

SOMETHING IN THE WATER

NEW • SHORT • FICTION • FROM • AFRICA



edited by ANATHI • JONGILANGA • & • MOSO • SEMATLANE



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Edited by Anathi Jongilanga & Moso Sematlane

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EDITORS' NOTES

There is something to be said about water as a mystic body from where all life is born. Something to be said, too, about water as the place our souls return to after their stay on earth. In some of our cultures, specifically here in Southern Africa, water is the site through which we contact our ancestors. But perhaps to talk about water is to also talk about freedom. Expansion. Refusing to fit into any specific shape or mould.

To us as the editors, this seems to be synonymous with a queer existence. It doesn't escape our notice that, even today, a queer existence is a policed existence. A criminalised existence. One beset with questions around who we are, why we were the way we are, and all the other subtle and overt ways society uses to punish us for refusing to fit within the 'mould'. However, water, like art, is limitless. Queerness is limitless. And through art, we lay claim over our place in the world to say, we are here. We are queer. We have been here. And we will always be here. As old and as mutable as water itself.

— Moso Sematlane

*When I was a child
I grew up by the River Lea
There was something in the water
Now that something's in me*
— 'River Lea' by Adele

These lyrics took up a lot of space in my mind when I lived at home in Ngqeleni, Eastern Cape. For reasons I can only rationalise to myself now, perhaps it stuck with me for a sentimental yearning I had to be anywhere other than my home at the time. Strange, considering some of the song's lyrics. One night I thought, perhaps a little too optimistically – for I would go on to dismiss the thought the next moment – that I could curate another book of short stories from that phrase, 'something in the water'. This was more of an escape for me as I tended to turn to fiction whenever I needed a 'distraction' from my life. I relied on it as I did on water to live. It wasn't until a year later that I committed to the idea.

As time glided by, I started to have ideas of what I would like to see, to read, to produce. The kind of book that would fuse fantasy, myth, folklore, realism, all the things I was interested in and those I grew to like in fiction. And at the centre of it all, narratives about queer people in Africa – following the *Go the Way Your Blood Beats* anthology, the predecessor to this book in The Blood Beats Series. The writers that my co-editor Moso Sematlane and I ended up working with submitted to us stories that read as if they had seen my desired vision for this book.

— Anathi Jongilanga

Imibulelo, Ditebogo:

Thank you to Shannon Cupido for designing that Call for Submissions poster.

Thank you to Everyone who shared the word that we were calling for submissions for this anthology.

Thank you to all the writers who submitted their stories to this anthology, even if your work did not make it into these pages.

Thank you so much to Thakhani RayOfAfrica for the design of the cover for this work. Your generosity and kindness will never be forgotten!

Thank you to BRITTLE PAPER for publishing this work and giving us a platform to publish, once again, an anthology of this nature. Thank you Tahzeeb Akram at BRITTLE PAPER for all the work you have done on this project.

Thank you, most of all, to the writers who have worked with us through the long time it took to produce this book. It honestly would and could not exist without you and your words and your efforts and everything, everything.

Thank you to EVERYONE who was involved, directly and indirectly, in making this book a success.

Finally, *Thank you*, Reader, for Being Here.

Anathi Jongilanga & Moso Sematlane

Editors: *Something in the Water*, for The Blood Beats Series

INTRODUCTION

Anathi Jongilanga, Moso Sematlane and the contributing authors to *Something in the Water* have called us together to a celebration of creativity and survival. By deploying literature as a force to free marginalised voices and as an agency to propel those voices to their farthest reach, they demonstrate the intentionality of the responsible artist in confronting oppression and erasure. The quiet audacity of this resistance and the empathy with which the tragic lives of ordinary characters are rendered bestow on this collection of short stories an enduring luminosity.

Let us enter into the collection and experience the tenderness of this invitation. Ema Babikwa's 'Garden Made of Water' welcomes us with an affecting threnody to the unfathomable darkness of separation and the finality of death. In 'Skin,' Merle Grace reanimates that stultified desire, while also illuminating how a loveless past haunts the present and renders the reclaimed desire inadequate; in 'Blue Skies, Harmattan Rain and Warm Springs,' Abeke Bello speaks of the self as a body of water finding release by flowing into other waters; and in 'Water from a Stone,' Tebogo Manthata juxtaposes the spirituality of water with its sensuality to create a powerful love story. What Manthata does with language is as surprisingly beautiful as the tragedy of Mati and Qhawe who must choose either life or love. This is just a brief entry. Babikwa, Grace, Bello and Manthata have equally brilliant companions whose writings help to consolidate the idealism and literary merit of *Something in the Water*.

Characters in this anthology are synecdochal, in that their struggle represents the dilemma of many queer people in Africa. Some of these characters find love in the water, others lose theirs in it; but ultimately, the water accepts all of them back when everything is lost. Remember this as you celebrate with Jongilanga, Sematlane, and these writers: *Something in the Water* is not the lamentation of drowned men and women; it is rather the testimonies of drowning people who have refused to let the water have the final say.

Darlington Chibueze Anuonye,
Curator, *Selfies and Signatures*
July 2022

Garden Made of Water

Ema Babikwa

March 11th, 2015

Some things don't change. The lake still smells of fish and wet salt. I am on the boat with my father's fishermen. I know Rwagasabo and Mugabe. I have known them since I was a child.

Rwagasabo laughs a lot and Mugabe is a 'buxom' man. He smells like yam. There's another. Jean. He is much younger than the other two and he looks like he is perhaps a year or two older than I am. He knows he has nice teeth. He smiles easily. This is the first day I've met him. He said my toes look like they belong to a person who has never played football. This wasn't a compliment. He wasn't lying either. I grinned when he said this. He is funny.

I am sitting in the middle of the boat, strategically, so I can be useful when the need arises. I am not like my father. I don't think work is poetry – not this type of work anyway. But I am here. I am doing the thing his father did, and all the men before him. He thinks there's some sort of honour in that. I don't. But when I'm here, he is happy. If there's one thing I've learnt from the couple of years I've been an adult, not all joy looks the same.

I don't think the lake is the place for me.

For about two hours, I've listened to these men talk about politics. I love politics. I don't interrupt. I don't interject. I only open my mouth to laugh. Mugabe suggests that for us to see the change that this country so badly needs, civilians should bundle up parliamentarians and the cabinet of ministers and throw them into the lake – the president too. I laugh again. Such cheek. Such radicalism. Such truth! I want to tell them I hate the regime too. I don't think I trust them that much – yet.

The conversation casually shifts to the owner of the beach where we dock our fishing boats. He apparently bought his neighbour cans of paint so he could match the colour of the beach buildings. He said the neighbour's house made the neighbourhood unattractive and that it was bad for his business.

I laugh again. I am now embarrassed. I have trouble speaking to these kinds of men because I always feel like I am sitting on a secret, like they should never truly know me.

My mouth finally opens for business at the third hour.

‘He is new money. Only someone who’s recently gotten rich could do something like that. People with old money are not that classless,’ I say.

Jean turns and peers at me as if to say he is surprised I can talk. I want to throw a shoe at him. I go on to talk about the many faces of nouveau-riche behaviour, one of which is a stiff superiority complex. They nod. Their heads rise and fall like the tides. I want to go on and tell them how our country is haemorrhaging money and how better we could twirl the economy if the government cared at all. I want to have enough money of my own to haemorrhage but I am a broke boy who likes drinks with icy smoke and olives in them. What do I know about money?

It’s over now. They think I am brilliant. I still have that city undergrad scent on me. They joke about how I cannot speak the native tongue for a clean ten minutes, a trait that my family despises.

I’ve heard people say that fishermen and sailors walk with their hands, that the lake is a cruel parent who does not shelter them when it rains. I fully grasped this truth today. Right after we draw in the catch from the first net, it starts to rain. Heavily. The boat engine swallows water and has a seizure. We pick oars and paddle. I am tired and I can feel the raindrops flogging the English out of me. I lose rhythm. Jean takes the oar from me and keeps paddling. I smile. I cannot thank him because he will gloat.

I am still feeling seasick and we’ve been out of the water for about four hours now. Seasickness is a hybrid of flatulence, hunger, throwing up and the urgent need to take a shit. All the four don’t happen. So I writhe on. It is cold out here and my ears hurt. I touched a snail earlier on, one of those little lake molluscs and when I brought my fingers back to my nose, they smelled like an unwiped bum. I need a cigarette.

It is 8:00 p.m. The mosque nearby just called for the last prayer of the day. I walk back home slowly. Sauntering. Chewing a blade of grass I picked on the way. It dawns on me halfway the journey that someone could have peed on it. A man. A dog. Or a goat. The thought of a man peeing on it doesn’t shake me much.

Like fame, my name arrives home before I do. I hear Rwa Gasabo say, ‘Gaju will share his room with Jean tonight. They are the youngest here. They have no women or children. He! he! he!’ Jean didn’t close his room window when we went fishing and the rain had fallen on his bed, his carpet and the laundry he had been too lazy to fold and put away. He seems enthusiastic about us sharing my little warm and dry habitation. I shrug.

I do not know how not to be awkward. It’s my third language.

It’s an East and West Germany situation here. We dance around each other in calculated steps and the energy is coming from me and he is mirroring it and I don’t know what to do to make it stop. For about twenty minutes, the air is enveloped in the silence of a thousand starless nights.

‘Do you want to smoke?’

‘Yes,’ I reply.

I join him at the bathroom window. He lights a joint. We smoke at the window so that there are no whiffs of hemp on our clothes tomorrow. We blow the wires of tepid smoke out the metal mesh.

‘Why did you say I’ve never played football?’ I ask in an attempt to permanently exorcise the silence from our midst. ‘You think I’m not strong like you? Eh!’

‘Your feet. Your toes. They look soft. You don’t use them much. I bet you’re always wearing socks or sandals,’ he says, catching himself between belts of laughter.

Again, he is not lying. I am wearing checkered woolen socks.

He leans out the window and I can see his side profile. His shadow on the wall is a very neat silhouette. Smoke leaves his lips and decimates itself into the cold darkness of tonight. He looks at me and something in me moves. My belly gets warm.

‘Well, I am going to sleep on the side of the bed that is closer to the door.’

‘Okay.’ I shrug lightly. I loathe the stunted stylistics of my communication. I loathe my monotonous body language and limited reactions to all things grand and small. I hate the invisible chains on my hands, eyes, lips and legs. I hate that I am too careful. When I say ‘Okay’ I mean, ‘Well, sure, you can sleep on whichever side of the bed you like. Just don’t snore or hog the blanket.’

He undresses and I avert my eyes. I hear the duvet fall onto his body. He is in bed now. I turn the light off and slide in next to him, fully clothed. I face the ceiling for about three minutes. He turns to

face me. Something in me twitches. He isn't about to sleep at all. I know this because his breaths have gotten shorter and very controlled. He is watching me. He drags himself across the sheets towards me. I don't move. His left backhand grazes against my chest and he finds my nipple. My skin becomes a village of small riots under the shirt I refused to take off. I turn and face him and my lips meet his.

'Are you..?'

He looks me in the eye. His face is gleaming in the dark and his mouth too heavy to speak.

He looks me in the eye and I know.

Tomorrow I will be a cathedral of regrets.

I fall asleep.

November 5th, 2017

Everything has a story on this beach. Its lingering smell of wet salt; the smell of fish wafting in the air, tobacco. My feet feeling the sand and the sand holding out her hands to feel me back.

What is the difference between promises and dreams? I say it is the rate at which they oxidise. A mouth that was once everything holy now lies forever shut.

'When did you know?'

I want to say I always knew. I want to say the other boys teased me in primary school because my voice was a little higher than everyone else's. I want to say I always held my towel up at my chest in boarding school as if to keep my 'bust' intact. Before adolescence, before I got a beard, I heard my father tell his friends that I looked like my mother when she was younger.

I want to say I lisp when I drink liquor and that I talk with my hands when I am angry. I want to tell him I make better millet bread and beef stew than any woman I've ever met. I want to tell him I've always been unusual.

I want to tell him my relationship with boys has always been turbulent, formless and powerful, like water. I want to tell him I close my eyes and think about boys when I'm with my girlfriend so I can ejaculate. I want to tell him he is the second man I've done this with and my soul is somersaulting at the very center of my being.

He asked when I knew. I told him I had known for only about a month.

Today is one of the dead things that the lake coughs up. I want to bite into a lemon. I don't want to be here. I really wish I was someplace else. I don't want to see anyone. Some pain is sacred. It is not to be shared. It is not to be halved. Only felt. Alone. Only kept. In the deepest darkest places where you keep god.

My hair is breaking today like a sudden onset of baldness, like an aggressive case of alopecia. I remember going to the local tavern with him. Jean. I recall in explicit detail the three evenings we skipped the promo meal and just drank beer. I hate beer. I hate the foam and the lazy bubbles. Its indecisiveness on whether to fizz or just sting like a shot of vodka. We skipped the meal in anticipation of how great the night would be. Oh the stories my body could tell! Him lying on his back and me standing over him. Slowly falling. Intertwining. Raw passion laced with sticky flesh.

There were nights I didn't want him inside of me or myself inside of him. All I wanted was to hold him so close that our souls would touch. I wanted him to be the thing that takes me to war. The thing that ends me.

I remember March, April, May and June. Moments that my mind has forever *italicised*.

I watched life whirl us in different directions in the months that followed. I watched life twiddle us between its thumbs like a toddler plays with toys. I taught myself to need him less. I bet he taught himself to not desire. To not feel. So we became two poles at opposite ends of a goal post buttressed into the ground by concrete. So close and so tragically distant.

Today is a story I don't like. I am exhuming things long buried with no idea where I'm going to put them. No final resting place. No home.

Have you ever buried someone you've had sex with? Is this something I should tell a priest? Something I should confess?

Your nine-month-old son looks just like you. His mother is crying. He is baring his gums. His baby nose is neatly sculpted. Like yours. I wonder if he will be a keeper of secrets, like you.

Sighs are answers too. They are answers to spiritual questions for which the mouth has no language. I know that now.

I got a big boy job, Jean, and I don't smell like fish anymore. I hate everyone I work with. I think they hate me too but they can't get rid of me. I got my degree and the only thing standing between me and my MA is nine more months and two installed payments to NAF Bank. I stay alone in an apartment in the suburbs that I keep so clean I can eat my meals off the kitchen floor. I come back home at 6 p.m., drink wine out of the bottle and watch Al Jazeera. The cleaning lady comes in and does the laundry on Fridays, wipes the place clean and takes out the rancid vegetables from the fridge. On the weekends when I have enough energy for social recreation, I call a couple of friends over and we grill meats in my oven.

The men come and go. The men come and go because they are rivers. You can't make them flow upwards. You can't make them flow towards you. They are rivers. They only know how to flow. And I am lonely. I leave all the lights on. I've become those people that cuddle cushions and accolades. Success is a cold bedfellow. The only thing at my place that's permanent is the Pinterest-inspired living room and the white walls that have never heard you laugh.

Did you ever feel chewed and spat out, Jean Pierre Kabaya? Disposable? Did you ever feel that I did less than I should have done? That I was not enough? That it was selfish of me to pick up my life and let you keep up yours? Because I feel that way now and have felt so many times before.

Three months are one too many. A year is an eternity. Two could be one too few. What is time? Why do you mean this much to me when I was with you for so little time? What would it mean if I went out now, collected all the clocks in the world and sunk them? Nothing. No one here knows me well enough to commiserate so I'm inwardly combusting. How many times did you pick the phone to call me and then put it back down? I did it once because I didn't know what to tell you and it was ten to midnight. No one picks their phone at that time.

You have a child. A whole toothless mewling child and a big bosomed woman. Fuck you Jean Pierre Kabaya! I'll never have that. I know. I'm angry and don't know who to rip

apart. I am overwhelmed by the sum of things I want but will never have, do or say. What are promises? What are dreams?

In the culture of my people, we wash our dead to show our last respects. It's our sacred homage before the priests sprinkle Latin and Holy Water to drive spirits out of the land of the living.

Jean is naked.

He is still uncircumcised.

Some things don't change. I am standing over him – again.

Blue Skies, Harmattan Rain and Warm Springs

Abeke Bello

‘Blue feels like a warm hug.’

This is what Sunday tells me on a hot afternoon in my thirteenth year, or what I think Sunday says as his words get lost in the sound of rusty aeroplane engines roaring in the afternoon skies above.

‘Ileri, are you listening?’ I feel him studying me, probably wondering where my mind has wandered again. So, I turn to face Sunday for the first time that afternoon, and I watch his face break out into the widest smile that welcomes me home after what seems like a long time away. I smile in return – a small act of kindness, even though what I really want to know is how one could *feel* a colour. His words seem random, but then again, it’s Sunday. Everything about Sunday is random, from the mismatched socks on his feet, to his half-bitten fingernails, to the missing button on his shirt’s collar.

He stretches out his right palm and reveals four interlocked wraps of Baba Dudu – a street candy made of coconut milk and sugar. I decline reluctantly, even though I can feel my tongue begin to water. Sunday tears out a wrap and pushes it into my fist, which I toss happily into my mouth, savouring the bursts of flavour and sweetness happening at the back of my mouth.

‘I just don’t see why blue should symbolize cold. Who says blue has to be cold?’ Sunday continues, tossing the plastic bag filled with candy up in the air and catches it right before it lands on his chest. We’re lying down on the open field that lies across the intersection of our separate neighbourhoods – a place where our worlds collide and diverge at the same time. I swallow and immediately regret the bitter-sweet aftertaste the candy leaves in my mouth.

‘The ocean,’ I mutter.

I’m thirteen and Sunday is fourteen, but when we lie here together every Saturday afternoon, we’re suspended in time where age and class don’t matter, and infinity feels within our reach for a short while.

‘Look at you,’ Sunday laughs. ‘What colour is the water that flows under the Third Mainland Bridge? Is that what you call blue?’

‘No, but that’s a lagoon. The ocean we see on TV—’

‘Tah! Don’t tell me that nonsense. Look, are Iya Ashabi’s oranges the same colour as the oranges you see on TV? Have I taught you nothing?’

He shakes his head and smacks the back of my palm teasingly, then he rubs the same spot affectionately, fearful he might have caused me the slightest pain or distress. I smile inwardly and pull my hand away abruptly. Sunday shrugs and turns his head to the sky.

‘Ileri, look up at the sky. Do you see that? That is blue and it’s something we can see with our koro-koro eyes, don’t you think?’

‘Hm.’

‘How does it make you feel?’

I look up at the sky and watch the clouds sail by, almost in sync and at peace with one another. I see the sun and how its rays bounce off Sunday’s newly shaven head like the bonnet of my father’s brand-new Corolla, its glossy black polish twinkling like an ocean of stars bearing good tidings. Sunday’s words reverberate at the back of my head, so I stare at the blue in the sky but can only think about the vast emptiness it promises every day, especially on the days the blue turns grey and the clouds become heavy with rain. Maybe grey embodies coldness, and blue merely serves as a prelude for the soulless void that is grey.

‘Ileri?’

‘I see it calling me home.’ My eyes are still focused on the clear blue skies, but I feel the smile on Sunday’s face fade away, almost as quickly as it spreads across his face.

‘Tah! You and your nonsense talk. Speaking of home, how far Hauwa?’ Sunday says as he leans forward to brush the dirt off his brown sandals. I shrug and Sunday nods as he tosses the last ball of Baba Dudu into his mouth.

Hauwa is new. Our friendship is in its early stages, and even though there’s still a lot of distrust on the surface, I’m still protective of her. I’m not ready to let either of them into the separate worlds I’d created for them. Sunday continues to nod beside me, and I wonder if he can read my thoughts and

whether he's nodding in agreement, or at the gushes of sweetness exploding at the back of his throat. He shoots his head back and swings his thigh back and forth to a silent rhythm. I arrive at my answer.

The week after Sunday moved out of my neighbourhood, Hauwa moved into the house next door with her family. It was a Saturday evening. I was moody and in need of a playmate when I found Hauwa hiding behind the water tank in our compound. She'd scaled the fence separating our houses to retrieve her little brother's football and panicked when she'd heard our backdoor swing open. I'd heard her loud breathing from behind the tank and always one to have the upper hand, she'd sprung upon me instead, causing me to scream.

'You seem perplexed. Did I use that word right? Perplexed?' Hauwa said after I'd failed to mask the horror and irritation on my face.

'Depends on if you think I look puzzled. Sorry, confused.'

'Oh no, that's not it. Well, you're squeezing your face like soaked bread. Who beat you?'

She'd eyed me cautiously, shoving the ball between her elbow and waist, then my mother's high-pitched voice had called out from the kitchen window.

'Mothers.' She chuckled, stretching out her hand. 'I'm Hauwa and I live next door. You don't have to tell me your name now, I'll be back to play with you tomorrow.'

The sunlight had bounced off the tight coils on Hauwa's head at that moment, and something about the warmth in her gap-toothed smile or the soft brown in her eyes made me shake her hand without a word. Hauwa returned the next day, as promised, and has continued to return every day since.

Lying here beside Sunday, I wish I could recall the first day we met. I've known him since I was old enough to run around the neighbourhood chasing tadpoles in the gutters, which are some of my earliest memories of him, but I still have no recollection of the moment Sunday first stepped into my life. He's just always been there, like how you don't ever wonder about the exact moment your siblings

were born, because you go about life assuming they've always existed, shaping your experiences around their presence, without questioning the adjustments you had to make along the way.

I think of Sunday and me as one flesh, even though we live in separate homes. It was an unholy circumcision when he moved away; it was the first time I had to consider our separateness as an option.



Sunday and I meet at the open field every Saturday afternoon, and the more time we spend apart, the more rattled I become by Sunday's boyish charm which manifests itself in different ways every week. He's in his fifteenth year now, and I'm slowly beginning to lose sight of the boy who stayed by my side as we gallivanted around my neighbourhood streets, hopping over large stones and small puddles, sharing pieces of freshly fried Akara wrapped in old newspapers while we chased stray dogs away together.

Every time Sunday flashes a smile in my direction now, with perfectly straight white teeth, I remember his red Arsenal jersey billowing in the breeze like a flag every time his younger self had run towards my house, calling me out to play like some clarion call.

With memories like this in mind, I wonder if shame can ever survive in this space we've created. Such doubts had previously been cast aside in my eighth year when Sunday hadn't recoiled when I told him about my older sister's first period. I'd narrated, in detail, how I'd been the first person to spot the blood-stained wrapper tied loosely around my sister's waist, how she'd panicked, rolled the wrapper into a ball and tossed it under her pillow. I'd even used a stick to trace out the shape of the bright red stain on her pink underwear on the sand, waiting for Sunday to recoil or cringe, but he'd watched eagerly, anticipating the rest of the story. So, I told him about how horrified my sister had been when the blood trickled down her legs to the terrazzo, fleeing to the bathroom where she'd tried to scrub it away. I'd explained that at the end, when my mother found the stained wrapper, she'd mumbled something about my sister becoming a woman.

'Promise me you won't become a woman until I'm ready,' Sunday says to me one afternoon as we hide from the sun under the shade of an almond tree.

‘Ready for what?’ I laugh, albeit nervously, waiting for Sunday to laugh along and let me in on the joke. Instead, he faces me with an earnest, pleading look in his eyes and I wonder if Sunday has begun to explore the gender dynamics of our friendship, seeing me more than what I’ve known myself to be: his friend.

It dawns on me that Sunday isn’t oblivious to the changes my body is going through and I instinctively cross my arms against the tender buds on my chest. Feeling defensive about being seen.

‘Tah! Till I’m ready na.’ Sunday laughs eventually, dusting his palms against his trousers before reaching into a plastic bag of mangoes. He hands over a freshly rinsed mango to me and looks away immediately. It’s the first time I feel some type of distance between us in his presence.



Somewhere between my fifteenth and sixteenth year, Sunday and I’s weekly meetings become infrequent. Our Saturdays are replaced with Sunday’s extra lessons, while I spend my slow afternoons lying beside Hauwa on an old mattress, flipping through pages of old, tattered copies of Archie comics and gossiping about our classmates. Somehow, my patience for performative studying has eroded over the years. The more my parents worked hard to afford private tutors to help my dwindling grades, the less motivated I felt to do better at my studies. University doesn’t interest me in the same way as it does for Sunday. My ever-playful Sunday has suddenly become obsessed with the idea of becoming an aeronautic engineer, and I secretly envy his drive and ambition despite the reality of his single mother’s financial hardships.

