

GO THE WAY YOUR BLOOD BEATS

NEW SHORT FICTION FROM AFRICA

"Proud, defiant, sensual, shocking, deeply pleasurable, haunting; you can throw almost any superlative at this book and it will stick."

DIRIYE OSMAN

POLARIS PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR
OF *FAIRYTALES FOR LOST CHILDREN*

Edited by
Anathi Jongilanga





First published online by *Brittle Paper* in 2019

Website: www.brittlepaper.com.

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Cover art and design: Dlozi Mthethwa

“Traversing streets replete with empty promises,
enlightenment and joy. What do you yearn for? How big
is your demon?”

— MANDISI MZENZE

“If you never make it,

I treasure you anyway.”

— SAINT SDUMO, *If You Never Make It*

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EDITOR'S NOTE

I CONSTANTLY YEARN to read books like this: books centering African, Queer characters in fiction, (re)imagining African queerness into existence for its own sake. Of course, many books had been out in the public long before the idea for this anthology was even conceived: anthologies such as *Queer Africa* (2013) and *Queer Africa II* (2016), 14's *We Are Flowers* (2017) and *The Inward Gaze* (2018), and novels such as Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees*, Ekwok Duker's *The God Who Made Mistakes*, and K. Sello Duiker's seminal *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, to name a few.

This anthology exists both as a contribution to an ongoing conversation and as resistance: because we must write about queerness from a place of love, to bring to life queer characters who exist just for existing, without the cis-heterosexual gaze, without the insult of a life determined for them by other people, without being sidelined in their own stories, without being the Joke, the Other Person, the Unspeakable Thing, the Errant One, the Mutant. To just be. To live a life. To claim themselves back from the fringes. To live with grace and joy and pain and love and all the things that make a person a person. To be complicated, be human. Because sometimes it is when we see these things in other people that we can also start believing them about ourselves – that we are not broken, we are just different. And where else to look but stories?

One evening in July 2018, I was crazy enough to flirt with this idea. I approached a few people who actually were willing to work with me on curating such a book. A few days later, none of them were excited about the idea anymore and I started to fret. Was I about to take on such a mammoth of a task by myself and see if I had it in me to see it through, to fulfill that need? My knee-jerk reaction was a resounding no. But my right thumb flicked on my phone's screen and went to Twitter, and, just like that, I sent out word that I was looking for short fiction

with the theme “Go the Way Your Bloods Beats.” Originally, this was only a theme and not a title – there were two working titles in the process of compiling this book – until a conversation with Otosirize Obi-Young made me decide on it as title.

Why this theme and title – “Go the Way Your Blood Beats”? I’d seen the line in an article – which I can’t remember now – and it stuck. It was evocative, the kind of thing that you could be given as a prompt and you would send your pen sprawling. It was enticing, and I think I was drunk enough from the idea of actually creating something from it such that it sounded easy, doable. I wanted to see journeys made, journeys inward and outward, to the world, to the heart, back in time, a run to the future. I wanted to see stories of hope, of love, heartbreak, joy, resistance, identity, politics, grit, *magic*. Little did I know at the time that the phrase is James Baldwin’s.

After a month, there were eight submissions, seven of which were good enough. But that wasn’t enough. Aside the low number of responses, something was lacking: a flow between the stories, a communication. Those seven wouldn’t do, and again, I thought of giving up. But with the help of *The Kalahari Review* and the *Ja. Magazine* teams, I put out another, more formal, call for open submissions, and two months later, I had over twenty entries to choose from. Twelve of those stories make up this anthology.

But because I was running only on passion and “need,” I had no *place* to house this wonderful work. I must be honest: I let my imposter syndrome get the better of me almost all the time. This was why I didn’t have it in me to approach *Brittle Paper* in December when I finished editing and putting the book together, why I had not thought about it until the last minute. But by late January 2019, I had contacted them and, to my delight, they said *Yes*. I sighed with relief, with happiness. It is not only that our work would be given space to be seen; it was also that there would be one more book about queerness out in the world and *someone* would be happy that there is.

I am grateful to the following people:

Everybody who shared my social media posts about looking for material for this work.

The *Ja. Magazine* and *The Kalahari Review* teams.

The *authors*. This book would not exist without you: this is *your* work. Thank you for trusting me with your words. To those who submitted but their work couldn't make it to these pages – thank you for submitting, for giving it a chance.

Diriye Osman. For agreeing to write the introduction to the book, for giving us the most generous compliment.

Saint Sdumo, Mandisi Mzenze.

Dlozi Mthethwa. For the cover design.

Otosirieze Obi-Young and *Brittle Paper*. I don't know how I could thank you enough for everything that you have done – giving this book a home, assisting me with so much more. For the many lessons that working with you has taught me. For your patience and generous spirit – you cannot know how much all that means to an emerging writer and editor like me.

I can only hope that, together with the authors of these stories, I have achieved my goal.

Anathi Jongilanga,

April 2019.

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS HOW WE LOVE

IN JAMES BALDWIN'S seminal 1984 interview with *Village Voice* journalist Richard Goldstein, he made a series of powerful statements. Baldwin pointed out that “the question of human affection, of integrity, in my case, the question of trying to become a writer, are all linked with the question of sexuality. Sexuality is only a part of it. I don't know even if it's the most important part. But it's indispensable.” When Goldstein pressed Baldwin on what advice he would give to young queer people, Baldwin shared the following wisdom:

Best advice I ever got was an old friend of mine, a black friend, who said you have to go the way your blood beats. If you don't live the only life you have, you won't live some other life, you won't live any life at all. That's the only advice you can give anybody. And it's not advice, it's an observation.

Taking that observation and framing it through a distinctly pan-African lens is what brings us to this deliciously-written and astutely curated anthology of queer African writing in the 21st century. Proud, defiant, sensual, shocking, deeply pleasurable, haunting: you can throw almost any superlative at this book and it will stick. As I read the stories, I fell in love with the collective deployment of language-as-dynamite, the deft pacing of every piece. There is so much ingenuity on display here. Certain stories made my heart burst with sheer pleasure at the possibility and elasticity of the queer African short story in English.

In Acan Innocent Immaculate's “Songbird,” there is an adroitness and sensitivity in the storytelling that would make the most seasoned short story writer puke-green with envy. It's an intensely poetic piece, laced with mystery. When Zouk is born, her mother is terrified that she is possessed by a powerful magical force. Zouk is mute for the first few years of her life; one day

she opens her mouth and sings like her voice is coated in honey. She becomes alluring to all—with damaging consequences.

“Her Stripes,” by Odah Brian, is a poignant story about a young trans girl who has been forced by her family and community to fold up her identity and keep it hidden away until she realises that such self-denial is a kind of death, and courageously reclaims her life by confronting the demons that have shattered her confidence. The third story in this exquisite anthology is Vuyelwa Maluleke’s “The Thing in the Blood,” in which grief and an indescribable element of alchemy are subtly fused with the desire for a dual acceptance: to be homed within our own bodies, and to find solace and kinship within our families. It’s a moving and elegiac story that heralds the arrival of a fantastic new talent.

“Ex Vivo,” by Tsholofelo Wesi, is a gorgeously constructed gem with a transgressive, tensile edge. To the Western eye, this story would be construed superficially, as an allegory about incest, suicidal ideations and superstition. But instead it is a story about how we, as queer Africans, are in control of our own mythologies; how brotherly affection can take on a more tender and, dare I say, passionate texture. It also demonstrates how parental disapproval of sexual difference is not necessarily manifested in ways as straightforward as disownment, and that there are complex and nuanced ways to represent who we are and where we are going.

Mercy Wandera’s “Cow and Chicken” is a heart-breaking prose poem about a young girl whose charismatic and adored older brother is punished by his parents for playing around with makeup. An exorcism follows, and this, and the frightened silence of the narrator that accompanies it, makes this story all the more relevant in the face of the often deadly suppression of queerness across the continent—and abroad—through the mediums of supposed spiritual ‘deliverance’ and cruel and scientifically-discredited ‘conversion’ therapies.

In Fiske Serah Nyirongo's beautiful "Who You Are," our nine-year-old narrator, Lilato, witnesses her aunt Mwangala engaged in an intimate embrace with her female paramour, before her mother, who is Mwangala's identical twin, quickly breaks up the moment and emotionally blackballs Mwangala from her life. This leaves Lilato without the role model she always looked up to. . . until they reunite sixteen years later in the Netherlands. It's a short piece, but one where generational traumas are healed, and our sapphic characters find respite from the dehumanising power of a homophobic, heterosexist world that refuses to see them for who they are. In "God in Jeans," Riley Hlatshwayo conjures a world where his protagonist, Lulama, has intense meetings with Eros in the form of a series of sexually robust but emotionally distant white pretty boys, who either want to consume him or replace romance and tenderness with unbridled, often dehumanizing passion. It's sexy and enticing, and Hlatshwayo is a writer to watch out for.

These stories are encoded with the sting of melancholy and a genuine sense of hopefulness and regeneration. There is so much to admire about this anthology, and the editor, Anathi Jongilanga, has served up more excitement, passion and moral acuity in these pages than the venerated Western literary magazines currently haemorrhaging readers with their inconsequential narratives of privilege and anomy, manage to do.

Kudos to *Brittle Paper* for bringing this anthology to the masses. Thank you to Otosirize Obi-Young for hiping me to this hotness.

So what are you waiting for, reader?

Dig in.

Diriye Osman,

April 2019.

Songbird

ACAN INNOCENT IMMACULATE

1.

HOME

IN THE OLD days, you knew when you gave birth to a musambwa. Before it released its first bewitching cry, before the liquor was cold on its skin, your mothers wrenched it from your child's body and buried it in a clay pot deep in the ground, where its entrapping song would never be heard. You bathed your child in pungent, blessed herbs so the Demon could never find its way back to the home it had chosen. You made offerings to your family's god, gave appeasements to the earth and the forest. You named your child after a strong holy ancestor of the clan. That way, you saved your family. That way, you saved your clan. You saved everybody.

But times have changed. The wisdom of old has been swept aside, usurped by the shinier knowledge of the Western world. This is why Salima doesn't know when she gives birth to a musambwa. It has been an easy pregnancy for her, easier than the first one who decided he didn't want to stay, easier than the second and third who almost killed her on their way into the world. The labour pains come like an old friend instead of a vengeful foe, gentle strokes in her lower back urging her to release, to let go. In the hospital, she pushes once, twice, and the child slips out onto the polythene covering of the maternity bed, squirming and screaming.

"A girl, a beautiful girl," the midwife murmurs. She holds the baby up, bloodied and pink and angry, for Salima to see. With each cry the two women hear, their hearts speed up to catch up with that of their mistress.

“Give her your breast,” the midwife says after the cord has been cut. Give her your life, give her everything, she wants to add. Instead, she settles for watching over the pair as the baby latches on a nipple, and the mother coos over her soft curly hair. And it is only when the child’s eyes slip closed that the hearts of both women settle down.

SALIMA NAMES THE girl Zouk. If she’d known what her child was, maybe she would have named her Djinn. Maybe she would have asked the sheikh from the mosque she prays at to bring the Imam to cast out this Demon. But she knows nothing. Besides, she’s already beholden to her child, having heard the song she sang when she entered the world. She won’t let her Zouk go hungry. She won’t let her Zouk wear the old hand-me-downs her older siblings wore. No, only the best will do for her Zouk. Her husband is bemused by the unusual expenses his youngest wife is sending his way, but he gives her what she asks for anyway. Money is no matter for Hajji Mulumba’s family.

No one else sees it – the sun that Salima believes rises and sets over her Zouk’s head. The child is surly, silent, unwilling to be carried by any but her mother or the old midwife, who came to work as her nanny a few weeks into her life. Her older sister, three-year-old Jamila, is the prettier one. Jamila’s twin, Adam, is the vibrant one. Why is she the one Salima adores the most?

“It is the way of a mother,” Hajji Mulumba says with the all-knowing smugness of a man who has never borne a child. “She will always love her most recent pain more.”

WHEN ZOUK TURNS four and hasn’t said her first word, Salima takes her to Nsambya Hospital to see an ENT specialist.

Nothing wrong, the specialist says. Give her time.

Salima takes the child to see a psychiatrist.

“Has she faced any trauma?” the psychiatrist asks. “Trauma will do this to a child sometimes.”

But what trauma, Salima wonders, when she has ensured Zouk lives a life as soft as pillows?

“Give her time,” the psychiatrist says, and Salima thinks: all these doctors are useless.

“Give her time, Nalongo,” her husband says, but she can see he is becoming impatient with her already. She is no longer the Favorite, a fourth younger wife having come in when Zouk was two. What does it matter, anyway, that she is the mother of twins, if she has cursed her husband with a mute? Even worse, her older co-wives’ sons have turned her own son against her. Adam is barely seven, and yet he prefers to eat his suppers in Hajati Madina’s flat. Is it because of that one time she beat him with a slipper for making her Zouk cry? Oh, but he had earned it, mocking her muteness, shoving her to the cold tiled floor. And Jamila will follow her brother wherever he goes, so most of the time, Salima is left in the silence of Zouk’s acquiescence and the sound of Najjemba, the old midwife, cleaning and organising Zouk’s room.

ZOUK’S VOICE RETURNS to her when she’s seven years old. Salima finds her in the compound, sitting on the grass in the middle of a circle formed by her many siblings. She is singing a song, an old Paulo Kafeero song Salima only knows because her grandfather forced her to listen to it, and yet her siblings stare at her, unblinking, enraptured, open-mouthed with

adoration. Oh, yes, she sounds beautiful, but to Salima it is like the taste of sugar to one who has tasted honey before.

“Children,” she calls, her breath suspended in her larynx, “it’s time for supper.”

The spell is only half broken when Zouk stops singing, because when she stands up to go into the flat, the children file in after her. And for the first time in months, the saucepans in Salima’s kitchen are scraped clean of food at supper.

“MAMA, MORE BINYEBWA, please.”

Salima almost doesn’t hear Zouk over the din in her sitting room. It has been several months since Zouk started speaking, since Zouk started singing, and Salima’s flat has suddenly become very popular with the members of the homestead. Hajati Madina and Mama Swaib sit to the left and right of Hajji at the large mvule dining table. Mama Swaib recently gave birth to twins, so she has kicked Mama Abdu out of the Favorite Wife spot. And Mama Abdu, it appears, is yet to forgive anyone for the slight. Even though her two sons sit with the rest of the younger boys on two papyrus mats on the floor, she’s not in the room.

“Sing us a song, Zouk,” Muzamilu, Hajati Madina’s first son says.

“She’s still eating,” Adam snaps. He sits next to Zouk on a papyrus mat, fiercely protective of a sister he loathed only a little while back.

“Just one ka song; she can go back to her food after,” Muzamilu whines, and Adam looks up at their father with a question that’s really a request in his eyes. Maybe, at that point, Hajji Mulumba sees something. Maybe it niggles at his mind. Maybe, distracted by Salima

reaching across Mama Swaib to spoon more binyebwa onto his plate, he ignores that something and says, “Just one song. Zouk, sing for us.”

The din vanishes like mist in the sun. No cutlery clanging against china, no plastic cups hitting the floor. Just silence, pure and sweet. Zouk begins to sing. And it’s like sugar after honey to Salima again. But with time, a person forgets the organic pleasure of honey and learns to enjoy the addictive hedonism of sugar.

IT’S ADAM WHO makes Hajji send Zouk away to America. Later, Salima will think she should have known, should have noticed it. She will think she should’ve seen the signs in Muzamilu’s bloodied nose when he and Adam fought over who would accompany Zouk on her first day at Kibuli SS, in Adam’s refusal to eat unless Zouk was there with him.

But this day, this day is just another day in Hajji Mulumba’s homestead. The entire place is lethargic from a particularly heavy lunch. Even the flies are too bloated with food to buzz about. The sun is smiling, rosy-cheeked with pleasure as wandering clouds tickle its face. Salima is content. It has been a good year. Her twins, sixteen in May, have both made it to Senior Four with good grades. Zouk is thirteen, and as normal as any child that age can be, if one overlooks the abundance of friends and admirers she has. And Salima’s belly is rounded again, another easy pregnancy ambling unhurried toward its culmination. All the children are home for their first term holiday, and Mama Abdu has been won over. What could possibly go wrong? Salima thinks this as she waddles down the dimly lit corridor towards Zouk’s bedroom. The door is ajar, as it always is. Salima hears a groan, and she laughs to herself. It sounds like Zouk is paying for her over enthusiastic enjoyment of Hajati Madina’s matooke and luwombo. Salima enters the girl’s room with the joke in her throat, but the mirth freezes on her lips when her eyes see. Her uterus seizes up in her abdomen, and fluid trickles down her legs. Her eyes latch onto the clothes

scattered on the floor, the empty expression on her daughter's face, the shining sweaty curves of her son's naked back as he moves over his sister. And she screams, and screams, and screams.

2.

AWAY

NEW YORK IS like a tobacco cigarette. On the first inhale, it burns your senses, makes your eyes tear up with discomfort and unfamiliarity. But then the second inhale. And then the second cigarette. And the third. And the fourth. And you realise it's not so bad after all, that you actually like the acerbic griminess of it, the muted high it gives. Then you begin to crave it, to take it in in lungfuls that seem insufficient, and you never want to let it go.

Zouk loves New York. She might have hated it once, when she'd been fresh from Austin, flabbergasted by the lack of sunshine, the lack of open space, the suffocating ever-moving crowds. But she'd needed New York.

"It's the perfect place for a singer like you to break out," Yohann had told her. She knows what he meant. The music in her soul could have taken her to Nashville, to L.A. in search of stardom. But that kind of stardom is for blonde country-singing girls with snow-white teeth, for slinky brunettes with legs up to their armpits and bodies models would envy. Zouk, with her cowrie-tipped locs and black skin and not-quite-American enough accent? She belongs in New York. She belongs on the radios, on the wooden dimly lit stages, on the pavement outside the subway, where the only thing to speak for her will be her voice. She revels in it, in the struggle to get people to listen, to get people to stop and get enthralled. After so many years of getting what she wants with a note or two, the inattention of the harried New Yorker is a breath of frigid fresh air. It makes her lungs expand with the need to sing louder, to sing harder, to sing sweeter.

Tonight she's singing at a small restaurant in Harlem. She's not expecting too many people – a few old friends from UT, a few new ones from her new home, a stranger or two who heard her somewhere else and was compelled to Google her. It's dark and cold behind the curtain, and she can smell mildew, but she's the happiest she has been in a long time. Her skin pimpls with the anticipation of performing for a crowd focused on her. It has been so long.

