsing through my chest and my throat. I’m climbing into my car – turning the engine on – the loud banging against my window – reversing – a face contorted with anger and shouting growing smaller – all of it happening again – I’ve seen this before.

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By the border under the bright lights the shapes of petrol pumps and cars and men in caps walking back and forth. The light carrying over to the empty street vendor stalls. The signs that say Safe Travels and Tsamaea Ka Khotso illuminated, floating above me. I pull over so that I can get out to stamp my passport but then I don’t move. The engine running, my lights still on.

On the pavement in front of me is a heap of old plastic sheeting. I stare at the shape of it and the crooked shadows that form around it. It starts to move as I watch, rising as the top layer of it falls off. A man sits there, barefoot. A thin blanket around his shoulders. His hair thick and matted. He blinks at the light, looks straight at me.

I reverse again, drive out, back in the direction that I've just come from, and at the traffic lights I turn right and swoop down past the Chinese Embassy, the hills of the Free State to my right silent and asleep. At the circle by Pioneer Mall I climb and as I'm driving past Lower Thetsane the silhouette of a broken bridge hangs in front of me and from the other side of the hill there's a faint circle of light, only just visible at first and then growing – expanding – and as I drive towards it the two bright headlights of another car emerge at the very top of the hill and swoosh down past me. The factories in Thetsane with their gates closed, thick Chinese gold lettering caught quickly in the light and then gone. Nobody in the abandoned structures of tin and wood and plastic that line the pavement.

I'm alone, the dark road stretching out.

In the distance I see the shards of shattered glass as the light hits them. The stains on the tar. The pieces of twisted metal that have been pushed to the side. As I get closer the figures of people begin to appear. Some lying in the middle of the road. Others bent over them. Some standing with faces in hands. I see the taxi now but it's upside down and it's the wrong shape and it isn't moving. Its body crushed, lying on its back, wheels to the sky. A feeling of sickness comes over me, pushing up from my stomach. Traffic cones and then a policeman who appears right in front of me with his hand held out but by then it's too late. I drive straight through him and then through all of them, one after the other. A long, drawn out screaming fills the car, shrill and high pitched and in terrible pain, but as I hit the brakes it slowly fades away and is replaced by silence.

I pull over, my heart pounding. I turn around slowly, afraid to look. The road is empty. No people, no cars, no movement.

I keep driving, cautious now. Unsure of what else might lie ahead. For a long time there is only darkness, the road moving towards me silently, but then I see the smoke on the horizon, lit against the night sky. Glowing orange close to the ground. A line of flames, small at first, rising higher as I get closer.

I come to a stop. When I open the car door I can smell the burning grass and hear the crackling of the fire. Against the smoke I see the silhouettes of people moving up and down with buckets and branches in their hands. Something is pulling me towards the flames. They

seem impossibly bright, the fire spreading far out across the field. I walk towards it until I'm at the edge of the rushing heat.

One of the women sees me standing there and for a while she looks at me. The light from the flames against the side of her face, her shoulders, her arms. She comes over to me and, without saying anything, hands me a branch, the end of it thick with green leaves. I watch as she moves away, how she walks around the smaller flames, beating them down when they rise. I start to do the same, the smoke heavy around me, creeping up my nostrils, burning in my chest. I cough and hold my hand against my nose and mouth but I can still taste the ash. My eyes watering, the sweat running down my forehead and shoulders and back. The feeling of the branch hitting the ground, the sound of the leaves against the grass. Sparks rising and landing on my shoes and jeans. The effort of it, my body bent, my arm striking hard at the flames. Something in me loosening, coming undone.

There are shouts around me as buckets are passed from one person to the next. The sloshing of water, the soft hissing. I get lost in watching the flames that come back up, in beating them down once more. The feeling of the burnt grass crunching under the soles of my feet as I walk across the length of the field, still coughing, my eyes stinging. Darkness slowly returning as the flames die down. The grass blackened, stretching far out. I straighten up and stop when I see that there are only a few glowing red cinders left, the smoke curling around them. Everyone else is starting to walk away and the woman who handed me the branch looks back at me once over her shoulder before she disappears.