I want to say that Sunday withdrew first by prioritising his studies over me, but the truth is I also prefer being in Hauwa’s company. It’s easier wading through the murky waters of adolescence knowing Hauwa is just a fence away, and quite frankly, I enjoy the experience of actively learning about another person’s fears and desires, and I know the exact moment when the lines on Hauwa’s face – the heaviness and distance in her eyes – started to speak a language only I could understand.

This doesn’t mean that Sunday is out of the picture. We both have mobile phones now, and I know he’s a text away. We try to speak on Friday nights, when Sunday calls at midnight, when network charges are free, and we speak in hushed voices until 4 a.m., right before call charges resume. But even

during these phone calls, there are things I share with Hauwa that I cannot share with Sunday, like when Rotimi, the head boy at my school, kissed me for the first time. It was Hauwa I'd run to and spilt all the dirty things I'd felt when his hands cupped my breasts, and she'd held my hands in solidarity in return, spilling the different times and ways she'd felt those same things too. It was Hauwa who explained the workings of my own body to me, held up a mirror and made me feel safe to become acquainted with myself.

These are things I can never tell Sunday and when Rotimi breaks my heart a few months later, it's Hauwa who wipes away my tears and steals his class notes a week to his final exams, dumping them in the canal beside our school fence.

'I'm sorry I haven't called in a while.'

It's raining heavily outside, even though we're at the beginning of the harmattan season. Sunday's end of the line keeps breaking, but he manages to tell me that he just finished writing his JAMB exams.

'How was it?' I ask. His apology means nothing because I know he'll stay away again. I'm not sure of the exact moment when Sunday decided that I was a distraction, and I try not to dwell on it too much because it only breeds resentment.

'You know.'

I nod, even though Sunday cannot see me. There's no electricity and I'm alone in the house. My parents are out of town to visit my grandparents in Ekiti. Hauwa is preoccupied with errands, so I'm sprawled naked on the bare mattress in my room, listening to the sound of harmattan rain outside my bedroom window, trying to match my breathing to the sound of Sunday's heavy breathing on the other end of the call. This disconcerting stillness that comes with being by my lonesome feels unfamiliar.

'Sunday, do you want to come over?'

Sunday arrives drenched and barefoot, with his trousers rolled up to his knees and his soaked shoes in hand. The minute he steps into my living room, he lets out his famous loud laugh that's as quick and sharp as lightning, the one I realise instantly that I've missed so much. He hasn't been inside my house since he moved away. Back then, he'd felt uncomfortable being in my father's presence, not used to having a domineering male figure lurking around in domestic settings.

'It still looks the same.' He runs his fingers over my family pictures and picks up a primary school class portrait of me. He holds it up to my face and cheers: 'There she is. That's my girl.' I smack the picture frame away, placing it back on the mantel and adjusting the figurines beside it.

'Do you need a change of clothes?' I'm unable to get over the sound of water dripping from his clothes onto the tiles. He offers an apologetic nod and I fetch a newly laundered t-shirt and pair of shorts from my father's wardrobe. When I try to direct him to the guest bathroom, Sunday quickly reminds me that he's no stranger to my house.

He returns looking like a ray of sunshine in my father's bright yellow t-shirt and khaki shorts. I take the wet clothes from him and air them out on the veranda. When I return, I find Sunday sitting down cross-legged on my living room floor going through my father's vinyl collection. He holds out an old Lionel Richie record that my father used to play and without skipping a beat, Sunday bellows out a tone-deaf rendition of 'Ballerina Girl', a song my father loved and we both hated as children. He closes his eyes, trying to recall the lyrics with all seriousness, and it makes me draw inwards and burst into belly-deep laughter that causes tears to stroll down my cheeks. I open my eyes when Sunday stops singing to find him inches away from my face, wiping away my tears with his thumb. It's the closest we've been in months. I lean into his touch, missing the other half of me in a way I hadn't felt in years.

'I'm sorry I haven't been here. There's so much I've missed out on.'

I say nothing, staring into his eyes wondering if he can see through me and tell the ways in which I've changed. I stare at the goatee on his chin, which has gotten fuller since the last time I saw him and for the first time, I feel my eyes tracing the outlines of his bow-shaped lips. Somehow, I lean in and kiss Sunday, waiting for his lips to part and usher a way in for our sparks to fly, but he remains still. Feeling embarrassed, I pull away quickly, jumping to my feet.

‘I don’t know why I did that,’ I say nervously, avoiding his eyes. His lips move to say something, but the words never come. Sunday leaves shortly after and I barely say goodbye to him, feeling rejected and ashamed. I don’t realise that he’s left in my father’s clothes.

‘He rejected me.’

I patiently wait for Hauwa’s usual reassurance, but she remains silent, slicing plantain into a bowl. We’re standing alone in her family’s stuffy kitchen as she prepares dinner while her mother sleeps off a headache. Her little brothers are outside playing football in the backyard, while the sound of the evening news her father is watching travels into the kitchen from the living room.

‘Hauwa, what do I do? Sunday might never speak to me again.’ I groan, lighting the stove and placing a thickly greased frying pan over the naked flame. Hauwa sprinkles a pinch of salt into the bowl of plantain and silently shakes it around.

‘Hauwa.’

‘What, Ileri?’ She slams the bowl on the kitchen counter. ‘What do you want me to say? You were right to kiss him, and he was wrong to reject you?’ She sets it aside to spoon white rice from a pot into a red cooler. I want to say yes because I need to know that I was the one who was wronged.

‘Why does it even matter?’ Hauwa says after a while, setting aside the cooler and scraping away burnt rice into a trash bag. The oil begins to sizzle in the pan and Hauwa moves towards it, shoving me aside.

‘I just don’t want to lose him.’

‘Again, why does that matter?’ She pours the plantain into the pan and I watch its yellow flesh sink as a pool of oil surrounds its head.

‘Do you love him?’

‘What type of question is that?’

‘Do you love him, Ileri?’ She faces me for the first time since I told her about the kiss and there’s a pinched look on her face. I shake my head and let out a nervous laugh.

‘I’m not even going to answer that. It’s like asking if I love you.’

‘Well, do you?’

‘Do I what? Love you or Sunday?’

‘Never mind.’ She turns her back to me and I can’t shake off the feeling that she wanted to say more, and my response had disappointed her.

One can say I split myself into two, sharing only the best versions of myself that I know they can both appreciate individually, which may be why I continue to keep them apart. Hauwa’s question makes me realize that neither of them can know the depth of our separate connections because I’d never disclosed enough information for one to feel like a threat to the other, despite replacing one with the other at different points in my life in the past few years.

My grandfather passes away a few weeks later and I grow numb. Hauwa asks if I want to talk about it and I say no, so we don’t talk about it. Sunday still calls, and thankfully never mentions that rainy afternoon. I don’t inform Sunday of my grandfather’s passing, even when he calls to talk about some movie he recently downloaded, I just listen. I’m beginning to resent him for not picking up on my pain the same way Hauwa has on numerous occasions. It’s a cruel thing because I know Hauwa’s proximity gives her an advantage; but if Sunday and I are truly one flesh, why can’t he sense that his other half is in pain?

I finally shed weeks-old tears at my grandfather’s funeral – when I hear my grandmother call him by his first name for the first time as she presses the side of her face to his coffin at his lying-in-state. Her voice, heavy with sorrow and age, echoes through our family home as she sings his name – a name she’d thoughtlessly failed to call upon for sixty-five years – in a way that pleads for her worship to usher him peacefully into the afterlife.

‘My grandmother’s feet are the size of melons now,’ I say to Hauwa as we trot down the creaky wooden bridge together, holding hands. I’d just finished recounting the story of my grandmother’s difficult journey to my grandfather’s grave with her weak knees, ignoring the warnings and pleas from

her children; how she'd leaned onto her walking stick up the steep hills until she stood over his grave, delivering a loud and final chorus that had ended in my grandfather's name.

We're at the Ikogosi Warm Springs Resort which is half an hour away from my grandfather's compound. Hauwa gives my hand a reassuring squeeze and points at a monkey climbing a nearby tree. It gets quiet as we move further along the bridge except for the sound of the warm springs rushing underneath and leaves rustling above. The smell of wet grass and damp earth fills the air as Hauwa lets go of my hand to pluck a leaf from a nearby branch.

She waves the loose leaf in the air and twirls in circles, embodying our reality.

'Hauwa, be careful. These wooden platforms aren't sturdy.'

'You and your big words. Who says 'sturdy'? I'm sure you aren't even using that word right.' We're approaching the foot of the bridge and Hauwa is humming the tune of a popular hit song that I feel too tired to remember.

'You know my mother and her siblings are tearing each other apart in my grandfather's living room right now about whose guest didn't get enough food and drinks at the funeral—'

'Ileri, there's a reason why I came to get you out of that place. Forget about them for a minute. You're with me,' Hauwa hisses, kicking her white plimsolls off her feet. She adjusts the straps on her crossbody bag and hops off the wooden platform into the water. 'It's so cold.' She flashes a beckoning smile in my direction. 'Don't just stand there, join me!'

I kick off my sandals and join her in the water. We're on the cold end of the springs and marvel at the cool feel of stones and sand under our toes. We follow the direction of the water flow until we're standing in front of a large rock that indicates the meeting point of the cold and warm springs. The water grows warmer and we squeal in unison, twinkling our brightly painted toes – a matching set of white varnish under the clear water as we dig our soles deeper into the sand, stretching our arms wide as we throw our heads back and embrace the sun.

With Hauwa by my side, I'm allowed, for the first time since I arrived in my hometown, to simply *be* – in all my self-absorbed and grief-drunken glory. A kindness my family is yet to show me as they channel all their emotions into anger, declaring who and how to mourn, making themselves the center of my grandfather's closing chapter.

It seems like a lifetime ago since Hauwa found me bawling my eyes outside my family compound, ugly tears and snot running over my most-expensive lace as I mourned my grandfather. I thought I'd run out of tears after the funeral, but I'd unexpectedly burst into tears when my uncles got into a tussle over property ownership and I watched my grandmother hurriedly throw her fragile figure in-between them before one could smash an empty glass bottle on the other. Hauwa had missed the funeral but arrived just in time to find me outside, holding onto a damp handkerchief for dear life. She'd thrown her hands around me and welcomed the raging storm within me. I'd crumbled in her arms, and she'd held me close until I put myself together again.

We'd lain together after, and she'd held me the same way we'd held each other on many nights before when boys troubled and threatened our inner sanctuaries and we'd held each other until we couldn't tell the difference between our skins and pain. It had been different this time around, because while in her arms, I couldn't stop thinking about the smell of her soap, and how soft her skin felt, and how warm it felt pressed against mine. I'd felt her eyes on me in the darkness and it was almost effortless the way our lips found each other. Hauwa's touch had thrown me into pits of pleasure that I hadn't known were possible and even when I couldn't help the tears from falling, Hauwa had kissed it all away as she worked her way through my body and I finally understood what it meant to call someone else's name as a kind of worship to both yourself, and them.

We run wild through the resort with our shoes in hand, splashing water at each other till our dresses get soaked. Hauwa holds my braids as I lean forward to drink from the spring pouring off the moss-covered rocks. We sit together holding hands and try to immortalise this moment in our minds.

'This is our debt to our ancestors,' Hauwa says as she kisses the back of my hand.

'Hauwa and Ileri. I like it.' She whispers again to herself as if it's still being written in the sands of time and if washed away too quickly by the tempestuous tides of life, we would be doomed to a life of unending sadness without each other.

After the weekend in Ekiti, Hauwa and I return quietly to our daily routine until our night together slowly begins to feel like a distant dream. On some nights, I touch myself to thoughts of kissing Hauwa again and having her gasp for air under my touch. These thoughts consume me to the point that I grow frustrated one evening, while we're studying together. I roll over on my back and let out a loud sigh.

'Nice try. We still have one more year of past questions to get through,' Hauwa says. Just like Sunday, Hauwa has begun to preoccupy herself with thoughts of university and dreams of becoming a pharmacist. We're both approaching our seventeenth year.

'Hauwa.'

'Ma?'

'Do you think about...?' I turn over to look at her, but her head is buried behind the tall past questions' booklet.

'Hauwa.'

She slams the booklet shut and crawls away to a corner, wrapping her arms around her knees with a cloud of guilt shading her face.

'I want to do it again,' I say as I sit up, folding my legs together to the side, and watch her face battle through guilt, fear and desire all at once. After a while, she lowers her head and looks down at her feet. I crawl towards her and wrap my hands around her ankles.

'There's no going back from there,' Hauwa whispers.

'I know.'

'I got scared when I got home. Just imagine if someone had seen us.'

Her voice trails off as she stares out the window, breathing heavily. I kiss her feet and listen to the rhythm of her breathing get steady. When I look up, her eyes are imploring and I move to kiss her, which she meets halfway. It's soft and sweet like the last time, but I can taste her hesitation this time around. Her father's voice calls out from outside her bedroom window then, and Hauwa pushes me away instantly. We hadn't heard his car pull up to their compound, and now he is calling for Hauwa to fetch his briefcase from the car.

‘Get away from me. I can’t do this.’ Hauwa jumps to her feet, her usual self-assured nature disintegrating before my eyes. Before she steps out of her room, Hauwa shoots me a look that is both apologetic and accusatory. I feel unclean for the first time.

Sunday and I kissed, and he rejected me.

Hauwa and I kissed, and it was beautiful.

Hauwa and I kissed again, and it was shameful.

These three sentences dance around my head for weeks. Hauwa and I have decided never to speak again about what we did and slowly, Hauwa and I begin to speak even less until we don’t speak at all.

Sunday is in his eighteenth year when he gets into the University of Lagos. He still calls every week and has invited me to watch a movie with him at the new cinema near his campus.

He arrives wearing my father’s yellow t-shirt from a year ago as his okada rider pulls up to the cinema gates. He looks skinnier than I remember, the contours on his face sharper and harsher, and there are tufts of hair growing along his jawline to keep his goatee company.

He pulls me in for a tight hug and talks about how much he’s missed my face. After the movie, we go out for shawarma and ice cream where we talk about his campus life.

‘Imagine both of us attending the same campus. Together again, like old times,’ Sunday says after a while.

We’re sitting on a bench outside the shawarma place as the rush hour traffic builds up a few feet away from us. We’d never gotten the opportunity to go to the same school and it had never truly mattered until Hauwa came into the picture when it became a fact that Hauwa and I would end up at the same university, and it hadn’t occurred to me until this moment that Sunday and I could also go to the same university.

‘How’s that your friend, Hauwa?’ The question throws me off guard because Sunday hasn’t said her name in years. I bow my head momentarily and look away. He nods because my silence isn’t unusual.

Many things have gone unspoken between us, and our friendship has survived despite this. We welcome the silence together because we recognise that we both have a choice on when and how we decide to share information. We make peace with the silence, knowing that those unspoken words will run like a fountain one day and we’ll welcome them, filling and pouring them out of each other at the same time. We’ll make space for it between us, letting it walk the earth for a short time, along with whatever pain and shame that comes along with it until it has its fill, and then swallow it whole; letting our secrets merge into one and doing the kind job of forgiving each other when we fail to forgive ourselves.

The only problem in this scenario is that I know Hauwa is one secret that Sunday will never forgive me for.

Sunday asks me to return during Easter weekend so he can show me around his campus. The campus is surprisingly quiet, and he explains that most students went home for the weekend, including his roommates. His room smells like him but compounded by the smell of many others, from their musty clothes to their cheap aftershave and smelly shoes.

‘I’m hoping to get an apartment off-campus,’ he says as I flip through the James Patterson novel on his bed. ‘That way, if you get tired of your roommates, you can always find a place to run to.’ Sunday squats in front of me and takes my hand in his, placing his other hand over mine as he looks sincerely into my eyes.

‘Look Ileri, I think we’re both old enough to make this work now.’

‘I don’t understand.’

He laughs and cups my cheeks in his palms, which feel rough against my skin and I wonder if it felt this way when last we were together. He’s the one who leans in and kisses me this time around. It’s slow and slobbery at first, not quite like my kiss with Hauwa, which had been soft and tender; and in

Sunday's arms, I can only think of the scent of Hauwa's strawberry-flavoured lip balm. Sunday's kiss grows urgent as our tongues tug at each other, but his hands remain limp at my waist, holding on like I'm a delicate flower in his palms.

The problem is: I want more. I want recompense for the humiliation he and Hauwa put me through.

I feel like they're both at different ends of a string tugging me in different directions over a bed of hot coal. I want to let go of it all, and if possible, wash my shame away in his mouth. I run my hands down his torso until I feel the length of his cock through his jeans.

Sunday moans then jerks away, shaking his head.

'We'll be going too fast,' he says, panting heavily. I try to make out his words, but I can only picture myself being driven off a cliff of desperation if Sunday rejects me once more. I try to lean in again, but he pulls away, rising to his feet. 'If we are going to do this, we have to do this right.' His oversized shirt swishes as he wades around the room and I'm beginning to feel like I'm the problem, mixing these confusing emotions with friendship. The moment is reminiscent of the day Hauwa walked out on me. I don't feel the tears wetting my cheeks until Sunday raises an alarm.

'No, no, please don't cry.'

'Why don't you want me?'

'I do.'

'Then why won't you have me?'

'Remember my promise?'

'What promise?'

'About when I'm ready. It probably didn't seem like it, but I intended for it to be a serious proposal at the time.'

'You were 15.'

Sunday looks at me the same way he'd looked at me that day in the open field three years ago, like some delicate flower – a fragile thing he could break easily. An empty feeling settles in my chest as he talks about not wanting to corrupt my mind; hence why he kept pulling away. In his eyes, I was still that child lying by his side under the sun, eating Baba Dudu and talking about colours.

‘By the way, where did you learn how to do that?’ He’s sitting beside me and there’s a curious but alarmed look in his eyes. He wants to know how I knew what to reach for. How can a child like me possibly know what a man’s body needs? I respond with a kiss instead.

‘I hope I haven’t done anything wrong.’ He breaks away and I kiss him again. Urgently.

Sunday caves in and this time around, I try to feign timidity and innocence when he reaches for the buttons on my shirt. I’d always thought of myself and Sunday as one flesh, but on this lazy Saturday afternoon in April, I feel nothing but how distinct and alien our skins felt against one another. Every time a semblance of a spark lights up between us, it dies as quickly as it came. Somehow, his hold feels like I’m being dragged down to the ocean floor, fighting for air but floating at the same time, waiting for the waves to wash me ashore.

Sunday is inside me – the closest we’ve ever been, but every part of me wants to shed this flesh away and call out her name. So, I lie there passive, thinking only of Hauwa and me standing on the sands of time.

Water from a Stone

Tebogo Manthata

I haven't known him all my life but it feels like he's always been there. Japanese folklore speaks of the red string of fate, a primordial thread that connects the lives of each and every one of us and pulls those whose strings are connected, those who are destined to meet, slowly but surely to one another. When I regard him now, I feel that string tug stubbornly, not to be ignored. His dark brown eyes, half-lidded from exhaustion, are full of life. Fueled by the adrenaline and desperation that adorns us as we crouch, hidden in the shadows behind a low face brick wall at a quiet and hostile intersection. As his eyes peer out above the wall, they are illuminated by the buzzing streetlight above. My heart flutters.

Even in this darkest of times and at his lowest, through the desperation and adrenaline, behind the abrasive layers formed by the many hardships he has faced in his young life – I see right beneath the surface. He lights up with the same warmth, joy, ambition and unrelenting spirit I saw in him when we met all those years ago. The string pulls tighter. I shift in place from the discomfort caused by my thoughts and ruffle some of the dead leaves beneath my feet. He gives me a sharp look and shushes me.

'Someone's coming,' he whispers, his back muscles rippling in anticipation through his t-shirt like a tiger preparing to pounce on its prey. A small white Toyota Hilux four-seater bakkie with bright LED headlights slowly approaches the intersection – solid gold on the black market. The driver, observable from our look-out spot behind the wall, is a short, stocky old man with hunched shoulders and an overgrown, grey beard. Precariously on the tip of his nose, a pair of small rectangular spectacles perches and on his trembling wrist a set of ivory bracelets dangle.

Apprehension pulses through my body. I place a tentative hand on my companion's eager shoulder. 'Maybe we should let this one go, jo.'

He scoffs and shakes my hand off. 'Hayi man. It's late Mati. We've been tailing this one all day.' His rugged features contort in a scowl. 'This might be our last chance.' Laser focused, he gives his signal.

Across the street our two accomplices, seeming to appear out of nowhere but at once seeming to have been there all along, pace steadily towards the car from behind, like lions descending on a gazelle. The first, tall and lanky with a torn leather jacket, jumps in front of the bakkie and before the driver has a chance to respond the second, shorter and broader with a red bucket hat balanced loosely on his bald head, brandishes a gun and points it into the car with the ease and indifference of someone holding a pencil. The driver panics, paralysed by shock.

Qhawe has vanished from my side and opened the passenger's door to enter the white bakkie, grabbing the old man's trembling hand. I follow tentatively in his wake, viewing the scene now framed within the ajar passenger's door from my new spot beside the still humming car. Qhawe doesn't need a gun nor to resort to violence. The hostility of the situation is clear to all parties, an ancient language, a primeval unwritten scripture engraved in all our subconscious and by which we must all abide. It's in how the ants know when rain is coming, how black lace weaver spider hatchlings know that they must eat their own mother's body for sustenance and how this unsuspecting man who has found himself cornered at a deserted intersection like in the many stories he may have heard from friends and family and probably never imagined would befall him, knows what is coming to him now. Once the initial fight-or-flight instinct has subsided, without the slightest utterance or explanation the man is resigned to his fate.

He raises his hands in surrender and, like a dance, Qhawe from the passenger's seat, turns the car off and pulls the keys from the ignition, his disarming glare never leaving the old man's stricken doe eyes, daring him to try something. Qhawe has signed the necessary paperwork now and the bakkie belongs to him. With the confidence of a new car owner he waves his wrist. 'Vaya baba, let's go, get in the back,' he barks in his deep voice. The man obliges, looking shocked to have heard a human voice come out of any of us. I reach over and grab his cell phone before carefully examining the car for any emergency buttons or concealed weapons, my trained eye knowing exactly where to look. Our two accomplices force the man out and into the back seat, flanking him on either side and I take my seat in the front next to Qhawe as he drives us off into the night.

‘Hey, look what we have here, a bottle of gin,’ the taller accomplice exclaims reaching down under the driver’s seat to pull out a seemingly untouched pint of spirits. ‘Looks like you’re a bit of a drunkard, eh, madala’.

Quickly he and his companion take a swig and pass it to the driver’s seat. Aggressively, as if overtaken by his bravado, Qhawe raises the clear bottle into the air – the liquid inside, clear and absorbing no light, bounces around teasingly – and he downs its remaining contents in one, drawn-out gulp.



When I met Qhawe we were both very far away from home. Him having come to Johannesburg for work from his small village near Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, and I, a city boy, having been out of work for nearly three years and finally finding a job at a new construction company looking for young energetic bricklayers needing a new learning experience. The construction site was remote and nestled at the base of a mountain in a dry, water-scarce area.

Qhawe and I were part of the new group of workers coming onto the site, and though my meekness often found me on the periphery of things, his confidence and self-assuredness secured him a space in the group almost instantly. At first I found him insufferably loud, arrogant and unbearably full of himself but my ire was easily surmounted by intrigue. It confounded me how audacious he was, how he never backed down to anyone nor to anything in front of him, even when it was clear he was out of his depth. He was unrelenting and unapologetic in every sense, and as someone raised to feel sorry for their own existence this was inconceivable to me. The way he would speak out of turn in site meetings and hold management accountable for their shortcomings and failures to deliver, seen as insubordination to some but endearing him to most. Yet, beneath this bold and charismatic exterior, beneath the unbreakable furrowed brows lay sad eyes, cavernous and dark. He would eat alone at teatime and at lunch and he would often disappear to be alone for long stretches of time.

We lived near the construction site in a shabby workers’ hostel downwind from the dam and neighbouring a shallow, dried out creek. Since his room was next to mine I would notice his empty bed in the ungodly hours of the night or hear him walk out to God knows where. I managed to observe

him from a distance this way for a while, seeing how he would work until his hands trembled during the day and then retreat into himself when he could find the time after hours. He was very good at hiding it, maintaining his impenetrable stronghold and selling to all the others his aloofness and stoicism, an act practiced and performed to raucous applause day after day. But in me he had found his match. I wasn't fooled.