I wonder whose fault that is, it whispers, the small voice that has been with her from since she can remember, the Demon. She knows she's not alone in her body, in her mind. She knows there's someone else in there who thrives on the adoration of the people she bewitches, who has always pushed her to take more and more for herself, for both of them. She tried talking to the college psychologist about it once, and what did that get her? A prescription for antipsychotics and a stern talking-to from her mother. But she knows she's not crazy. She hasn't tried to harm herself or anyone else. Except Adam. Poor, weak Adam. *That's on us, isn't it, Zouk?*

Not on her. On him. On the demon that had his devotion.

She wants to close her eyes and ears to the Demon's voice, but she needs it right now. As if from a distance, she hears someone tell her it's time. It is time. She will shove this thing to the back of her mind and sing. Yohann's is the first face she sees when she steps onto the low wooden stage. She has to shade her eyes against the blue light illuminating the stage to see the white of his smile. He's at the head of the long table her friends have taken up for themselves. The remaining tables are occupied as well, and a few patrons stand along the walls. A full house. She hasn't had this much attention on her since she was her high school's choir leader. Her gaze returns to Yohann, and something inside of her twists at the look in his eyes. Her Demon sighs with contentment. He's still in love with her, but it's that dirty unfair love, the one that came when his will was taken away from him. And she could have loved him back, Zouk thinks. She could have loved his easy smile, his shiny curly hair, his olive skin, if her Demon hadn't been

there like a fence between them. When the news of Adam's death came and the pieces of her had shattered to dust, Yohann had been there to scoop her up, to glue her back together. Maybe she does love him, but it's the same way one would love a friend's pet. Enough to give it attention when it comes close, to stroke its head and rub its belly, but not enough to want to keep it.

Are you ready?

She nods and takes a step back into her mind. She feels the Demon step forward, feels its essence sink into her larynx, and she starts to weave the spells it has taught her.

When Zouk's set closes, the thing inside of her head is pleased by the new disciples she has made. They clap, mindless adoration shining in their eyes, and it makes her skin crawl and tingle at the same time. Her friends are on their feet, hooting and clapping. She forces a smile on her face as she makes her way to their table.

"I'm famished," she says, reaching for the plate of fries nearest to her, and her friends laugh. Her mouth is full when she realises they're laughing at her, not with her, and her gaze lifts to see the owner of the plate she has ravaged.

"Zouk, this is Kamara," Yohann says. Zouk stares at the woman in front of her. Bright gap-toothed smile, short afro like a halo around an angelic face. Her heart freezes, and then there is a moment of breath-stealing relief when she realises her demon is silent in the back of her skull, either unconcerned or not seeing the woman at all. Home, she thinks. The woman feels like home.

"Kam is from Uganda too," Yohann is saying, his arm heavy around Zouk's shoulder. "So you guys can bond over matooke and rolexes or whatever."

But Zouk barely hears him. Her attention is locked on the bright eyes smiling at her, on abrupt selfish realisation. Home is the person who can be hers alone.

3.

HOME

WHEN YOU COME back home after a long journey, you toss aside your shoes, shrug off your clothes, and, naked, you give up your secrets to the walls. It is how Zouk feels when Kam finally opens the doors of herself. Naked, stripped to the soul, fighting to hold on to her secrets. They meet in tiny increments of aloneness – in the company of their friends at first, then in small pockets of warm coffee-scented privacy on cold mornings, and finally, finally, in Kam’s small apartment, sprawled across her bed, arguing over books and jazz and politics and self.

“Who is this?” Kam asks one day. It’s one of those days when the skin of their solitude is still damp from hanging out with the rest of their friends. They’re lying on their backs, flipping through their phone galleries and finding the stories hidden in the photos. Kam’s finger hovers under the smiling face of a ghost with Zouk tucked under his shoulder, and Zouk’s heart pounds in its cage.

“That’s Adam, my brother.”

“He seems nice.”

Zouk swallows around the lump in her throat and says, “Yeah. He was.”

That makes Kam pause. She does that a lot – the pausing, the ruminating on words and carefully finding which ones slot best into the gaps questions leave. She starts to speak, pauses again. There’s pain there. Is she ready to mend the tears her curiosity will leave?

“What happened?” Kam asks, and her question makes a small gouge in the skin of Zouk’s soul. But that small opening is all the secrets need to spill out. Zouk sucks in a fortifying breath, then she releases.

“From the time I was born, I always belonged to someone.” Zouk wonders if Kam understands that she doesn’t mean the loose-leashed belonging that allows you to breathe and wander, that she means that she has always been someone’s most prized possession, to be watched and kept close, always. “First, it was my mother. I don’t resent her for it. I was mute for seven years, and her love was my only shield against the world’s cruelty. Then it was my family. I was like this songbird they brought out from a cage to impress the guests. I could’ve borne that. Maybe I even enjoyed it. But then Adam. Adam loved me. It was oppressive, the way he loved me. He did it so completely it scared me. I was just a kid, and I was his whole world. Imagine how heavy that felt.”

She stops. Then she continues. “When my dad decided to send me to Austin to live with his sister, I was happy. Relieved. Even if the desire to get away from my brother made shame burn hot in my chest. Do you know how belonging to yourself for the time can feel? Like this sweet taste on my tongue. Two months after that, my mom told me he’d killed himself. Hanged himself in his room because our father wouldn’t let him follow me here.”

“Zouk.” Kam’s hands are a gentle balm. Zouk doesn’t realise that she’s crying until she feels them on her cheeks.

“I’m so sorry,” Kam whispers, and Zouk wants to take the words and bury them in a bottomless grave. Not because they hurt or make her remember things she doesn’t want to remember, but because she’s unworthy of them. How does she tell this woman who has become so dear to her that she doesn’t regret her brother’s death? How does anyone who’s even remotely human say she is relieved, that at least now that he is in the inescapable grip of death,

he cannot chase her to the end of the earth with his mad obsession? Instead, she sits up, wipes the tears from her cheeks, and reaches for her guitar.

“Let me sing you a song,” she says. There’s indecision in Kam’s eyes – she wants to dig in and mend the wounds of Zouk’s past with her gentle hands. But maybe the magic Zouk wields works on her, even with the demon in her mind sleeping. Kam smiles, closes her eyes, and hums her agreement. And the tear in Zouk’s soul seals itself shut.

WHEN YOU’RE HOME, you let down all your shields. It’s because home is the place you can, you should, be vulnerable in, without any fear of attack. But sometimes, the thing you should fear is inside there with you. The thing Zouk should fear is the Demon in the back of her skull which unfurls from a week-long sleep. It’s deprived of the worship it thrives on, ignored for too long, and it stretches its neck to see why its vessel has turned her back on it. At first, it can’t see. It squints hard, and it sees that Zouk hasn’t met or spoken to its devotees. She’s happy, deliriously happy, for herself alone, from herself alone for the first time, and the Musambwa wants to break her and the invisible thing that makes her happy.

Zouk forgets, like she never has, to close all the little doors to the part of her brain with a tiny ladder down to her heart. She has been made careless, you see, by the blinding ecstasy of new love. The floor has been swept from beneath her feet by Kam’s easy acceptance, and she’s falling without a care for how devastating the landing will be. So she forgets, and one day, while the Musambwa is taking a walk through her mind, it stumbles upon her memories of an afternoon with Kam. It sees the beautiful face, sees the smile Zouk loves, hears the voice that has bewitched its vessel, and it screams a horrible scream.

She is performing when it happens. It's a small gig – a little get-together where the people pay more attention to the food than the entertainment. But when that scream leaves Zouk's mouth, tearing through the air like some physical force, everyone turns to stare at her with feverish adoration in their gazes. The screaming won't stop, not when Zouk tries to close her mouth, not even when she slaps her hands over it. It keeps going and going, until she drops to her knees on the damp grass, until blood runs from her ears and the oppressive weight of the audience's unwavering attention stops the breath from reaching her lungs. She gasps under the screaming, clutches at her throat while the bewitched audience watches with empty eyes, and when she loses consciousness, the screaming is still there in the blackness of her mind.

WHAT DOES IT mean when you fall in love with the one thing that can destroy you? Kam hums a church hymn under her breath while she strokes her thumb over the thudding pulse on her love's wrist. She knows – she can feel it in her bones – that there is a thing in Zouk that wants to slip into her. Maybe, even, she was the socks made to cover this thing's feet. A vessel from the beginning, robbed of its purpose by a mother's vigilance. She remembers the stories her mother and her aunts used to tell her when she was younger. If she digs deep into her mind, she can remember the pungent smell of the herbs they washed her with until she could bathe herself.

“My child will not house a musambwa,” her mother would say every time she tried to weasel her way out of Sunday morning service. Maybe running away to live with Auntie Macy had been her way of seeking respite. Saved from one prison to become a slave to another; why would she accept that? Her mother still sends her long sermons every week on WhatsApp, but at least the pretentious *Amens* she gives in response get her off the hook.

Will it be so bad, really, to be the slave she would've turned her family into? Yohann seems to be doing well enough. The thought of him makes her smile. A lesser woman would be terrified of his blind devotion to Zouk and the years they had shared. But to hate him for that would be like resenting a dog for having its owner's love. Will her enslavement turn her into a dog? She sighs, smiles again. For this woman, maybe she'll become anything.

THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND is a lonely place. The moment Zouk wakes up there, she wants to leave, but there are no doors in the white and grey walls that hem her in. The unconscious mind is a lonely place, but the last thing Zouk wants is the company of her demon. She doesn't know what she expected the Demon to look like. When she'd been younger, she'd given it the face of the Djinn they taught about in school. And when she'd outgrown her father's religion, when she'd tried to snatch back the reins of her mind, she'd stripped it of that face. Let it have nothing, she had thought. So now, when she sees it, grinning at her from a dark corner, she's surprised.

It has the face of a child. Its body is swathed in the matter of her mind, but its face is infantile, the stretch of its lips over its white teeth angelic. It wriggles in its seat, and Zouk feels the movement like worms in the pit of her stomach.

You have been hiding something from me, Zouk.

"She's mine!" Zouk growls through clenched teeth. The Demon holds up its hands, palms out, like Zouk is the irrational one here, and says, *Relax. I don't want her all for myself. Not the way I took Adam. We can share.*

"Go to hell, you greedy bitch!"

The thing laughs. Laughs a laugh that should feel like broken glass on the skin of Zouk's mind but feels like silk instead.

Your mind is more fun. All this delicious guilt and resentment and It puts a finger in the space before it and then puts it in its mouth. Oh, this is new. Love and lust! Who knew our pure Zouk was capable of such lowly desires?

Helplessness is a cold ache that blooms across Zouk's chest like a blood stain. She wraps her arms around herself and whispers, "Why won't you let me have something for myself?"

Because she smells forbidden. Is there anything more delicious than forbidden fruit?

WHEN CONSCIOUSNESS PULLS Zouk from the prison of her mind, she's in a hospital bed with tubes running in and out of her. All of her senses seek out Kam, and when they lock onto her, sitting in the bedside chair and surrounded by dozens of flowers, Zouk reaches out with her hands and her heart and her mind, and holds on tight.

"You can't be here," she says. Kam unwraps the fingers digging into her skin from around her arm and coos, "You've just woken up, babe. Calm down"

"You can't be here!" Zouk repeats. Her entire body hurts when she tries to sit up and shout her words louder. She can feel the Demon uncoiling from its slumber in her mind, stretching across to touch her love, to sully it, and the monitors are going crazy from her panic. A nurse and a doctor rush in, and her terror throws a translucent curtain over her eyes.

"You can't be here!" she's screaming over and over again, and her strength is almost too much for three people, almost too much for the sedative they shoot into her veins, but she tires, and the drug lulls her back into darkness.

The next time Zouk wakes, she's in the backseat of the vehicle of her mind. It's the Demon that sits at the wheel, careening at an unsafe speed toward the thing it wants.

“Slow down!” Zouk shouts. From her seat, she can see that Kam is now asleep in her nest of flowers, looking like a beautiful bird of paradise. When her body rises from the bed, she’s not sure if it’s her legs or the Demon’s leading her toward her love.

“So beautiful,” the Demon whispers, and their hand strokes Kam’s smooth face. Kam stirs, her mouth waking first with a sweet smile.

“You shouldn’t be walking,” she says. “Let me call a nurse.”

“No! No... I’m feeling okay. Let me look at your face for a bit.”

Kam laughs, convinces her to get back into bed. And Zouk supposes it’s a small mercy that the Demon actually allows her to look at the woman she loves, like this, without anything contaminating her.

“Don’t take her from me,” she whispers, and the Demon with the face of a child turns to look at her. “We can share, Zouk.”

“I love you,” Zouk wants to say to Kam, but she’s in the backseat, powerless.

Tell her I love her, she begs the Demon. Her heart cracks down the middle at the sparkle in Kam’s eyes and the curve of her mouth when the words come. The Demon raises her hands and places them on Kam’s cheeks. When their lips touch, Zouk feels it like she’s in the front seat. The warmth, the softness, it melts her into a liquid, and behind her closed lids, she feels herself flow and drip and move.

“I love you,” Kam says, and the loudness of her voice makes Zouk open her eyes. She’s disoriented for a moment in the darkness – the words were so loud, almost like they had been spoken into her own mind. The eyes of her mind open, and it is her own face she sees.

Her Stripes

ODAH BRIAN

“THAT ONE,” THE little child pointed at a red floral dress in the shop. It looked beautiful hanging up on that wall, just waiting for her. Held in her mother’s strong arms, she eagerly reached out to grab the dress. She could already see herself on Christmas day in all her regal splendour just oozing Christmas newness. She will want her Mama and Mama Mikayi to send her everywhere just to show off her new dress. Though she had never been clad in a dress before, she would be a blooming flower in a verdant meadow, she knew. “I want that one, Mama,” she insisted. Mama surprised her though. She quickly stepped back, pulling her away from her prize. Mama’s face betrayed a deep-seated worry, but only for a second before she masked it with curated calmness. The tailor was however tickled by the child’s aberrance, her mirthful bout in turn affecting the other lady clients previously arrested in a winding yarn. The cackling got Mama all knotted up. That was her furthest memory that things were a little off-kilter.

She felt embarrassed, looking at her mother in confusion. Her mother’s visage said it all. She had done something wrong. She couldn’t point out exactly what it was. Her only recourse: to place her tiny hands over her eyes, to disappear out of sight.

“That one is for girls, dear,” the tailor explained in a pressed voice, keeping her tone low and pedagogic. The other two ladies tried to pry her fingers away from her eyes, showing her an alternative outfit. It confounded her. Why did they laugh? Why were they showing her a short-sleeved checked shirt? Why was mum suddenly zipped? Mama quickly picked up her bag and stepped out of the shop without even as much as a valediction. She knew Mama was disappointed by how tight she held her but she dared not ask anything, or even talk.

She was only too grateful when they finally got home and Mama let her out of the firm hold. Mama was not in her moods, her usual bubbly sense had deserted her and she had turned cold.

Cold and worried. Pressed by the urgent need to miss that vibe she ran straight to Mama Mikayi's house. Mama Mikayi was her father's first wife. She found the rest of her siblings on the floor dipping into a huge bowl of fried fish. They looked like a suckling litter, each quickly swallowing their morsel so they could pick up another. Mama Mikayi looked on lovingly, all her worldly pleasures had been reduced to the simple act of feeding her seven girls, and, whenever they came, her co-wife's daughter and son.

She stood by the verandah's door, meekly pulling at her fingers, willing Mama Mikayi to invite her in. That is what their mother had taught them. Mama Mikayi summoned her to the table seeing that there was no space on the floor. She carefully skipped over her siblings but one elbowed her shin at the slightest touch. Mama Mikayi's stern eyes averted more drama, and she managed to settle herself in. The gentle lady rose up and went back to her kitchen. A few minutes later she came back with a plate full of fish and a mountain of jollof. The oldest girls looked up in envy as Senior Mama put the plate in front of her. The rest continued hogging obliviously. Mama Mikayi sat back down in her chair and keenly observed as the little child picked up tiny pieces of the fish and put them in her mouth. Mama Mikayi always regarded her avidly. There was something off about the child but her mind simply couldn't piece it together. All she knew was that this last child was in a way peculiar, like nothing she had ever seen. Her eyes saw a boy but her mind didn't know.

The child skirted around the fish's head, especially avoiding the eyes. Mama Mikayi wasn't particularly impressed but she didn't mind. Her eyes had seen too many disappointments to be fussed by a child's fussiness.

What worried her were the boy's feminine tendencies. She laughed it off when she once spied the boy opting to play the daughter of the house in their children's games, but she got concerned when she found the boy peeing while squatting. For the sake of peace in that homestead, she hoped the boy would grow out of it. She knew how desperately her husband wanted a boy – a proper boy. It was important for the man's image and, to some extent, his authority and income. The peace she had sacrificed so much for would go up in the air if that boy wasn't a proper boy.

She had heard whispered musings of such possibilities but she dared not bring it up with her belligerent co-wife.

Halfway through her plate, Mama came in from *her* house, her eyes red as alien orbs. She had been crying and the little child knew it was because of the incident. Mama had always reacted strangely whenever she did certain things, it confused her. She still couldn't understand, but she could definitely see a determination on her Mama's face. She saw fear too, like disturbing thoughts had been running through her mind.

The young woman quickly scanned the room and spotted her target. Without a word, she lifted the child from the table and walked out. That surprised Mama Mikayi. She knew that Nyasuba was a mean and calculating woman, but she never thought for once she would bring their issues before the children. She let her go without much ado but wondered why she left her elder child behind.

Back in her house, Nyasuba quickly shaved the child's hair even lower, washed her and dressed her in more loose-fitting clothing, all in a darker shade.

"Mama, are you angry at me?"

The question stunned her. "No, no, no, baby, Mama is not angry." A smile cracked her sad veneer.

"Why were you crying, Mama? Your eyes are red." Her voice was tiny, sharp and innocent.

"No, baby, Mama just wants the best for you." She picked up the little girl and placed her on her lap. Slowly she pressed her tiny feet into black leather shoes.

"Can't I have the pink ones with butterfly laces?" she pleaded, her big round eyes right under her mother's nose. Her mother swallowed hard, hesitated a moment, her thin ruddy lips tightly pressed as her mind quickly worked out her options. Finally she proceeded to actualise her thoughts. She leaned down towards the child and whispered her words like a secret. "Listen, honey, Mama is going to need you to do her a very big favour. Will you, baby?"

“Of course, I will Mama.” Mama’s strange way of asking bothered her. She searched her mother’s eyes keenly. A half smile was vaguely evident at the edges of her mouth.

“Okay, baby, so from today I don’t want you playing with your sisters, you can go play with Fred and his friends. Is that okay?”