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I stop at the turn to the dirt road to Nkhono's house. I'm surprised to find myself here but as I sit in the dark and stare ahead I understand that this is why I drove out of Maseru and kept driving and I know now that I shouldn't go any further. The sky hangs quiet and the moon keeps slipping in and out of view, throwing a circle of pale blue light onto the clouds around it.

In the stillness I drive up the dirt road into the village and my brights shine onto the soil and rocks ahead and behind me everything is swallowed back into dark. A red and white tent appears, floating alone, surrounded by deep black night. High and wide and glowing, propped

up by metal poles. As I drive past I see that one of its four sides has been left open and that inside there are rows of chairs standing in the light, all facing the same direction. Fires burning a few metres away and now I see the round iron pots and the women standing around them. I recognise this. I know that there'll be a funeral here tomorrow, that the women around the fires will be cooking all night in preparation for it. The walls of huts and thatched roofs visible in the firelight and a woman walking out from a doorway carrying a silver basin.

I park under the old eucalyptus tree and stand for a while looking up at it, but in the dark its branches reach high and disappear into the night. I press my hands to its trunk, turn around to lean against it. Its rough bark is peeling off in places. The sharp smell of its leaves, the sound of them moving above me in the wind. I can still see the tent from here, smaller now but clearly visible – a drifting structure of red and white stripes of light. The fires next to it, the trails of smoke that rise from them.

The moon slides out from behind the clouds and my eyes begin to adjust to the dark. I walk down the slope to Nkhono's house, the shape of it standing still and silent with no lights on, the bare ground a shade lighter than the grass. I knock on the door, the sharp hollow sounds breaking the quiet of the night. I wait but I hear no noise or movement and then I remember what it's like to be on the other side of the wall, to be woken like this. I imagine Nkhono sitting up in the dark, eyes wide-open, heart racing. I walk over to her window. The cold glass of the windowpane against my hand, the thin white curtain in the moonlight, the heavy darkness behind it. I lean forward and through the silence that has formed in me my own voice pushes out and I'm surprised to hear how it sounds deep and warm and strong.

'Nkhono! It's me, Nthati. Nkhono!'

I wonder who else can hear me, if anyone in the shadows nearby has looked up or turned their head in surprise, suddenly alert. I let a few seconds of quiet slip by then I repeat my words, my voice ringing out again. This time I hear sounds from the other side of the window. A shuffling, something dragging across the floor, the low murmuring of Nkhono's voice. A moment later I hear the metal sound of a bolt being undone and the door creaks open. Nkhono stands there, stooped and thin, one hand against the door. I can't see her face clearly.

‘Nthati, my child...’

She says something else but her voice is too soft for me to catch her words. She steps back and aside to let me in. In the dark I hear her moving around and I watch as she lights a paraffin lamp, her hands shaking, our shadows growing tall against the wall as the flame rises in the glass. I see her face in the light now, the wrinkles that crowd her skin, her mouth trembling slightly, her eyes turned up to me.

‘Nthati what’s wrong? What’s happened?’

I step towards her, reach out and put my hand on her shoulder, squeeze it gently.

‘Nothing, Nkhono. Nothing’s happened. I just wanted to come and see you. I’m sorry for coming so late, for waking you up.’

I feel her shoulder rise and fall with her breath. She keeps her eyes on me.

‘Are you OK?’

I nod.

‘Is your mother OK?’

I don’t want to think about Mama, her raised voice and all the things she said, but I nod again. We stand in the light of the lamp and Nkhono continues to watch me in silence. I don’t move my hand. She no longer looks frightened. She scans my face slowly. There is something quiet and understanding in her eyes, in the expression of her mouth. She doesn’t ask any other questions.

‘Can I stay here, Nkhono? Can I sleep here tonight?’