Since my father had thrown me out of the house as a teenager following a tumultuous war that climaxed in an explosive battle which tore my family apart, I had mastered the art of withdrawal myself. I had the rare skill to pull back the layers and peer into what really resides within. In his eyes I saw a loneliness so deep and unrelenting, it dared you to reach your hand in. It was familiar to me, comforting even, and scariest of all, it mirrored my own. How could I not fall for him as hard as I did?

We all want to fall in love with ourselves, and those of us who fail to find ourselves try to tease or sculpt it out of those we love in order to turn them into us. In him I saw a kindred spirit that was pleading to be seen, to be found. The red string of fate that had connected us all along was becoming clearer each day I watched him.

When we spoke, miraculously, for the first time, it was under the strange circumstance that he had a splinter that needed to be taken out. He pulled me aside and almost whispered that he needed my help, peering around as if to make sure nobody would learn of his secret shame. Behind the workers' residence we sat alone, his pleading eyes watching me like a wounded animal. Impatiently I reached for his hand before he had a chance to protest, surprising even myself. I grabbed his hand with both of mine, turning the palm upwards to assess the damage. He gave me an inquisitive glance. I saw that the space between his thumb and his index finger had reddened. It looked infected and the splinter itself – later revealed to be a metal shard – had recessed deep into the skin, signaling that he had suffered in silence with this problem for a long time, either thinking it wasn't something to be concerned about or feeling too ashamed to show his weakness and vulnerability to anyone by seeking help.

Since he had been too ashamed to fetch the first aid kit, all I had to work with were my fingers and a sharp needle I had found time to bring from my room. I squeezed the damaged area in a meager attempt to force the splinter out. He gritted his teeth in a grimace, a single tear welling up in his pain-stricken left eye. I released my grip slightly to give him reprieve, resisting the urge to trigger that

uncharacteristically colourful expression again. In a way it felt powerful having him at my mercy in this way. That he was willing to be vulnerable with me, shed back the layers and open up this hidden side of him meant that I was someone he felt he could trust, whom in some way or another he knew could see him, whom he could hand the knife to and not be stabbed with it. In that moment, as I brandished the needle and pierced it into his reddened skin, I was silently gaining his trust. ‘Agh!’ he howled as the needle drew blood. His hand, locked in a tense fist a second ago, loosened and he looked back at me with a reassuring glance and a nod as he winced again.

He was giving me permission, not just to hurt him in order to relieve his pain. More than that, he was lifting the veil finally and allowing me to look at him truly for the first time.

His dark brown skin glowed in the late afternoon sunshine; his well-defined bicep convulsing and flexing against the sharp waves of pain that his entire body now rode through in pulses and ceaseless vibrations. Beads of sweat fell from his brow, down his immaculate complexion, dripping from his perfectly sculpted jawline and falling just so onto his collarbone to frame him like fresh dew in the sparkling sunlight. My breath caught in my lungs. What I saw, what he had revealed to me, was beautiful. Not a man succumbing to his weakness but a beauty so pure and immense it was unlike anything I had seen before or since.

As I used the needle to pluck the tip of the splinter out beyond the skin I held it there for a second, weighing my next move carefully. This needed to be done quickly with as little pain as possible. I leaned over to his hand, clasped firmly between mine, and with my teeth I pulled the protruding shard out of him in one swift motion. He shuddered and let out what sounded like a short gasp of surprise from feeling the skin of my lips against his hand, followed immediately by a guttural sigh of relief that embarrassed me slightly as it vibrated through my ears. We looked at each other transfixed for a second that was filled with a thousand small eternities. The metal splinter was still balanced between my incisors. I could feel an unmistakable bond of mutual understanding forming between us. We were seeing in each other’s eyes the loneliness that fueled my silence and that ignited the ire in him. The red string of fate which had been tangled until now was finally taut. We had found each other at last. The shard slipped from between my teeth, grazing my lip before falling to the concrete floor in a pin-drop and forcing us both out of our trance. He reached over with his sleeve and wiped my lip where his

blood and mine now mixed. Another wave of deafening silence washed over us as we both imprinted our smiles onto the sunset.

We stayed up all night speaking about anything that came to mind. He was obsessed with cars and could weave together long and detailed arguments about performance and engine parts that flew over my head but brought me joy at seeing how passionate he became. He told me about life back home and I told him about my ongoing war with my father. He never knew his father but was certain he was out there somewhere and would drive in his Ferrari to find him one day; for now though he was content with his family and loved them dearly.

‘You should come visit someday, Mati,’ he said. ‘Those panoramic views that these rich white people pay thousands for a hotel room to see, in my village we get them for free year-round.’

He told me about the beautiful waterfall that ran into a river flowing just down the hill from his house where wildebeest and zebra came to drink every now and then. He swore he’d even seen a lion or two there before. He could not fall asleep without the trickling of water nearby.

His stories of home dug a painful hole in my heart. Home was a refuge for him, it made him into a full person. Something I did not have. That night we stayed out behind the hostel for hours speaking about life and cars and our tyrannical construction boss. From that day forward we would sneak out every night to find time alone. Our spirits intertwined and our bodies dying to do the same. We continued this way for a long time. Stealing glances from afar during the workday and in the night stealing time together until the early hours of the morning.

On one night he asked me to follow him into the night, far away from our rooms, down past the dried-out creek and into a clearing. He reached his hand out in a familiar embrace with my own. Behind him, framing him in a moonlit silhouette, a group of willow trees hung low, concealing something just beyond. The clearing was silent, and the air was still and crisp, but I could feel that something stirred beyond those trees, where Qhawe was taking me. Something ancient that would not be easily silenced. He sensed my hesitation and squeezed my hand tighter. ‘Don’t worry, you can trust me. You just have to promise to never tell anyone about this.’ My lip quivered as I nodded.

He led me through the willows and what I saw would have been simple enough in any other context, but it took my breath away. A beautiful river flowing wildly. A miracle nestled just beyond

the destructive reach of humans. An Eden that only someone as pure-hearted as Qhawe could have found. He gave me a sly grin as he absorbed my amazement, stripping down naked and stepping backwards into the river. He trusted the current and he trusted me, his eyes never leaving mine as the water engulfed him. As if responding to a new resounding presence the waves came alive, raging and crashing fiercely onto the riverbank. He was unmoved, his body an expertly crafted ship riding the waves with ease.

I now noticed that the riverbank was made entirely of a strange metal alloy, the exact one I had pulled out of Qhawe's hand. It made the water shimmer in the moonlight and mesmerized me as it illuminated my black-blue skin. Without hesitation I bared my trembling body and joined the smiling man in his miraculous shimmering river. The water was warm, like a passionate embrace, all encompassing. When I entered, the water calmed with my every movement, creating an entrancing whirlpool. With the raging waves on Qhawe's side dancing harmoniously with the stillness on my side. I made a frantic movement, my mind swaying me towards escape but Qhawe's movements were quicker. As if propelled by some supernatural force he was by my side, holding me afloat by the waist, calming me with his touch.

'What is this?' I spluttered.

His answer came like a hymn, sung since time immemorial. 'The spirit of the river. It reads your soul through the water. It's how I found this place. It called me.'

I had no answer, only the trickling of the water filled the limited space between us. His hands around my waist and mine resting against his arms, we floated in that river for a lifetime. 'This is amazing,' I whispered, careful not to disturb the presiding energies around us.

Nodding shrewdly, he leaned into me, bringing us closer together and before I had a chance to process the ecstasy of his body against mine, our lips met. I leaned further into him, never wanting to be released from the trance of that moment, the trance of him. We felt as if at once completely submerged and floating on air.

Every phase of the moon that followed that night found us entangled in each other on that riverbank. Mind, body and soul. The sound of nature, our lullaby, we could finally rest and found a refuge in that, our sacred, hidden cradle.

When the tyrannical site boss laid Qhawe off – partly for taking a joy ride in the company bakkie and partly for inciting an uprising amongst the workers who were, at that point, fed up with the horrible treatment they were receiving – he was left, as many like him often find themselves, with very few options. He still had to support his family back home but the few vacancies that were available to him had boxes that his pen had simply run out of ink to tick. The frustration and exhaustion of being dismissed at every turn became too much and life on the streets seemed more compelling to him than returning home to his family hopeless and empty-handed. A plan needed to be made quickly. I had followed him into that river and now all these years later I had followed him down this dark and illicit path.

As we drive down the dark and derelict streets lit only by the droning LED lights of the white Toyota Hilux, life and all sense of safety fade with each passing minute.

‘Where are you taking me?’ the old man whimpers from the back seat as our two accomplices strip him of all his possessions and berate him mercilessly.

‘Heyi, voetsek wena man! We’re not playing around here.’ The shorter man howls, pointing the gun into the driver’s face to silence and shrink him.

A feeling of disgust fills my veins. I look over at Qhawe for reassurance but his eyes are vacant. He is numb to the moral implications of what we are doing, focused only on the responsibility he has to carry it through. When we are far out enough into the bush, Qhawe pulls over on the unpaved roadside, tracking dust in his wake. Our accomplices open the back seat door and, menacingly, Qhawe looks the old man dead in the eyes through the rear-view mirror.

‘Get out. Run as far and as fast as you can and if you turn back, we will shoot you.’

It happens in a blur, frantically, and with barely the clothes on his back the man jumps out of the bakkie and runs. Never turning or hesitating, he runs endlessly into the ravenous maw of the darkness. We drive off with our spoils until we reach the getaway car parked not too far away. Our accomplices

take that car and speed off while Qhawe and I are tasked with delivering the stolen goods from which the black-market money will be distributed equally later.

This is not our first rodeo. We have pulled off many more harrowing deeds than this one but something seems different now and when we arrive at the one-room housing unit we share the next morning, it is rife in the air. Qhawe tries to kiss me but the kiss is as vacuous as his eyes and his hands on my skin feel like ice. He sleeps the entire following day and then the next and doesn't leave the room except to relieve himself. I bring him water to drink but he complains that it burns his throat and every morsel of food he eats is vomited out an hour later. Worry sets in me quickly and in massive doses. He is unable to move and his eyes are beginning to glaze over. I try desperately to tell myself he will be fine, he is always fine.

One night he wakes up screaming and hysterical in a fit of tears. 'I'm blind, Mati! I can't see!' His face is in his palms and he is curled up at the foot of the bed facing the wall, his glossy grey eyes staring at nothing. When I try to touch him or speak to him he is unresponsive. Days pass in stress and turmoil as I try to figure out what to do next. Qhawe is the one who normally figures things out, he would know what to do, but the man I knew is simply no longer there. I use all of my share from the hijacking to call in the best doctor I can find.

Qhawe is examined and taken through scan after scan to no avail. Nobody seems to know how to solve this. All vitals seem fine and he is healthy on paper. This is something deeper, something beyond what western medicine can comprehend. The language in which it is practiced lacks the words required to adequately diagnose him.

I make the decision then that I need to consult someone closer, someone more well-equipped. I need to call home. The phone call is shorter than I had expected and not the hellish dread that my pride had made me feel it would be. As soon as my mother's voice comes through the receiver, tentative and concerned, I weep.

I knew she would be busy at the hospital at this time but she answers immediately, of course she does. A massive weight chained onto me for all these years finally lifts off my shoulders. A child again

in my mother's embrace, she consoles me like she had all those years before, as if no time has passed and as if I had never truly left, as if home had never truly left me. The vulnerability in me pours out, crashing through the dam I had built all this time to suppress it. I am alone, lost and, more than anything, afraid of losing the love of my life when I have only just found him.

Hearing this my mother says reassuringly, 'Fear not, my child, all is not lost,' her voice like a warm blanket on a cold winter's night. Her mother had been Inyanga and she senses from her experience that what afflicts Qhawe is a spiritual illness brought on by something dark. She asks if there is someone with a grudge against him, someone he has wronged who might have offered him something to eat or drink, and immediately the scene of the hijacking flashes before my eyes.

The gin!

'He has been cursed, my son. Poisoned by something vile and dirty, and none other than the one who placed that curse can wash it away.'

I grab all that I need from the house and hurry to Qhawe's side. He has curled up in a ball on the bed and is shivering and weeping softly. I swallow hard, mustering all the strength I have left. His golden-brown complexion has turned murky and grey and when I reach over to grab him, parts of his skin peel off in flakes. I do not flinch. I must focus on how to fix this. I need to fix this.

I travel to the home of one of the accomplices from the hijacking – the only one I know outside of our criminal endeavors. He lives just outside the township Qhawe and I call home. As soon as I enter the red gate of his shabby facebrick house, I can feel that familiar feeling I had felt before stepping out of the clearing onto the riverbank but this time more sinister as if something very wrong has happened here. I know what is coming but it does not lessen my shock to find the skeletal body of the tall man still adorned in his torn leather jacket staring blankly out of his living room window. His eyes, mere lifeless black holes in his face and his skin cream white and tattered like old parchment paper. The sun shines sadly into the house but even its illuminating rays cannot brighten the black shroud of death that hangs here. I act quickly, taking the man's car keys from the kitchen counter and I drive off to get Qhawe.

We drive for hours following the trail of the old man who has delivered this tragic fate onto us. We follow the clues about his identity that we find in his bakkie and finally track him down to an old suburban house south of the city. I knock on the door twice and a small girl, wearing a set of ivory bracelets around her tiny wrist, answers it. ‘May I help you, sir?’ she says in a voice as sweet as brown sugar.

Pleading and desperate, I tell her the full name of the man we are looking for and a fatal silence falls between us. Tears start to fall down her round cheeks and the weight of the crime we committed falls on me like torrenting hail, all at once and hard. I stutter in panic and flee, hearing her yell for her mother as I take the wheel and drive off again.

He didn’t make it back home to his family. He had died out there in the bush, naked, cold and alone. I grab at my stomach as a wave of guilt and bereavement attacks me from within, my own body betraying me. I look back at Qhawe’s shivering body in the back seat and anger overtakes me. What have we done? Maybe he deserves this fate for what he has done and maybe I deserve to watch him die for my part in it. I sink into resignation for what seems like forever. I am awoken finally by Qhawe coughing up blood onto the seat behind me. I can’t let him die like this but what choice do I have? With the old man gone, there is no hope for reversing the curse.

I remember what my mother said over the phone: ‘None other than the one who placed that curse can wash it away.’

...wash it away.

I reach for the steering wheel again, fighting the exhaustion that grips me after days without sleep. I drive for nearly the entire day, the sunrise solemnly watching my last desperate effort to save the man I love. We reach our old construction site just after dawn, the familiar haunting sound of cicadas, the burst of fresh air, and the bite of the mosquitoes welcoming us once more. I carry Qhawe on my shoulders down past the dam, past our abandoned workers’ hostel, into the dried-up creek and back to that radiant river, where it all began and where our souls had become intertwined. Our Cradle.

I step into the river and carry Qhawe in with me. Allowing him to float for a moment, seeming frozen. We are running out of time. I call out to the spirit of the river, begging for help, for anything. We wait and wait, every minute that passes fueling my anxiety and draining the life from Qhawe’s

already cold body. Then the voice comes. It is low and sonorous and sounds as if someone is speaking from behind a door or underwater. I cannot gauge where it is coming from nor the sex of the one it is coming out of. I can sense their presence though. They are taller than me and standing right behind me, speaking down.

‘What do you seek?’ the disembodied voice says. ‘What brings you back here?’

I look up at the sky as I speak as if saying a prayer. ‘Please, you cradled us all those years ago. Help us now. Save him! Bring him back to me!’

‘You think you can come here and make demands of me. Your love makes you foolish, boy.’

I look around, frustrated. Every moment we waste here is killing Qhawe and I am becoming impatient.

‘We don’t have time for this!’ I scream out into the abyss, my voice bouncing off the walls of the riverbank. ‘Look at him, his life is slipping away! Please, Spirit! You have to help us!’

‘I cannot,’ the voice retorts matter-of-factly.

‘Why? Why would you bring us together all those years ago and then doom us to part now?’

‘You humans are so arrogant. Burning your unruly path onto this world never caring who you harm or what you burn down along the way. Careless and selfish creatures. I cannot help you because only you can undo this.’ The current in the river roars stronger and faster past us, forcing me to brace on a nearby rock to keep us afloat.

‘I don’t understand,’ I splutter weakly, through ferocious waves.

‘The crime committed on the innocent must be repaid! It is not a toll I can pay for you and there is no balm I can give to you. The liquid in that bottle was not meant to kill, only reveal. When the old man brewed that poison, he intended that the one who drank from it would be tested, be forced to reckon with their darkest self. Qhawe failed that test. Made to look into the abyss of himself, he could not face it, he was appalled. He could not bear how far into darkness his actions had led him. He decided he deserved this fate. He decided to die, to turn into the shadowy husk that he saw within, that he felt he had truly become. The poison is not what is taking his life now, it is his guilt. He has chosen this fate, he has chosen to take the plunge and never return...’

Tears caress my ashen cheeks.

‘...but as your mother said, all is not lost. I loved you both when you visited my waters all those years ago, but I did not bind you. You were fated all along, bonded by a love beyond any of my powers. It chose you both and you both chose each other. It strengthened you and now to save that which you cherish the most you must relinquish that strength. You must sever that string and be parted forever.’ The voice roars on, ‘You are fortunate in a way because the love you have formed here, boy, is the only currency worth the value of a life itself.’

Words fail me. The price is too high to pay. I cannot pay. I refuse to pay. It is selfish and I know I am proving the spirit right about the nature of human beings but I do not care. As I look down at him now, slipping through my fingers like water, I want to hold tighter, to grab on with all my strength to whatever is left, not to release willingly and watch him disappear from me forever. I kiss him gently on the forehead, almost expecting that to heal him instantly, that his skin will remember my touch and rekindle his dying soul but this is a fallacy. His breath is becoming short, his heartbeat is catching in his chest as mine races on through the anxiety.

‘His time is spent, boy, you must act now.’ the voice beckons from above again.

I look at the winding river beyond the clearing, at the rushing current crashing against the jagged alloy and rocks. I know what needs to be done and I cannot hesitate. I squeeze Qhawe’s hand one last time, bracing for the indescribable pain that awaits me down that ravine. I share a last heartbeat with him, a final breath with him and then I let him go. I dislodge myself from the rock I was holding onto for support and allow the current to carry me away. Down, down, down the riverbend, I leave Qhawe floating alone, colour instantly returning to his eyes and his skin. I smile as the water engulfs me and as the rocks and metal tear my body apart. I am tired and I can finally rest now.

When we awake from our respective slumbers we will not remember the powerful love we birthed here and we can never again return to it, but as he drifts out of my sight, I know that like water baptises the sins of the wicked this love has cleansed us forever and we will forever be changed by it. The blood that flows within me, that paints the water red now, is no longer mine alone. It is laced with his and his hands are now stained with mine. The severed red string of fate has washed away but we no longer need it. We will pull our own strings now and nothing can ever be the same again. With new eyes I look up at

the darkening azure of the sky and allow my lids to fall slowly as I drift down the river, gently off to sleep.

The Calling of the Lake

Keratile Moses Israel

Epilogue

The wind had changed its tide, and the animals foretold of the coming doom. Dogs barked louder than the cats called, and birds flew in flocks and often dispersed before coming back together again. Although a normal concept, that particular order was strange on its own: birds flying at the hours they were not supposed to be in flight. But soon after, there was some essence of balance restored to nature, that was until the dark clouds began to form.

The lake in the Lagoon Park in Bodibeng, the capital city of a small country in Africa called Matumaini, soon joined in the unnatural occurrences of the natural. It turned red in its entirety. It was at the stroke of midnight when it all happened, with no witness in sight. As if the change in color was not enough, waves began to form on the lake as the wind whistled at its highest as if in competition with the cries of the animals. And long behold the eyes of no one, the lake opened, parted in two, and out of it a silhouette emerged from the red, fiery waters, clothed in nothing and only carrying what seemed like a piece of paper in one hand, this paper dry as the day it was when made. The cries of nature soon quietened as the man had fully emerged from the waters. The redness disappeared and soon there could be no telling at all that such phenomena had taken place.

The animals returned to sleep, the clouds passed with no rain, and the lake took back the color of the splendid spring that often attracted many people to its scenic view. The figure that had caused all this anomaly walked out of the park and made its way through the streets under the city lights to only come to a full stop outside an apartment building at the city center. It looked out to the third floor, the eighth window from the south and remained fixed in that view as if it could see the man that was asleep inside. This figure then withdrew its eyes from the window and directed its gaze to the paper in its hand, looking through all the twenty-three names that were inscribed on it. Whilst deep in reading and rereading the names of the Called, a police patrol car passed nearby and soon came to a screeching

halt at the sight of a naked man by the curb. One officer emerged and with her flashlight, evaluated this strange person that stood in the middle of the street before her, nude as the day he was born.

‘Do you know that I can charge you for public nudity?’ asked the police officer with one hand guiding the flashlight towards the man, the other circulating around the gun holster.

There was no response. Eye contact was made, and only after a small while, this naked man finally cracked a smile that threw the police officer off. It did not take a word, not even a movement, but a half-cracked smile, and the officer turned her flashlight off, got back in the car and left, mesmerised as if enchanted and ‘under the influence’.

Then this mysterious man turned his attention back to the apartment one final time before vanishing into nothing.

I

There was a loud knock at Evans’s front door. A flash of excitement rushed through him with a chill of expectation. He had an idea of who it was. Days of receiving fake pictures and meeting many catfish that did not meet his standards, turned him off and dimmed his hope of ever finding an honest match on the internet. But this time he had followed all the right online investigation to ensure that the handsome beau that had texted him unexpectedly was really the one from the pictures he had drooled over all along. And no online investigation of exposing a catfish was better than a video call. He and Sydney – the date he was set to meet that night – had first met on Grindr, and later they had spoken in a video call that restored his faith yet again in the cyber dating world.

He tended to the knock half-dressed, only missing a t-shirt, his preparation having been disturbed by the early arrival of his date.

‘Wow. Thank God you really look like your picture,’ said Evans sarcastically, and the two men laughed as Evans made a way for his guest to enter the house.

‘I see I came in the middle of your dress-up.’

‘Yep. You are about twenty-five minutes early, but it’s not a problem. I generally take a long while to get dressed.’

‘And I did not expect anything less. Your pictures are telling that you dress to impress,’ Sydney said, the corner of his lips slightly raised in a smile, a seductive technique that had Evans already engorging from down below. He could not believe that this attractive man actually took any interest in him, and the thought of having him all night did not help ease the hardening reaction of his manhood. He needed a distraction, and so he turned away from his guest and began counting from 100 as quietly as he could.

‘I hope you are impressed by what you are seeing in this instance,’ Evans said while finally putting on a t-shirt, but in a slow motion, with a slight swaying of his body as they often do in strip clubs. His voice, however, failed to compliment his intended eroticism and instead broke softly as if something was stuck in his throat.

‘Truthfully, I have been mostly impressed with what I was seeing before you covered it all up,’ Sydney said with a subtle smirk.

Evans finally turned back to face Sydney, and still, that half-smile was pasted where he last saw it, and still being greatly nurtured.

‘You are quite a charmer boy, aren’t you?’

‘Not really. I only just voice out my feelings. Circling around the truth is a ghoulish waste of time and I would rather not partake in it.’

‘So, what exactly do you wish to partake in at this moment?’ Evans asked, his mind completely subjected to his lust, and waited for the words that could release the passion already brewing around his groin. But, he was soon to learn that expectations are not always so easily satisfied. He was utterly shocked by the response that came from what he had assumed was his sexually driven companion.

‘Honestly, at this very moment, I could use a cup of tea.’

There was complete silence after those words. Evans stared back at Sydney. Sydney stood still, completely immobile, and only raised his eyebrows to further cement his request, but the seriousness of the demand only markedly confused Evans.

‘Is that code for something?’

‘Actually, yes, except without encryption. It simply means that I have a thirst that could only be quenched by a steaming hot cup of tea. Preferably green tea if you have it. Got to respect the temple.’

‘What temple?’

‘My body.’

‘Wait, you seriously want to drink tea at this exact moment?’

‘Yes, and the kettle could already be boiling by now.’