“Yes, it’s fine, Mama,” she agreed, though the thought of Fred and the boys sent a knot down her gut. They were no good. Too rough, dirty, and constantly bickering over stupid marbles and two men called Messi and Ronaldo. It would be difficult, but she didn’t want to disappoint her mother.

“That’s nice of you, baby. If you want to play with Fred, you have to put on these shoes and dress as I tell you.”

“Fine, Ma.”

That evening when Papa came back home, she realised that he was extremely pleased by her new transformation. He was also way happier with Mama. He had always been pleased by Mama more than with Mama Mikayi, but that night he was more jolly. It got ingrained in her that dressing and acting like Fred made Papa and Mama happy. She would do it every day.

Many suns witnessed her misery. Day in and day out, she spent them doing things that were completely unnatural to her. Playing marbles, wrestling, making a sturdy bow, rowing, talking about girls, trying not to stare at boys. She kept up a face though. Everyone was used to it by now. Her eyes had opened to the ways of the world and she knew how important it was for her father, Chief Manga, to have a boy child. She shouldn’t disappoint anyone. More so her mother – her father would get another woman, or worse, they could be disowned.

SHE WAS THIRTEEN when her act came to a head. She noticed how carefully her mother studied her. Always keen to take away anything that expressed her true soul. Even mundane things

like cooking made Mama lose her mind. Instead, an Archer was hired. “He is going to teach you our community’s proud tradition,” Mama explained.

That was all good, but how would she handle what her mind was telling her. She had seen a boy at school. Martin was all she wanted in this life. He was different from the other boys. Witty, kinder than most, and soft-spoken. His shoes were always clean and he wrote his notes in three colours. Martin spoke of things that blew her mind, of far away cities and wars long fought. His mind took her to Marie Curie’s lab and up across oceans to Aztec ways. It is because of Martin she started reading the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* series. Together they cracked the rate-of-flow math problems; she learnt how compound interest worked and she helped him with compositions. But Martin always broke her heart when he hugged the girls in greeting but only fist bumped her. How he would get excited when dumb Naomi brought them a math problem, it made her boil inside. She thought about it a lot when Martin would cheekily kick her shin on their way home after school. He would never do that to Naomi. He never offered to carry her school bag but was constantly begging for Naomi’s brick case. She desperately wished she could tell him how she felt, but she dared not. How could he like her the way he likes Naomi? She looked nothing like Naomi. Naomi’s uniform was a skirt, hers were black pants. Naomi had a nice scent and did her nails; she knew Mama would never allow that. How could Martin like a fellow boy like how he liked Naomi?

Martin was just a crush, a first crush, a childhood crush. Ibrahim was different though. He was her love. They met in university, two foreign students unable to make friends with anyone else. They had both been uprooted from the familiarity of their worlds where everything neatly belonged where it was. The sun knew its hours, men were men and women were women, and everything was either black or white and they had forced themselves to not be grey. But they had found themselves in a world where grey was not only possible, but an accepted way of life. A year had four types of sun and they came out at jagged times. Men could be women and women could be whatever they wanted to be. They had broken some ostensible glass ceiling. It was a better world, but still strange. So they stayed closeted and quiet except around each other. She truly loved that boy; she would

have given him her soul if only she could get his love back. He was confused though – the world had confused him. He loved her too – she knew that he loved her dearly but he didn't know how to.

They were two pariahs that had navigated towards each other. He confessed to her. He bared his soul to her: he was attracted to men and so he was attracted to *her*. The irony wasn't lost on her, though she couldn't bring herself to say it. To say that even though she looked like a man, she didn't feel that she was a man at all. She knew she was a woman, always had.

She sat in silence in his room as he narrated his challenges. She saw his shame, his denial, and it hurt her. "Back in my country, they stone people like us," he said, and a sad smile drew on his beautiful brown face, gently shifting his dark mane. She could not betray that kind of trust. She thought about it for many days. If Ibrahim wanted to burden her with his secret, it was only fair that she unload hers on him too. Maybe it would bring them closer, she hoped. Two people so different, yet so similar. His religion forbade that kind of talk. God had sent them a messenger who told them that nobody could be the way he was if he couldn't bear to be so, and God can't be wrong. So he couldn't be how he was; a dark spirit had taken over his soul. A spirit that forced him to think warped thoughts and desire wickedness. That is how he always explained it.

One day, after an afternoon of weakness, she noticed the marks on his back. Long ruddy lines running the length of his back. He said that he flogged himself every morning. To crucify the desires of the flesh, to rid himself of his 'evil energy'. He even had a name for it: Elvis.

"Why Elvis?" she asked.

"It's a Western name. As Kafir as a name can get. These people, they think they don't need God, they accept anything and do everything!"

His words were spat out in disgust. It worried her. She knew he was angry: angry at himself, angry at what they had just done, angry at the world, maybe even angry with God Himself.

"Are you angry with me?"

It surprised Ibrahim. His head snapped back, his eye blinking like a ventriloquist's dummy-mannequin's.

"No, no, no, baby, I am not." She witnessed yet another smile trying to stretch itself on a sad face.

It was the first and the last time. Though they couldn't stay away from each other, they knew it was a truly complicated relationship. She thought about telling Ibrahim, but she was afraid things would only get worse. She didn't want to lose him, but the sense of betrayal weighed heavily upon her.

One day she gathered enough courage to reveal herself to him. She walked across campus, a cold wind nipping at her skin under the frozen willows, to his hostel room. It was a small pad, its best feature being a window overlooking the campus' soccer team training pitch. He had crammed in a four feet wide bed, a study table that would double as a kitchen table when the cooker top ran out of space. By his bed was a huge radio system but its volume never went past 'four'. She never quite knew what Ibrahim listened to because it was always in his native language.

When she settled in his single sofa, Ibrahim offered her a glass of milk and cornflakes as usual. This time she couldn't even bring herself to eat, inexplicably struck by queasiness. Her eyes dashed about the room like she was seeing it for the first time. She thought about changing her mind – zip it and let things flow. But how could she handle the utter torment swirling in her heart? She got straight to it. Ibrahim was settled on his bed trying to pause a video tutorial on his laptop when he realised that she would be there a while. She told him all: how she felt like a prisoner, a character in a movie living a scripted life. She knew that she was in the wrong body. Ibrahim's jaw flopped out of place. He reacted angrily. Each word she said made him paler, his teeth gnashed as he shook uncontrollably. He accused her of tricking him, being with him even though she knew that she had, in her, a worse demon. She wished she had told him earlier, but she was too afraid. Then she wished she had never told him. Her soul quivered at the coldness of his words, scared of being rejected by the one person she deeply longed for.

Ibrahim said that it was their two demons that were attracted to each other, not them.
“Never call me! Don’t ever come back here!”

He chased her out of his room. He started flogging himself.

Thick layers of cement may as well have dried up in the walls of her heart. She couldn’t have been more unaware when she suddenly bumped into a girl, a sophomore, perhaps. She would have helped her pick up her books had she not noticed the red floral dress the girl had on. She froze, her eyes welled up, and the girl gave her a befuddled look. She stepped back, as if from a feral animal, and took yet another step backwards before turning and taking to her heels, her cheeks soaked by the waters of pain. She ran, faster and faster, this time careful to avoid other people. The cold foreign land wind whipped past her ears, biting the lobes and everything felt terrible. A stifling pain in her chest grew with every stride, its source as electric as her fears.

When she finally got to her room, she flopped on the bed and just let herself wallow in all the emotions. It must have been hours of despondency, self pity and ceaseless crying, because the trees outside were turning into shadows and she could see lights on through several windows. It then occurred to her, she could remedy her situation.

THOUGH SHE HAD undergone weeks of psychological counseling, she still felt undulating waves of anxiousness swamp her the first time she walked into Dr. Werner’s office. She took her through the entire process and procedures of Hormone Replacement Therapy and it was evident to her that the doctor was well-versed. Having already been informed of the cost implications and probable side effects, she was still adamant, quickly overcoming her initial anxiety and signing several consent forms. She couldn’t wait to let her hair grow, or to put on a blouse – or just *be* herself without any pretenses.

It was a couple of months before she finally noticed flabby mounds on her chest, and the excitement made her forget the erratic loss of appetite and constant drowsiness. Weeks piled up

into more months; she lost some friends and gained new ones; but her happiness grew every week. Finally her body was starting to look right, just the way it should have been.

As the stars would have it, graduation almost coincided with the final days of her therapy. She had never felt better, her radiance not only captured in the glow of her smile and new found confidence but in her grades too. But in her mind, a niggling worry. Her plan had always been to go back home, to serve in her country, to offer help to others like her.

When the day came, she took a final look around her latest house and sighed heavily, her feelings all mixed up. The full-body mirror beside her cast a fine reflection of her standing by her suitcase and she swiveled to face it. It felt good taking in her full form: chest full, waist tapering and hips curving. A total justice to the navy blue skirt-suit and Manolo heels she was rocking. She smiled a satisfied smile, blanketing the fear of how she would be received back at home. All she knew was that she was her own person for the first time in her life. “Let’s do this, baby,” she whispered to herself and grabbed the suitcase, ready to leave for the airport.

The Thing in the Blood

VUYELWA MALULEKE

THE WOMEN IN your mother, those before her, consume the first child.

“Like the women in me,” says your aunt K.

She is sitting on top of the carpet which lays flat on top of the red step outside her kitchen door. Her legs open to house between them the foamy waskom – big enough to fit a fat adult. The carpet is placed under her to protect her church body from the hardness of the red stoep while she washes your cousin Lefa’s white school shirts.

Since your mother died you are a child with many mothers.

“It has always been that way,” Aunt K. says, breaking through the loneliness.

Your aunt lives on old things like hard work. Which is to say that she does not believe anything good can come or be reached without sweat and struggle. Which is to say that she trusts the fire in her body more than she does a machine. She refuses to put Lefa’s white school shirts in the washing machine and instead washes them by hand to keep them white.

Every Friday, after Lefa has returned from school, she sits on the stoep facing the high grey wall, a song in her mouth as she soaps, rinses and hangs her daughter’s white school shirts. You notice that your aunt has softened all over. The austerity which would not allow her to let her sister’s only child rot under her roof has softened. The strictness she always maintained was what your mother would have wanted her to give to you has softened. It is not that she was unkind, it is that she was so rigid there was no space to bend, the kind of bending that loving a daughter would require. The kind of bending she was doing now over the waskom, for Lefa, who now at sixteen was old enough to wash her own school shirts but instead was out at the movies with friends.

YOU HAVE COME home for the weekend; you do this once a month. Present yourself and whatever you have managed to collect for the family that has made your life so full that the longing into which you were born rarely visits. When you come home you make sure to return with something in your hands. You have the house keys so you did not need anyone to welcome you in. This is home.

Aunt K. knew that you were coming but did not hear you drive in. You met each other in the kitchen. You were carrying three plastic bags of groceries from the car. She was collecting Lefa's school shirts into the waskom when she saw you and went towards you for a hug. She did not wait for you to put the bags of groceries down.

"Dumelang bo'Mma," you said, trying to lower the bags and keep yourself in the hug. Your aunt released you and held you a little away from her, to examine your health.

"Are you eating?"

"Yes, Ma," you said and rolled your eyes. You were a teenager again.

"Sure? Sure?"

"The frozen food in the car will melt," you said, as if to turn away from her but she pulled you back into her gaze.

"Is there a boyfriend?" she asked.

"In the car? No, I ate him," you said, and you both laughed as she released you.

You left the kitchen to fetch what remained in the car. Your aunt followed you and offered her help. You stopped her and told her to sit down. She was grateful but, like a mother, she expected your kindness.

When you were done transporting and packing the groceries into the kitchen cupboards you returned to the car to fetch the gift you had brought her, a glamour that was hers, one that she would not share with the house or your uncle. You returned to the kitchen and handed her

the material you bought from a market in Ghana, when you were performing at the Sabolai Music Festival with Lulama. Lulama is a singer and you do background vocals for her.

Her excitement embraced the material, then you. “My child, thank you!” she said. “Where did you buy it?”

“Ghana,” you answered. “I was there for work.”

“Mildred will not believe me when I tell her that my child got this for me in Ghana,” she said, making an expensive and airy shape with her mouth on the word ‘Ghana’.

Your aunt is not a woman who is conquered by excitement. Her life has taught her to come to pleasure slowly, without announcements. A trepidation that it would soon be taken from her. Like her sister and her first born child were taken.

“Thank you,” she said again. “I will make a dress and a matching head wrap.” She examined the material and then with her hands showed you on her body how she would shape it.

She told you that she would make it soon and wait for Mother’s Day to show it off at church. Church women love beautiful things, they love more than anything to show them off to each other. “I will show them that I too am a loved thing,” she said, and you laughed, pleased to know that the pride in her was about you.

“Is this why you do not come home often?” she asked, lowering the material to search your face for an acknowledgement of the question. You did not understand what she meant.

“You think you cannot come home if you do not have gifts for us?” she asked.

You lowered your eyes.

“Keabetswe?” she said, her hurt tearing softly through your name.

“I do not want to come home with empty hands, Mama.”

“My child, you are my gift given to me through my sister’s grave. I do not need more, I have you,” she said. And you knew what you have always known, the fear was lying, you belong here.

AUNT K. PUTS away her gift and you lend her your hands to help with the rinsing of Lefa's school shirts. Each time she finishes with a shirt she passes it over to you to rinse in the bucket of Sta-soft you squat over as you listen to her tell you about the thing you are now old enough to hear. Your bucket moves much more slowly than hers as you try to listen and rinse. You think she is better at this because she has spent a lot more time handwashing laundry, and not that you are lazy- which makes you slow at all house chores.

In the Jo'burg apartment you share with Lulama, your friend of three years, you do not wash your laundry by hand, you do not even clean the place yourself. You hired a helper, who comes once a week to do what you cannot make time for. You cannot tell Aunt K. that you and Lu pay someone to do what she has taught you to do yourself. You cannot tell her that the fear she had throughout your teenage years repeated is finally true: You are rotting.

Aunt K. rubs a shirt at the armpits first. She says, "Her armpits are stronger than her father's." And you laugh remembering that she used to say the same about yours.

Why did she expect girls to smell like roses on the hottest days in summer?

"Do they need a doctor, like mine did?" you ask.

"Two," she says, and rubs until she is satisfied that she has pushed the smell off the shirt. She moves then to the collar of the shirt, changing the speed between fast and slow to concentrate on the sweat that maps a brown line along the neck of its wearer.

"Lefa greases her hair too much," you say, watching her working on the stain. "It is why her collars are always so brown."

You have told Lefa to use the MPL hair oil sparingly, "once a week is enough," you advise because you are a big sister.

"Lefa is sixteen now and should be washing her own school shirts. It is the only way she will learn how much MPL hair oil is too much," you say, perhaps afraid, like your aunt was for you, that she will rot.

Aunt K. says that you are right.

“You did not let me get away with things like this,” you say, your hands rinsing a second shirt.

“I was practicing with you, Kea,” she says.

“Practicing?”

“You made me a mother. Lefa gave me”—you wait for her to name your lack—“she put the feathers in my body, here and here and here,” she touches under her arms, her belly, her hips, her face.

“She made you soft,” you say and clear another shirt out of the bucket.

The jealousy in you could heat the water. You have loved and unloved, you know that all love burns hot, but not in the same way or in the same place. Loves are not equal or comparable. To measure them against each other is to kill the futures in both.

“It suits us that she is not here. I need to talk to you,” Aunt K. says. Trying to pour water into the need she sees in you.

“The women in your mother and before consume the first child. Like the women in me,” says Aunt K., picking up another shirt by the armpits. “Your grandmother learnt from her mother how to stop the body from taking like this; setting the blood on fire. And we learnt from her. But not before all the loss.”

“Is it in my blood too?” you ask clearing another shirt. She nods, making a sound that travels between fear and agreement.

It is because a nose can be passed down through the blood that this ghoulish thirst can be passed on through the blood too. This blood, like your face, is a hunger that comes with all of the women in your family. You are made in unison with your mother’s sisters, waiting, sleeping through the years when you are not born. You have a nose like your mother and her sisters. It sits like an old button, not round or small, a shape remembered by the blood. It is not what your father would call ‘a White woman’s nose’. Your father who loves White women and marries

Black women. And leaves Black women. Your father who disappeared after your mother's funeral.

Aunt K. says, "Before your grandmother died she would come upon the evil herself."

After her first miscarriage she named the second child who came into her body after her loneliness, after a lake that no one and nothing would want to look back at, take, or rummage through. She named her Kenosi and tore into the child's face a line running from the outer corner of her left eye to the corner of her left mouth. It scarred into the shape of a sickle, and made her look dangerous. You had to stare at her a little longer to see that she was, like the rest of her sisters, beautiful. Aunt K. is that little girl.

"I was only a year old when your grandmother called another child into her body, and your aunt Ontlametse was born."

To make sure that the blood has stopped taking your grandmother called another, who would be your mother Barulaganye.

"We are made from prayer and old magic," your aunt says.

"Do we only make girls here?" you ask her.

And 'girls' sounds like loss as she passes you a shirt to rinse in the bucket of spring fresh Sta-soft.

And though you know that it is the men who decide gender, you do not tell her that you think that it is the men who bring the thing into the blood. You are convinced that something that is not love is choosing the men for the women; it is choosing men who can make the inside of your body a loss. You do not know if it is a punishment or a test. You do not know if your kind of love will make the same curse.

You remember your grandmother's Saturday rituals. How she would dress in white, turn herself into a devoted appeal, demand that all the lights be switched off as well as all the electrical appliances and pray all day. You heard her beg and call to God from her bedroom.

After she died, Aunt K., the oldest, took up the appeal, and the white. The kneeling and punishment contributed to her softness.

“She was begging back all the children after the first,” says Aunt K.

“Is it a curse?”

“A sickness,” your aunt corrects.

“What kind of God lets a sickness live in the blood this long?” you ask, to confirm what you are hearing.

“It could be that your mother has healed it for you,” she says, rubbing the collar of the last shirt in the waskom.

“By dying?”

“By making sure you lived. By pushing her life into yours. You are the only first born alive,” she says.

Lefa, who has a boy’s name – Kgalefa – has a scar running from the outer corner of her left eye to the corner of her left mouth. She is your aunt’s second child. You could not meet the first.

“It is good then that I do not fall in love with men,” you say.

Aunt K. lets out a chuckle and says: “No one really does. Have you seen your uncle’s toenails?”

“I mean, that there is no sickness that can choose love for me.” You are finished rinsing the shirts now. They hang on the line like people waiting to be filled.

Your aunt pushes the waskom away and gets up in stages. She bends over the waskom to pick it up.

“I can choose my children myself,” you say, standing too.