She picks up the lamp, leads me into the next room. She sits down on the edge of the bed and I hear the heavy creaking of its old springs as she slowly lifts her legs and turns her body

around. I kick off my shoes and climb in next to her with my clothes still on. We don't speak, the orange light warm against the bricks and the silver tin of the corrugated iron roof.

'Sleep well.'

She reaches over and turns off the lamp and the room is returned to darkness. I can still smell the smoke from the burning field on my clothes, and another smell in the room that's both distant and familiar and tugs at something in me, at the feeling of a memory that won't show itself.

It's then that I hear the singing, drifting across the silence, and I know that it's coming from the household where the funeral tent has been set up. The steady drumming and the voice that rises alone before it's joined by others, a chorus that swells and stays, the melody slow and mournful. I close my eyes. I can see the red and white tent, the women cooking around the fires. The group of people standing and singing together, their feet moving to the same rhythm. I know that somewhere close by a grave has been dug and that it now stands empty and waiting. The voices seem far away at first but then they change direction and grow louder and for a long time it feels like they're in the room, surrounding me. I keep still as they fill the darkness, as they lift and carry me.

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I shift in my sleep, turn around and open my eyes. You're standing over the bed, looking straight ahead. Your hands are in your pockets and your shoulders are relaxed but you don't move and you don't look down at me. You're not wearing a hat. You must have just had your hair cut because your scalp is smooth. There are no bruises on your face. The scab on your lip is gone. I wonder how it is that I'm able to see you so clearly in the dark.

I wake up again when I hear you unbolting the door and closing it behind you as you leave. I slip out from under the warmth of the covers, knowing that I need to move fast, that I need to follow you. By the time I'm out the house you're already up the slope and walking past the eucalyptus tree, moving in and out of shadows. The moon seems brighter now, the sky free of clouds. I can see the path ahead, the rocks and patches of grass on either side. Houses and rondavels and the fences that surround them. The silhouettes of trees and aloes, all sharp and

clear. I try to walk faster but you're still ahead of me and I can't shout out because I don't want anyone to hear me, to know that we're both out here in the night, to know that I'm following you. We walk past the fires and the red and white tent, the light inside it glowing brighter, the singing growing louder and for a while I feel drawn to it but you're walking even faster now, away from the light and noise.

You keep going on the dirt road that I drove up earlier. You're walking with confidence, with the bounce to your step that I recognise. Your feet moving easily on the uneven ground, stepping between rocks without looking down. Your back held straight, your shoulders gently swaying. You don't seem to be rushing, to be putting any effort into it, and yet you're moving much faster than me, even though my legs are straining. I know that the main road lies just ahead of us but before you get to it you turn onto a path that leads away from the village, through a field, past heaps of dried maize stalks. We're walking through bare, empty land, the mountains ahead of us with the faraway lights of houses blinking in the dark.

Your silhouette is getting smaller and at times I feel like I can't see you anymore, but then you reappear, moving ahead. I start to run, my feet pounding against the quiet ground, my eyes fixed on the shape of you in front of me. You seem to not be able to hear me because you don't turn around and you don't pick up your pace, but even though I'm running now I can't get any closer to you. I push my legs harder, sprinting, but you're still far ahead, still out of reach. Tall piles of stones begin to appear on either side of me, one after the other, throwing strange shadows onto the soil below. My muscles are burning and there's a sharp stabbing at my chest and I stop, my breath heaving, sweat running down my face. I look back up at the path, but your moving silhouette is gone.

I'm no longer in an empty field. I don't recognise this place. The mountains are closer than they were and their shapes have changed. There are no lights shining on their slopes. I'm standing next to a kraal with a jagged, uneven stone wall where I can see the black shapes of cows lying heavy on the ground. The ruins of rondavels nearby, with broken walls and no roofs, their windows and doorways empty. I stand in the silence and realise that I'm alone out here, that you've disappeared, that all I can hear is the sound of my own breathing, these new and strange mountains rising around me, dark and still.