Evans was still lost for words, but slowly he made his way to the kitchen and Sydney followed closely behind. He was expecting to hear his guest say that it was a joke, but he managed to fill the kettle with water without objection and was heading to place it on the stove still with agreeable quietness from his guest. Behind him, Sydney was really focused on why he was in that house, a motive far from lust. His attention was drawn to the set of knives neatly tucked in a knife folder on the kitchen counter, and without rousing any suspicion, he pulled out the biggest one he saw and hid it behind his back.

He moved closer to his host, who already was holding onto a cup, still with his back towards the looming danger from behind. After a while, Evans could feel Sydney’s whole body pressing up against his and he wondered if somehow his tea making was a fetish of some kind. Of course, he was not complaining. He was just happy that, finally, they were getting back on the sexually charged train. But just as he was reeling into his feelings of desire, Sydney drew out the knife and immediately stabbed him with such intensity, aimed directly at the spine.

Evans let out a loud gasp for air as he fell to the ground, and the cup he was holding, breaking right next to him. He tried so hard to yell but Sydney hastily moved closer and covered his mouth.

‘Shhhh. If you are quiet, this will end quicker than it began. Don’t fight it, darling, ‘cause the truth is, you are going to die tonight, no matter what.’ Sydney moved his hand from Evans’s mouth and played with the knife right before his eyes.

Evans groaned heavily in pain as he mustered all the power he had to try and plead for his life.

‘Please... plea....please. I be.. I am begging you... Don’t do this. Please.’ The poor lad was crying, sniffing, and at the same time, losing so much blood. His legs no longer had reflexes and his pain continued to worsen. It was in that instant that his whole life flashed before his eyes.

‘Ple... please... I don’t want to... I don’t wanna die.’

‘But you are already dead. Your name was cast to stone. Your fate, sealed by your own absurd ambitions and pride.’

Sydney was so calm throughout the entire process, devoid of any feeling of remorse, regret nor fear. He seemed like a man that was not new to human decapitation and misery, a man that was void of any empathy.

‘What are you doing? Please, I can... I can’t... feel my legs. Please help me.’ The groaning was growing, the snorts and sniffles involuntarily produced, but still, this did not move the attacker.

‘Remember this name, Tau Mogapi, because that is why you are dying.’

Evans tried to recollect whom the name belonged to and what it meant for the seconds that seemed like hours when, finally, after hopeless guesses in his head, he had a face to match the name with.

‘Ple... I will.. help...’ and as he continued to beg as he had been doing, Sydney slowly took the knife to his throat, and with one clean cut, Evans was dead.

‘I’m really sorry, Evans, but the choice to spare your life does not depend on me. Oh, and I meant to tell you, my name is not Sydney.’

‘Sydney’ then threw the knife to the floor and went on to finish making himself the cup of green tea he truly did crave, before leaving the scene of the crime, completely unbothered and without worry. He made his way to the Lagoon Park, stood on the edges of the lake, and threw himself into the water.

II

Two weeks earlier

Evans had been seated at one of the booth tables in the Maila Restaurant, the only four-star master chef granted restaurant in Botswana, patiently waiting for his date to arrive. He took out his phone and looked at the pictures of the man he was meeting once again and smiled before putting the phone back in his jacket’s left pocket. He checked the time on his wristwatch, already 19:20, and looked around the restaurant, beginning to worry as his date was already twenty minutes late. He was growing agitated, feeling that he was getting stood up. In bits of whispers, he angrily called out the name of his

supposed mystery date. He took out his phone again, went down to contacts and searched the name Tau, and called the number.

‘Hi, I am so sorry, I know I am late. I am rushing over right now and will be there in just a few minutes,’ answered the man on the other end of the call before Evans could even call him out on his tardiness.

Immediately after relaying that message, Tau disconnected the call with haste and continued looking through the restaurant’s see-through glass design to where his date for the night sat.

He had long arrived before Evans. The two had even exchanged greetings outside the restaurant, but Evans could not have known that he was the one with whom he was meeting, for the man that stood helplessly looking from outside, looked the complete opposite of the pictures he had sent.

Some minutes passed with Tau still in anticipation of his reception by the handsome gentleman that sat in a glimmer of slowly wearing out pieces of hope. Tau looked through the window at Evans and envisioned, finally, being embraced and accepted by a man he had chosen. And it was that vision in his head, the chances he deemed impossible, that made him hate himself so much more. He hated the way he was born and hated even more his unquenchable need to find a companion. *‘No one will ever love me for me...’* he let out a whisper of further disappointment before finally deciding to enter the restaurant.

Tau moved closer to where Evans sat, and the closer he got, the more in love with the man he became. And just as his venture got him a few centimeters closer to where his fate was either grimmer or possibly, for the very first time, hopeful, his feet instead guided him to the opposite table. Heads in the restaurant had followed him from the entrance up to the point where he sat, and it was that judgment from everyone in that joint that further sent him into self-doubt and more self-loathing. After he settled, he directed his eyes to where Evans sat.

The two men’s eyes met, prompting a quicker reaction from both to look away. Evans did it so as to not seem rude in staring, but Tau did it out of guilt and regret of the labyrinth of lies he had woven from the beginning. His mind ran wild as he tried to think of conversation starters that could ease an acceptance from Evans for who he truly was, possibly getting him an invitation to sit down and

explain. With his eyes solely looking down at the table, he felt a presence next to him and could hear someone clearing his throat as if seeking his attention.

‘Excuse me, sir. The menu.’

Tau quickly locked eyes with the waiter, who had his arms extended out, holding the menu and wearing a calming and enthusiastic smile.

‘Thank you,’ and without complete ease, he took what he was given, his heart beating louder than the clanging dishes he heard behind, until he felt everything around him come to a complete and unfathomable halt. The only thing louder than the dishes and his racing heart in that moment, was the ringtone that Tau used to love up until that instance. He could already anticipate who the call was from, and as his eyes finally fell directly toward Evans’s, he could already see the resentment that was beginning to form against him. The call went dead just as the waiter left, and Evans, who had already been angered by his date’s delay, had reached the expectedly terrifying climax that Tau had calculated and recalculated repeatedly in his mind.

For several seconds, neither of the two men moved an inch.

Tau looked over at Evans with a plea of pity, regret and hope of a second chance while Evans looked over with resentment, impatience and anger. Ultimately, Tau got the courage to rise and move even closer to where his already unhinged date was seated, with his heart racing faster than his thoughts of what exactly it was that Evans was thinking.

‘Hee... Hello,’ embarrassingly whispered Tau. In his tone of voice, he did sound sincere, and there was also in it acknowledgement of guilt. He waited patiently to hear a reply from Evans but all he got were the piercing eyes that could only be interpreted as disappointment and pure hatred.

‘I know I have a lot of explaining to do and I could—’ Tau’s voice was so low and characterised by shame as he began to try and reason, when all of the sudden it was cut off by a response from Evans.

‘Not really. It’s very clear. You pathetically went online and stole pictures of some poor fella who might not even be gay just so you can come and mess with the feelings of the vulnerable. It’s shameful, really. And no explanation could make up for the emotional investment and honesty I put into talking to a different version of you.’

‘I just knew that you wouldn’t talk to me if I had approached you looking like myself. No one does.’

‘If your fear was that no one could approach you, what exactly were your expectations out of physical meetings with the fools that fall for your trap? You know what, I don’t even care. I have entertained your mockery for too long, I am getting out of here...’ he said as he slid to the side to try and exit the booth.

‘Are you disappointed that I’m not the guy in the picture or just disgusted that I look the way I look?’

‘You have absolutely no moral high ground to even ask me that question. You catfished me, played with my feelings and then made me wait for you for almost thirty minutes while you sat and watched me freak out wondering where the guy in the picture was.’

‘Okay, I understand that. I tricked you and that was not right. But not many people ever stop to look at me twice. I’m sure that even if I had come here looking different from the picture but somehow with your skin, you would make an exception.’

‘What in the actual fuck is that supposed to mean? That I am discriminating against you just because you are—’ and then he paused and took a big sigh before proceeding. ‘How you look has nothing to do with how I am responding. Only your actions do and the fact that you can even play that card says a lot about your manipulative personality.’

‘You would practically say anything to avoid facing the facts about your own personality. The fact that you can’t even say it, shows exactly how you feel about it. It’s hypocrisy.’

‘What!’ Evans’s voice rose higher than Tau would have liked and grabbed the attention of the other patrons in the restaurant. ‘I am not mad that you are an albino!’ Then he lowered his voice before he went on: ‘I am mad that you lured me into a fake online relationship and then have the audacity to come here and call me a hypocrite after lying to me for days. It just makes you a terrible person for even trying to shift the blame on me and use how you are as a weapon against my intentions. Goodluck man. You have serious problems.’

Evans grabbed his car keys from the table and walked away from the scene.

The murmurs of the people following what they had heard shattered Tau. He ran out of the restaurant, completely humiliated, in tears and angry at Evans, the world and, even more, himself.

He made his way to the lake in the Lagoon park which was not very far from the restaurant where he had been, and it was there that he did the ritual he normally did following such moments of disappointment. He took out a One Pula coin and tossed it in the lake and then made his cursive wish yet again.

‘Tonight was the 23rd date I have been on so far and it ended exactly the same way. I just wish that these pathetic guys that think the world belongs to them could cease to exist. They don’t deserve the life they were given. And as for me, I still come to you, oh Great Lake, and ask that you give me a man that would love me for me and help me forget about all my heart breaks.’

He stared longer into the waters, his thoughts running without coordination. After some time, he moved back to one of the empty benches and took a seat, throwing his head on the palm of his hands and bringing it to his knees. He was so sad in that instant, his pain running deep, his heart broken, his hope shattered. He recalled the disaster of a date he had been on, recalling what he perceived as a look of disappointment from his ‘supposed match’ upon realising that he was meeting an Albino.

That was what was telling himself had happened, as he had previously done all along following all the other dates he had had before that night.

All of a sudden, while still deep in thought, he heard a voice. He quickly followed it to his right, where at the other end of the bench was seated the most handsome man he had ever seen. A man better than anyone he had ever met.

So, in utter surprise, he asked, ‘Are you talking to me?’

The man chuckled, and then stared at him, right in his eyes. ‘Well, I don’t see anyone else around.’

‘You may be talking to yourself. It doesn’t necessarily mean that there has to be anyone around to talk.’

‘Well, that would be foolish. If I was talking to myself, it wouldn’t have been so loud that you could actually hear it.’

‘Madness comes in many ways, and sometimes we don’t even see it,’ remarked Tau, with a slight chuckle. He was starting to forget his frustrations as he gave into the moment.

Then the man continued, 'You seem rather exhilarated. Everything okay?'

'Troubles of life, dear stranger. But nothing I cannot handle.'

'Something to do with your date, perhaps?'

Tau was shocked that this man knew about his date.

'And how did you know about that?'

'Well, a few minutes ago you said madness can lead a man to talk to himself. I suppose you are mad then 'cause you talked about the date... to yourself.'

Tau this time around gave a big chuckle and the strange man reciprocated it with his own.

'Touché,' replied Tau.

Then the stranger pressed on: 'So, you want to share?'

'Share what?'

'The encounters, troubles and frustrations of the night as pertaining, perhaps, to the date?'

'There really isn't much to tell. Disappointment pretty much sums up the entire night. It's really a problem that someone of your caliber doesn't really have to worry about.'

'What do you mean 'someone of my caliber'?'

'Well, someone attractive. Like yourself.'

'Ooh is that a compliment?' the man asked with a smile that could drive anyone crazy.

'Haha. No, no. It's not a compliment, it's a statement.'

'A statement that actually makes the implication that I am attractive enough for a particular conversation. Sounds more like a compliment, don't you think?'

'Well, that's not how it read in my mind.'

'That's how it read in mine.'

'Hmm. I bet you hear that a lot.'

'Not as often as I want to. Although, I am confused.'

'By?'

'If someone of my caliber cannot interact with you about your frustrations, shouldn't you also know not of those frustrations, given that you are of the exact same caliber.'

Tau laughed out loud so hard then.

‘Flattering, but I know what I look like and I am nothing compared to you.’

‘Hmm.’

‘What’s that ‘Hmm?’’

‘Nothing.’

‘It can’t be nothing.’

‘Well, don’t worry about it. It’s just... curiosity.’

‘Curiosity?’

‘Yes. The mind’s way of keeping healthy. Often we wonder things, and answers actually help ease the mind. Overthinking things could be a problem. A fact that should be best avoided. For example, I am curious to talk about your night but you are resistant to talk about it.’

‘It is pointless to talk about things that have happened more than twenty-three times.’

There was silence for a few minutes following what could only be perceived as a humiliating revelation.

‘You have been left on dates more than twenty-three times? Wow, that’s got to be sad.’

‘Well, it’s only sad when someone attractive seated next to me insists on reminding me of it. And it’s even more sad to think that if it were you instead of me on those dates, the guys would have stayed and prayed that you don’t leave. It’s really funny how life works. Some people have it all and some have wishes that could never be satisfied.’

‘Why do you think that?’

‘Because I have wished for years to change and not be like this.’

‘Do you think it’s a curse?’

‘Why would it be a curse? I was born this way. Born with innocence.’

‘Well, wishing to be different can only mean that you think what you are is something that isn’t normal.’

‘And it is not normal. Only a handful of us are born like this.’

‘It may as well be that very perception that has you single to this point,’ the man said. ‘Yes I don’t understand a handful of things and even nature itself, but I do understand that abnormality is a term coined by those without all the knowledge of life. You seem to only question your albinism but not

your sexuality and that also has been said to be abnormal. Like you said, there are certain things I may not relate to because I am different, but that difference does not give answers to life and why hierarchies exist. One thing I do know however is this: the belief that you are unlovable, leads you not to love yourself. If you can't accept yourself the way you are, how do you expect someone else to accept you?'

Tau was silent for just a few seconds.

'Why are you talking to me?'

'What do you mean?'

'People that look like you avoid me. So, I wonder why you have outlasted every conversation I have had with people that almost resemble you.'

'Do you know that sometimes a person falls in love with the personality and not the appearance?'

'I know it's possible. Not in my case but it's possible.'

'Hmm. Charming.'

'What is?'

'Your personality. It's intriguing. Your constant need to beat yourself down so that when others do it, you don't feel pain. It still affects you though, doesn't it?'

'What are you? A therapist?'

'No, I'm not. I'm just good at reading human emotions. You believe you are unlovable, and that is making you unlovable. But I bet that if you were to open your heart and not guide your perceptions by the standards of society, you may be able to find that which you desperately seek.'

'It's impossible.'

'It's not.' He paused. 'I have been speaking to you for a few minutes and already I want to tear off everything that you are wearing and fuck you all night long.'

The mood of the conversation had changed drastically. Tau was shocked by the unexpected confession that sounded rather impossible to comprehend.

'*What?*' he uttered in complete disbelief.

III

Nine weeks later

Tau's relationship with Adam had progressed greatly and beautifully. For the first time in his life, Tau felt that everything he had ever wanted was being fulfilled, with his love finally reciprocated by someone he would have never believed would be attracted to him.

All this excitement had been shadowed by a great evil that had been roaming the streets of Bodibeng for the past weeks. There had been high spree killings of homosexual men in town and it was feared that someone was specifically committing an outright hate crime towards that community. But perhaps more terrifying to Tau was that all the nine men that had already been murdered had been on dates with him and turned him away. Tau feared that there could be a pattern in the killings and that he could end up on the list as well, but he was assured by his adoring boyfriend of the unlikelihood of such a tragedy.

As much as these occurrences were scary and inexplicable to Tau, they were just a mere addition to the suspense that was his life. He had realised that for most nights, Adam was absent when he should have been in bed. This was a grey area of paranoia for him. He knew the risks that came with dating someone whom everyone wanted; and he feared so much that Adam could be out cheating when he should be in, by his side. It was weirder even when the missing boyfriend turned up all affectionate in the morning, with Tau having not noticed the hours of which he had returned.

And then one night, Tau felt him leave his presence, and quickly followed behind him. He walked close enough, but out of sight, to witness his darling Adam disappear into one of the houses.

He was shocked by this discovery, and his mind victimised him even more as it insisted that this was the infidelity that he had been thinking about; but he soon lost all powers of speech when he saw Adam emerge from the residence, stained with so much blood from head to toe. This was more than he could have anticipated and his imagination ran rampant.

What had happened? he wondered. *Why is Adam dripping in blood? Whose house is this?* He took a long gasp when the most unsettling thought dawned on him: *Could Adam be the serial killer the police are looking for? But why?*

His questions overwhelmed him but could not be answered then as the events that took place within that house were, for the time being, shut from the outside world.

Finally, as his attention withdrew from the house, he continued his pursuit, following Adam, who seemed rather unbothered and carefree, and it was this spirit that brought even more questions to Tau about his man, as such an amount of blood stains would worry anyone. He followed his Prince Charming to the park, where, as if the night was not weird enough, he witnessed something he had never expected to see. He saw, with no one else in sight, Adam, standing at the edge of the lake, and after some moments, throwing himself in. This incident took him by surprise and so he watched, wondering if that was the blood cleaning process. Soon after, though, worry took over. A minute passed, two, three, until ten minutes had passed still with no Adam in sight.

Did he just witness an act of suicide?

Tau rushed to where Adam had stood and called out to him. After some time of yelling to no avail, he threw himself in and swam as further as he could go in attempts to draw his lover to shore. But he could not find the man. He emerged, called out Adam's name and submerged yet again when no one answered. But as he came yet again to the surface of the water and looked around in weariness and anxiety, he saw a silhouette of a man standing outside the lake. A man who had, just a few minutes ago, completely given the impression that he had drowned. Adam watched Tau in amazement and offered no response to the calling until Tau had swum and gotten out of the lake, only to be stunned by how dry Adam was compared to himself. His clothes had no stains of blood, and it was as if he had never been in the water nor at the strange house before coming to the park. All this confused him, and he could not understand what was going on no matter how hard he tried.

'Adam, what is happening? A few minutes ago I saw you stained with blood, and watched you drown yourself. Are you the one the police are looking for? Are you the killer?'

Adam replied with so much calmness, 'Not necessarily a killer, but the answer of prayers.'

'What the hell does that mean? What prayers?'

There was a pause, a long weight of silence before Adam replied.

‘Your prayers, Tau. You came to this lake almost every day, and after every bad date, and prayed to the waters for love as much as you prayed for everyone that has ever hurt you to cease to exist. I am your answer to all!’

Tau sniffled, a bit cold from the water but also trying to understand the unnatural phenomenon before him.

‘I still don’t understand what you are talking about.’

‘I am the spirit of the Water, Tau. The Man of the Lake who has now taken the form of a Man of the Earth to grant you your wish. I am a manifestation of your tears. We have existed for generations, but as the world advanced we grew more unnecessary to man. Only the ones who truly call out to us and drop their tears in the waters, can command us to their aid. I needed to give you all that you wanted. It was not my will to kill those I killed but rather the will of your wish. Wishes are at times vague. But what the heart seeks may sometimes be more dire than what the flesh would want to admit.’

‘How could you not be Man? How could you not be human? Spirit of the lake? Come on! How stupid do I look?’ Tau could not bring himself to accept the definition he was given – it was more impossible than plausible.

‘A few minutes ago, you saw me drown, stained with blood. Now I stand before you, neither wet nor stained. How is that for logic? I am what you want me to be, Tau. I am the one that will love you the most.’

‘Everything you are saying makes you more of a figment of imagination than reality. I must be crazy to even entertain that thought.’

‘I am what you think I am, Tau.’

‘I don’t want anyone to die, Adam. You are killing people and spirit or no spirit, murder is murder. That’s not what I want.’

‘Is it not?’

‘No! I want to be with someone real and that loves me, not someone I conjured out of pity.’

‘I have given you everything you had ever wanted. Are you saying you would be willing to trade it all for nothing?’

There was a pause before Tau responded.

‘What if the police catch you?’

‘The police are mortal, I am not. They would never catch me. I am a ghost, Tau. I have left every weapon at every crime scene, and still to this day there is no fingerprint or anything of use to them.

‘But I hear your request and I can judge your humanity. That then means that you have a decision to make. Either you want me or you don’t. I leave now and the dead remain dead and the thirteen that remain will live. And you – you go back to having no one. Or you let me complete your wish and finish the remaining thirteen and let me love you for all your life. Which will it be? The waters hear all and the waters answer all. I am to love you for as long as you choose and never leave your side, but also, I am to fulfill this wish, and get rid of everyone that has hurt you. What will it be, Tau? Do you choose humanity and morality, or do you, for once, choose yourself?’

The dilemma was impossible to even be debated when it came to the value of life. Tau knew this. He knew the importance of every person to someone else, and the thought of taking a loved one from a relative hurt him even more than his loneliness ever did. But the love that he had received from Adam in all the past days, tore him even more when he thought of losing it. How does one choose? A life or love? But it really was not a difficult choice, and he knew this.

*Skin***Merle Grace***Kaycy, 31*

People often think that my shows are about politics, or pretext, or Papa, whom I've always called Harry. They do not know that everything is about landscape and skin. Not only the dunes but also the veld after the rains. The way little sheep's pea sprouts push through the soil, and then, when you look again, they become a mass of grey-green fleece, which, when you touch it, is like touching the ear of a newborn lamb.

On stage, I can feel the hairiness of the plant without the plant being there. I create colour, projecting it onto the objects I have chosen for the night. How do you remember the landscape of love if it had never been there? I try and recreate it. I find the terrain, but my parents' love is elusive. I feared that only a couple of people – if any – would come to the show, but it's packed tonight. I need to thank Jaxon for this. Always gathering the community like a real flock.

I get Jaxon to give me a tattoo on stage. The spotlight falls on me, a violin howls like a spotted hyena in the night. All I see through the pain is Jaxon's hands. A love that comes to me out of the blue. A city love. A love that Ma and Harry would never know about.

Jaxon starts with the stem. Ink. Needles. Agony on skin. Leaves. Then the flower of the wild senna. Without rain, it grows in the Kalahari, without rain, the yellow flowers reach up, yellow kisses to the blue sky. My chest is projected onto a screen. The audience can see every chest hair, every pore. My skin is mine now. Mine. Nobody knows that the growing senna on my chest is also my granny's name. Her love flickers like a seed hidden under a rock, and then when it rains, my granny appears, she sprouts and reaches for me. Hidden, but trying to reach out. Granny. The one who kept me when all else collapsed.

Jaxon's needle starts stuttering higher up, venturing into the chest area above the nipple. Senna seeds pop up, one by one: joyful possibility. The music wails, colour moves on the stage like the slow

crawl of a tent tortoise. Keeya and I used to collect senna seeds and chew on them until their sharp coffee flavour burned our mouths. The Japanese needle goes in and out, my skin quivering like a porcupine.

People clap. Stand. Cheer. I bow. I take it. It's all I have. My water. I collect the lights, the memories, the violin, the search for gembok, the longing for the bark of a gecko, and I pack it in the suitcase Harry threw at me so many years ago when he kicked me out. I use it in every show. I pack my most flamboyant props in it, thinking of how far I've come. I pick it up and walk into my city life. Jaxon holds my free hand; electricity runs through us.

Kay, 7

Ma still talks about it. *The Day*, she calls it. '*The Day* is what helped him along.' She smiles at Harry while she shaves my hair. So short. Too short. I get up as soon as it's done. I'm scared of her and Harry now. Harry doesn't say anything. Guilt hangs over him like the odour of an abattoir. I stick close to Granny Senna, not leaving her. Behind her legs, close, always close. We collect eggs from the hen house. I don't like the smell of chicken poop and wet hay. The chicken coop is like a dog breathing in my face, but I take it.

'Shall we pick peaches, boykie?' Granny Senna takes my hand. We walk. The hot sun doesn't bother me. She carries a basket on the other hand, and I believe that holding that basket must be much better than holding me and my fear, day in and day out, but Granny Senna says nothing.

'Why does a porcupine have quills?'

'What now?' Granny has let go of me. She reaches for the yellowest peaches, their itchy skins something I cannot touch.

'Does a porcupine get hurt when she has her babies?'

I squint into the sun, wanting to know about skin and fur and quills and hurt.

'What's it with you now?' I can hear that granny is grumpy. I still want to ask her why a bushbaby doesn't have quills. Or whether a bushbaby could be born *with* quills. Like a mistake. Like me. But I don't ask.