“Are you a witch?” she asks, and with her hands she splashes you with the water, as if to purify you.

“I can choose them with Lulama,” you say, carefully.

It is not an accident. It is fear and courage that allow the confession. You have been waiting for a way to tell her about yourself. Each time you come home, you promise Lu that this is the weekend you will come out to your parents.

“You want to have children with your friend?” she says, pouring the water in the waskom out into the drain next to the stoep.

“My partner. Mma, I’m a lesbian.”

The words struggle like an old car out of you. They burn through her like a hymn sung too long in the chest.

“This is why you do not come home?” she says, putting the empty waskom down.

“I was afraid. . . .” you say, and the shame eats your eyes until they start to water.

“My child,” Aunt K. blows into the air between you, injured by the sound of your sudden tenderness.

“. . . of what you believe,” you sob.

She moves towards you, softly, so as not to scare you.

You had heard of friends whose coming out prompted prayer circles and exorcisms, because their families believed that being gay was brought by a spirit that needed to be pulled out. Some were killed. Those who could not kill starved, ignored, punished with silences, accused their children of letting white people things too close into themselves, or disowned them without long arguments. When those you love will not say your name, you walk around hungry until you rename yourself or forget them. This is why you were afraid. A girl born into losses avoids loss.

“I love you and so what I believe must make room for you,” says Aunt K., and holds you and the sobbing towards her body – the house of her God.

The warmth of her body swallows your fear. She rubs the fear and the shame out of you. She does not let go until your body feels hers say I have heard you and nothing has changed, this is where you will always belong. You are home.

Ex Vivo

TSHOLOFELO WESI

OUR WHOLE LIVES, my brother and I held our parents' grief close to our chests. We held it like hefty headstones lifted off graves. The grave where my mother's sister lies has a rusted iron sheet for a headstone. When we were small boys, my mother sometimes told us stories of her dead sister as our bodies lay face up in bed at night. She told the stories like she was not doing it, as if she merely remembered things while she looked for the specific grey blanket my brother loved. She washed blankets more than anyone I know. Mama told the stories as she laid blankets on our waiting chests.

We grew into young men. We started hearing less and less about my mother's sister. Mama started laying leaden blankets on our chests without unfolding them for us. We started unfolding her grief ourselves.

We have grown into young men with duties that grow more and more complicated, that fold out into more and more expectations. When duty calls, I follow. When my brother issues his mating call, I follow.

I would roll to Kenosi's side of the bed after all the lights and candles in the village, in Taung, had gone out. The weight of my body pressed into the mattress each time I rolled. My body landed on the springs like ash rests on the soil upon landing. So softly I rolled that my body gathered with it an arrogance that underestimated the loudness of our moans.

The sounds reached our father standing on the other side of the door like a forgiving gust of air. Anything louder would have made him jump into action. And that is why he chose to not open the door and see any of it. There was just the right amount of tenderness in the sounds we made to keep him from opening the door and disturbing death in its sleep. He stood on the

other side, gaining an understanding as the sounds of our fraternal bonding retold the story of a brother he lost. My father's brother died in a fire when he and the brother were our age.

Had my father acted on his disgust, punished us, or repressed us, he would have let go of the bond to his brother he still yearned for. The easy cadences of our moans retold the story of his loss, but our tales could have just as easily been lost on him and made him open the door. Before his discovery, Kenosi and I could not fulfil the promise of the brotherhood my father refused to stop grieving – we could never fulfil that promise by just being.

Had he acted on his disgust, he would have missed the way we were bringing that promise to life in our bedroom at night. It unravelled slowly until it caught. He had sat down to think, and he had kept his anger at us at a low flame. Papa had grieved and waited long enough to see us bring the promise to life, to see us turn the smoke into fire – long enough to witness the self-immolation of ecstatic praise poets.

He kept his knowledge from us while it percolated. In the meantime, Kenosi and I cultivated our brotherly love. One day when our parents were away queuing at Home Affairs, Kenosi handed me a Minora blade and said: "Write your name on my skin." So I took my time gently slicing my name on to his forearm until 'Neo' bled from his skin.

For a while, a peace unfurled around the house, but one night my mother followed my father out of bed, sneaking, and stood dead silent behind him. It had just been a matter of time before she got curious about the way Papa's heels kneaded the night. Papa had become less and less careful with his movements at night, less careful with his need to hear the praise poets' stories of how he once had a brother who loved him back.

My mother heard our room filter out sounds of pelvic collisions. The scream she let out bled our names from the core of her throat. 'Kenosi' and 'Neo' came out crunchy and mangled as our names gurgled out of her.

When we heard her frenzy, the first thing Kenosi said to me was: "Just like in my dreams."

Instances like that were why I believed the dreams Kenosi had. I believed in them more than I did my own waking moments. Did the thought of kissing him become conveniently easier when he revealed to me he had a dream where my father told him he was not his real father? Maybe.

We have a heap of ash in the corner of our yard. We throw the coals and ash there after lighting a fire for cooking. Mama doesn't like using the stove. The ash heap accumulates into a burden that papa more or less chooses to ignore until it's hard to – until Mama expresses her displeasure.

After my mother's frayed screams when she caught us, the morning after was jittery. Her eyes trembled with fury, eyes too alive for a woman who had gotten no sleep. She sat in front of the house watching the occasional bakkie pass by, and she tossed pronouncements of our banishment from the house into each gaping hour that passed. Everything was wounded. We never saw our father do it, but the mound of ash was also scalped by midday. My father called my mother to see his efforts with the ash heap.

Refusing to be appeased, she started using up nearly all the wood she had collected and burned it throughout the day. She stoked the fire to let it burn into the night. The following day, she scooped up the bulging remains into the wheelbarrow and threw all that ash into the hollowed-out heap.

All three of us, me, my brother and Papa, watched her walk back to the house as the three o'clock sun cast its light anywhere but in front of her, choosing to shimmer only behind her, where it was safer. The wind blew her long dress off her lower legs as she trudged towards us. The wind also carried with the dress the ash she had just poured to the ground, but which the earth burped out again. The sun, the wind and the ash chose to not get too involved. They only provided a curtain of shimmer, breeze and grey cloud that sharpened her silhouette to let us know she was coming back to us, that she was ours to face.

Papa scalped the ash heap again and again to appease Mama. The spade became a scalpel attached to Papa's aching knuckles, and he kept clearing the ash with it even as my mother burned and finished all the wood at home for the ash heap. She persevered until she had finished all the wood in the area of the veld where she normally collected it. Her excursions into the veld grew farther out and longer, pushing the daylight hours into the night. She even secured a secluded piece of land she had stumbled upon, a ledge on which she said her sons could build a shack and live out their abominable nights. My father refused to entertain her ramblings, so she ventured out alone every day for her firewood, her days turning into night, where the dark secured forgiveness.

And so my father kept digging and digging out the ash of the fire that kept the memory of his brother alive through Kenosi and I. He kept digging to appease Mama until her search for firewood led her to disappear beyond the horizon with the sun. In the deepening dark, she found mercy, drops of resin for her pain.

That was all that remained, as the trees did not drop branches fast enough to yield the firewood she sought. All the trees were teeming with wetness. Industrious trees slept at night to manufacture the juices that heal. My mother's honesty grew out of the mercy she found in the dark. Her leaves grew and developed a blunt, bitter shade of green. She chewed the leaves, savoured their medicine and spit out the revelation that Kenosi was not my father's son.

Papa was watching TV and eating his supper when he heard her words. He first looked down at the food Kenosi helped my mother to cook. He took another spoonful of the spinach, almost as if to ascertain that that was its taste. He tried, he really did. There was only so much saliva to soak and soften the food in his mouth. That last scalping of spinach sat on his stiff tongue until he had to make the decision to spit it out, right on to the ash heap on his plate.

It needs to be understood that when Papa accepted how I spent the nights with Kenosi, his own grief smothered his disgust. His disgust with two boys sleeping with each other had stayed buried there, but broke new ground as soon as my mother made this revelation. His

disgust grew as wild as weeds, and by the end of the week, my brother slung his bags over his shoulder and set on the path to the man he had just learnt was his father. Kenosi left despite my mother's protestations. All Kenosi asked was that she call his new family to tell them he was on his way.

Kenosi was born in the middle of nowhere. My mother went into labour while hitchhiking to Reivilo, and the white woman who picked her up helped deliver my brother on the roadside. She gave my mother a bag of seeds to plant next to our house that same day. If not on that day, because my mother would be too exhausted, then the following day. The following year, I was born.

But the seeds were never planted. Kenosi even learned to speak and found them still sealed in those palm-sized plastic sachets, those thick, transparent ones shopkeepers store their money in. Our parents were too indifferent to tell him what to do with them, so he started planting seeds, but not the ones given to him as his birthright. He went to town to buy new ones and planted them all over our yard. He saved his birthright for the day when he would know how to tend to flowers. By the time he left home, he hadn't planted them.

The day he left, aged seventeen, he kept pulling the seeds from under the mattress. Kenosi held the seed packet in his hand like he was not doing it, as if his hands merely remembered to touch them while he found the specific words to convince me he would be fine wherever he went. That day, he used a condom for the first time. The use of protection may have been the first acknowledgement between us that things would not be the same anymore. He marveled at his own semen drooping heavily at the tip of the condom.

My brother left the seeds behind, and said nothing to indicate what I should do with them. That was unlike him, as Kenosi did not hesitate telling me to etch my name on to his skin, nor hesitate telling me anything else. I did not know what to do with the seeds, so when spring arrived, I did what I thought he would have wanted. I did not know what I was doing with the seeds, so I cut straight lines on to my forearm and let the blood drop on the soil. I did not know

what I was doing to the seeds, so I let the blood drop on to the soil for several nights of the new season. I planted my knuckles on the ground while my arm stood rigid as a tree trunk. I wounded the earth and dropped a seed. The open slits on my forearm aligned horizontally with the land. The blood that trickled from the flat lines ejected downward and bled at right angles, like a prostrate letter 'E' wounded in battle. Soon, the blood trickled down my forearm in irregular lines, smudged like wayward page margins. Every other night, I did this at the spot where I planted the seed.

I mixed the soil there with the ash from the heap to fertilise the bed where the seed lay. Ash that knows itself would know what blood is when it makes contact with it. Ash comes from wood that burned because the wood once had life coursing through its veined leaves. The ash joined my blood and courted its past lives. When done courting the past, the ash should be able look at the future fertilities it will continue to nurture.

One night, I sliced my forearm too close to my wrist. I did this again at the same spot in the yard. The soil was blue from the moonlight, and the moonlight turned the blood an inky blue that approaches a shade of black that glistens like coal. What my parents found in the morning was congealed blood that had turned a dark red from exposure to the open air. They immediately threw me on the wheelbarrow we loaded our ash in, pushed it to the tarred road and hitchhiked to the hospital with me.

The dog from next door gave birth to a litter of puppies while I was gone. When I returned from the hospital, my father, who was relieved to see me alive and back at home, had adopted one of the puppies. We heard him ask about the whereabouts of the seeds that were given to my mother to accompany Kenosi's growth. No one answered. When he found them under Kenosi's mattress, I fought the urge to strangle the puppy. My father planted the seeds along the fence late afternoon, and the little dog skipped around to witness the renewal of its birth, the planting that was meant for my brother.

My mother said nothing, and simply picked up the blankets from the beds the following morning and threw them into the water-filled basins outside. She sat on an upturned enamel bucket while her hands strangled the water out of the blankets before plunging them back into the basin. I looked at her waiting to say something. I minded the basin on the ground. My feet were soaked in the water with the blankets as I kneaded them with my heels. I marched and marched, but I got nowhere because I had to be there to listen when my mother finally starts speaking.

“I should have saved my anger for this – for *this*! But I instead wasted it on my own child, who is no longer here with me,” she said. She tried plunging the blanket back under the water in the basin, but her parched feelings hung stiff in the dry air. She wrung more of the soapy water out of the thick fabric. The skin on her wrists wrinkled with each twist that looked like a final exhalation, but she startled me each time she revealed she still had more torque in her.

The seeds my father planted for the little white puppy grew into little white flowers, much quicker than the ones I had fed blood-meal at the arrival of spring. I should have been concerned, seeing as I planted those earlier than my father planted his. It bears repeating that I didn’t know what I was doing with Kenosi’s seeds when I planted them. From the same seeds that gave my father little white flowers for his little white puppy, bloomed a huge red nest of petals.

More petals grew and stood ready to take flight, weighed down only by their congealed sap. They remained attached to the stem, sheathed by the ties that bind. Kenosi’s rosebuds grew petal after red, red petal – petals I could not control. The rose petals seemed to have shaken off their need for water, and only reached out to the brilliance of the sun. Their deepening red blushed at the audacity to steal so much colour from the sun.

There seemed to be a new layer of rose petals each week, and as the days went by, hundreds of petal layers passed by without seeing Kenosi.

I suspect that one of the roses had secured a flooding of my blood from the night I slit my wrists too close to one of the critical veins. The rose ruptured from its bud with unprecedented size and speed. So large it grew that it weighed down on its stem, its neck, and it drooped so heavily that one day it broke off and fell, and my mother that evening told me Kenosi had fathered a beautiful baby daughter. I picked up Kenosi's rose from the ground and sealed it inside the small money bag that still had a sprinkling of Kenosi's seeds, anticipating the day I would meet my niece.

Kenosi's roses stole the sunshine, and stole my mother's affection. My mother was drawn to the brilliance, and came closer to inspect it. She felt they had her affection, something of hers. She inspected the roses like she was not doing it, as if she merely loved the sight of them while she remembered that this spot was where they had picked me up unconscious. My mother remembered seeing my congealed blood the day they found me lying there, and remembered thinking how the first drop of blood must have been a brighter red, a red as bright as these roses she was looking at.

These roses ... these red, red roses. This child and his wretched roses. Neo!

This time, her screams bled into themselves. They got stuck like a knot in my mother's throat, a scream that swelled into a clot. She walked into the house and found me trying to fix the TV's aerial, shifting its short metal branches this way and that. White noise blared from the box and its screen, its dots grey with tiny flecks of black and white, like quivering ash behind a magnifying glass. She still confused my name with Kenosi's, so it was his that bloomed from her throat when she sternly began: "Kenosi, there is a plant of roses that has stood there for months – and what beautiful roses they are, my child, I cannot deny you that – but what is that thing?"

I said nothing, and guilt sat on my face, sitting sure as the certainty that Kenosi wasn't my name. "Neo, answer me."

"Mama, I" I couldn't go further.

“Go to that plant. Pour water on it to soften the ground. Water, not blood. You seem to be confused as to what the difference is. Let the ground soften and pull it out gently without breaking the roots. Wrap that PEP plastic around it and bury it so it never grows again.”

I did as she told me. Kenosi’s rose plant was uprooted after all these years. I lay my own roots inside the house and stayed there trying to forget about Kenosi’s rose plant. My mother kept saying to me: “Have you done it again, Neo?”

I shook my head and told her I didn’t know what she meant. She told me: “Go outside and look!” But I just ignored her as I had done when she asked me if I would give her grandchildren, and she let me go, only to say it again later.

At three o’clock, the sound of movement came from the ash heap, distinct from the crunch of goats’ hooves. I stood on the side of the house and shielded my face from the sun, watching the figure coming from the heap.

He came this way, taller and thinner than I remembered him. His path followed the serpent chain of rose plants that had sprouted overnight, the incident my mother wanted to blame me for. They grew in a crooked line leading from the heap, past the spot of the buried rose plant, and towards the house, towards where I stood. Kenosi followed their guiding path. With each of his rose that ushered him towards me, it gave up its ushering duties and became a rose, just a rose. They were no longer his roses; just roses. The plants went where they wanted, went their own way, away with the blood I gave them, to which they were entitled. They went away, their roots running underground, and soon their trail would be on the other side of the fence behind our house. My love belonged now to the one I held in a twig-snapping embrace.

I hugged him, and that’s when I saw the little girl standing behind him. She didn’t look at me, and focused instead on the rose plant she had pulled from the ground. Kenosi’s daughter, Lemogang, was determined to put a rose back on to the stem from which it had fallen. When that failed, Lemogang pulled out the broken parts of her doll and successfully fixed the head

back on to the body. Her head sprouted little bantu knots. She wore a red dress Mama sent her, resembling her father more and more the longer she kept that mournful look on her face.

Kenosi brought only a few bags with him. He wore a T-shirt that exposed the scars of my name on his forearm. The scars were faint, an echo of our mother's horror when she found out about us, a horror that has clearly receded into the past. Judging by her ululations when she saw her son, the past had faded, and the rose was just a rose. The letters of my name had bulged with his arm, just as everywhere else on his body had expanded. We were only a year apart, but he was so much taller. My mother was overjoyed when she saw Kenosi, just as I was too, and she was overcome by love when she saw little Lemogang, just as I hoped I eventually would. My father was not there when Kenosi arrived. If only my mother could keep him away just as she kept off the question of how long Kenosi planned to stay. She disappeared outside for a moment, and we heard a jangle of chains. Later, we heard Papa shouting from the gate, asking my mother to unlock the gate.

"This is my house!" he shouted over and over again. "I'm going to climb over this fence, and you will know who I really am," Papa said, although we knew his aged knees would fail him.

He somehow managed to enter the yard, and he appeared in the doorway, with dust and thorns all over his flowered shirt. When he saw Kenosi, he was stunned into silence, and we didn't learn who Papa really was as he had promised. Papa went straight to the table and sat on his favourite chair, close to the drums of water he had filled at the village tap earlier.

He glanced at Kenosi, and then at the jug on the table before him. He called Kenosi from the stove and told him: "You! Bring me some water. I'm thirsty. As you can hear, my throat is dry and hoarse."

Kenosi walked over, picked up the jug and took a single step with legs as long as my father's to the drum. He dug the surface of the water with the jug. The jug came back up, and Kenosi scraped the bottom of the jug on the rim of the drum to let the dripping water fall back in. A dishcloth was within reach, so he resolved to just wipe the jug with it, and then handed it to

my father. He went back to helping his daughter peel one of the figs he had brought with him. Papa's dog, as furtive as his owner, sneaked into the house and ran towards Lemogang. Mama saw it just in time, and chased it away, saying to Papa: "Watch your dog! It looked as if it was going out to bite off the child's head, like the head of her doll it has already chewed off."

Papa was unbothered. He tipped the jug, and the water dripped down his chin, and dribbled on to the floor. When he lifted the jug, we saw where he had grazed his skin from crawling under the fence.

He drank all the water in one go, and when he finished, he said: "Some of you would be interested to know how I broke into my own yard."

My mother ignored him and walked over to examine his hand, holding it tenderly. My mother loved tending to open wounds. She watched a gash close up and heal as if to gradually awaken from a nightmare where the ground collapses into the depths of the earth.

My father continued: "The dog next door, the mother of that one of mine, has been digging a hole under the fence for days now. I didn't know for some time why it kept doing that, and I've tried chasing it away. I'm now glad it stayed on the trail of blood. I wouldn't have known what it was after if I hadn't, as I was crawling under the fence, been confronted by the sight of a rose that was surely not planted by my Neo. And you can tell it doesn't belong to one of those roses that have sprung up everywhere – as for me, I didn't even know these plants could skip here and there with their roots like roots of potato plants."

"Papa ga Neo, we have seen the ancestors present us with miracles before. It's been happening right here; in fact, where has anyone seen a Motswana love a dog like you do that thing?" my mother said.

"I received it as a gift. I don't turn my nose up at gifts."

"Hmm. That's alright then. Lemogang, I'm your grandmother – listen to me when I tell you to stay away from that dog."

"Who planted that rose, mama ga Kenosi?" my father pressed on.

“Who is asking, and why do they want to know?”

“I’m asking, mama ga Kenosi. It’s me, the husband who loves you a lot, as you obviously know.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be dead soon anyway. Love those who still have many years to live; love your children.”

“Neo knows I love him. Isn’t that right, my son? As hurt as I was that he tried to kill himself, it’s true that I love him. Isn’t that right, my child?”

I nodded without looking at my father.

“Ah, the most delicate child of them all. I haven’t achieved much in life, but I brought a delicate flower into this world,” Papa said.

“That rose was planted by me, papa ga Neo. What more do you want to know?”

“Nothing. I only note that the roses are a deep, deep red, mama ga Kenosi. I’m not a dog, but I suspect if I were, I would also bark at the plant as if it’s supple flesh.”

Kenosi’s voice came from the other side of the room: “Leave my mother alone, Papa.”

“I’m not ‘Papa’ to you, Kenosi.”

“I know that. I knew long before Mama told us. I also told Neo long before Mama told us. You came in drunk one night when Neo was gone to visit auntie. I was sleeping, and you came in and whispered – and I remember every single word – and you said: ‘My son, your legs already look like they are going to grow as long as mine, but I would never be a fool to think you’re my son. Your father is the foreman who helped me build this house. He is handsome like you, and just as your mother likes. I’m not ugly, but I’m not that handsome either – it’s by luck that your brother took his mother’s good looks.’”

The precision of Kenosi’s recollection took my father by surprise, but a shadow grew across his face again, and he shrugged. “I thought you were sleeping, my child.”

“I thought I was dreaming, Papa.”

Papa told the man he had just called his child: “I’m not your fa—”

“You’ve already furnished us with this knowledge, papa ga Neo,” my mother intervened.

My father challenged: “Mama ga Neo le Kenosi – mother of roses!” His voice carried a vitriol my mother had managed to keep at bay for a long time.

My mother dropped the bowl into which she put the fig skin. She stomped out and trudged to the side of the house, and we followed her as she expected we would. We found her pointing her finger at the fat red roses, on the side of the yard opposite where I grew that rose, that dead one whose kin I’ve now decided to claim as my own. The dog from next door, its graceful limbs seeking to tread the other side of the fence, our side, barked and bared its pointy fangs in the direction of the rose Mama was pointing at.

Her rigid finger never moved from that same direction. She said: “I birthed them! My blood courses through them. Now you know.”

We stood there and said nothing. Mama continued, her nostrils flaring: “I had my period for the first time in years – I don’t know in how many years. The seeds have been under that mattress almost as long I’ve stopped having my periods. They had to finish in the end, am I wrong? My son had to come home in the end, am I wrong? So what did I do? I salvaged and swallowed them. Do you want to know more, papa ga Neo?”

“No,” Papa said, his voice cowering from his wife.

“And then I bled!” she screeched. “Just like your son almost bled to death, I also bled from the place where he had crawled out.”

We saw the dog from next door, the mother of the dog my father adopted, run towards Lemogang. It had finally realised that papa had lifted the bottom of the fence a bit higher and that it could now slip through. It elegantly bounded with its sharp canines like scythes towards the child, past the child, who was just a child, and decapitated a rose with its teeth.

Cow and Chicken

MERCY WANDERA

MY OLDER STEP brother, Pat, was a charismatic deviant and he relished in his little oddities that he considered wins. Like how he would always beat me at doing splits and somersaults, something I never really got a hang of. He was rebellious and fun, and had a flare for the dramatic. His personality was the size of the Indian Ocean.

He was always cracking the funniest jokes and impersonating Baba. Baba never so much as cracked a smile for anything and he was the most anti-social person I knew. Pat would poke fun at Baba's framed pictures that were peppered all over the sitting room, and laugh, "Baba ate all his friends that's why he's so fat." Everything was as serious as a heart attack to Baba. He had a permanent scowl plastered on his face and the expressions he did best were fuming anger and nonchalance. So we ardently strove to earn the latter, at least then we didn't have to deal with his flaring temper. He was easily ticked off by the slightest thing. You would only have to laugh aloud and he would stare you down into stark silence. He would always bark: "Nobody is here to baby you!" — a pronouncement Pat perfected in impression.

Because of Baba's constant vexation and the fact that we were always on the receiving end of his brutal punishments, we created a hide-out in Baba's run-down grey Peugeot 504. Beat-downs were part of our regular home routine and we would go lick our wounds in hiding, sometimes literally.

Pat would say to me, "You and I have to stick together, Chicken," and lovingly ruffle my hair. He had easily morphed into my knight in shining armour.

Funny enough, Pat was the photocopy image of Baba. Right from the gigantic protruding moles on their foreheads that almost looked like a cow's horns, to the pitch black skin

complexion, to their tall and imposing frames, and even down to the stammer in their voices. It was almost eerie when they stood together. But Pat had the most striking eyes that made him stand him out. Eyes so large they threatened to push out their sockets and pupils so tiny that sometimes his whites enveloped them completely. He would look dead in the eyes, something that had earned him some snickers in the neighbourhood.

One loose idle afternoon Pat said to me, “Let’s apply some *wanja* so my eyes pop out.” It was a game we liked to play. He didn’t have to tell me twice. I eagerly stole Mama’s make-up kit and set to watch him work on his eyes. I was in awe at how he never missed even a tad nor poked his eye. He was in his element, shading his eyebrows here and dubbing some mascara there. His transformation was even more astounding when he contoured his nose. I was more than ready for him to do my face next.

We got so engrossed and caught up with playing with makeup that we missed hearing Baba coming in. And we should have because he was in an extra awful mood judging by how loudly he was cussing out the watchman. Granted he was a lazy lad who spent most of his time eating and sleeping instead of tending to the gate.

Before we had a chance to dash into hiding per usual, he spotted us.

“What have you done? Did I raise clowns? *Ghasia gani hii kwa macho?*” Baba bellowed once he gave us a swift look-over. No sooner had coherent thought started forming than I heard a loud whack land across Pat’s cheek. And another backhanded one. So hard were the smacks that I felt all my muscles clench in response and all I could do was freeze on my spot and await my turn. I had never been so scared. Yet my turn never came.

“Remove that rubbish at once! Where is Mama?” Baba demanded to no one in particular as he made his way inside presumably to get to the bottom of the situation with Mama, all the while murmuring some obscure obscenities.

I looked at Pat who had bowed his head down. My tongue felt so dense and much as I tried, anything I yearned to say to try and ease the situation got stuck in my throat. I

chastised myself for my weak disposition. After what seemed like eons, Pat plodded back into the house with slumped shoulders not sparing me half a glance. Not that I blamed him anyway.

That night dinnertime was akin to a graveyard. Mama said a prayer for the food and that was it. The silence was thick and laden with a poignant sense of retribution. Pat had his head bowed down the entire time and I searched for the best way to break the ice at the table. Apparently, I took too long thinking because with the quickness of a blink, Pat had finished his plate and was excusing himself from the table. Mama beat me to saying something though: “Don’t steal from me again Pat. And be sure to pray.” That was the only time Pat looked up, curtly nodded in response and retired to his room.

The day following the incident Mama wasted no time in calling the pastoral team from her church for a prayer meeting over tea and scones. Pat was summoned and immediately bombarded by a litany of church folk putting their hands on him to pray the gay away. The prayers got louder with each passing minute and I swore the roof was going to come down on us. I stood in a corner as I watched on. Tongues commenced wagging in foreign speak and spurts of saliva were sent flying with such venom. Pat did not once close his eyes, only moving to wipe off saliva that landed on his face. He shot me a look and for a second I swore he fully detested me and in that moment I wanted nothing more than to profusely apologise to him and give him a bear tight hug. But I could tell that the dynamics of our relationship had shifted for the worse, and all I could do was hide away in shame and turn reclusive to my room.

Who You Are

FISKE SERAH NYIRONGO

Two silhouettes are joined together in an intimate embrace. The cool air dries the sweat their bodies are covered in. Nine-year-old Lilato watches in fascination the two women she sees. Her mother told her to wake her up whenever she wanted to use the latrine a few metres away from their house, but tonight she wanted to go alone; the sweets her father had passed on to her when her mother wasn't looking have given her an achy tummy and she doesn't want her mother to know that.

"I think there's someone out there," she hears one of the women say. A giggle slips out of her mouth and she stops it from echoing with a quick hand over her mouth. She turns back to the direction of her house when she knows that she'll be found out and get in trouble with her mother. What those two women were doing makes her feel like she wasn't supposed to see it. Her nine-year-old mind doesn't know how that is possible or what it means. Her sisters talk about sex and, from the way they describe it, it seemed to be an unpleasant activity with a lot of pain involved. What she has just witnessed looked so different and no one looked to be in pain.

With her mind still back in the bush, she doesn't notice her mother standing outside the house. "Where are you coming from?" her mother asks in an angry voice.

"I...I saw auntie Mwangala with her friend. I wanted to see what they were doing," she replies sheepishly.

She sees her mother look back at the forest she has just emerged from. "Go back to sleep, I'll be back." The anger in the words she spits out has Lilato walking as fast as she can into the house. She gets back into her bed beside her older sister and drifts off a few seconds later.

“You think I enjoy being ashamed of and disrespected by everyone, including you?” A low voice says in the still dark room.

Lilato opens her eyes and the first thing she sees is a suitcase open near her head and things being thrown into it. Her aunt Mwangala is picking up the clothes she hanged in the small wardrobe in the bedroom and throwing them into the suitcase from across the room. Her mother is standing by the door looking on. “I told you to keep...” her mother says, stopping when she sees that Lilato is wide awake.

“What? Finish saying it! Keep what? You want me to keep a part of myself hidden from your children?” Aunt Mwangala says in resignation. Her hands shake as she closes the suitcase up. Lilato’s mother has her eyes trained on the floor now. Aunt Mwangala lets out a sigh as she bends to leave a kiss on Lilato’s forehead.

“You can come visit me when you are older, I have to leave. Take care of your sisters and mum”—the last words she hears from her aunt for sixteen years.

A MAN SCREAMS at her in Dutch as she drags her large suitcase out from the airport terminal. She shakes her head, no, to the words she doesn’t understand. Her eyes are searching for the familiar face in the ocean of strange faces. Her long braids are tied up in a bun atop her head, and the heaviness of them is hurting her neck as she stretches to see beyond her reach.

“Taxi, Miss?” the man says to her with a huge grin spreading across his wide, set face.

“No, thank you,” she replies with a smile.

“Lilato!” a familiar voice calls out to her.

She turns in the opposite direction and relief floods her body as she looks into the warmest grey eyes she has ever seen.

A tall woman with tattoos covering her pale hands takes easy steps towards her and envelopes her equally tall frame in a tight embrace. Lilato lets out a breath at the feeling of safety that flows from her head to her toes.

“It’s so good to see you, sweetheart,” the woman says to her, her soothing voice contradicting her appearance.

“It’s good to see you, too, Aunt Beatrice,” Lilato replies.

The woman lets out peals of laughter as she guides Lilato in the direction she came from. She takes Lilato’s suitcase from her hands and carries it with ease. “That always gets me; I’m an aunt,” she says between laughs. Lilato smiles at this. The laughter warms Lilato’s body in the Dutch cold. She waits as she watches Beatrice place her suitcase into the boot of her Audi and a slight blush comes onto her cheeks when Beatrice catches her staring at the unsightly scar on her right inner arm. The car ride is quiet and awkward as Lilato scrambles for any topics that are both small talk and interesting.

“My younger brother gave me the scar.” Quiet words leave Beatrice’s mouth. “I was sixteen to his fourteen. He found me with his magazine stash featuring naked girls with my hand down my pants....”

“You don’t have to...,” Lilato interrupts her.

“No, it’s fine. I’m over the pain of it, I forgave him a long time ago, and we are cool now,” Beatrice says with a smile, crinkling the corners of her eyes.

Lilato knows the pain of growing up in a family that hates who you are; the thought of her family makes her feel nauseous.

“I’m glad you came, your aunt would have loved to have you here sooner,” Beatrice says to her with tears in her eyes.

“I’m so glad to have gotten the internship. My friends are so jealous,” Lilato replies with the excitement of a child on Christmas Day.

They drive through a busy street and branch off into a slightly less busy neighbourhood. The houses in this neighbourhood range from mini mansions to outright mansions with pristine lawns and big yards. Lilato smirks at the lack of wall fences and barbed wire around all the houses. Beatrice turns into a property with a driveway that is littered with big cypress trees. A white house lies at the end of the driveway. The house Lilato saw in pictures and videos is tiny compared to the house that is right in front of her.

“We are home,” Beatrice says with a sigh. “Welcome to our home, sweetheart,” she adds on.

Before she can answer back, an exclamation of joy in her native Lozi has her smiling. A small, dark-skinned woman comes running from the house. The woman has locs reaching all the way to her waist; the locs swing behind her as she runs towards the moving car.

“My baby is here!” Aunt Mwangala exclaims. She opens Lilato’s door before Beatrice stops the car. “You are so grown up. I can’t believe you are here!” she says as she sweeps her into her arms.

Lilato holds on tightly to her, not letting go of the safest arms she has ever been held in. She breathes her in; her scent brings back memories from Lilato’s childhood. “I missed you,” Lilato says and tears follow soon after her admission.

Mwangala breaks the embrace and rubs her niece’s arms in comfort; she wipes away her falling tears, ignoring her own.

The sound of Beatrice dragging Lilato’s suitcase on the pebbled ground breaks the moment and Lilato shyly swipes at her face.

“Thanks for picking her up, babe,” Mwangala says to Beatrice as she comes to stand beside them. Mwangala lands a quick peck on Beatrice’s lips. The intimacy in the peck has Lilato feeling like she is intruding on a private moment. The love in both of her aunts’ eyes is something that sends a clear message to her broken heart. *It is possible*, she thinks to herself.

“I cooked so much for you. I hope you still enjoy your childhood favourites,” Aunt Mwangala says to Lilato, forcing her eyes to focus on her.

The three women all walk side by side into the open door. The smells of beans, rice, fried chicken and something baking make Lilato’s mouth water and her stomach to grumble that very moment. The two women beside her let out twin laughs. A shy smile appears on Lilato’s face. Aunt Mwangala lets out another laugh at her niece’s expense.

“Let me check the cake, I don’t trust your aunt’s baking skills,” Beatrice says.

Mwangala raises one perfectly groomed eyebrow in fake outrage that has Beatrice scurrying away from the living room area. Lilato is taken by the beauty of the interior of the house. The space looks a lot like what she had imagined her aunt Mwangala’s house would look like. The similarities between her aunt and her mother cause the usual sadness and guilt to appear whenever she thought of them. Mwangala and her mother are identical twins. The two of them are so identical in appearance but so apart in character, interests and other more important things.

“Your room is downstairs, hope you don’t mind,” Mwangala says as she takes over dragging the suitcase down a hallway. Lilato follows after her and she opens a door at the end of the hallway.

“Wow,” the single word leaves Lilato’s lips. The room is almost as big as the entire flat she rents back home with two of her friends. A huge bed lies in the middle of it; there is a desk and a table pushed to the far end at the foot of the bed and an en suite bathroom with its door open, revealing the shiny interior of it.

“This is too much. I...,” Lilato says, not believing that this would be her home for the entire duration of her stay.

“You are here for work. I wanted to spoil you while you’re at it,” Mwangala says to Lilato as words escape her.

The reminder has Lilato smiling less. She is here for work but a month ago she wouldn't have taken a job so far away from home, so far away from her whole life. *You are running, girl*, a voice says to her.

"Rest for a while, I'll call you when dinner is ready," her aunt says to her and she leaves the room.

The closing of the door brings back the moments that Lilato has been trying to suppress which led her here. She broke up with her girlfriend of four years. Well, not broke up, per se: she was dumped. She had already applied for the internship months before the breakup so when she was told her application had been accepted she had immediately packed her bags and taken the first available flight to Utrecht, Netherlands.

Her mind drifts for a while before she finds herself getting comfortable in the middle of the bed. She falls asleep immediately.

"Lilato, wake up," Beatrice's voice sounds through the sleepy fog covering her. Lilato opens her eyes and is greeted by the amused face of Beatrice.

"Eat something and you can come back to sleep," Beatrice says in a motherly tone. "Mwangala and I have eaten already, so it's just you," she admits with a shy look in her eyes.

"How long did I sleep?" Lilato asks as she gets up, rubbing her eyes. The now darkened room tells her she has been out for some hours.

"Three hours," Beatrice replies. "You sleep like you aunt, you know. All the space in a bed and you choose to curl up in the middle of it." Beatrice laughs, then excuses herself as she gives Lilato privacy to get out of her travel clothes.

Lilato finds the two women lounging in the living room laughing at something they are watching on the large screen television. Beatrice notices her first and rises up from her seat before Mwangala stops her.

"I'll get it," Mwangala says to her. "Good morning, sleeping beauty, let's get you fed," Mwangala says jokingly as she walks towards Lilato.

Lilato follows behind her as she enters into the open kitchen. Mwangala takes out a plate covered in aluminium foil from the oven and places it on one of the counter tops. She places a glass and a bottle of unopened water next to the plate.

Lilato sits on one of the kitchen chairs and digs in into her food. Mwangala leans against the kitchen counter gauging the look on her niece's face.

“Is it as good as you remember it?”

“It's even better than I remember,” Lilato replies with a big smile on her face.

The smile that appears on Mwangala's face is breathtaking and warms Lilato's body from head to toe. Once upon a time they were an aunt and her precious niece who were so close to one another but fear and hate separated them. This time with both niece and aunt estranged from family, they know they would need each other and this time they would never be separated again.