Before *The Day*, I walked to the stroois to fetch Keeya, my friend, my soul, my everything. I never noticed that her abode was soot-ridden, the walls bare. I stepped carefully, avoiding the devil thorn that stretched out on the sides of the path, waiting for Keeya and me to step into them. Their burn stayed with you for the whole day. Sometimes Keeya made me sit, and then she plucked the thorns from my flesh in quick flicks. Then she would suck at my foot, trying to get the thorn's burn out of me. On these days, the world stopped. I loved her hands holding me. Her tongue moved on my foot as she sucked the burny patch. *Thloooop-Thloooop*, trying to make it better for me. On these days, the clouds were whiter than hope.

When the sun went down, Keeya had to go home. Keeya wasn't allowed to sleep over at my place. I never asked why. When she walked home, I felt left behind. She went from the green grass of our yard to the dust path, past the thorns, the barren patches of earth that have made themselves at home in front of Keeya's stroois.

And what did you and Kee get up to today?' Ma always said 'Keeee' as if Keeya's name had gone off and now stank.

We chased a whistling rat all the way to the graveyard on the far side.'

Ma said nothing. We ate our mielies in silence. Butter collected on Ma's face and made it shiny like Keeya's face when her ma rubbed her in with Vaseline. On those days she shone, but she hated it.

'And?'

It went wheeo-wheeo-wheeo and then ran like *fuck*.'

Ma sent me to bed for using that word, although she used it all the time, and Harry too. They used it as if the word was a normal word like *water* or *gemsbok* or *farm* or *desert*. But when I used it, it was wrong. I thought that she sent me to my room because she just got cross with me for no real reason. Because I tilted my head. Because I copied the mouse. Because I opened my mouth *this* way and not *that* way.

At night I think of myself. Of who I am. I knew something was wrong with my skin, but I asked nobody, fearing their answers like I feared myself. But then I thought of Keeya, and then it felt okay again. Sometimes when I looked at Keeya, I started to cry. Sometimes I ran away from her, not because I was angry with her, but because I could never *be* her.

Keeya and I held hands the next day. We knew every secret that surrounded us. We watched tumbleweed catch breath in the wind. In summer, the tumbleweed grew and fanned out, looking full and lush. In winter, it was nothing. It struggled in the wind like ghosts.

‘Look at this.’ Keeya started digging with her hands. The sand gave way as if it would not dare to resist her beauty by refusing her access to the soil. She dug, loosening a bulb. I didn’t know what it was, but I could see in her eyes that she did. Her eyes looked naughty. She fluttered her lashes at me. She pulled at the bulb until it sat in her hand like an egg.

‘Have you seen the baboons eat this?’

‘No,’ I said. I very seldom spotted baboons. They seemed to be my run-away animal.

‘They go crazy, Kay! Just *crazy!*’

‘I don’t think so. They know what to eat and what not to.’

‘I think we should take a bite. Just a little. See what would happen.’

I shook my head. No ways. I started walking away.

‘It’ll be fun. Maybe we’ll turn into something else.’

‘I don’t want to be something else.’

Keeya looked at me as though I had betrayed her. She knew perfectly well that I wanted to be someone else. She clicked her tongue.

‘Do whatever you want.’ She forced her lips together, and her cheeks puffed up. I didn’t like that look on her, but I didn’t say so. She carried on as if I wasn’t there.

‘But right in the middle is superhuman poison! It can kill you in a flash. Bam! Just like that.’ She carried on talking as if she wasn’t angry with me.

The egg in her hand had turned into a time bomb.

‘Let’s leave it.’ I didn’t want to take chances with poison or with something that might make me crazy in the head.

Keeya pulled a face again. This time there was a frown between her eyes.

‘Don’t be such a girl, Kay,’ she said, allowing her words to hurt me.

And then she threw the bulb to the side, as if the egg was rotten after all. When I told Ma, she scowled. I could feel my porcupine-skin wrinkle with goosebumps. ‘You two are alone together for far too long.’

I didn’t reply. I went to my room, wondering if I should have tried the bulb. But then which part would make you change into something else, and which part would kill you?

Kaycy, 32

The hall is packed. London. Who would have thought? Jaxon is on stage already, musical bow in hand. Its *ting-ting* sound isn’t really something I enjoy, but it reminds me of Keeya. My skin is dyed a dead yellow. It’s impossible to make it shine like Keeya’s, like honey from the veld. I wear a porcupine headdress, dark pink bows tie it at the back. I’ve asked the designer to add silver sequins to it. It shines in the light. When the violin begins to howl, I walk onto the stage. My leather panty is the only piece of clothing on my body. I’ve tucked my penis back between my legs, making the panty line smooth.

I creep into a corner. Then I dance to the middle of the stage. I am female. I am male. I am both. I am neither. I am I. I stand on sentry duty, the violin making that screech I know so well. As I imitate a silver fox, I see Keeya, her eyes bright, shouting, always knowing what I was mimicking before I even started.

‘Bullfrog!’

‘Tent tortoise!’

‘Gemsbok!’

The audience sits quietly and watches in wonder.

‘Wild dog! No? Bat-eared fox!’

To be a porcupine is hard, but I hope the quills on my forehead will help. I don’t feel those spikes anymore. They have become me and not me. They are on the outside now. And they cannot reach me from the inside any longer. I morph into the stillness of myself, my quills are proudly thrown back with my forehead touching the top circle of the stage light. I am everything. I am me. I am nobody, transparent. Invisible. Then visible, and loud, soft. I am everyone who watches. I am animal and young and old and male and female and nothing and everything.

The audience goes home. We catch a cab, fearing that my porcupine headdress might be used as a weapon against me on the underground. Jaxon takes it off at the hotel. His hands are as gentle as feathers. I exhale as I look in the mirror.

I laugh. I tickle Jaxon. A few friends come over. Jaxon lights candles and pours us drinks from the mini-bar. It feels easy. I am Kacey and I am Kay. I am child and I am adult. I am a visual artist, and I am free in my skin. I am a dancer, actor, creator. I am me.

But I mourn the absence of Ma and Harry's love. I will mourn it all my life.

Kay, 7

Keeya runs up the sand dune. She rolls down to me. The social weavers are causing a racket in the camel thorn tree.

'Must be a snake in that nest.' Keeya doesn't sound concerned. I am.

'What if it eats one?'

'Well, it has to eat, doesn't it?' She dusts the red ochre out of her hair. 'And there are about three hundred birds in that nest.'

I think of so many birds in one nest. Are they all happy in there? Do they help each other? Are they all at home? Will it be *home* if the snake eats the babies? I don't ask Keeya; she wouldn't understand these questions.

'I think we should go warn the birds.'

'Don't be stupid, Kay.' She hoists me up, and keeping my hand in hers, we run up the sand dune.

'Bushbaby!' I shout as she lets go of me and starts jumping.

'Do you sometimes wish for something, Kay?' Keeya's eyes are big. She seldom has questions. She mainly has answers. She knows everything, just everything.

'I do.' I'm thinking of my odd skin, but I don't think I can tell her yet.

'What can you wish for, you're...' I want to say 'beautiful' and 'perfect' and 'like honey' and, maybe, 'The Girl I Will Never Be.' But I don't.

'I wish to be white like you.'

She blushes right through her skin. I stare at her in amazement. I cannot imagine why.'

‘I want a garden and a spray to run in when the sun shines like fire. And I want my own bed.’

I do know that Keeya doesn’t have a garden, but it’s as if I’d never known. I don’t know how she falls asleep at night. Granny Senna usually tells me a story. Like where fire comes from or why the elephant has a trunk. I’m always under Auntie Fay’s boy-blue blanket she’d knitted for me when I was born. I don’t know what to say.

And then I say it.

‘And I wish I were you.’

I blurt it out without thinking.

Keeya laughs, her belly moving in and out beneath her ragged dress. She doesn’t believe me at first. She thinks I’m just copying her. Then she sees my eyes.

‘Let’s swop clothes!’

‘Oi, I’m not wearing boys’ clothes!’ She takes a step back as if she’s afraid of me.

I go on my knees. Her eyes become even bigger. She can see that I’m pleading.

‘Just this once.’

And then she takes the dress off. To me, it’s the most delicate thing I have ever seen. I leave my own clothes at my feet. I carefully and slowly pull the dress over my head. It smells of her. Like the smoke of a fire. And a little bit of a soil smell. I inhale again, and it smells of her skin. I look down at myself, and I feel like crying. I *am* crying. My porcupine quills have fallen out. I touch my skin, and I cannot believe it is mine. I feel like me for the first time. I am wearing a dress. I am a boy. And I feel whole. I feel like I’m a boy and a girl. I feel like the dry riverbed that starts flowing after the rain.

‘Touch me.’ I hold my arm out and Keeya pokes at it. This is real. Her belly button looks at me, a single eye. I rub my arms, my legs, sit, and hold one foot, then the other. Could this have been the only thing I ever needed to be me? A dress? I laugh at how easy it turned out to be. Keeya laughs with me. I look at her eyes. She thinks I look funny, ridiculous even. But the dress keeps me, and I do not mind. Not today. Today we laugh till we cannot laugh any longer.

‘Let’s roll in the sand.’ I want everything to touch my new skin.

We roll down, laughing. We almost crash, and when we reach the bottom, it’s where Ma finds us.

Kaycy, 32

I've spent a fortune. On sand. I've carted it to the city. Not bleak or white or grey or brown sand. Red sand, Kalahari sand. A glass case is illuminated on the stage. It's filled to the brim. Jaxon holds me.

'You okay?'

'This is the moment I become me. I have to.'

'You sure? It's also...'

'I know.'

Jaxon walks onto the stage with a drum he made himself. I saunter behind him. The stage is like fear.

My dress is of pure Egyptian cotton. It flares in the purple light. It sparkles at the hem. It clings to me, hugs me, keeps me. It makes a sound as I go, the sound of a social weaver flying in and out of its giant nest. It almost purrs. Jaxon watches me. He is worried, I can tell. The drumbeat reaches a jagged rhythm as if sound has launched itself into a sea of chaos.

Two stagehands tip the sand out of the glass casing. It falls, then trickles. For a moment, I want to stick my tongue out and taste the texture of the landscape that I love and will never see again. My heart stops. I bend down and start rolling in it. It feels as if I won't stop rolling. The discomfort of the heavy dress does not hold me back.

A gemsbok walks over the stage. An illusion, created with light. It looks at me, sniffs. My voice isn't going to make it, but I have to speak. Say these words. The words that made me break away. I sit in the sand. I trickle some of the sand through my fingers as I speak into the microphone that is tied to the inside of my dress.

'You're a boy, *my* boy. My fucking boy. Not a stupid girl.'

I take more sand. It trickles like thoughts.

'I can't love you. Not like this.'

I have many more lines. I know them by heart.

'I never want to see you in this, ever again, you understand?'

I can repeat the words in my sleep.

'You stop this bloody sissy nonsense. Right now.'

I lift my dress. It falls back into place. I can't speak. Jaxon leaves the drum. He gets off his chair. He comes to me. He bends down, and he sits with me. Red sand. I don't know what the audience is doing, but I do know that Jaxon is kissing me. I feel his warmth and his energy. His hand is in my neck, and I cry as I kiss him back.

Kay, 7

Harry doesn't mean to let go of the belt, but he does. The buckle cuts through skin. Blood. I've stopped screaming.

'If I ever see you in a dress again!'

Buckle. Blood. Buckle blood.

More than anything, I weep for Keeya not being allowed to play with me anymore. I stay behind Granny Senna's legs. I lock my room at night. The nightmares haunt me like vampires. I cannot sleep. I wish for Keeya's hard floor, for the five brothers and sisters next to her at night. I wish that she could suck the burn from my heart.

At five, Granny is awake. When I hear her shoes on the linoleum, I am next to her. The hen houses. Dog breath. Granny looks at my legs, but she says nothing. Every day she looks. Once she lifts my shirt. I hear her gasp.

'Just listen to them, Kay. Don't do it again. Promise me.' I crack the egg I am holding in my hand. The unhatched waste drips at my feet.

Kaycy, 34

Stage. No music. No lights. No illusion. No sand. No clothes. No dye. Just me. A knife. I cut into my thigh. I stand. I bleed. Curtains fall like abandoned love.

When the curtains open again, the stage is filled with abundance. The underground people of this city, the hopeless, the hopeful, those who live on the fringes, they are with me. Those who still feel the quills. Those who don't. They stand here. With me. We have chosen each other. We are weaver birds, in our new nest, high up in a mimosa tree. Music vibrates with the illusion of birds. I want to fly. The

brightness of lights and clothes shine on us, a celebration. We dance without worry. We are life. We are creativity. We are everything. We are each other. I project laughter into the sound system. Its carelessness fills the stage as if it could be touched. Colour fills us like water. Lights. Golden sequins fall on us.

Cleansing

Viola Konji

I look at myself in the mirror, examining the capsule that makes me. Mama holds my hair as she passes the blow-dryer through it. I watch as the roaring machine takes life from my curls. They become tame with no vibrant character. Sparkless. My neck flinches from the steam. I try my best to hold back my tears. I feel a burn on my scalp. I scream.

‘Ah! Ah! Ai! You are twelve years old. A big girl now! You cannot continue to have tantrums ‘cause of blow-dry. It will not eat you,’ Mama shouts at me over the noise.

‘But it burns me,’ I try to plead with her as I lose the fight to my tears.

‘If you had just agreed to relaxing your hair three months ago, we would not need to go through this process today,’ she says. ‘Or do you want it gone again?’ she yanks at my hair.

I stare at the pair of scissors on her desktop table. The same scissors she used on that dreadful day. After I had screamed and pushed the hairdresser. After Mama had to pay extra for her daughter was ‘a difficult client’. After Mama dragged me to the car in fury. After Mama kept shouting that she was tired of my *kichwa ngumu*. After Mama locked me in her room. Then she pinned me to her bed and used those same scissors to cut my hair. Every bit of length gone. Just patches. Even after I wailed and screamed and begged her to stop for she was causing me pain. Just like the hairdresser, Mama did not listen.

The bitter taste of that day has never left my mouth.

I glue my lips together and keep shut.

My hair is now straightened.

If my scalp was made to produce hard coils, and there are no mistakes in creation, then why is there a need for correction? These are not questions to ask Mama. I am not sure she has the answers to them herself.

Today I need to pretend. I need to act brave. I feel as if the relaxer will be a permanent mask. I need to be assured that at least one part of me will not be lost after today. I know I will just need drops of water to awaken my hair again. That brings me peace.

What I do not need are the thoughts of *her* to be with me today.

I felt like a fraud agreeing to Mama's proposal. I felt shame consume me as I sat through every class and read every verse. I felt judgement reciting the prayers we were taught. I felt doubt as I wrote how my name would appear on the baptism certificate.

But Baba now sleeps in the guestroom and Mama's breath is often of wine.

I want to be a source of their togetherness again.

I also hope that today will remove the thoughts of *her* from my head.

Mama leaves the room while I put on the white dress she had bought me. She had warned me not to wear it before the baptism, just as I should not be touched until I promise myself to someone, it must not be touched as it promises itself to the church. It does hide my sudden curves which have been a source of shyness, but it does make me feel beautiful. Beautiful and elegant.

I hope *her* eyes will see me like that today.

I smile at my vanity.

My eyes look across the room to the picture of the angel. No resemblance. I remember the Father telling us that we have a home above. A home of freedom and happiness. We just need to be cleansed. But there are no angels who look like me. There are no saints with the friction of my hair. To be cleansed does my skin have to go too? To the whiteness of my dress?

Will I be accepted at the Golden Gates in my black and white?

These are not questions to ask the Father. I am not sure he has the answers to them himself.

I hear a knock at the door. It is Baba.

'Wow! You look very smart!' he tells me. 'Give me a big smile!'

He pulls his phone from his pocket and takes a photo of me. The same phone that made Mama scream when she found pictures of the house-help. After the evening Mama had gone to the market. After Baba told me I was a big girl, I could spend time outside alone. After Baba gave me money to go buy sweets at the kiosk. After I found the kiosks closed and ran back home. After I heard Mama and

Baba's bed creaking. After I told Mama about the strange noises. Then Mama took his phone when Baba was at the shamba. They did not know I could hear their shouts about pictures. When I asked Mama to show me the following day, she said I was not big enough for that.

'My beautiful girl! You make me very proud,' Baba tells me as I show off all my teeth.

I prefer when we do not talk much with Baba. Usually, he only asks me if I have eaten and if I am full. He never asks if the food is tasty. He says that is irrelevant. What matters is that it is there and it can fill your stomach. He asks about my grades in school and if the teachers are nice. He says with good grades I will be able to buy all the dresses and toys I want with my own money. Even the sweets that Mama often hides from me.

The times we do talk much is when he is angry. He speaks to me as if he does not know me, as if I do not belong to him. His ears become irritated by my voice. He wounds me with his words. I would rather have the distance.

'Are you ready to go? We leave soon,' Mama says as she stands by the door.

'Yes, Mama.'

'The dress you bought looks very nice on her,' Baba tells Mama.

She just smiles and nods at his futile attempt to start a conversation – her only form of communication towards him now. She does not even look at him.

Baba leaves the room.

Mama comes in and combs my hair down. It is shoulder length. She says I look like a princess. She gives me a small white purse. It makes me feel quite grown up.

We leave after ten minutes. Mama drives us to Church. Baba stays behind. He will come to join us later. We used to journey everywhere together but the ambiance has changed too much for that.

White and blue balloons are everywhere. There are big tents outside with matching ribbons at the front and at the corners. A huge banner is near the Church doors.

*This water symbolizes Baptism, that now saves you,
not as a removal of dirt from the body
but as an appeal for a good conscience.*

Bouquets of flowers blooming. The Church looks beautiful. I guess it too wanted to look its best today.

The women greet and hug each other with smiles. At the back of their minds comparing and judging their children's dresses and suits. The children's home choir have their glee. The Church is ready to serve them food and give them donations for it does this during huge events. One of the things I like about church: it gives help to those in need. Does it come from a fear of being punished for they are obligated to do so, or altruism? Altruism in itself may be an act of selfishness, for in exchange of it, people hope to get a feeling of self-fulfillment. Does it really matter as long as the help is being delivered? These are not questions to ask The Sisters as they pick contributions from the congregation. I am not sure they have the answers to them themselves.

I follow my mother as she greets her churchmates before the service starts. I see my friends from the catechism classes talking with chitter and excitement.

In the middle of it all, I see *her*.

She is entralling.

She waves at me and the thoughts come. I touch my hair. Suddenly, I cringe at the texture, at the same time hoping she finds me beautiful. My heart wants to run to *her*. I crave to touch *her*. To be touched by *her*. My thoughts scatter. Her presence is enough to engulf me. Does she get the thoughts too? Am I a trigger for her as she is for me?

I hope so but then I hope not.

I was surprised when I saw her walk in the first day of the classes. Maybe she is trying to get rid of the thoughts too.

I see *her* walking towards me.

She greets Mama with her charismatic smile. Mama gives *her* a hug and compliments *her*.

She *is* beautiful.

'Come and join us,' she says to me as she grabs my hand.

'We will meet after the service,' Mama says to me.

I walk side by side with *her* to our friends.

I like the warmth and togetherness the classes created. I like the safety they sometimes make me feel. I enjoyed buying smokies together after every class. I enjoyed the games we would play. I enjoyed having people to play games with. I enjoyed listening to the stories the other children would tell.

People do not listen to my stories except *her*. Their faces turn stale as I speak. I do not know how to tell stories either way. I do not put the pieces and the puzzles in the right order. I add details and side notes that do not seem to matter. I do not know how to tell a story in summary. They intrigue *her* nevertheless. She makes the room quiet the rare times I get the courage to speak. Dare anyone that tries to talk over me.

She laughs.

She listens.

I feel heard. I did not know what that felt like until I met *her*. I am not a spectator with *her*.

I am participating. I fully belong.

I never used to have the thoughts for *her*.

She used to be just a girl in the neighbourhood. Then we began to talk. We began to become friends. We began to share. She began to show that she cared. She began to show that she understood. The gulp of fear I have when I am with people, I swallow when I am with *her*. My words are easy to articulate to *her*. Her personality overwhelms me in the most beautiful way I have ever felt. I am in awe of *her*. In the warmth of *her* nurture is when the thoughts began to appear. That was when I became so drawn to *her*. It is not even *her* beauty that brings the attraction to me but the connection between us. That is something I have never understood.

I see that she is wearing the bracelet. The same bracelet that I gave her after we had played kaati. After I was worried Mama would pinch my ears for my socks being so dirty. After we walked back home with *her*. Then she asked me the question.

‘You get quiet at times. What is it you feel?’

I was scared to answer for, really, I did not have the words. ‘I do not know,’ I said. ‘I mean I do know but explaining it outside of myself seems not to make sense.’

‘Okay then. What does it feel like?’ she said, refusing to let go.

I looked at her in confusion.

She laughed.

‘You cannot tell me what it is, but you can tell me what it is like,’ she went on.

I surrendered. I looked down and took a deep breath.

‘It feels as if my heart is trying to escape from me. It bangs at my chest causing my head to thud. Everything within me and around me feels loud. All I can do is sit in silence and wait for it to calm down.’

I looked up at her expecting bewilderment and concern.

But—

She reached out for my hand and smiled.

I love her smile.

‘And yet just like the sun, you rise up for another day and try your best,’ she told me. ‘Let’s go buy smokie pasua. I am hungry. My treat,’ she continued as she pulled me to walk.

What I was afraid to add was that when I am with her, my heart wants to remain. It is calm. It is quiet. It is as if it too wants to experience her presence.

The thoughts are wrong. The thoughts are condemned.

I should not be having the thoughts for her.

That is what the Book that the Father read to us, said in every class we went to. That is what the Father says in almost every sermon Mama takes me to. I cannot be here today, in this dress that Mama saved money to buy, waiting to be baptized, allowing myself to have the thoughts.

The service is about to start. I see Baba’s car come into the Church’s parking lot. He waves at me as he goes inside. We begin to form a line.

‘We should walk side by side as we enter the Church,’ she tells me with a smile.

She holds my hand and leads me to the back of the line.

‘You look scared. Are you ok? Is the huge crowd making your heart try to escape you?’ she asks me as she laughs in a caring way.

For that was our language.

‘Yes, I am. It is just a big day today,’ I answer her.

She squeezes my hand.

The thoughts intensify.

I try to fight them.

Guilt attacks me.

Maybe I should not be here today.

The hymns begin. The line moves. We gradually walk inside as the melodies hit the atmosphere. Mama and Baba sit next to each other. I smile at them as Baba takes pictures of me with his phone. Mama smiles back at me with so much pride.

I want to be here. I want to belong; but the thoughts give me a feeling of being an imposter. People with my thoughts are not accepted here. Why are my thoughts equated to those who kill or even those deemed to be of greater sin.

Can the congregation hear my thoughts?

Can their eyes look deep within me and see my fear?

Maybe I should not be here today.

We are lined up at the altar. The Father welcomes the congregation. The bucket of baptism water and a branch of leaves are brought to him. I hope the readings are true; the water will remove the thoughts. The water will make me new. I remember the taunts we are told that people who still go to the altar with sins are not cleansed by the water but burned by it. My heart races. I wonder if there is fear inside *her* too.

We are told to kneel.

We follow.

The Father places one hand over us.

He shouts a prayer for us to the congregation.

He dips the branch in water.

He splashes us.

I close my eyes as I wait for the droplets to hit me.

The Smell of Water

Rafiat Lamidi

I

Dream

The stars are trapped like bubbles in a transparent bottle of light. Each star is a world of its own connected to the others by great speed. Ray holds her breath in prostration while praying. Afterwards, she raises her head to see a world before her changing rapidly. Memories and dreams intersperse with sleep, forming an eternity of portals. She closes her eyes to let go, opening them inwards. She finds herself in a room, breathing. It is almost morning or it is already morning. It looks like dawn or dusk but she cannot tell. The room is dark and cold. There is a small patch of light falling in from behind the curtain covering the only window to the room. Ray is standing right behind the curtain, breathing. The wind enters through the window, blows the curtain towards her. She feels air entering her lungs and going back. The curtain recedes. The room is breathing too. She touches the wall and feels it touching her back. This is what it means to be alive. To go forth and back and still remain. To exist as something while disappearing, splitting into different things.