God in Jeans

RILEY HLATSHWAYO

WE'RE NAKED IN his bed one night when he digs his fingers into my hair, and grabs hard, bringing my lips closer to his in such a violent manner that I let out a moan before our lips even meet. I would be lying if I said I liked being handled this way, but I would also be lying if I said I didn't.

The taste of alcohol in both our mouths merge and become one, as our tongues dance a tango of sexuality that makes me so hard I clasp tightly onto his muscular biceps, my legs curling around his and anticipate what I know is coming. With Nakhane's *Interloper* playing softly in the background, the scene is nothing short of special as my hand slides down south reaching for the hardness entrapped under his Jockey briefs.

"Sometimes," he says between kisses and licks on my clavicle, "I fear that you're using me to get away from something." My grab on him loosens, and he feels it. There is something about the way he says that that doesn't sit well with me. I get off the bed, quickly reaching for my shorts and shirt from the floor. I put them on without turning to look at him. I find shelter in the deafening silence in the room birthed of the tension suddenly taking over space – not even his apologetic giggle has an effect on me as I walk about the dark room, the only source of light coming from the moon gleaming through the open window. Call me dramatic, but it is not what he said that has me feeling like a veil over my carefully constructed faux bravado has been discarded and all the people I have tried fooling into believing that I have my shit together can see me as I am: exposed. Also, it is not that he said it, but that if he didn't I would have still left his house shattered because, while there may be something that drives me crazy about white boys, there was a part of me that believed that Chad was different to the many that I have slept

with and the few I have dated. I still didn't trust him to keep things between us casual as I wanted to, despite him repeatedly telling me he would. Here we are, where I knew, but hoped we would never get to.

"But I don't mind," he quickly adds, faking a laugh that he hopes will erase what he has just said.

I didn't need convincing.

"I don't mind," he says, wrapping his arms around my waist, kissing my neck in that way he knows will get me to submit to whatever he wants. "Lu, I don't mind settling for whatever this is – as long as it means I get to have you in my bed."

He doesn't know that I like it too. We have never spoken about it. We've never had reason to, until now. Yet, still, I don't want to get into it. I turn and smile at him, wrapping my arms around his neck and will him into a kiss, to which he annoyingly submits and smiles back. In the same way that I got off the bed – no words said and no sign of disapproval whatsoever – I free myself from his embrace, and scan for the rest of my clothes on the floor. I don't even say goodbye as I find myself looking at his door the moment I reach the elevator. There is a part of me that silently hopes that he doesn't follow me, and is glad when he doesn't. While I may say that the sigh I release is in response to it, feeling as though his following me would have made things worse for both of us, it's a lie.

I can't explain it, but there always existed this fear inside me that I would meet a guy like Chad. Meeting a guy like him was never in my plans.

It was on three occasions that I found myself betraying my own rules when it came to these white boys. The first was in college when I met Kevin. He convinced me that there was such a thing as true love. He was my first, you see. The second was with Simone. He was married and convinced me that I could be polyamorous as he introduced me to his rich husband. And then there was Edward Keites. He was my colleague, and we would fuck in the restrooms, behind the printers, in the showers at the gym. He convinced me that I was capable of shutting

off my emotions whenever sex was involved, that I could separate pleasure from the romance; hence it was easier for me to not fall for him as he gave me that good dick. However, as the legend tells, the student always surpasses the teacher: it was Eddie who ended up falling for me.

Reaching my car, I get inside and do something I usually attempt when I'm drunk and surprise myself at the level of restraint I still possess by not going ahead with it. But this time, I shut it all off and find myself dialing Eddie's number.

He answers on the third ring, just as I am about to end it. "What is it, Lulama?"

"I want to come over," I say, the flashing neon light next to the dashboard indicating that the time is a few minutes past midnight, as the car starts moving. "I'm coming over." He sighs, and, judging from the silence that follows, his breathing behind the mouthpiece, he wants me to, but like every other man with a bruised ego, he doesn't say *yes*. I hang up, set my full attention on the road as I drive past the Pacific Centre, a few blocks before Eddie's house, and more so from where we work.

The moment Eddie opens the door I grab him by his shirt and pin him against the wall, shoving my lips at him. He doesn't protest, and I feel his hands trace around my body. For a second he pushes me off, catching his breath and tries to say something – whatever that was is inaudible with my tongue finding its way down his throat again.

"Shit, Lulama. Slow down."

"What? You don't want this?"

Having said that, my mind surges without me.

What? You don't want this?

So long ago it was, yet so unfamiliar the story would be if one were to tell it.

THERE ARE THOSE of us in whose hearts pain holds a very special place. Drunk on sombre thoughts, those of us who, out of yearning and the fear of the unknown, have developed a bond,

a relationship, with all that which comes to hurt and do us wrong. And Lulama Ndelu was no different. He smiled candidly at the thought, the sudden surge that consumed him and his memory.

There was once a time in Lulama's life when he found peace in being by himself. A short time and it disappeared with very little fight, on his part, as he lost himself in the kisses of suitors and the arms of lovers who wanted nothing but to fill what they lacked with bits and pieces of his decrepit self-esteem. In allowing himself to wear out another person, to claim a certain façade, to breathe the life of his lovers, he lost himself and lived to be who they wanted him to be. He lied to himself and claimed that there was a certain kind of peace in knowing that with each person he wore he was relinquishing the pains of the last one, breathing anew and embracing the metamorphosis in the light of a new lover's gaze, like a virgin yet again.

"Come over here and eat this pussy," he said, catching his lover off-guard, the young man smiling from where he was sitting, listening to some Fleetwood Mac. He knew that he was teasing him, but the offer was so enticing, as he moved towards him, crawling on the bed like a panther prancing towards its prey.

"What, you don't want this?" he continued taunting him, "you don't want to eat all this?" Opening his legs widely and unzipping his pants, Lulama maintained the eye contact between them as he got to him and grabbed him hard by the neck, or, as a panther would, ceased him by the gullet, forcing their lips together, hard. He knew that the guy would act like the two of them weren't lovers the following day. He knew that the guy loved what they were doing, what they were going to do, but he did not want to admit it. For him, being here meant he had to relinquish all that his father had taught him to be masculinity – just by spending the time he did with Lulama already that was a questionable offence to his manhood on its own.

Lulama moaned, pushing him away from him. He'd just bit his lower lip, yet the second their eyes locked again, they went back at it. When they were done, lying on the floor naked, with Lulama crouched seductively on his breast, stroking his hairy chest, admiring the build of this

creature in his arms, his beautiful and lean body. If divinity was real, Kevin would be the personification of a god, in jeans. Fighting against his better judgment, the young man asked the one question he shouldn't have asked, "Why are you here, Kevin?" He did not answer. He asked again, kissing him on the depth of his sternum, licking the contours of his broad and buff body. Kevin did not say anything. He just took his hand in his, and placed it on his chest. His heart was beating rapidly, either out of the fears that admitting to what this setting made and wanted him to feel, or perhaps because the beating of his heart spoke volumes, said more than his lips could ever utter. Lulama knew better. He knew better than to trust the pretty boys – pretty white boys at that – to care so much about having them in his bed that he cannot think of anything else. That was how most boys like him fell into this trap of being used and misused: they trust with their minds and fall in love with their hearts.

Pretty boys – pretty closeted boys – have their own girlfriends. And they always go back to their girlfriends.

He laughed and kissed him on his lips. Moving away from him, Lulama changed the song that was playing on the iPod and played Jhene Aiko's "Wading" instead. He picked his shorts up from the floor and got dressed, the very same way he would do in years coming, as hurt from a broken heart and loose spirit would make him do.

CUPPING MY FACE into his hands, Eddie wills me to get up from the floor where I now suddenly lay, knees spread apart.

I don't know how it happened – the last thing I remember is Kevin's face as he eats me out, and the lies he says afterwards that would later lead me where I am. Not here in Eddie's house, but in the beds of random men, on dirty tiled floors wet with urine in clubs as I worshipped gods in jeans, searching for him to free me from a hurt that shouldn't have been mine.

Silenced

PENNINAH WANJIRU

“WHEN?”

“At the museum,” I replied.

“Really?” she answered as she slightly tilted her head and squinted.

“Yes, Banda, static. It felt like static every time we touched!” I Goggled at her as if it were possible to transfer the memory.

She scoffed and brushed it off, implying I was mistaken. However, I knew she didn’t want to talk about it. Banda never did like it when we were too close in public. She maintained a ‘respectable’ distance between us – in supermarkets, in straight clubs and on that day, at the museum. Our dates had the air of formal business meetings.

I couldn’t hold her hand; or rather she didn’t allow me to. One Sunday evening, on a stroll, I fumbled with her palm, trying to entwine her lanky fingers in mine. “What are you doing?” she scolded, and she quickly moved my hand away to take its place on my thigh.

“No one’s looking,” I implored.

“What if they are?”

“We could be sisters!” I interjected. “Heck! I look big enough to be your mom, Banda.”

Her expression hardened. She went silent. “I don’t like trouble you know,” she answered, subdued.

Perhaps it is was me. I loved the thrill of shamelessly showing my affection in public. I longed for the puzzled looks on people’s faces when we didn’t conform. However, overtime, her fear seeped into my mind. What if they were watching? What if I didn’t pass for her sister or her

mother? Slowly, I began to keep my hands to myself in public. Not even showing affection in ways that were considered platonic.

The only place we could brazenly be was behind the closed door of her studio apartment, with the blinds drawn round the clock. There's a way Banda looks at me when we're alone. The same way I look at a chocolate dessert. There's love, passion, a kind of hunger and at times despair. I can tell it pains her too that we can't make eye contact in *matatus*, or walk arm in arm down the street.

Especially on that afternoon at the museum. Being right next to her, yet feeling like she was far out of reach. I felt like a caged bird, fluttering away, demanding to be set free. Each time she brushed up against me, there was electricity and knots in my stomach. With every graze, the walls of my cage began to close in. Still, I kept my hands to my sides and together we hovered around the old, decomposing museum, hollow, like forlorn ghosts.

Hoping for Time

DENNIS MUGAA

THREE MONTHS. THAT was all she had left, what the doctor had told her. But the doctor had been wrong, and now she was at the Aga Khan University Hospital. Wambũi looked up at the ceiling but she could not see it. The heart rate monitor beeped, and she knew that it would stop at any moment.

Wambũi's thoughts drifted into the afterlife. She thought that the stories she had heard of hell were made up by persons who would themselves have been glad to sin, ironically only if such stories did not exist. Because she had been through hell, and it was the torment that you endured alone – fighting the demons that emerged within until you lost. The idea of heaven was equally as dreadful; it felt to her that she would spend an eternity poring over hymns with an ascribed humility to someone whom she had never known. She believed that the inventor of such an inconceivable truth deserved the greatest applause, not for his invention but rather the improbable capability that such an idea could persist for over a thousand years.

But Wambũi felt at peace. She had found herself in her love for her mother and Marie; and in that very moment they filled her whole life completely.

She could only hear their voices. She was in the zone between life and death – oscillating between the two. Her mother quietly sobbed beside her. It hurt Wambũi that she was leaving her alone. And she heard Marie's voice too, beautiful and calmly hinged with serene clarity: “Je t'aime aussi ma chérie. I want to let you know that my words may never be enough to explain just how much love is in my heart for you.”

She took one more breath, a deep breath that used up her remaining energy, filling her with an unexplainable peace. Her finger twitched one last time. The heart rate monitor drew out a flat line and she was gone.

LIFE HAD BEEN cruel to her before, but when she found out she had ninety days left to put her affairs in order, Wambũi had spent two hours of her limited time in an exam room.

It hurt her deeply that she would probably never be able to practice medicine even for a single day. The countless nights she had spent throughout her six years in the University of Nairobi had gone down the drain. She could recite *Gray's Anatomy* by heart as if the book had been written with only her in mind, and Sigmund Freud's work in psychology made her quiver with excitement. What really fascinated her most was that she did not find medicine as tedious as everyone else said it was: she breezed through medical texts with a great deal of excitement such that she saw those who held a contrary opinion to be quite ludicrous.

She pictured herself at some point in her medical career walking in the hall ways of the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore with a stethoscope around her neck, moving from one emergency room to the next. Maybe she would look like one of those doctors in the television series that she loved to watch. Then she would probably come back to Nairobi and open her own paediatric centre to offer affordable health care for children. But what was it all for? Her dreams would never come to fruition; she did not have a bright future ahead of her. In fact, at that very moment she doubted if she even had a future at all. It had dawned on her, a gut wrenching realisation, that imagined futures almost always had the most heart-breaking endings, for they rarely ever came true.

Despite this she did the final exam. She was fighting back tears while everyone around her was evidently at odds to curb their enthusiasm. Wambũi could only imagine what an emotional wreck she must have seemed. All she wanted to do was fall in her bed and cry, pull

and tug at her bed sheets and soak in a pool of tears while gritting her teeth in despair. But she was holding on for now and it took every single morsel of strength to keep her from falling into pieces. She handed in her paper before everyone else without answering the last question because a tear drop betrayed the immense torment she desperately wanted to hide. When the professor asked her if everything was okay, she said that she was just happy to have completed medical school. He laughed at her obvious lie, and it hurt her just how oblivious to the world or to anything else for that matter he could have been. As she walked out of the room, she glanced at her hand and saw the wrist watch that she wore out of habit. She took it off and dropped it on the floor. It reminded her of what she already knew: she did not have time.

She went to sit on one of the benches in the gardens of the medical school so that she could wait for her friend Marie. Besides the exam, that was the only reason she had gone to school in the first place. Events of the previous day raced through her mind frantically but with a certain clarity that had not been evident to her up to that point. Wambũi had been to hospital the previous afternoon with her mother to receive her test results. It was the penultimate day of her exam timetable and she had set up an appointment with Dr. Shah. Over the past month she had been having pains in her lower abdomen, but until that point it did not seem serious to her. When they entered the office and sat down, the doctor glanced at her medical file, looked at her, before staring down, defeated. A sombre mood engulfed him and Wambũi felt despair fill the room.

“Wambũi, your cancer has relapsed,” Dr. Shah had told her. Before she could say anything, the doctor in a calm and deeply sentimental voice added, “It’s terminal.”

Wambui’s mother clutched at her hand and slowly began to cry. Wambũi did not shed a tear but her face morphed into a miserable sadness, so much so that she appeared sick. She could feel her stomach burning. Her confident demeanour immediately changed and the beautiful glow of her face present earlier that day faded away. All she was left with was a hole so deep inside her that she doubted if anyone could ever save her from drowning in her sorrow.

“How long do I have?” Wambūi asked; she could barely recognize the sound of her own voice. The doctor, an Asian with a well-rounded face, adjusted his glasses before saying in a low voice that almost sounded like a whisper: “Three months.” Those words broke her and shook her to the core. The doctor continued talking but she was no longer listening all she could see was his lips moving but the sound never seemed to reach her ears. She tasted her tears as they fell, and her heart was ripped and torn apart.

Her mother was inconsolable, evidently struggling with herself not to faint; she hung her head with a desperation that only served to deepen Wambūi’s own depression. Her mother’s reaction reminded her of the first time she had fallen ill when she was seven. Wambūi and her mother had gone from one doctor to another. It was a desperate journey that the two of them had to endure, since her father had passed away the year before, and to Wambūi’s mother it felt as though the entire world had conspired to crush her. One moment they were given hope and the next it was taken away. They eventually found Dr. Shah, an oncologist. Wambūi carried out numerous tests that at the time seemed strange to her. A biopsy of her lymph nodes confirmed that she had leukaemia cells. The news hit her mother like a train; she spent her nights crying herself to sleep until at some point she learnt to cry on the inside so that Wambūi would not see her pain.

Wambūi had begun her chemotherapy immediately after her diagnosis; the doctor had mentioned to her mother that the cancer was only in its initial stage. The trips to the hospital to receive her treatment came to define Wambūi’s childhood. She was constantly fatigued at school. During some nights she could barely sleep because the drugs hurt her body immensely; at times the morphine that was given to her caused her to have drug-induced hallucinations, and her mother would have to go along with it so that Wambūi would not feel bad about seeing things which no one else could see.

On one of these nights she remembered asking her mum if she would die like her father. She had asked her mother to give her a message to pass on to him. Her mother could only hold

her closer, and reassure her that everything was going to be alright. But the fragility in her voice had betrayed her so that even she wondered if her daughter would live to see another sunrise.

On every one of her visits to receive her medication, she could feel the drugs they were pumping into her killing her even more. Wambūi had never known loneliness but at that point she felt completely alone. She knew then the cold hard truth of life: that there were some fates worse than hell. When Wambūi began to lose her hair she thought that it was the end. Doctor Shah however had reassured her that it was all part of the healing process. She came to adore him because he was with her throughout her treatment, every step of the way. During each routine check-up he would make sure to tell her a joke. Even though they were not funny in any way Doctor Shah laughed at his own jokes so wholeheartedly that his dimples would show, and Wambūi would laugh at him for this and the entire situation would become so funny that both of them would tear up. He came to be the one positive thing about her illness. She admired him and wanted to be just like him. She had decided then that she would become a doctor.

WAMBŪI'S THOUGHTS MELTED away and she found herself back in the university garden. It was a cold and chilly late morning and the eminence of noon had done nothing to brighten the day. Still Wambūi could feel her palms sweating and her heart racing. Her sadness was giving way to wild anticipation. She read the text message she had sent to Marie again, she had lost count to the number of times she had stared at her phone.

Please meet me by the university garden, it read.

She had to tell Marie – this was probably the last chance she would have. Marie would be on a plane to Kigali the next day. For Wambūi, the urgency to see Marie had swelled up quickly and the shuffle of her feet at the bench did nothing to hide even in the subtlest of ways this undeniable fact. The day before her life was headed in a different direction, now it was headed in

another. She believed that before she would not have had the courage to do what she was about to do.

I am on the way. The reply came quicker than she had expected.

That meant Marie had finished her exam. Wambūi could not explain why she was excited and afraid at the same time. This rollercoaster of emotion caused by someone who she had seen almost every single day the last six years. Her heart almost raced when she saw Marie walking towards her. It was a sensation that thrilled her in a strange way, like the odd pleasure one feels by saying things they know they should never have said.

Marie sauntered casually towards where Wambūi was seated. She was immaculately beautiful. Marie was Rwandan. She was tall, slender and walked with a nonchalant grace that complemented her calm demeanour. Her face enchanted like the moon in a cloudless sky. She had chocolate skin and the part that Wambūi loved her to bits for was that she wore her natural hair like a crown. *Fineapple*, Wambūi fondly called her from time to time. Hers was beauty in its most supreme development, the kind that excites the sensitive soul to tears. It amazed her as to how her affection towards a person's personality stimulated her own to gravitate slowly into theirs. Wambūi had picked up Marie's humour and her love for the small things in life, to the extent that she even congratulated herself for the slightest achievements.

"Hi, Wambūi!" Marie said while she gave her a warm embrace, leaning down slowly to reach Wambūi.

"Marie!" Wambūi exclaimed with excitement. When Marie sat down Wambūi looked deep into her eyes and breathed in deeply, composing herself before she began to talk. "I have terminal cancer, Marie. My cancer has come back after all this time in remission." Marie looked shocked. She was clearly not ready to receive the news. Marie did not speak but sat down next to Wambūi holding on to her hand with no intention of letting go.

"Does this mean that you will..."

"Yes, I have three months, Marie."

They both fell silent. Wambūi knew that this would be harder than she initially thought. Warm tears welled up in Marie's eyes; she was trying hard to keep herself together. Wambūi noticed this and she knew it was now or never, she had to say what she wanted to say before it was too late. Her thoughts would not last in the world if they were just in her head. She took another breath and began to speak.

"I need to tell you something. Please give me some time to speak before you say anything." She stopped momentarily and then continued, this time looking down, fidgeting with her fingernail. "I never had the perfect words because the only thing I have been thinking about is you. This past year I have been with you, I have felt every part of me screaming out for you but my words have been trapped deep in me knowing that all I ever wanted has been right in front of me all this time but I have never had the courage to reach for it. Now that I do not have much time, I want you to know how my heart feels about you and I no longer want to wait. In these few moments of my confusion I feel an immense joy in my heart for telling you how I feel. I have been always fearful that you would leave but now it seems that I am the one who will leave this world sooner than I expected. I want you to know that I am in love with you and my heart beats for you. I do not want to wait forever because I do not have forever to wait. I hope that I am not too late and I do not want you to leave for Kigali without me telling you this. I know I am not thinking now, I am just doing what my heart is telling me to do. In some odd way I believe that if you cut me open now your name will be engraved in my heart, no matter how implausible that idea may seem. I need to let you know that I am in love with you, Marie."

Time seemed to stretch after she had finished speaking. After what seemed like an eternity Marie turned to face her and said: "I know, Wambūi. You are not particularly good at hiding how you feel. I feel the same way too, but I have been afraid to tell you."

Wambūi could barely contain her happiness. She smiled, she blushed, then she said goodbye to Marie, who was dumbfounded. She left quickly. Her entire body was shaking with excitement until she reached her home in Kilimani.

WAMBŪI THOUGHT THAT they would never meet again. But how far were they from the end?

The next morning Marie showed up at Wambūi's house with all her belongings packed. "I want to be with you for as long as I can," Marie said. They still had a long, long road before them and the most complicated and difficult part of it was the beginning.

Marie moved in with Wambūi, foregoing her planned trip home, to Kigali. She would wait until their graduation, which was only two months away. Wambūi's mother understood everything from the minute Marie walked in through the door. She understood that her daughter and Marie were everything but just friends. The three of them went about trying to make each day as beautiful as they could. Wambūi's mother took a prolonged leave from her job and came to be with her daughter.

Every morning the three of them went for a walk at Karura nature trail. Wambūi felt like she was seeing everything anew each day. The way the trees were lined up perfectly next to each other thrilled her to bits. The best part for her was during sunny mornings when the dirt trail created beautiful shadow patterns of the trees that lined the walkway.

Wambūi and Marie became inseparable and would talk on end about everything. Not that they did not know enough about each other after six years together in medical school but they wanted to use up every last second that Wambūi had left. Their love for each other set them free and they could be things that they never thought they had the audacity to even whisper to be. It was beautiful that both their hearts were open to love and they surrendered to it without fear.

The cancer continued to take its toll on Wambūi. She was growing weaker day by day and she began to lose weight much quicker than she had thought. But she had already made a decision not to let the cancer interrupt what was, at the time, the best days of her life. She was happy but sometimes sad because of the ephemeral nature of her relationship with Marie. It hurt her that it would not last for so long. She made up for this by hugging Marie tighter every single day and loving her more each day that went by.

One evening the two of them decided to go out to eat. Wambūi chose to go to Le Grenier à Pain, a French restaurant that had recently opened. They wore dinner gowns but what they wore best was happiness. They walked hand in hand and held on to each other without any desire to let go. It did not matter that their show of affection would have been construed by some as being too much in a country where such affection was frowned upon. They had really found each other and learnt to be together without fearing the consequences. That was enough and it made all the difference. When they were done with dinner they left for home and found Wambūi's mother asleep.

Without thinking, Wambūi held Marie closer, feeling her warm breath, her heart beating faster with every second that passed. She kissed her. She had read a Robert Frost poem, about how some people said that the world would end in fire, while others said it would end in ice. However, for her, from the taste of desire in Marie's lips, she held firm with those who favoured fire. She had tasted heaven. And she could not stop there – how could she?

They were breathless when they were done.

IT HAD ONLY been seven weeks since Wambūi was told about her condition, but she continued to deteriorate much quicker than she expected. She was now too weak to leave the house. Her mother and Marie had to take turns to do most things for her. She was put under palliative care at home. The graduation ceremony for medical students was only a week away and Wambūi hoped that she would at least live to see herself become a doctor.

One morning, Marie went to the medical school to collect both her graduation gown and Wambūi's. That day, Wambūi felt too weak – she could feel everything around her becoming darker by the minute. She sat at her study table and began to write to her mother and Marie. The morphine was no longer working and she could feel the pain tearing her insides apart. But still she wrote.

Dear Mum,

I want you to know that it is not your fault that I will not survive this disease. I know that you did everything that was humanly possible. I feel that most of life is a search for yourself, when you do manage to find yourself then you are truly happy and being happy is the fulfilment of a life well-lived. I have found myself in you and Marie. I wish that I could have stayed with you for the long haul but all I can leave you with is the love that I have for you in my heart.

I want you to know that I love you with all that I have.

She picked another piece of paper and this time with tears in her eyes she began:

Dear Marie,

I am seated here now trying my hardest not to think about you. Not because I have stopped loving you, but because I may never get the chance to love you fully and wholly in the way that you deserve. With you I can see things differently in a way that was hidden from me before. I never thought I would know how it felt to love with a love that is more than love. But I know that love is too shallow a word. I know now that you are the light of my life. I am looking at a picture of us and it fills me with a kind of happiness that I never knew existed in this world. How sad is it that this picture will forever remain young and you will grow old and weary but I will have passed on, having lived the best days of my life with you. I need you to know that if I had a choice I would look for you over a thousand lifetimes just to love you and feel your love. I have learnt that time is limited. Life is all we have. And you Marie, my

Fineapple, you are the most beautiful thing to ever happen to me. I just hope we
had more ti...

Wambũi did not finish the last word because her body gave away. She dropped to the floor, bringing down a glass of water with her. Her mother rushed into the room in great panic. "Please don't die on me!" her mother cried. She called an ambulance and Wambũi was rushed to the intensive care unit at the Aga Khan Hospital. Dr. Shah was already there waiting for them and Marie arrived as soon as she could, carrying the graduation gowns that she had gone to pick. She could not believe what was happening, the frenzy around her only served to heighten her emotions.

Wambũi's mother was holding on to two pieces of paper, and immediately handed one to Marie. "It's from. . .Wambũi," she said, in between tears. Marie was in a state of confusion; she read the letter quickly at first then slowly, taking in every word. She realised just how immensely she loved and adored Wambũi when she read the remaining part of the letter. It broke her completely. In what was almost a whisper she spoke into Wambũi's ears everything that she felt for her in the most genuine way she could muster.

The two of them stood beside Wambũi's hospital bed, tears running down their cheeks, listening to the frantic beep of the heart monitor, watching the line become flat.

The Dissolution of Thabang

THATO PATRICK TSOTETSI

“DO YOU THINK we’ll ever make it?” he asks, propping himself up on an elbow on the couch behind him. He shuffles on the small sequined cushion and sits on his right hip to lull the numbness of his left.

She looks into the distance for a while and takes another drag of the cigarette. Her index finger twirls one of her long box braids.

“We must,” she says, “we have to. I mean, that is what life is about, isn’t it? Surviving? Pulling through?”

Sunlight creeps through the steel blinds on the large windows. The light brings warmth into the open plan living room that doubles as a kitchen. The two are huddled in front of a three bar heater and do their best to ignore the heat that stings their shins.

Groaning sounds come from their right. It is Muzi, who turns to get comfortable on the three man couch he sleeps on. His 1.8-metre-tall body renders the exercise futile, the couch is simply too small for him.

Thabang and Vuvu turn towards the couch to see if Vuvu’s boyfriend is okay. He always sleeps off, leaving the two alone to their conversations. It generally played out this way following a night of partying and intoxication. They have been at it for over 36 hours, which isn’t abnormal when they have the aid of other potent substances.

“Yeah, but. . . *esh*. . .,” Thabang says, “I always want to be in control, and right now it feels like I’m losing all sense of who I am.” He receives the cigarette Vuvu passes to him and moves his knees closer to his chest and rubs the palm of his hand against his shins, one at a time. His eyes dart around, wholly focussed on the ground before him.

“Vuvu, it’s like every time I feel like I’ve got shit on lock, then”—his mouth is agape as he scrutinises his feet and the hand against his shin, which is what he does when he wants to gather his thoughts so he can make his point as eloquently as possible—“then it comes, you know? That overwhelming feeling of dread as if...as if it’s all going to come crashing down. I just...I guess I just choke, sometimes. Well, most times.”

Vuvu reaches out her hand unconsciously, touches his and pulls it onto her lap. She turns her head so she can face him and look into his eyes. They are glazed over and expressionless. For eyes that haven’t slept in as long as more than a day, they seem aware and piercing. She had said a number of times how beautiful Thabang’s eyes were. Large, brown and glistening like orbs that held within them the soul of the world. And more than the soul of the world, they held in them a pain so heavy that it threatened to engulf the whole universe in eternal darkness. The darkness in those eyes attracted her to him.

He takes another drag of the cigarette squished between his thumb and index finger. He makes out Vuvu’s face in peripheral view and knows she wants to say something but doesn’t because she understands that he hates being interrupted mid-thought. He despises people who finished his sentences for him, something that does not apply to Vuvu. It is Thabang’s way of letting her think she knows him well when the converse is true. The truth is that not even he knows himself well, if at all.

Apart from the short stories, articles and prose poems he writes and publishes, few people can penetrate the steel veneer of nothingness he puts up to guard him. Ironically, he has an unwitting way of getting people to open up to him instead. He does not expect this of Vuvu because unlike everyone else, she never assumes anything, never judges him.

He sighs and turns slightly to meet her eyes only to look back down and say, “I don’t know who I am, Vuvu.”

She clutches his hand in her palm as though to stop his innards spilling over and holds it tighter. “You know that you don’t have to be strong alone, Thabang. In fact, you don’t have to

be strong at all. Sometimes,” she says, her body turning to face him, “you should just allow yourself to feel, you know?”

“I can’t,” he says. His voice trembles and cracks. He takes another laboured drag of the cigarette until the filter burns his lips. “Agh!” he exclaims and yanks his hand from the firm grip of her hand.

They laugh heartily and the cold seems to thaw.

“Should I cut some lines?” she asks and stands up from the floor to go to the kitchen area.

“Uhm, why not?” Do we have a bag still?” he asks, lifting himself from the floor to sit on the couch.

He can no longer feel his legs and his buttocks has gone numb. He shakes his legs one at a time so the blood flows liberally again and starts to feel his toes tingle.

“Yeah!” she calls out from the kitchen, “I called John before we left Stones,” and pulls a plate from the cupboard above the sink area.

“So, what happened to Bagon?”

“*Bohan*, Thabang! His name is Bohan! Thixo! Ndikuxelele kangaphi?” she yells back, slamming her hand against the granite counter.

“Hayi, no! I should be excused, though! What kind of fucked up name is that, anyway?” he says, his voice louder as though to affirm a lifted mood.

He stretches his arms out before him and hovers his palms over the heater at his feet.

“I told you that he is from *Zim*. I *think* that’s where he’s from. Yhu, kodwa usisicefe?” she says in an animated voice.

She fiddles with a small bag of white trying to sprinkle the powdery contents therein onto the plate.

“I eventually had to tell him that my sister was coming to pick me up so he could get off my back.” The fine powder falls on the plate in a burst of cloud. “And can you believe he

thought that you and I are dating?” She runs a Discovery Medical Aid card over the powder on the plate and cuts neat, precise lines.

They laugh again, louder than before.

“Hayibo, is that why he was being so antagonistic towards me the whole time?” he asks, reaching for the DSTV decoder remote on the glass-top coffee table.

“Umuncu nje yena umkhuba wakhe,” she says striding back to the couch where he sits.

“Oh my God, I love this song!” Thabang shouts and begins to hum the tune to Bruno Mars’ “Treasure” out of tune.

“Seriously? I thought you didn’t like Bruno Mars, though,” she says and sits next to him.

“Well, yeah,” he says, “but there is just something about this one song that makes me want to fall in love and all.” He scoots to the far end of the couch to give her more space on the couch.

Perched on the spot next to him, she pulls out a piece of straw cut three quarters in. She pulls back her braids with her free hand while the other pushes the straw up one nostril. *Sniff.* She repeats for the other nostril before passing the straw to Thabang and he does the same, except with no braids to pull back.

The song is cut short by an insert about how Trace Urban loves Hip Hop and RnB and the volume is quickly turned down to a near hum again. Suddenly a silence follows and envelopes the room.

Thabang’s eyes find their way back to his feet. When he speaks again, his voice is almost a whisper: “I hate the smell of Dawn Cocoa Butter.” The depth and darkness return to his wonderful eyes.

Vuvu turns and looks at him again, her eyes widening.

His large eyes dart from side to side like someone visually impaired while his mouth remains open. He seems to search for some way to speak his thoughts, words to tell his heart. Vuvu touches his thigh and strokes it gently.

“I was about four or five – I must have been. Uhm....” He pauses and swallows spit against his tightening throat. “There had been a wedding or something somewhere in...uhm...some place in the family, I think....” His eyes are fixed on a spot between his feet while they dart side to side splendidly as he heaves in.

“Wait, can you remember that far back?” she says and he lifts a hand and she understands and stops speaking. He reaches for the box of Courtleigh on the table and lights one. He lowers the hand and seems to get lost in his thoughts again.

“So, uhm...because of the wedding or whatever, my mom was not home. An uncle or some relative had dropped us off, I think – my brother and I, that is.” He inhales audibly and exhales a louder gust. “Look, I might be imagining all of this, and actually, Vuvu, this is something I’ve never spoken about.”

He leans forward and sits towards the edge of the couch the way people watching their favourite team sit when they approach the goal posts of the opposing team. He clasps his hands together tightly as if in prayer and takes a deep breath.

“My brother would have been ten or so at the time—” he pauses and unclasps his hands then looks at them open-palmed. “I remember how my dad called out to us, asking that we come sleep with him in his bed.” He sighs and swallows loudly which makes his Adam’s apple dance up and down. “Look, now...at least I can say this without bursting into tears and turning into a complete fool,” he giggles.

Vuvu runs her hand up and down his lap as if rubbing heat into it. He holds it in place and they both freeze in the moment for what could have been forever while he stared at the floor before him and she looked into his face.

“What,” she stammers, “what happened?” her voice a whisper, and she pulls on the cigarette.

“Well, I was put in the middle, between him and my brother. And he...I remember him saying....” He presses his eyes shut and his lips tremble.

“Who? Your dad?”

“Yes. Yes, my dad.” He rubs his hands together but they do not get warmer. “He said ‘*Are bapale manyobana.*’ I don’t” — he swallows again — “I ...well...and then...he did it...”

“Wenza ntoni?”

“He pulled off my underpants and, well, I don’t know when he got the lotion, but...but I remember the distinct smell of Cocoa Butter. It was mom’s favourite, you know?”

He speaks rapidly at this point and consciously avoids looking at her. His eyes glisten that much more as tears well up at the corners. A lone teardrop trickles along the edge of his nose and down his cheek when he blinks. He shuts them tightly again and another tear rolls out the other eye.

He hears Vuvu gasp under her breath as she grips and digs her fingers into his thigh, no longer moving her hand up and down like before. He opens his mouth and pauses. “I can’t remember if there was any pain,” he says, finally. “But I felt it, the thick of it. That and the smell of stale beer, sweet on his breath. Beer, or brandy, I don’t...” his voice cracks and more tears stream from both his eyes. He blinks rapidly with his mouth agape and bows his head.

“Thabang, no! This is your biological dad you’re talking about here?” she asks, her own eyes threatening to let tears flow.

He lifts his head up in a jerk and snuffles. “Vuyelwa!” his voice cracks again and his shoulders start to shake. He shakes his head as if to will the tears and pain away. “I mean...my brother just...well...I mean, what could he do?” His voice shakes to the point where the words are nearly inaudible. “He was just a boy then, as well...and I, well...I didn’t scream or push him away or say no or anything. So...” His whole body shakes violently at this point.

Her fingers dig deeper into his thigh as if that would stop his body from convulsing as violently as it threatened to — but he does not feel anything. She isn’t strong enough and she finds herself burying her face into her hands as her own shoulders shake.

“Vuyelwa,” his voice is hoarse and shaky, “I didn’t scream or anything. I didn’t scream for him to stop, didn’t push him off me and I never told anyone. Why didn’t I? Is it because of *it* that I’m gay?” he asks, his voice shaking still, his sobs loud and audible. He cries uncontrollably.

Vuvu sniffs back the run in her nose, lifts her head and wipes away tears clumsily from her eyes, leaving mascara smudges across her face. “No, Thabang, no. Oh Lord, *ob Thixo!*” she almost wails. “*None* of this informed your sexuality.” She inhales and tries to steady her voice. “Look, what he did to you was wrong, and none of it was your fault – not any of it, you hear?” she almost shouts. And she breaks down and cries.

They sit in the silence and cry.

Thabang finally regains his composure and speaks again: “Then they don’t understand why I hated him so much. But, Vuvu, if I hated him as much as I said, or thought I did – I mean if this is what he did to me – then why – *why* the fuck did I cry when he died?” He breaks down again and says between hiccups and gasps of air: “I spent so long convincing my bloody self that I loathed him, but I cried! I cried, Vuyelwa! I must have loved him then.”

Without a second thought, she shifts towards the edge of the couch and pulls him towards her and presses him against her bosom, hugging him tightly. They cry quietly in the hollow of the room with his face in her arms, arms which got tighter with each passing second.

Love of My Blood

KARIN HENRIQUES

SHE AND HER mother stand to one side. They are not unwelcome, but they are White and out of place.