II

Present

The stars are here again and they look like sprinkled white dust. The clouds hold them and they feel whole as a map. Ray is alone outside her room in the school hostel. She watches the night sky in admiration. She dreams of different worlds and she feels comforted, less alone. She goes back into her room and reads. She remembers a memory of someone calling out to her. She remembered only the voice and the form of this person. She does not remember the face or the name no matter how hard she tries. There is a table at the center of her room. On the table, there is a golden purse. In the purse, there are seven bronze coins. Each coin is worth two naira. She picks up the purse and pours out the coins to count. They are complete. She returns them. *This world is real*, she thinks.

It was all a dream she remembered.

III

Water Bleeds Time

Things fall into water all the time. Like an image draining off memory. Like words broken into pieces becoming only incomprehensible parts. Materials are swallowed by water all the time and they do not drown, especially when they are water-bound. The first time Ray heard about the water-bound people, she felt relieved. She realised that she was not alone and that there was a possibility that someone could finally understand her.

Ray dreams within a star. She hears the familiar voice again. This time, the voice sounded distorted like it came from under water. Someone is drowning.

Water-bound people dream of rain all the time. They carry it in their bones for relief, like they carry their pain. Hidden behind grey clouds, thunder and lightning, they release it when they need to. But water is brutal. It moves and changes form quickly. It sways with the wind and shuts out every burning fire. It soaks the earth. It drowns. Ray wonders if she is like that, drowning people away.

She wonders if that is why most people prefer not to come closer to her.

She feels a bit lonely.

Someone is still drowning, calling out her name.

IV

Love

'Love is always slipping away. Love is always slipping away from me,' Ray said while holding the hands of the person she loved. She'd hoped that time would never end in that moment as she stared into the eyes of her lover. She woke up from the dream sweating while trying to remember the face of the person she saw. She was shaken with the intensity of what she felt, how it consumed her, how she was the one doing the consumption and the one being consumed. She was confused about why she loved someone whose face she did not know. She checked the time on her phone. It was 6:00 a.m. and she could hear the searing voice of the muezzin reciting the azan. When she looked outside, she saw that the stars were still very bright within the blue sky. She went into the bathroom to perform ablution in

preparation for the morning prayer. While pouring water on her face, the image of a familiar face flashed into her memory and went away as quickly as it came. She felt a sudden and sharp pain in her chest like she always did whenever she needed to face a truth she did not want to see. It reminded her of the time she had to confess to her roommates that she was still bedwetting in boarding school. She felt naked, exposed and frightened at the same time. To calm herself, she continued her ablution and went to pray. After prayer, she burst into tears like a heavy weight were being lifted off her. This was when she knew. She remembered everything.

V

Truth Holds Us Like Freedom Running into Undeterminable Beauty

The first time Ray saw her was at a friend's birthday party. She followed her roommate to the party out of being tired of staying alone indoors as she had been doing for a while. She was following her mum's advice that the university was a place to form lifelong friendships. However, Ray found it hard to connect with anyone. She felt like she was the only human model God made of her because it was hard finding anyone who understood her. She thought that she never would until she met her. She saw her that night when she came in looking all radiant like she was the sun and everyone else were the planets revolving around her. Ray saw herself as the observer, not qualified enough to exist as an object in the world of this light before her. The beauty of the sun floored her completely but the easiest thing to do was to look away. So she did.

Later when her roommate and some other girls started discussing, she realised that they were talking about the girl.

She is such a fine girl, oh. I wish my brother could marry her so we can have fine babies in my family.'

'You are not okay. Just go and kidnap her then.'

'Wow. I don't think I have seen someone this beautiful in a long time'

They talked endlessly. Ray could not keep up with it. She moved to another side of the hall that was more isolated. She came to the party but could not find someone like-minded to talk to. She felt weighed down by a familiar loneliness and she leaned into it.

The next day was a Friday and Ray went to the mosque to pray Jumat. When it was time for prayer and everyone stumbled to arrange themselves in rows, she looked beside her and saw the girl again. This moment seemed unreal to her. She knew that the girl wore a turban the last time she saw her but did not think that she was a Muslim too. The girl smiled at her and Ray realised her mistake. She discovered that she was not just an observer. She was at least a star in the girl's solar system. A star like the girl, even if not as radiant as she was. After the prayer, the girl asked her to stay and they chatted like long lost friends meeting each other again.

They talked about religion and academics and back to religion again. It was interesting being enamoured with someone. This was the first time Ray felt this way, like she was on an adventure with someone. She did not realise it then. She was still naïve trying to make sense of everything she felt.

VI

Memory in Poetry, Truth Scattered in Form

She remembered. The girl's face appeared in Ray's memory again and she could feel everything. The rush of emotions, the fear, the pain, the pleasure and the calm that came after. She could not remember the name which was so important to her but at least she saw the face. She proceeded to draw that face but it didn't materialise on paper no matter how hard she tried. All she could remember was her smell that reminded her of petrichor, the colour yellow, some sunflowers in her hair, the taste of something indescribably sweet on her skin. All the things she could not hold but only felt kept coming up. And then she hated herself for forgetting. She hated herself for forgetting someone so important.

VII

When a Person Holds You in Paradise

At the mosque, Ray meets the girl.

'Hey, my name is Firdaus. I saw you at the party yesterday,' she says, smiling down at me as I take her outstretched hand. It felt soft and I wanted to hold on to it longer but I couldn't.

‘I am Rayhana.’ I wanted to stop the conversation so I could proceed with my reading of Surah Al-Kahf which I had been trying to finish all day.

But she continued: ‘Do you know I stay in the room beside you? I see you every morning when you go outside to perform ablution. You never notice me but I see you. I also perform ablution there too, though I get there earlier than you do most of the time. I think you almost always miss fajr.’

Wow, you do monitor my movements, don’t you? I just end up sleeping late most of the time and it’s unintentional. Will you wake me up from now on,’ I said jokingly after gaining a bit of confidence owing to her openness towards me.

‘I guess I will be your personal alarm from today onwards.’ She said that laughing, but the next day at 6:00 a.m., she came knocking at my door, waking me for fajr.

VIII

Indescribable Feeling

The first time I wrote a poem about love was violent. I wrote about swallowing and drowning the person I loved. It seemed everything I wanted was to overcome the other person. The second time made me sad because it was tragic loving someone seemingly greater than you. Someone whose love you never completely realise that you deserve. The first time Firdaus held my hand, I folded into pieces, unable to keep myself as one. The first time she kissed me, I was eclipsed and I thought the world was going to end. It didn’t. The world stood still as I fell. I didn’t know what I was falling into, but it felt like freedom. It felt like truth and I wanted to keep falling forever.

IX

Naming

‘I am going to call you Ray from now on,’ she says, hands deep in my curly hair, detangling it. ‘It cannot be mistaken for Rihanna and it really fits you. What do you think?’

‘I love whatever name you give me, babe. I just want to sleep in your cuddly arms,’ I say, stretching and yawning.

‘Alright, you’ll do that when we are done here. You need to take good care of your hair.’

‘I don’t need to do so much when I have you,’ I reply, hugging her left arm.

She kisses my forehead. ‘Goodnight, Ray. Goodnight, baby.’

X

The Tornado Effect

I saw a man standing at the edge of the road on my way home. I thought he seemed so much like a character from a story I was yet to write. He stood there in a black suit and tie, wearing brown leather shoes and carried a randomly patterned white and black bag. I passed by him and thought that he seemed too familiar. I had never met him. I did not know who he was.

After many years of losing contact with Firdaus, I met her in a queue for the ATM in Ile-Ife. She was standing in front of me looking like something I imagined. I did not remember her but she remembered me. She always held me in her heart even when she had to leave. Even when I got angry and cut all contact with her because I could not imagine her leaving me. I thought I could abandon her, and I did, but she held on to me. She latched onto my memory and kept pulling me into dreams reminding me of the life we lived. Suddenly, the imperfection and impossibility of everything we were told we were became vivid. My mind turned into an open door and all our memories rushed through.

She turned to look at me, radiance embodied in being. Still, she opened her arms wide and engulfed me.

A Pillowcase of Beans

Hugo ka Canham

To shut out the noise, he closed his eyes. Unbidden, he was transported to the lake of his childhood. His reflection looked back at him from the still water. He did not have lipstick then, but the face looking back at him from the water wore scarlet lipstick.

‘So, you want to be a woman? You will be a real woman in jail.’

The water rippled and he returned to the present. A string of denouncing statements rang out over the din of laughter and loud jeering from the throngs of people waiting outside the courthouse. The noise reinforced the loneliness of the moment. Teddy’s shackled hands reached out for his lover, partner, and now his accomplice and prison mate for the next fourteen years. His hands found the firm dry ones of Goodwill and for a moment their handcuffs grated against each other before their hands tightened in a protective grasp. This was met by a loud booing by the watching crowd. Mercifully, the officious policemen, also participants in this spectacle, frog-marched them into the waiting police vehicle that would take them to Blantyre Prison. The door had been barely bolted behind them when the vehicle sputtered and sped off in a cloud of diesel fumes. Teddy caught a fleeting sight of the jubilant crowd through the iron mesh covering the windows. And like a mirage, he made out Goodwill’s aged mother standing apart from the on-lookers. Her ashen cheeks were streaked with tears that glistened in the bleak autumn sun. Then she was gone. Beside him, Goodwill breathed heavily and slowly exhaled while his eyes fluttered open to rest on his partner’s kanga-clad legs. The eyes that did not meet his gaze now were the same ones that had held his firmly throughout the ordeal of the public humiliation that was their court case.

Although short, the case that decided their fate was punctuated by several postponed court appearances. High-level government officials, local and international organisations, activists, and the ordinary people of Malawi had provided the backdrop to the saga through the newspapers, television and radio stations. The holding cells for prisoners awaiting trial had been their home for over four

months since late December the previous year. Public servants and the unemployed had not tired of greeting them with jeers every time they made their walk of shame in and out of the courthouse. Deepening his shame, Teddy was not allowed to change clothes and had to appear in court in the kanga and mauve floral blouse that he had first worn to his commitment ceremony. While the pair had not held out much hope, the day of the finding and sentencing came on them suddenly. The Information Minister had made the government's position clear on the matter.

'The people of Malawi are governed by rules and laws not unlike any civilised country. We are unashamedly Christian and we will not brook interference from other countries whose sovereignty we do not challenge. Unnatural acts are wrong and must be punished.'

The magistrates' sentencing sounded alarmingly similar to the minister's condemnation. On the day of the sentencing the chief magistrate of the district, Mr Moyeni, did not mince his words. He breezed into the courthouse while the packed room stood to attention. The white hairpiece, a throwback to the English legal system that Malawians clung to, did not disguise the huge forehead that presided over his face, creating a shadow on his otherwise unremarkable features. He was fat yet thin at the same time. These concurrent extremes cohabited unattractively on his tall bearing. Goodwill and Teddy were the last to be seated.

To the onlooker, they represented the worst possible sin but they also looked like two vulnerable little boys. The interpreter, who usually looked bored, allowed his eyes to dart about excitedly. He smelled blood and this brought some joy to his otherwise unhappy existence. Like his face, his clothes were dark brown, and to Teddy, he looked like a round mass of brown.

The magistrate began. He spoke at length about the arguments that had been presented to him throughout the trial. He began with the State's case against Teddy and Goodwill. He laid it out, layer by layer so that it was soon a mountain of evidence. The duo appeared to have broken every law in the law books of the State of Malawi. By loving each other and acting upon that love, it seemed they had trampled upon the Constitution of the land, including casting the country in a bad light and setting an atrocious example for the youth. He had not completed enumerating the State's attack on their behaviour when he announced the recess.

Teddy and Goodwill shuffled to their feet with the throngs behind them as the magistrate took leave of the house. The break saw them back at the holding cell.

Presently they were marshalled back to the courtroom. The crowd returned but their voluminous chattering was reduced to a murmur when the magistrate returned with his black cloak spread like Superman behind him. He sat down before the rest of the court was instructed to sit.

The defence's case, when finally it was presented, sounded pithy and weak in comparison to the State's submission. The magistrate said as much. The attorney representing the pair sat with them, his head slightly bowed. He made no eye contact with either the magistrate or his clients. He had been assigned the case by the State and had unwillingly taken it on. He was afraid of the damage that defending homosexuals would inflict on his career. Although staying below the radar in this case was impossible, every utterance and appearance that he made was driven by the desire not to be seen. The brown interpreter made a great deal of relaying the Chichewa spoken by the magistrate in officious English. This was in spite of the fact that everyone understood Chichewa. The magistrate rounded up his summary of the defence's case. The sentencing would be delivered after the lunch recess.

The on-lookers swarmed to the takeaway stalls across the road. Food hawkers conducted a thriving trade of the very popular chicken heads and pork trotters. The smells of deep-fried foods assailed the senses. Beers were gulped down before the drinkers rushed back to the courtroom. The magistrate looked decidedly energised after a full day's work. He stated that he had no choice but to concur with the state prosecutor and the Malawian government's reading of the crimes of the two sitting before him. They had indeed brought the country into disrepute and had broken laws that clearly spelt out that homosexual activity was forbidden.

'I, therefore, sentence you to fourteen years in prison,' he concluded.

There was a burst of thunderous applause and cheering. The court assistant and magistrate did not bother to ask for order. The magistrate rose to his feet. The wig on his head had ridden back a little to expose the large forehead that appeared to continue all the way to the back of his head. He walked out, leaving Teddy and Goodwill shattered.

There is a middle place between something planned and yet spontaneous. Looking back, Teddy is uncertain about how it is that a day that he had longed for and envisaged in his mind's eye for so long had turned out so differently to what he'd thought it would be. Even though he had not known it at the time, it had been three years in the making.

It all began at the river. Goodwill was leisurely driving the cattle towards the river for a final drink before steering them homewards. The sun was tumbling towards the peaked skyline. Shadows chased each other behind the six cows he drove. In the crimson glow of that time of day, he made out a clutter of women at the stream. They were drawing water and rhythmically loading their buckets. Then he saw him. Barely a silhouette, hovering somewhere between man and woman, boy and girl, Teddy was heaving a bucket onto his head.

The light banter was muffled by the sound of the cattle's hooves against the ground, their heavy breathing, and the sound of occasional tugs of grass and swooshing tails. The group was now walking up the path away from the stream in single file. Goodwill soon made out that the giggles were about him. He kept his eyes on the form of the feminine man among the women. Although he didn't know it then, his steadfast gaze was piqued by more than simple curiosity about the man on the other side of his gaze. He couldn't quite make out the colour of the sarong jauntily tied around the object of his interests' slim waist in the rapidly approaching dusk. The man nearly lost his footing. This sent the girls into a fit of laughter. The arm that flew up to steady the bucket on his head was well-formed. The blouse was taut against his chest.

The cattle had started drinking and Goodwill called out and shooed them away from the communal drinking area from which the group trudging away had just drawn their water. When they were comfortably drinking at a lower part of the stream, he stole a look over his shoulder and with rising disappointment realised that the group had disappeared over the rise of the hill.

As they neared his home, Teddy was also thinking about Goodwill. He chuckled to himself when he thought about his near fall resulting from stealing sidelong glances at the man that had been herding cattle. Teddy thought he recognized Goodwill. A more accurate account was that he vaguely knew of him. He was from the big family in the neighbouring village across the river. Even from the distance of

his own nondescript home, Teddy could make out the disappearing silhouettes of the tall gum trees that marked the parameters of the big yard that was Goodwill's home.

Teddy did not know the man's name yet, but he was already formulating a plan to find it out as he transferred the water from his bucket into the drum. The candlelight flickered and his shadow danced until the flame came to a standstill.

The next day he set off to the neighbouring village with a pillow case laden with about two kilograms of beans taken from the family harvest storage room. He approached two houses in the vicinity of Goodwill's home. He chose both houses because they did not appear to have poultry. At the first house he enquired from an old woman basking in the sun on a grass mat.

'I have beans for barter with eggs. Do you have any eggs?'

The old woman shook her head regretfully. She pointed him to the gum tree-enclosed household. 'The house over there may have eggs.'

But before heading to the big house, he tried at another house that also appeared not to have any poultry. He received the same result accompanied by an insult about his effeminate mannerisms.

He walked away leaving the fat woman discussing the impending end of the world with her thin husband. He compelled himself to carry through his plan even though a major part of him was filled with hesitation and sudden dread. Teddy was welcomed by a gang of barking dogs in the yard of the big house. He was about to back out when an adolescent boy came running out to chase the dogs away. He threw a stone at the barking dogs and a high yelping sound from the retreating dogs indicated that he had hit one. The boy disappeared behind one of the rooms and suddenly Teddy was alone in the strange yard. He clutched at his bundle of beans and then slowly placed it on the grass at his feet.

The boy must have gone off to call someone older. After what seemed like a lifetime, a man emerged from the shadows of the trees. The sun shone onto Teddy's face and kept that of the approaching person obscured. When he spoke, Teddy knew it was him. He doesn't remember the words spoken but recalls that he quickly recited his line about bartering beans for eggs. The figure before him was clad in a grey jersey and frayed jeans. The jersey sleeves were halfway up the strong forearms suggesting that Goodwill had been working on something before the interruption.

‘Ah, beans. We always need beans. Our garden doesn’t yield half as much as it should.’ His teeth gleamed. Teddy smiled his relief at finding Goodwill home and reached for the bundle of beans at his feet. ‘Maybe you should put your beans against the wall,’ Goodwill said, gesturing towards the house around which the youngster had disappeared with the dogs. ‘My mother and brothers’ wives are in the maize field so we will have to go and gather the eggs ourselves,’ he said walking in the direction of the circle of animal enclosures.

Teddy placed the beans where he’d been asked to and ran after Goodwill. The pigs grunted in their pen as they walked by. Goodwill’s pace was fairly fast and Teddy felt a hint of disappointment that his time with him would be rushed. Tall weeds and shrubs grew between the empty sheep pen and the cattle enclosure.

At first Teddy couldn’t make out the hens but he saw them when Goodwill bent over a short disguised enclosure and startled some brooding hens into appalled shrieks. ‘Here they are, but the trick is for you to find the eggs. I’m not sure which of these five hens has the fresh eggs because some must be due to hatch soon. You might be lucky though because there may be hens that have not begun sitting yet.’ Goodwill stood back and folded his arms with a wayward grin on his face. And then, seeming to suddenly remember that he had not introduced himself to the shy boy on the egg search, he reached out his hand.

‘Forgive me, I am Goodwill.’

Teddy placed his smaller hand in the proffered one with a surprising cockiness. ‘Nothing to forgive. Good to meet you. Again. I am Teddy,’ he said with a grin.

Their hands remained in the handshake as their eyes drank each other with an intense curiosity. An irritated hen clucked them out of the gaze that had locked their eyes together. Teddy spent the next hour in a blissful state that had little to do with lifting angry hens off their eggs and poking around to find hidden eggs in the underbrush of the hedges and weeds.

The movement of Teddy’s wrist fascinated Goodwill. The little knife was expertly wielded over the chicken. Then he deftly gripped the drumstick with the left hand while the right snipped the skin off.

‘But I like chicken skin,’ protested Goodwill.

‘You’ll like it this way more,’ Teddy responded, unfazed. ‘In any case, I know what you like,’ he said giggling.

He owned this space. ‘Boil the water and add it to the pot.’

‘This is clearly a gourmet meal being prepared here,’ Goodwill quipped.

‘You bet. Your man is cooking you a meal better than any in the city of Blantyre’s up-market restaurants. And you will enjoy it,’ he said, bouncing the knife threateningly on his palm.

Goodwill burst out laughing while Teddy doubled over clutching his kanga trying to stifle his laughter. Their eyes met and the laughter died, prematurely extinguished by the intrusion of the ever present realisation that they lived in a world that frowned on their joy and, specifically, in the village where many generations of their families had resided. They lowered their eyes thinking that even their laughter was a desecration of a way of life. The internal and external animosity shut down their laughter. Teddy dried his hands on a dish towel and asked Goodwill to pass the mayonnaise to him. Goodwill unscrewed the lid and silently handed it over. The time that he had spent as a dishwasher in a Blantyre restaurant had not been totally wasted. He cast his eyes around the kitchen. Although Teddy was preparing a meal to rival any of the city’s sophisticated chefs, the kitchen in which he worked was a far cry from a city kitchen.

He cast his eyes back at Teddy and again couldn’t hide his amazement at the grace with which he moved. He bent over the pot with his behind slightly protruding as he vigorously stirred the contents. He dunked his index finger into the steaming pot and delicately held it out to Goodwill to taste. Goodwill held his gaze as he lowered his mouth over the tantalising finger. Teddy withdrew the finger when he felt the tongue teasing it.

‘If you want to eat burned food, you can distract me,’ he quipped while heading back to the pots simmering on the stove. ‘Pass me another plate.’

The smell of chicken was beginning to seep into the room. Goodwill made out the slightest hint of apricot jam – bittersweet with lemon juice, garlic, ginger and unnamed spices playing on his tongue.

Teddy began removing the chicken from the steaming pot. He transferred it into a pan sizzling with hot oil. The oil hissed loudly as each piece was delicately placed in the pan. His forehead gleamed as he

shook spices onto the chicken pieces. He was soon withdrawing the chicken again and placing it back into the pot. All the while he appeared to move with the grace of a dancer and a boxer rolled into one. Goodwill reached out and twisted the knob of the radio, increasing the volume so that Piksy's *Unamata* was heard over the din of the pots and pans jingling about the stove and counter surface.

Without looking back from the stove, Teddy said, 'Please refill the juice.'

Goodwill did as he was bidden. He was out of his depth in this space and he would not dare to disobey the curt instructions couched as requests. The scent of garlic and onions assailed his senses and he realised that he was very hungry. The rice was steaming and would need a few minutes more. The song came to an end and the DJ began talking. Goodwill lowered the volume to a background murmur.

He watched as Teddy made a kitchen homerun. All three pots were ready at the same time. Teddy lifted off the lids and placed them on the now cluttered counter.

'Come and see your man's work, baby,' he said.

Goodwill bent over the steaming pots taking on the varying aromas and colours.

'Looking good, looking good,' he beamed at Teddy.

'Who's your mama, boy?' Teddy said, swatting him with a dish cloth.

Teddy bustled around, taking out plates and cutlery. They sat down and were beginning to eat when the door opened. Teddy's mother walked in.

'The smell of your cooking called me back from the maize field...' She broke off mid-sentence when she saw Goodwill. 'Oh. I didn't realise that you had a guest.'

Without giving Teddy a moment to facilitate the introduction, she reached out her hand and bowed slightly. 'I am the fancy chefs' mother, Mamwambi. You can call me, Ma.'

With Goodwill in a half-standing, half-seated position, they shook hands. 'The Americans love a firm hand shake. Have you been abroad?' she asked, chuckling.

Goodwill smiled back, unsure about whether or not to return to his seat near his lover. He didn't quite know what to make of Teddy's mother's comments which lay before him like unsolvable ancient riddles leaving his face searing with heat. Solving the dilemma, Teddy, who had until now been a spectator to the scene of his mother meeting his lover in her kitchen, brightened up and asked his

mother to take a seat across from himself and Goodwill. He bustled around for a moment and returned to the table with a plate and a spoon for his mother.

‘My son knows his unsophisticated mother will not eat with the knives and forks that you kids use,’ she said sitting down gingerly as though suddenly remembering a backache. She ladled some food into her plate, bowed her head, murmured grace, and spooned pumpkin into her mouth.

As though carrying on an old conversation, she asked, ‘So what do you think of the American evangelists all over Malawi?’

Not waiting for an answer from either of them, she went on and gave her opinion: ‘I am grateful for a number of things that America has made possible, but I cannot handle how they impose their brand of religion on us. In exchange for the school that they have built, we must attend their church services and get force-fed their versions of wrongs and rights. There are many certainties and uncertainties in our ways of doing things. They can’t seem to understand that the certainties are merely to ground us and uncertainties work for us and help us adapt to life.’

Her glistening eyes were locked with her son’s. Teddy understood his mothers’ message. He represented an uncertainty that she embraced. He smiled at her.

The moment was not lost on Goodwill who watched the pair with a mixture of envy and wonder.

‘The food is delicious but it’s going to be cold if I don’t hush and eat up.’

Teddy itched and for the umpteenth time fantasised about a hot bath and change of clothing. Forcing his mind from the discomfort of the vehicle taking him to a life of prison, he conjured up the bittersweet memory of his commitment ceremony. The best and worst day of his twenty-two years of life. The commitment ceremony would probably not have occurred in the manner in which it had, had it not been for their short stint in Blantyre. Stolen moments searching for eggs, herding cattle on deserted hillsides, going swimming in forsaken and faraway rivers, and furtive lovemaking in the high maize fields. All of these had been intense and scintillating times, but in sober moments they were struck by the fear of discovery.