SHE WAS BORN in the '70s, to a white Afrikaans family, and grew up during Apartheid. She did not understand Apartheid because no-one talked about it. In her young life the only difference between Black and White was that she was allowed to go to Maria's kraal to play with Petrus, but Petrus wasn't allowed to come and play in her house. She never thought about it, or questioned it, she just accepted it.

While Mom and Maria worked together in the white house she and Petrus played in the Black kraal. They were each other's only friends. They made klei-osse at the vlei and smeared mud on each other's faces. They ran barefoot criss-crossing the veld and sat side-by-side eating peaches straight off the trees.

At sunset they would help old Petrus light boma fires for cooking and heat before she would go home to the White house. In the morning she would eat mieliepap under fluorescent lights at the kitchen table while Petrus waited for her on the step of the stoep.

When she turned seven Mom dressed her in a blue dress, white shirt, black shoes and white socks. Instead of stepping out to play with Petrus after breakfast, she stepped on to a blue bus that took her to a White school.

That same year Maria gave Petrus the school shoes that Mom bought, gave him two slices of brown bread and sent him on his way, walking for an hour to a Black school.

She read from library books, learnt songs, played in concerts and went to sports events. Petrus learnt how to count from a blackboard, only played in the dust road and walked home straight after school.

She was the top student in primary school. She did cross-country and learned debate. After school she went to art classes and during holidays she visited white friends in fluorescent kitchens on their own farms. She went on school tours, visited Natal, the Kruger, Cape Town and the Voortrekker Monument.

She out-grew her blue dress, and seven years later exchanged the white socks for stockings and a high school blazer. She went to boarding school. She came home once a month but stayed indoors to study, paint her nails and talk to friends on the phone.

She did well during high school. She was in the top ten, best art student, and played hockey. After school she did drama and during holidays she visited student exchange families and had pastries for breakfasts at kitchen tables in Europe.

Twelve years after matric, after she studied Law, moved to Cape Town and went into publishing, Mom told her Maria died. Twelve years after matric she went home.

AT NOON SHE walks with Mom to the graveyard. Maria is laid down where old Petrus went to rest eight years ago. Maria's friends, all older women with full bodies and round friendly faces sing praises to the ancestors and everyone joins in a harmonious celebration of life.

Where the kraal once was, now stands a burnt orange brick house. The peach trees are heavy with fruit and to the left thunder roars over the vlei. Family fills the space inside the garden wall while strangers spill out onto the farm. A cow and chickens were slaughtered, and they cook in big pots over over warm coals high flames. Children run and play while grown-ups huddle in circles.

Petrus has become a wealthy man who can afford to pay tribute to his dead mother. He paid for family, his wife's tribe and neighbours to come together. This is his way of saying thank you to Maria for sending him to school. For making him the man he is today by bringing up the child he was. He is saying thank you to her for allowing him to pursue a life. Not his dream life, but a life that afforded him the opportunity of choice.

Petrus did not do art classes or travelled to Europe. He did not go to boarding school or play provincial sport. He walked home every day after school on a dust road, and did his homework after dark next to a hearth fire. At fourteen he moved to stay with family to attend high school. Like thousands of other Black people, he shared a one room shack in Alexandra. He worked at a car wash, earning his bus ticket home every holiday where he would work in the fields with old Petrus. At the start of each new term, for five years, he went back to Alexandra.

Petrus is a monopoly, owning car dealerships and workshops in all the townships on the East Rand. His house is large, his car is German, his children attend a private school and his wife, Lerato, is a doctor. He sponsors sport keeping kids off the street and Lerato runs a community clinic.

When she studied Law, he trained as a mechanic. When she moved to Cape Town, he got a job in Duduza. When she changed careers, he saved for lobola. He excelled despite his context. He believed enough in himself not to be disillusioned while building his life on who he was as a person, not on 'what' he was expected to become.

Black eyes fix on her's. There is sadness in his smile.

"Morali'abo rōna ea molemo. Meet my wife."

Lerato reaches out smiling. "I've heard so much about you."

"I'm sorry about your mom," she says, looking past friendly hands.

She steps closer, hugs him naturally.

He pulls away slowly. Nods. He curls his arm around Lerato, pulls her into him as he turns around and walks away. Petrus looks back once.

Realising the heart is colour blind, she watches her once-a-childhood friend disappear among the strangers of the bus. He is Black and a respected township millionaire; she is White, divorced, middle class and alone.

Thirty years before she had everything and he had nothing. Thirty years later she wonders what his life and his love feels like.

The Owl from the Dark

AGA JEM JEMIMA JAPHET

THEY ARE ALL sneering and jeering – they do not understand. These people that call themselves my family know absolutely nothing about the *me* they create conferences for, and table for talk. All of them are blabbing now, and I am just sitting and watching them, thinking thoughts initiated by the happenings of *yesterday*.

It was last year when I packed my small *kaya* and moved out of the house I had been living in with my parents and seven siblings – the house that had been the entirety of my existence. It was like I was choking in that place, crowded daily by family looking just as hopeless as I felt, and going to bed just as hungry as I was. I was living with my family, but it had felt like being incarcerated with inmates, all of us guilty of some horrendous crime or other.

Now, these people are saying it is not right to leave one's home no matter what; but where do I begin explaining it to them? I do not know how to let them see that it was not the lack of space, or hunger, that drove me away, but something deeper than that; something that surpassed the needs of my body; something that had looked into my soul and seen that my spirit would soon die if I had to keep living my life like I did, no other way but *like that*.

The thing is Papa, who is shouting his lungs out now, has no clue. Mama who has cried till her throat is now grating with dryness, does not understand. For Pastor James, he knows better than to look me in the eye with this his talk of *God knows how to care for those who ask of Him, if they can just be patient*. He is murmuring his plenty words because Mama invited him to the meeting, but I am glad he knows that he is an idiot, and deserves to be burnt the way the Sodom and Gomorrah he often scares people with had been. He knows, and because I am the only one present here that knows with him, he can't talk past his throat as I deride him with my stares.

For the uncles and aunties that were invited, I care less for their speeches; neither do I give a moment's thought to the *amebo* of family, friends and neighbours that are honouring an unofficial invitation to come and hear stories – my story, that is.

I long to tell them, to make them feel what I had felt, what had been running through my mind that day last year, when I was only sixteen, and had finally made the decision that I would leave. Oh, I want to shout back at them and tell them, all of them, to shut their mouths and cover their faces in shame for us even having a cause to be holding this kind of meeting in the first place. I mean...*Why are we here? Why ever should we be here, talking of these things?*

There is so much to say, but I won't say so much as even a little. But my thoughts go back to yesterday, and I indulge my mind's flight back to it, leaving these people in my present to continue with their theories and criticisms about something they know nothing about.

PAPA WAS NEVER at home when we woke up to Mama's swipes with a wrapper, indicating our day had started. And we seldom were awake when he came back at night from wherever it was that he worked, bringing nothing home, nothing but a worn-out face, stress-induced irritation, and mounting complaints about how he would die soon from having so much to do and so little to eat. When he complained like that, my sisters and brothers, the five of them older than me, would turn their faces away, indicating that they had shut the ears of their minds from his words, and were nursing the anger in their hearts at not having enough to eat themselves.

But I was different. When Papa complained, I would re-evaluate our situation, think deeply, and try to decide if I should pity him or not. Most times, hearing things from our battered radio that we had to hit before it worked, I would almost cry for Papa.

Times were hard and money was harder to come by. We lived in the village, and food, satisfying food, was always a *luxury* because the land yielded close to nothing, and the river and creeks were dead too.

It's the oil...

Oil was destroying everything: Land, water, the air, people...it was all being sullied and swallowed up by oil. And we were swallowed up by tales of Big Men in the city, who we knew about only through our nearest-to-death radio. The woman who usually read the seven p.m. news, with the sweet voice that would resound in my head all night so I wouldn't be able to sleep till day break, made us know that people were protesting against these Big Men that stole the country's money and sent it abroad along with their children who schooled there. She would also tell of the boys from the creeks that blew up all things blow-up-able, so as to pass on a message to these Big Men in the city, and to the world at large. It was a message laden with the hunger, the deprivation, the abuse, and the anger that the region felt for being used and forgotten like a toothpick. But beyond that, I knew, even as I would ruminate upon the woman's voice at night and sometimes find my hand straying to my privates, that the message also carried with it the perplexities in my heart.

With every voice that spoke out against the greed, wickedness and corruption of our leaders, was my voice, unheard, as it may seem, telling the world that I never got to see my father happy and contented because his farm yielded nothing, his nets caught only oil films on the water, and the menial jobs he did could hardly get us through the weekly feeding.

With every pipeline blown up was the angry outburst I sent to the world, telling it of the bitter things that rose to my throat as I watched my mother's perpetually tired frame, evidence of her aging before her time, because there was so much to worry about and so little to use in fuelling the body and mind that performed the task.

With the kidnapping of foreign oil expatriates by the creek boys, I whispered to whoever was on the other side, the way I felt when I looked at my siblings and me, wondering and asking what the future held for us. None of my seniors had furthered their education beyond the free Community Secondary School they attended, and which I was now attending, and which my sister after me would attend. I often wondered what the point was in schooling at all since we

would all stop at the same spot, not able to go further, simply because we had nothing, nothing at all but oil destroying Papa and Mama and all of us – destroying everything.

So I pitied Papa at times. What could a man do when it was as if all of creation was fighting against his full destiny and that of his generations unborn?

But then, at other times, I didn't think to pity Papa. I didn't because I knew – we all knew – that it wasn't only his menial jobs that kept him out late at night. No one said anything, but we knew from the strong smell of alcohol that reeked in the house when we woke up in the morning. And then there was that thing of Mama crying when she thought we were asleep, asking God to kill the other *her* that would not leave her *poor* husband alone. Her husband was poor, alright, but his mistress was definitely poorer than him, because he seemed to *get some* from her every other day.

There were a lot of things this degraded place, this place that I call *home*, did to people. My father was so spent and frustrated by this place that only alcohol and rounds with a whore could save him from strolling into the river and never come out again. For me, I didn't know, yet, what it would take for me not to run mad with the bleakness I saw before my eyes and experienced as my life as I awoke to each stretched out, depraved day.

MY SENIOR BROTHERS and sisters were being sucked into the vagueness along with Papa.

The oldest one, my twenty-one-year old brother at the time, was usually nowhere to be found, and his name was always mentioned in things that had to do with the theft of people's yams and goats. Sometimes I wondered why he didn't put his criminal mind to better use. If he wanted to steal for a living, at least he should be doing it with a bit of prestige and worth – what exactly would the thievery of goats and yams add to his miserable life?

The twin sisters, who came after the food-thieving brother, now talked about nothing but marriage. It was clear that they had both lain to rest the passion and hope they had had of

studying Medicine. It had always been their waking desire and sleeping dreams – I know it. I recall those times when we were younger and they played ‘Nurse’ in all those childish dramas we put up that had no defined script or directing, just like the life we lived. But we didn’t know that then. We were only children, innocent and naive, and were permitted to dream dreams bigger than our heads; somehow, we managed to carry them without our necks squashing and our bodies crashing down... Until we didn’t anymore.

Timi, the boy after the twins, got a bit of sense to start learning the art of shoe-making, and before long, he had carried Tari – the boy before me – along with him. So the two of them seemed to be doing something with their lives; something very useful, at least. But they lived in this same place we all lived in, where dreams are born to die, and so the spirit of the place caught up with them. Soon, they also reeked of alcohol and started to abandon their dreams.

Things were falling apart. Everyone was trying to hold the pieces of their lives together the best way their weary bodies and souls allowed them to.

With Papa hardly around, and Mama caught up with her bouts of crying and sickness and fatigue, and my older siblings being short of giving up on life altogether, my junior sister and I were mainly forgotten and left to our own devices, or to those of our personal angels – if they too hadn’t turned their backs on us, that is. My sister was five years younger than me, and so I took responsibility for her life.

Seeing the way things were going and how we were all being sucked in by the filth and rot and poverty in the place our ancestors had come to settle, I slept at night not knowing what was in this life for me. But I knew I wanted more. I wanted to be better, to be different; different from the rest. I wanted to be better than what I had seen unfolding before my very eyes daily. So I began to read harder and to listen to the woman on the radio with keener ears. Above all, I thought deeper, asking myself questions I didn’t have answers to yet.

I knew I couldn’t sit and wait for chance to find me in this home where everything was falling apart and no one expected anything good anymore, but one particular day made the

knowledge come like an awakening. It was one night after I had listened to my woman crush on the radio, and my hand had travelled down and my body jerked and spilled, and I had gotten up to go wash my hands in our unsophisticated toilet. Somehow, I had come back to the sleeping mat angry, very angry. And I knew why – I was tired, very tired!

And then, there was also that thing I caught Mama's pastor doing to my eleven-year-old sister when she went to ask him money for food. She was hungry and there was no one at home – no one was ever home again because there was no home to call *home*. I had been taking extra classes at school because my final examinations were just days away.

When I got to the house, she wasn't there; she wasn't at neighbours' houses either, so I went looking for her. My legs somehow led me to my mother's pastor's church – why, I might never know.

I had never liked Mama's Pastor. There was always something about his eyes and speech that annoyed my spirit. So I didn't go to her church even though she always tried to turn my not going into a cold war with emotional blackmail as her major weapon.

He talked too much – that was another thing I realised about him. I hated people who believed they had all the answers for things based on just what they knew. Pastor James was fond of condemning people to hell on the pulpit in the name of preaching, probably because he felt he was the only 'holy' one.

But my mother adored him as if he were the love of her life, the kind of love she sought from her husband, most definitely. She adored him too much; she was blind to the invisible thing I didn't know how to define but felt within me against him. But her loving and trusting him so much, so that she cried her problems out to him weekly, did nothing to change the shiftiness in his eyes and awkwardness in his mannerisms that I never missed.

So when I walked into the sight of him at his small church, lifting the skirt of my perplexed-looking sister, trying to put his hand in, my heart didn't stop for too long. A roar escaped my mouth after the first shock, and he froze and jerked up from the chair he was seated

on with my sister on his lap. I wondered, as I saw fear and shame intertwine and dart around in his eyes, how stupid and hungry and shameless he was to not have found a more concealed place to demonstrate his madness. But then, he must have believed that nobody would visit the church since it was a weekday; or he had simply been possessed by one of the demons he constantly yelled at and cast out from members of his church.

He stepped back, one foot after the other, scared witless, as I advanced towards him. But, I really had no time for him and his stupid self at the time. I just took the hand of my sulking, silent sister and led her to the door.

He seemed like he wanted to say something to me before we went. I saw his lips move, but I had stared hard at him with eyes that must have spoken volumes, and his mouth clamped shut. I wondered, on the way to the house, what his words would have been – A plea? An excuse? A bargain? A spiritual threat, perhaps? But, his words didn't matter, just as he himself didn't matter. I just wished Mama would see it *and* know it.

On the day my exams finished, I packed a small bag and left the dilapidated place that had been my home for all the days of my life hitherto. I left and never looked back, except to turn into Pastor James' parsonage to threaten the living lights out of him. He must have seen seriousness in my eyes and felt guilt in his heart such that he nodded his head, rather quickly, to my truce: *He would keep his bug-ridden hands off my sister, and I would not tell the whole village that he fingered little girls for a hobby.*

I didn't know where I would go to, a boy of sixteen, just done with secondary school, but I knew that I had to go.

I also knew – from the words of my darling woman on the radio talking about the Big Men that took our money and resided in the city – that the city was a viable option, if not the only one. I would go to the place where the rich people lived. I would go and understand how the brain of the rich people worked, at least. I would go and save my life from being sucked in and under by the thing that had gripped the rest of my family and would not let go. It seemed

stupid to run away from a place one was almost becoming comfortable in, not knowing life anywhere else. Yet comfort was a luxury, one that cannot coexist with poverty.

I wanted to fly, and I surely couldn't do that, remaining on the tree I had slept in all night long while other owls, like the nocturnal beings they were created to be, had ventured out.

There was a difference I needed, something I had to do, a place I had to get to, and I could only do all this and more if I ventured out into the world in the day, forgetting – choosing to forget – the fact that I was not used to this enterprise I was venturing into; choosing to neglect the voices of ancestors and families past, telling me, reminding me, that we were never meant to come out into the light, that it was the tradition to let ourselves be sucked into the darkness – that of starvation and degradation, of poverty and nothingness, until we died, achieving nothing, being nothing, our lives gone into the blackness of the night, because it was a tradition for our lives to be alive only in darkness.

But I was tired of the tradition of darkness and how long it had to last based on someone else's timing; based on my environment's comfort with stagnancy.

I wanted to be an owl of all hours. I wanted to be free to do and be with no rules for activity or rest, but mine. I wanted to be able to take charge of the light, and also own the darkness. I wanted my being me to work for me in all the ways I wanted me to be *me*. I chose to go. *I had to go.*

SO, AFTER ONE year – a year of much learning and growth – I have come back. But none of them has thought to ask me the most important question in the past hour they have been making such a fuss. None of them has thought to ask me *why*. It isn't crossing their minds that there is a reason behind every action, every thought, and every life. They are not thinking to ask, and so I will not tell them.

But I know it in my heart that going out had been my best bet.

I had found someone to attach myself to in the city, learning to make clothes. And for one year, I have been seeing, firsthand, that not everyone in the city is a Big Man. Many of them are people me and like my family whom life gave the coarse side of the rope; but they, as opposed to us, had taken that rope and fine-tuned it into something better, something more profitable. I have seen in the past year what I knew as I left the village: *It seems easier to settle for the norm, the rubbish, the darkness that life has put you into; but it takes purpose, a reason, a need for something to come out of that place and venture into the light that nature seemed to have been keeping from you, and go ahead to take that something you have left your sleeping-tree to achieve.*

So I feel like a bird now as I watch them *jaw-jaw*: the owl, the unusual kind, most definitely. I have seen the light, and it is beautiful and foretells of more pleasant things to come.

They think I am tired and have come back to perch on a tree and wait for darkness to crawl in, but I am a different being now – a man on a mission, a mission of light, so I can see enough to attain that *something* they have been wishing for all their lives. But I am not wishing – I am *taking* – and that is the reason why I left my home in the first place.

They are still talking and jeering. The sun is starting to go down, and now I know it is time to declare my reason for coming back.

“I have come to take Boma with me to the city,” I say, raising my voice above their noise.

They all stop talking at once. You can hear a leaf flutter to the ground. And then, as suddenly as the silence had descended, it lifts again, with a flutter of questions from every angle. Pastor is silent, though. He meets my eye, and I nod. He, only, understands.

I ignore their questions and look on as the darkness – the darkness I had escaped from – gradually descends.

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