There was no reference point for their love. There were no forerunners that they were aware of. Life in the rural villages rolled on at a pace set centuries ago. Love between men was not part of the rural script. It was silently forbidden but no one could point to why it was illicit. Goodwill both loved and feared Teddy's effeminacy. He noted a rising sense of self-loathing in the second year of their relationship. He both embodied and resembled the only form of masculinity of his family and community. The relationship with Teddy was a betrayal and denial of his legacy and way of life. Without verbalising it, it was equivalent to turning on his mother and father and telling *them* that had given and taught him what he was – 'No, thank you. You are liars that don't know what you spawned.'

If it had been a choice, he had had no hand in it and would have gladly undone it. He always laughed bitterly when people said that sexuality was a choice. A preference. But he couldn't undo it because try as he did, he could not stop loving and desiring Teddy. Rejecting Teddy felt like a self-amputation. He couldn't bear to witness Teddy's depression when he tried to talk him out of the relationship. It was like breaking his own heart into a million shards and fragments. When Teddy urged him to run off with him to the city of Blantyre, against his own judgement, convictions, and commitments to his ageing parents, he agreed.

Blantyre had not been an easy city.

Teddy washed dishes at a restaurant and Goodwill worked as a fruit vendor at the fruit and vegetable market. It had been a joyous discovery to see other people like them. These people lived in the shadows but unlike in the rural villages, at least they lived. Teddy and Goodwill slipped in and out of the shadows. They had heard of the political underworld, now they experienced the homosexual underworld first hand. It had dark moments but the light moments were bright. Men of all shapes and sizes that loved each other fiercely. Women that held other women's hands and declared their love for each other. Long conversations that went deep into the night. Parties filled with dancing, gossip, flirting. This all constituted a mutual recognition which Goodwill had never experienced or dreamed possible. While Goodwill had moments of discomfort, Teddy took to this life like a duck to water. Even as the police actively sought out hidden sexualities, this did not diminish the liberation experienced by the young lovers. Goodwill was especially worried about Teddy because he mostly

'forgot' to disguise his sexuality. Marshalling him was not always easy because it carried an implicit judgement and bore both Goodwill's prejudice and that of the world. It is not easy to tell someone that you love to ease up on a part of who they are.

Even with the ever-present agony of having run off from their families, the five months spent in Blantyre had been the best time of their lives. Teddy and Goodwill attended an acquaintance's commitment ceremony in the depths of the underworld. Teddy was sold on the idea. He cried and swooned at the possibility that he too could one day get married. Their time in Blantyre ended abruptly, when all three of Goodwill's brothers suddenly appeared and forcibly returned with him to his home village. Adrift without his guiding star and source of sustenance, Teddy soon followed and returned to his home. His mother embraced him and asked no questions. She embalmed the wound with silence. And yet it continued to fester because of other silences. Still and deep like the waters of Lake Malawi.



Teddy feels the bitter taste of bile rising to his mouth as the prison vehicle meanders up the hill towards the distant prison gates. Goodwill sits sullenly across from him, eyes closed. Yet, Teddy knows that he cannot be asleep. Not at this moment. It was not possible to fall asleep on the jolting corrugation of the road. It was impossible to sleep when the demons raged in his head without respite. Again he forcibly returns his mind to the ceremony that both made and destroyed him.

It had been a bit of a spur of the moment decision. It was Christmas day and Teddy had not set eyes on Goodwill since the day that his brothers had taken him away three months ago. They had not spoken either. Teddy's efforts had gone unrequited. He walked the paths where they had walked. He scoured the hillsides hoping to meet him herding cattle. He swam in the lakes and rivers remembering happier swims. He kept his head in the water and surfaced sputtering for air. The maize fields were empty.

Unable to bear the joviality of Christmas at his village, Teddy had once again filled his bag with beans and made for the house on the hilltop of the neighbouring village. This time, however, he had not walked in at the main entrance to the yard. The rising smoke and voices in the yard suggested that

there were people this time around. Instead, he had sat down at the bottom of the garden, obscured from the path and house. The sun was beginning to set and he was half on his feet getting ready to return home when he heard a rumbling through the tall grass. Suddenly the dogs were on top of him, barking and bearing their teeth. He kicked out and his leg made contact with a wet snout. A sharp pain followed. He was now surrounded by four raging dogs. The voice which cut across the din may have been shouting all along, but now all four dogs and Teddy heard it. The dogs reluctantly drew back. Their barking was only marginally reduced, but the figure that had stopped them from tearing Teddy apart strode forward and cursed them quiet.

‘Oh Lord, it is you,’ Goodwill had said with bewilderment. Teddy was not sure what lurked behind the statement.

‘Yes. It is me.’ He gathered his tattered wrapper from the ground and fastened it around his waist.

He felt an uncontrollable anger rise up through his body. He had begun to walk away and he felt the wetness of tears coursing down his cheeks.

‘Hey, wait up, Teddy,’ Goodwill called, running after him.

Teddy marched on but was forced to pause when he felt an urgent tug on his sleeve.

‘You forgot your beans,’ Goodwill said, managing to look tortured and happy at the same time. Teddy grabbed the bag and flung it across his shoulder.

‘I’m sorry. About the dogs. About Blantyre and about here.’ And then Goodwill’s bombshell: ‘They are marrying me off.’

Teddy stood still, his face impassive. But something was withering inside. In a low, trembling voice that he didn’t recognise, he said, ‘Marry me.’

Goodwill stared at him.

‘Marry me,’ Teddy repeated.

The dogs whined. Teddy became aware of the setting sun and the night insects striking up their chorus.

‘Yes.’ Goodwill’s face was incredulous. ‘Yes, I will marry you.’

The bag of beans fell onto the ground as they covered the space between them to embrace.

‘I don’t have eggs for those beans,’ Goodwill murmured before succumbing to Teddy’s kiss.

It was night when they reluctantly arose from the high grass. Goodwill had sent the dogs home much earlier when it had become apparent that he was not leaving just yet.

‘What time is it?’ Teddy asked.

He snuggled up against Goodwill again as though allowing any distance would result in his disappearance. Goodwill shrugged and looked at the sky.

‘It is probably ten o’ clock,’ he said.

Teddy looked upwards as well. The moon was high and its light brightened the sky. It illuminated the stretches of grass against the undulating land about them so that the grass looked like stationary sea waves. Stars streaked the vast sky. They remained silent with their heads upturned.

Without turning to look at Goodwill, in a low voice, Teddy asked, ‘What are you looking at? ‘What are you thinking?’

‘The sky,’ murmured Goodwill. ‘I am wondering how many stars there are out there. What do they do? Do they have to make decisions about where to shine their light? Are their differences a point of contention or admiration?’ He broke off.

Teddy remained quiet, silently knowing that Goodwill was not through. It was a balmy night and the night sounds were disturbed by distant dogs moaning into the moon, much like they were. ‘...it is painful, what we have to go through. Do you think that we were chosen for this? They made an awful choice. I am weak.’

Teddy felt the fear reek out of Goodwill’s pores. This scared him not because he was afraid of himself or the world. He knew what he wanted. He was afraid of what he thought Goodwill might have been saying. And right there in the most unlikely place in the world, he decided to take his moment.

‘How will you live with a woman? All your life, not knowing what could have been?’

The intensity in his voice gathered and he held onto Goodwill’s arm.

‘I am offering nothing in the form of certainty of how your life can turn out. I don’t know the likely consequences. I am offering you myself. Forever. Wherever our love takes us, I want to be there. If the consequences are death by stoning, I will block the first stones with my own body. I have no

illusions of what my neighbours, the village, the bible and the government think about me. I just know that I love you without any reserve.'

Teddy dropped to his knees pulling Goodwill towards him. Looking at something that Teddy could not quite see, Goodwill listened to Teddy. The fear did not subside but Teddy had pushed him beyond a certain threshold. No one had before expressed such intensity of feeling for him. He would go to Blantyre with Teddy. They would leave that night under the cover of darkness. Now, his face was contorted. A multitude of sensations assailed him, wracking his body.

The second escape to Blantyre was more studied and planned with a stronger resolve. This time around, Teddy was the silent leader. He wasted no time in contacting the friends whose commitment ceremony he had witnessed. Goodwill was not crazy about taking part in a ceremony. The sacrifice of leaving home, his family and a woman expecting marriage, was sufficient statement of his decision and commitment. However, he also understood that Teddy needed this. So, he quietly agreed to flow in the direction of the water.

They sat at a restaurant in downtown Blantyre. Word had gotten out and the place was bursting at the seams with friends and some curious onlookers. A well-known older gay man who saw himself as the leader of gay Blantyre was leading the proceedings. His underground name was simply Helen. He spoke at length with his words not only directed at the couple seated on the raised platform but also meant to show off his flowing outfit and nasal voice. He was paying for the event. Goodwill squirmed in his seat and beads of sweat lined his large forehead. Mercifully it ended and they began to loosen up as the waitrons began serving food. They were having dessert when the policemen entered.

And now, here they were with the vehicle rumbling and creaking into the prison. Teddy made out the bleak buildings towering around them. Goodwill finally opened his eyes and they fastened on the all-seeing panopticon. The prison was quiet but Teddy felt hundreds of eyes bore into him. And then the steel bars were tightly shut behind them.

*The Teachers***Msawenkosi Motolwana**

The wind howled, and with it brought a stubborn rain sifting through the holes on the ceiling. I resented my brother Madoda deeply when recalling how he had sworn up and down to find someone to help repair it. Why couldn't he have started doing that repair job instead? Kwanele warned him that spring brought with it a lot of rain. That it would be better to fill the holes before it came. But my brother postponed. And now I sleep with a drip... drip... drip sound that goes from being an irritating gong to a relentless lullaby.

'The water drops from here,' Kwanele explained. He flattened his palm to feel the level of the puddle whilst preaching to the contractor of how serious the leak will get and how damp the room would be. I so wished he would just tie those dreads away from his face permanently. Whether it was a bun or the makeshift head rails that were fashionable to most in Ntabetsolo, I did not care. It annoyed me that his hands would constantly flick those dreads about.

'We should maybe put some covering around those holes?' Kwanele continued. 'This may stop the leak from getting worse.'

After the contractor had quoted what was a steep fee, Madoda told our youngest brother Vusi and I to move the beds around. Dodge the leaks. And then he and Kwanele argued about who would pay for what. Their disagreements had a pattern. Kwanele would be the first to apologise, then Madoda would propose a solution that was near to Kwanele's initial suggestion. This time, Madoda promised to get someone to investigate the leak problem. I held out hope that he would make good on his promise, so when the contractor came to inspect, I held my breath that a small waiting period would pass before the issue was fixed.

It was not to be. The ceiling still leaks.

As I was trying to sleep, thinking of broken promises whilst rubbing my frosty toes, I suddenly became teary-eyed and melancholic, recalling how our parents disappeared under the same weather.

The wind was furious that day. It threw the showers in every direction such that Vusi and I could not avoid it. Our walk home felt like an abysmal baptism that threatened to kill us. When eventually I reached the steel gate – calling for Ma to come and open for us – I realised the gate was locked from the inside and the fence was too slippery, too high, too many things to jump over. I had lent Vusi my jacket and whilst I questioned that foolish action, I started to taper off into irritation as I searched for a reason that would have my parents lock the gate whilst we had both yet to arrive from school. I do not recall much of what happened after that. All I can reflect on is that Vusi and I woke up one day bombarded by the presence of relatives from either side of our parents' family coming to confiscate household items.

After that, the house was empty, save for an old reclining three-seater, sundry items in the kitchen, smelly mattresses in the cupboards, and a pair of lopsided beds. During those invasions, Vusi and I would cede our beds to hostile older cousins. We watched with muted grief as our aunts and uncles shook our home for whatever belongings they deemed worthy to loot. Our emotional restraint from reacting to both the loss of parents and the disgorgement of our home was so convincing, that they all believed that we felt nothing for home or parents.

Madoda – the eldest brother out of the three of us – was twenty-three at the time, an electrician who was adept at fixing problems. He made decent money and was old enough to care for us. Though he did not want the responsibility, he knew there was no alternative. At times he was like our mother, swift with affection. Then at other times, he was our father, generous with beatings. The two living in one person like conjoined twins.

A year later, Kwanele moved in, and Madoda mutated into someone we'd long forgotten existed. The types of smirks that we had never seen, or imagined lost to Madoda in childhood forever, made a comeback. Kwanele summoned a curious sort of tenderness from Madoda. Much like a puppy does to children. We would feel the spongy texture of Madoda's fast-developing pot belly. He was happy. And Vusi and I learned how sweet the caress of the afternoon breeze would get whilst sleeping on the firm branch of a deep-rooted oak tree. We knew what it was like to rest guilt-free of any unfinished chores.

To have the body free from a painfully crafted belt trail, running from the back of the head right to the thighs.

The location of our parent's whereabouts was evaporating like salt in warm morning porridge. Save for the police intermittently coming to the house with little assurances that our parents would ever be found, we were remembering to forget. At first, we welcomed the officers in blue with anxious eyes, hearts seated at the foot of their mouths. Would today be the day they close this off? Give our lives back to us as they were?

But it was always the same terrible feeling of being suspended in the air right on the peak of an inevitable free-fall. In time we resented them for coming. It felt like they tortured us. Firing an empty gun at our nervous stomachs. We, like the presumed fate of our parents, wanted to rest in peace.

The officers however insisted it was standard protocol for them to keep coming, they felt they could give us developments on how the case was going and receive feedback on the leads they were following up on. It felt glib to me. Maybe they were trying to stop us from thinking they were doing nothing. Perhaps they had already long shelved the case and were only going through the motions. I had lost interest in those conversations and preferred to sit in the bedroom whenever they came.

The last visit was during my matric year. It was nearly three years since the investigation had begun. This time, one police officer came. A woman. And behind a half-eaten meal in the kitchen, I found the courage to listen to what was being said.

She sat on the edge of the living room chair with her hat off and placed her elbows on the armrests. She talked of many things that I could not hear whilst steadying my ears to eavesdrop behind the door. But what I could discern was that the police had exhausted all available resources and the case was being closed. No hysterics flew off anyone's eyes. Perhaps we all knew that to expect different was useless? As the officer made her way out of the house, Kwanele held me towards him with palpable pity.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

I felt numb. The finality of the announcement made it clear to me that whatever link I had to my parents was now locked in memory and pictures. I would not see them again. I quickly accepted that.

That was nearly ten months ago to this evening.

Droplets from the roof hit my brow. Vusi and I had moved the beds, but the holes trailed behind us wherever we went. The 7:00 p.m. wind coming in from beneath the door was cold. I peeped through the window and saw the rain dancing with the blankets hung outside. Vusi, on the other hand, was his usual annoying, oblivious self, releasing stomach bubbles in between the snoring. Not at all bothered by the droplets. Nor the cold. I heard rumours in my school days that someone can get pink eye from flatulence. When sleeping so close to Vusi, the danger to my eyes was always imminent.

The rain slowed in its downpour. I left for my friend Kamva's house. Maybe I could convince him to return with me. He would not mind. We would sleep on the couch, tell stories until we were completely worn out. I knew that Kamva's stories were worth the toil. That his sleeping close to me was also stomach breeze-free. It was a just motivation to keep walking.

Upon arrival, I had to endure his mother scolding me for walking in the rain. Afterwards, she gave me some of Kamva's clothes to change into. When the rain ceased completely, I used Kamva's phone to tell Madoda that I had left. Madoda was busy reading *How to Do Just about Anything*, a firm favourite of his to pass the time when he couldn't sleep. I told him that I probably would be home later.

I was good at winning Kamva over to me so I got him to agree to return with me, but first I had to indulge him in our oldest ritual. So that night, Kamva and I did what we always did. We watched the stars. Moving the beds to cusp the wall, both of us plastered our heads on the window. His late father had told us stories of how the stars are the souls of those who have walked the earth before. That if you spoke to them, they would answer you in dreams. I hoped that that would be true. But I was also frightened by the idea of someone who had died appearing in my dreams. So, I tried not to speak to any stars openly. Only whispered things in my head that I wished would come true.

I wished that Madoda and Kwanele would never leave Vusi and I. Not like our parents did. I wished Kamva and I would stay friends forever. The last wish always made me cry without warning. No matter how many times I wished. But I quickly averted the tears, turned to Kamva, and asked him his wish?

'I wish I could stay young forever,' he said. I marveled at what he said because I thought we both wanted to see what life would be like as we got older.

‘No,’ he asserted when I challenged him, ‘my wish is to stay young forever.’

Kamva held the torch close to the ground on our way back. The road felt steeper, edgier than when I left home. We had walked it on so many nights, I did not think it possible for us to ever be lost. We missed a gaping hole by an inch. I held Kamva back, told him to watch his step. The muddy path seemed to have more revelations of puddles and sinkholes as we plodded onwards, and the wailing dogs in the distance made us a little nervous.

‘Why is it like we have been walking for longer than we are used to, Zama?’ he asked me.

The torch’s light was fading.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘But I am sure that we should reach home soon.’

The trail did not feel familiar, but we continued. I arrogantly insisted that his torch and our past experiences hiking home could not deceive us.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ I said. ‘It’s not too far now. We will get home.’

The torch went off. An agitated Kamva took out the batteries, then reinserted them. Even hit the torch a few times, but to no success.

‘Can you believe it?’ he said, showing it to me. ‘And it’s still brand new!’

He put it in his pocket and zipped it up. Then we both sat down on the grass, watching the fog blanket us. I sensed something pull at the back of my neck before we both heard a sharp noise behind us. We looked at each other with eyes gaping and alerted by fear.

‘What was that?’ he asked me, his voice disappearing behind his shock. The fog serendipitously uncovered a large marble rock a few meters from where we sat. Was it the *star* fathers we spoke of earlier signalling for us to hide behind? We did not have the time to wonder and obeyed. The noise grew more insistent as it approached. I began clutching for possibilities. Perhaps it was cats? Maybe dogs? But no dog I knew ever walked around at night howling in that manner.

The noise gradually passed, and my eyes were thirsty with curiosity. If only I could just peel Kamva off from the deathlike grip he maintained around my waist, then I would quickly peek behind the convenient protection of that rock. I could not help my neck slowly bobbing to the surface like a hippopotamus in a lake. Barring the mist, I could see some four-legged animal trailing a freakishly tall being. The Being had a lanky appearance, cloaked in a bulging hooded outfit that sat on it like a

hanging curtain. It seemed to glide through the mist. From the back, it had a deformed shape. Its long arms, like those of an ape, allowed its hands to reach the ground and swing its body forward.

Kamva yanked my shirt to get back down. I didn't hear him, but he must have uttered something because I saw the Being freeze in its tracks. Like an eagle perched on a tree, it surveyed its surroundings and spotted me from a distance. It turned its neck in our direction with its eyes glistening like stray glass on a hot day. I felt my eyes wince and my heart squeeze like a sponge gripped by angry hands. My head crouched and tried to hide beneath my neck, but it was too late. The Being most certainly heard us. It looked directly at where we were hiding as if the rock that was supposedly protecting us was just a wall of lace. The Being floated closer. The noise of what sounded like crackling, burning corn and the smell of incense saturated the air. It was the same nauseating odour of an altar server passing by congregants during a church service, swinging that thurible back-and-forth like a pendulum. But the fragrance was more concentrated and suffocating in its effect.

'Don't move,' I directed Kamva but it was too late. It found us, gazing blankly at us huddled together like rats dug up from a hole by a predator. I stared at it. Perhaps it was an old man? An old man with grey hair and patchy skin? Or was it scaly? I could not be sure. The orange-yellow colours of the eyes were deep, sunken. It spoke in clicks, an incoherent language, for a few seconds before it ran backward as if moonwalking. Its head still transfixed on us before fading into the bushy mist.

'We have to get home,' I told Kamva immediately after it disappeared. 'I don't want that thing to return.' We haphazardly made our way out from behind the marble rock and continued a guess route in the dark, naïve in our belief that it was going to lead us home. We didn't fear any sinkholes or other impediments. If we were injured in panic, it was better than being frozen in death.

Miraculously, we found familiar traces and trees, and there was some light. Then a tar road. As if the road was being illuminated as we walked. The fog that was as thick as the blankets hanging on my home fence, had all but vanished. All along the walkway Kamva and I trotted in silence. Comforted only by the sound of our boots. Careful not to look back and gravely certain that we would turn to salt if we did. I did not know how Kamva felt. But the blank stare he had on him told me that he did not want to talk.

‘What was that?’ I stuttered. Kamva looked at me still wrestling to answer the question with what was probable. We got home and knocked on the door. I thought it odd for Madoda to have locked it so early – this especially since I told him I was coming back. I could see a light beaming from Kamva’s jacket.

‘Hang on,’ I said pointing at it, ‘your torch just came on.’

Kamva opened his pocket and held the lit torch to further inspect it.

‘What the fuck!’ he exclaimed. ‘A while ago it was completely off!’

Madoda opened the door briskly and looked elated to see us. His face had seen panic and was now glad. But then he remembered his rage.

‘Why couldn’t you both have stayed at Kamva’s house?’ he shouted. ‘Do you know what time it is, Zamani? I thought you’d decided not to come back.’

I saw the clock mounted on the kitchen wall and I thought it impossible. We had left Kamva’s place at around nine o’clock. We arrived home at three in the morning. All this time we had been going around in circles. Getting lost on a route that we had used repeatedly, a route that usually took us twenty minutes.

‘Is it that late?’ exclaimed Kamva.

‘Yes,’ Madoda responded irritably. ‘Too late for you two to be strutting around like you were doing.’

Madoda quickly closed the door behind us and switched the light off. Kwanele was balanced on the wall at the end of the passage and asking if all was well. He rubbed his eyes and stretched whilst still fastened in strands of sleep.

‘Relax,’ Madoda assured him, ‘it’s only Zamani and Kamva.’

They both disappeared into their bedroom whilst Kamva and I found our way into mine. Vusi was sprawled out on both beds and deep in sleep.

‘What the hell happened, Kamva?’ I asked him. We needed to talk about it.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘But I am glad that we are home, Zama.’

I was glad too. I pulled out a sponge from the cupboard and grabbed the few remaining sheets on the side chair.

‘Let’s go sleep on the couch,’ I said. ‘I will flatten it out. Put the sponge on top. It’ll be comfortable.’

There was no story to tell that night. Not from Kamva and not from me. The room was cold, but I could not feel its icy touch anymore. Especially since we had met something that was still hot in the heels of our minds. We lay close together on that sponge. Sleep took its time to come to me, and when it eventually came, it was in patchy instalments. I thought I felt a kick from Kamva during one dream.

‘Yeah,’ I answered as if I was being called.

I was back on the outside, on that same rock. Alone. The old looking Being and the creature were both there. The Being held my shoulders from the back before rounding to stand in front of me and look deep into my eyes, speaking without moving its lips. I tried to avoid looking at it in the face, but it was of no use. Its blazing orange-yellow eyes were gradually erupting out of their dark sockets. It had no eyebrows, patchy, scaly white skin, and the same stench of incense reeked all around it. It spoke through me. And although I could scarcely comprehend the language, my lips moved in a manner of parroting what I was hearing in my head. I was a blank canvas being imprinted on with thick dark ink. Its words became mine and a flow of my own thoughts and feelings eased, going from fear to calm and finally to hunger. Hunger for what was being said. Spontaneous words flowed through me as vomit spewing from a poisoned stomach. Then Kamva kicked me again, disrupting the dream state. I turned on my side and clung to the sponge, bracing myself for another inevitable dream. I recall seeing a feline-looking creature playing with me on the river shore. It made catlike noises that were reminiscent of the sounds Kamva and I heard before we ducked behind the marble. I was comfortable with this four-legged animal. Only I could not make out which animal it was. I shook and felt a flood of water over my face and gasped for air. It could not be sweat.

‘Zamani,’ shouted Madoda in a panic. I felt myself coming to.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked upon waking. ‘What is it?’ I felt around for Kamva.

‘Where is Kamva?’ I asked in between his monologues. The sponge Kamva and I slept on had spontaneously sprouted steel legs, the sheets were whiter, and the room was fuller. Who were all these people behind Madoda? Where was I?

You slept through it,' Madoda shrieked. 'What happened to you?' he asked me whilst placing what I recognised as Kamva's torch by my bedside.

I did not understand his frenzy and hoped that he would calm down. My one head had been split and in its place were two separate thoughts. Why was Madoda in such an erratic state? And where was Kamva?

'He died,' Madoda definitively stated. 'He died.'

'Who died?' I asked. Madoda's moans crowded the background.

'We have been trying to wake you for two days now,' he continued, crying. 'What happened to you, Zamani?'

He continued to wail, hugging and kissing me with smothering delight.

'Days?' I asked, still in a confused state. 'Kamva? Who is dead? Wake me for days?'

The aerial fan overhead swung ever slower until it felt like it came to a complete rest. My nose breathed a horrid smell of remains rejected by an upset stomach. Could it be true? It hurt to hear it. Was Kamva dead? The shock unnerved me so deeply that I wished I were dead too.

My thoughts twirled frantically above my head like flies to a fresh carcass. I felt the texture of the Cadbury wrapper on the tips of my finger, the remains of the sweet taste of the last one fading from my tongue and throat. Kwanele had given them to me to calm my nerves. He sat at a distance from me, whilst on the other end of the room I was surrounded by crowds of people, his dimpled smile trying to be as reassuring as possible. Who were these people that kept on being wherever I was?

'You have nothing to hide,' Kwanele assured me, 'God is your witness.' But what if there were things that even God was asleep to?

'We came down the same road as we always did,' I started. The chair I sat on felt like small grinding stones on my crack. I struggled to remain stationary. Kamva's mother's eyes looked up from the black coat she was wrapped in. Her face looked sunken like a bed on its last springs. She had long divorced rest. She feared to sleep now – the only dream she had worth waking up to, was now permanently hibernating.

'We felt the road was longer than we had always found it to be. We were going around in circles. Walking the same walkway repeatedly? But the fog confused us. It made us feel tired. So, we sat on a

rock to take a pause and figure out why we were so muddled by a road we had used dozens of times before.’

A random drop of water slid down my cheek. It was too late to wipe it off. I recalled Kamva and I bundled together behind that marble rock. The smell of him was still visceral. It jumped out at me like a toddler wanting to play.

‘It was getting harder to see past the fog and the sounds of dogs bothered us. They were barking in a manner that we had not heard before. But we were still hopeful that we would find the path. We were not discouraged.’

I stopped for what was a long moment. The eyes in the room pressed through me impatiently, as if to say, ‘Go on boy. Don’t stall!’

‘Then,’ I continued, ‘the Mantindane appeared.’

The room stirred with whispers. Vusi was sitting alongside Madoda covering his head with a cap and his eyes averted from mine. A look of concern still stamped on his face. It felt strange to name the Being. It felt like I now openly acknowledged it existed. And not only had it existed, but also, that its existence preceded my own.

A dwarf-like healer was called to the house on the same day I left the hospital. The people that were crowded around Madoda were now sitting at home with me. I don’t remember the visit much, but I remembered someone saying that I was more detailed in my description of the Being while being questioned by the healer.

The Mantindane,’ the dwarf man concluded at last. His eyes were wide open with both astonishment and terror. Vusi says they could not tell which of the two expressions he showed.

His name was Yal’uluntu. He had a frightful appearance exaggerated by all his beads and furs. After his sudden assertion that my family could not challenge, Vusi said that he performed a smoky ritual throughout the house and left a cob of maize at every corner of the yard. He then glazed each of us with the blood of a chicken. He instructed that the maize must never be moved. That we were to sleep facing the windows in all rooms and ensure that all the doors were locked. This we did from that night and have not yielded since.

Now that the creature had a name, a part of me felt relieved. That all knew I did not imagine anything. Nobody would believe that I had anything to do with Kamva's death, let alone had caused it. He was my friend. I did not get to say goodbye to him. But there was still opportunity. I also heard Kamva's family had refused to bury him. I was thought half dead only to wake later from a 'sleep.' Surely there was still a chance. A chance that, like me, Kamva was stuck in a dream state that rendered his body catatonic. Even the dwarf-like healer told his family to wait.

'And will they wait?' I asked Madoda. This question I posed right after the ritual with Yal'uluntu was performed. Kamva was the only thing that mattered in my mind. Everything else was unclear.

'We are not sure, Zamani,' he answered. 'His mom and others in the family don't want him buried. But then other family members are insistent. It is Spring now. Extremely hot. He'll start to stink if he is not sent to a mortuary.'

'Stink?' I asked. 'Where is he kept?'

'At home,' Madoda answered. 'We are scared that his mother is going crazy. The body has been kept in an iced room since you two were moved from the house. She prays all day and all night. It's all so bizarre.'

'But how was I not dead?' I asked. 'How did you know to send me to the hospital instead of an iced room or the mortuary?'

'You were still breathing,' he said. 'You were kicking and muttering clicks in your sleep. But this was not the case with Kamva. He was stiff. Lifeless.'

'So, she keeps him,' I said, 'hoping he'll wake too.'

It is not bizarre to me. So much has yet to be explained. And so, nothing can be called 'bizarre' anymore. The Mantindane was known. And because it existed, it could be commanded or dragged in front of everyone to explain what it had done to us. We all needed answers.

'There was a smell of burning corn and incense,' I continued whilst still on the bumpy chair. 'The smell was very intense and spread generously around us. It made us fearful, so we hid. Then the figure of the Mantindane with a creature walking alongside it floated past us.'

'Do you know what kind of creature it was that was walking with the Mantindane?' asked one of the Elders. She looked sceptical. Or was it the dense crease on her temple, typical of someone old? I

dared not tell them about the dream I had. The one that had me playing with the very same creature on the river.

‘No,’ I answered. ‘I couldn’t make out what it was. But the Mantindane heard us. It heard us and it is the one that came towards us.’

I wanted to continue but a pounding headache was progressing. It rose above my eyes like heat from a furnace in a tightly shut room. I battled to remain alert through the last response.

Kamva’s mother suddenly burst into tears. Nobody seemed alarmed by the eruption. She did say to Madoda that she had hoped that I would tell her details of what happened. That if I could not, she would not know what to do with herself. How was she ever going to reconcile a child that went walking his friend home, as he always had, only to not wake the very next day? If it were witchcraft, then perhaps she could consult and find the culprit. If it was an accident, then she would have someone to blame. But this? This unknown creature from an unknown place came to unsuspecting children and took her son in an unknown fashion. It was too much.

The walk home after the meeting felt arduous. The path was the only gravel road there was in Ntabetsolo. The first and only development made by Council people. Madoda dreamed of becoming one of these people. He had a love of politics and, according to Kwanele, would have succeeded. This was before our parents vanished. Then suddenly he had responsibilities thrust on him. He took his electrician vocation more seriously, as there were shoes to be filled. Commitments that alienated the attempt of chasing dreams. At times I understood the resentment he felt towards us. A resentment that motivated his habitual escape to the soccer fields.

During the time that he took on the parental duties, and usually in some half-sober taletelling, he would regale Vusi and I with stories from his soccer days. We concluded that it was in one of those fiercely watched rivalry games between Ntabetsolo and Ezibeleni, that he met Kwanele.

He told us that after every game with the visitors, he would routinely walk Kwanele to the rank so that Kwanele could catch a taxi back to Ezibeleni. On some days, he would accompany Kwanele home and sleep over in Ezibeleni. At that time, he would leave us in the hands of our neighbour Nosipho before making his way back in the morning to make us breakfast and get us ready for school.

‘Did you like him?’ asked a curious Vusi.

‘Well,’ Madoda continued, ‘on the banks of Imvelo River, our faces were close enough for the noses to greet. I slid my hands between the twin creases of Kwanele’s lower back.’

Vusi and I cringed with embarrassment. We did not want the story to end, because we both wanted to know. But it was equally painful to our ears to have it told.

‘Our gym bags dropped from our shoulders,’ Madoda continued, ‘and only the sound of white noise stood between our lips.’

It was the first time that Vusi and I had heard Madoda relay the story in such intimate details. It excited us both. The idea that one day we were going to experience the sound of white noise and lips suckling with someone we liked. It made us look forward to the journey of growing up.

I came back from that memory with a smile. At a distance away from the gravel course, I saw something that cemented my feet. My throat felt like it had swallowed a concentrated dose of cayenne pepper. My ears lit up with passion and my eyes bulged.

‘What is it, Zamani?’ asked Vusi. He had grown distant from me these past days. The ‘me’ he knew was no more and in its place was a ghost. It was awful. Many at his school told him I was bewitched.

‘I didn’t see this place,’ I muttered. ‘Did we pass here on our way to the meeting?’

‘We did,’ Madoda answered. ‘But you were dozing off in the back seat of Miza’s car.’

I took a numbing step forward. And there it was, like it had been before. The marble rock that Kamva and I hid behind. At about forty or so meters from that rock. As clear as a mirror rubbed with crushed newspapers, was the riverbank that I dreamed of. The creature of my dreams and I played here. The Imvelo river.

Madoda gently took my hand.

‘Let’s go home, Zamani,’ he said.

I realised that I had not said anything to any of them. That I stood there wide-eyed and dazed, chanting an inner monologue. I must have looked like a person who was chasing their sanity on a slippery road.

That evening, the pillows chained my chest. I watched in borrowed skin as a messy symphony of squealing cat noises and familiar incense filled the air. Suddenly, next to me is the four-legged creature. We are chasing something, the hooded Mantindane. The four-legged creature raced off in an easterly

direction from where I was. I suppose the strategy it had was to round off the Mantindane before it could get to the Imvelo river. In my sleep, my legs fence the sheets whilst in the dream, I am trying to catch up.

When I approach the floating figure, I am angry. I kick its back and it tumbles easily and falls on the ground. The feline creature approaches on the opposite end, looks at me and gently smiles as if to say that we have accomplished something great. As I take a moment to catch my breath, the Mantindane suddenly gets up, evades us both and plunges itself right into the river. I look at the feline creature, and it speaks to me in click sounds.

‘Go in,’ it says. ‘There is something in the water.’

I jump inside and swim to the depths of the river floor. As I approach the Mantindane, it looks smaller than I recall. More human and less intimidating, even diminutive in stature. But it matters not. It could be an expert illusionist and shape-shifting trickster. Despite its more frail-like demeanour, I was happy to torture it until it told me what it had done to me that night, what it had done to my friend. I wanted to break its neck to fix things up again. I floated towards it to snatch its robe and draw it towards the surface. It did not resist me. Instead, it paddled towards the direction I was taking it up to, and as we were nearing the surface of the river, I felt I could not wait any longer. I wanted to look into its eyes and tell it that I was no longer afraid, only angry.

I aggressively dismounted its hood. ‘Kamva?’ I muttered. The shock split my body in the dream so much that the ripples carried over to my bed. On that surface of the river, whilst still recovering from what I had just seen, and paddling furiously underneath, I felt a bite on my shoulder as the feline creature dragged me away from Kamva.

‘Ndiyagodola,’ Kamva shouted with a voice so eerily familiar. *I am cold.* I could taste the dirt of the sandy road we rode our bikes on, and the sweet smell of flowers on the open fields we would trail past when chasing butterflies.

I shook the dream off, wet with sweat both from the running in the dream and the heat from the blankets. ‘What am I to do, Zamani? I am cold.’

The words ring in my ears.

Dissolution

Raul Bimenyimana

We went to the nosynthesizers on Thursday evenings. That was when there were no crowds. The risk of having strangers pressed onto you, you pressing onto strangers, stepping on a stranger's shoe and having to give an embarrassed apology that would go unacknowledged, or – even worse – making banal conversation with a stranger to pass the time, was substantially reduced on Thursday evenings.

I reached Kumbu House before Tetu and waited, looking at the advertisements on screen for pet food, help wanted, and a sale for red soil and sand. The waiting room was small and only a few people sat on the thin black leather seats. Kumbu House was a four-storey building sectioned into different decades, the old having the ground floor and the rest divided accordingly.

A drifter I had seen around walked past me, moving with the stubborn look they can all be identified with, as if waiting to give retort to an intrusive question. It was time for the evening's scheduled session and people began heading to their rooms. Tetu approached slowly, a soft clink from her beaded braids accompanying her. She smiled an apology for making me wait and we went to our second floor room. We each asked about our respective weeks and quieted when we got into the half empty room. Our guide typed on the screen before her; I noticed the few bright orange wrappers of a candy brand once popular in my childhood scattered on the floor. There was also the soft thrum of an old pop song I struggled to remember.

Once we arrived, we had to wait for the others. They were running late. The door was to be closed fifteen minutes after time and they were running out of time.

I sat at my usual spot, the table two places from the last seats and close to the wall. What was left of the day's light seeped through a high small window. I sat and imagined the latecomers. They rushed up the steps worried that they would find the doors closed. Arriving in a sweat, they walked gracelessly to their seats, and listened to their ragged breaths in the quiet room. But of course no one is ever so guilty,

they practically saunter into the room. I know this because I have watched them for the signs of self-reproach I would have had. They either hide them very well or simply do not care that we must wait for them. Fortunately there are few latecomers on Thursdays, another reason to stick to the day.

The guide looked around the room and activated the machines. The three silver balls rose in their holders from the table. I placed the balls in an arc, the largest one at the lower temple and the smallest one close to the tragus.

It began.

The laughter of running children. Old plastic milk crates, green and scraped, and myself squeezed in one of them, careening down the hilly tarmacked road. Joyous shouts tinged with fear, and relief as we stopped safe at the bottom and ran back up yelling.

Then, following the trails of the fading laughs, he was there before me. We were alone. Kissing, our bodies rubbing. Later I felt the fear and excitement as we sat with others and he winked at me when he thought the others were not looking, and smiled at my discomfort.

And then we were alone again, seated close together so that our knees touched. ‘Don’t look at me,’ he said, his voice tight from the repressed laugh. I smiled and looked at him, he turned and saw me. ‘Ah,’ a sound half-gasp, half-laugh rolled from his mouth. He surrendered to the force of the laugh and allowed his body to be rocked with it.

These images I remembered as I placed the balls in their glass holder and watched as they descended back into the table. I went through the memories again, trying to retain as much detail as I could. It felt like it had lasted a few minutes, but a look at the big white clock on the wall showed it had been the standard one hour and fifteen minutes. It could have been a dream.

The nosynthesizer experience felt like a dream because it resembled one. Other than lasting longer than it seemed, not everything was remembered, and brain activity resembled the REM state of sleep. Only more was remembered and there was little invention, almost-forgotten memories were being rescued and excavated from the crevices they hid in.

Over the years, as more doubt was cast on the process and questions arose of the accuracy of memories regurgitated, the Mnemo Corporation released a statement explaining that the function of the nosynthesizer experience was to bring comfort in familiarity through pleasant past memories

recalled more than strict accuracy. Their estimation for inaccuracy kept changing with a recent update of seven per cent inaccuracy, up from the initial zero.

The question of drifters was often raised as well. These people had no claim to the time and thus the place they inhabited in their sessions. Glorious images of the eras they pined for were used instead of their own memories. Through the years they were challenged and ridiculed. They defended themselves claiming that they took relief the rest of the users did with their own memories. We realised that we could not articulate the wrong in their misplaced nostalgia without incriminating ourselves somehow, and finally settled on silent hostility. The Mnemo Corporation also insisted that drifters were a niche clientele deserving of their services, and that was the end of it.

I walked outside the room beside Tetu, both of us wrapped in a comfortable silence, needing nothing from each other, other than our presence and the warmth it carried. We stood at the entrance of Kumbu House with the people we found huddled there. Earlier rain had reduced to a drizzle, the tiny drops were visible under the yellow light of the streetlamps, and the streets were wet.

I turned to Tetu, shivering. Her hands were folded inside a white wool sweater; the beads in her hair emitted a faint glow.

‘What do you think? Should we walk it out?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said, staring at the dark sky. ‘It doesn’t look like there will be more.’

The drops felt light on my head, like wet dust, and it was easy to think of Terry again. I could not remember the last time I saw him but I did remember when I last thought of him before he left. I was in boarding school, praying the gay away and it had been easy to blame him for it, so I did. I prayed that once we both went home from our respective schools, one of our families would have moved, and naturally one of us with them.

Yet, it was a shock when I returned home from school and learnt his family had moved. I had worked fast to convince myself that we would have been caught eventually and that the move was for the best, trying to cheat myself out of the fullness of the pain.

Lost in these memories, I had not noticed that Bakari was walking with us. I looked at Tetu and realised that she was intent on keeping quiet. Bakari looked at me and smiled.

‘Hi,’ he said.

‘Hi.

‘You both really stick to a schedule, huh?’

‘This evening could be a lot more peaceful if we kept silent,’ Tetu said. ‘And you did stick to the same schedule too if you haven’t forgotten.’

Bakari nodded. It had been weeks since I had last seen him. The encounter, like all the others since he had joined the Transparency and Watchfulness Group, began with him trying to convince us to stop using the nosynthesizers and ended with harsh words after it was apparent that neither party was going to convince the other.

We came to an old building, built during colonial Nairobi and the only remaining building from those days. All its neighbours were tall new glass buildings and there in the middle it stood, grey from all the smoke, dust and dirt that had clung to it through the years. As we walked I got the sense that we all knew that the evening would end with another argument, we were simply delaying it and I was determined to be the last person to speak.

‘At least you do know that you don’t want to talk about it because it ruins the experience for you?’ Bakari said.

‘The way you talk no one would ever think you were once a drifter,’ I said and regretted it as soon as I finished speaking.

‘I’ve never denied it,’ he said and turned to face me. ‘In fact, I’m proud of the progress I’ve made. Drifter to standard user and now an adamant opposer.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘That’s not funny. This is serious. Think of all those the government is surveilling and trying to keep in check or will in the future through your memories. Of the harm posed in the collection of all these memories and all the ways that the information can be manipulated.’

‘You do realise how you sound like those people you used to make fun of?’

‘You using my past doesn’t change anything I said. I was wrong then—’

‘And of course you’re right now.’

‘Yes.’

We remained silent for a while again. The number of people in the streets increased the closer we got to our buses.

‘I don’t say all this just because it’s true. If I insist, it’s because I care about the both of you.’

The gentleness in his tone as he said this did its work and I decided I would listen to what he had to say and politely disagree in the end. Tetu was still silent and walked staring straight ahead.

‘It doesn’t even bother you that you know so little about each other outside these sessions? That you’ve become dependent on the machines?’ he said.

‘We go there once a week. How is that being dependent?’

‘Every week.’

‘And so?’

‘And so you can’t go a week without it. And what about the gaps that it leaves in your memory?’

‘Don’t think that I don’t know what you’re trying to do.’

‘What am I trying to do?’

‘This is getting tiring,’ Tetu said. ‘It was tiring from the first words and since you can’t both keep quiet let’s just talk about something else. How was Fiona’s show?’

‘I don’t know, I didn’t go,’ Bakari said.

Fiona was a singer friend of theirs that I knew through snippets of conversation but had never met. They spoke about her and other friends I didn’t know and I didn’t feel offended to feel excluded in their conversation. It made it easier to recall the memories stirred to the surface that evening.

The drizzle had long stopped. I looked back and saw I had left some distance between us. They walked slowly, close together so that they were almost leaning into each other. I hurried my steps and walked to the bus station alone.

A week had passed since I had gone to the nosynthesizer. It was a Friday and Tetu had called the previous night to ask where I had been. I had told her that I was busier than usual and had missed the session. She was silent and finally said, ‘Don’t let Bakari get into your head.’

I knew that she wouldn't call again next week if I didn't go and felt sad. That is what had happened with Bakari, after the first week there was no more contact until he reappeared two months later babbling about the dangers of a false golden past and nostalgia and the government using people's memories without their consent to crack down on dissidents.

Tetu's voice reemerged and I realised that I missed her. I asked myself what the experiment I was undertaking was supposed to prove. I had let Bakari get to me.

After the last time I had seen him, sitting in the bus headed home and what normally would have been my head pressed to the window and listening to sad songs, barely aware of the cars outside, comfortably immersed in the sadness and longing from my past memories and the happiness derived from it, Bakari's words came back time and time again instead.

I was determined that I wouldn't go to show myself that I didn't depend on nosynthesizers. Although Terry had been trapped in the amber that was my memories for a decade, the machine was only a light that focused on points that had darkened with time and I told myself that I didn't need it to relive the moments I had shared with him.

Telling Bakari about it was out of the question. If I failed I had no one else to disappoint but myself, and there was no reason to make him feel he had finally had some success after trying to convince us to stay away from the machines for weeks.

It was a warm afternoon. A cool breeze came into the room through the open windows and played with the sand-brown shades. I lay on the bed and asked myself what would happen if I stopped going to the sessions. I was scared to think of the answer. A child was crying somewhere below in the building, a voice threatened a beating and to give a proper reason for crying, and then silence, interrupted by the child's intermittent snivelling.

I asked myself why I kept going to the nosynthesizers and the answer came in his image. Why had I never tried to find him? It was difficult but not impossible. But the fear of rejection if I met him, or worse the possibility of disliking the person Terry had become, was too great. I had to admit to myself that I preferred the memories.

I summoned him in my mind: he came leisurely, grinning. One day we had been sitting together in a small field close to home. Terry was wearing a red shirt and blue shorts, a small scab under his knee

from a recent fall. He had a star grass in his mouth which made the words he spoke to me sound muffled. I tried to remember what we had talked about and failed. He took the star grass into his right hand and made a revolving gesture twisting it. Still nothing.

Calming myself, I was mindful that a relaxed state was better at remembering. His image seemed to get dimmer and more unclear, like I was seeing through a foggy window wiped down.

The panic jolted me so that I stood up breathing hard. An urge for the nosynthesizer came in a sweep and I sat back on the bed. Ninety minutes were left until the evening session for Friday began.

The fear that the memory, or parts of it, and others like it could be lost to the oblivion of a forgetfulness so permanent and fixed decided the matter. I dressed hurriedly and left the house. I got to the street and the thought that I might not have closed my door came suddenly. I ignored it and walked towards the bus stop. The unlocked door would not leave my mind, and so I rushed back, only to find the door safely locked.

The waiting room was empty when I arrived. I got to the door just as the guide was about to close it. The place was almost full, one seat remained in the middle of the room. I walked quickly, looking at the floor, and tried to breathe evenly as I sat down. The balls emerged from the table and I stared at them as they gleamed.

Forced Apart

Mathopa Moeti

The loud sound of cowbells filled the air as the sun set and the sky turned red. It was at that time that the cattle returned to the kraal after a day of grazing in the luscious green fields. The rain had been generous that year. The rivers were overflowing, the fields were green and the land fertile. Dikgothatso rushed to the kraal when she heard the sound of the gate screech on the concrete beneath it. Her uncle, Mokgethwa, led the cattle inside the kraal.

‘Bring me the bucket,’ Mokgethwa instructed loudly to Dikgothatso. She took off running, entered the kitchen where she fetched a bucket and gave it to her uncle.

‘Okay, you can get out now. You know girls are not allowed inside the kraal,’ Mokgethwa told Dikgothatso.

‘Why I want to see what you are doing,’ Dikgothatso said as she climbed the logs of wood stacked upon each other on the side of the kraal to get to the top and watch her uncle.

‘Why are you not tying its feet today? What will you do if it kicks you? Is the milk coming out?’ she questioned her uncle as he milked the cow.

‘Ahh, you and your questions,’ Mokgethwa said. Dikgothatso had always been inquisitive about everything since she could talk. She continued watching quietly as her uncle finished milking the cow.

She brought out a chair for Mokgethwa and they sat outside waiting for supper to get ready.

‘You look exhausted today. How did it go?’ Mokgethwa’s mother, Maphuti, asked about his day.

‘Yes, extremely. But it was alright. They are grazing well now and none got lost so that is always good,’ Mokgethwa replied.

It got darker as they continued with their chatter. Matome came home from football practice just in time for supper. He had always loved football more than anything. Even though he and Mokgethwa were twins, they always had different interests. They have always been opposites: Mokgethwa was

quiet and reserved, Matome loud and social. Maphuti had them rotate on taking the cattle to the field because she knew that Matome would never do it if it was not set up in that way. He joined them to eat and they continued with their chatter.



Matome was woken up by a loud mosquito hovering above his ear. As he tried to go back to sleep, he heard voices whispering right above the window. He looked over at Mokgethwa who was sound asleep. He tried to wake him up with a gentle kick and Maphuti walked in.

‘Mokgethwa, where is Donald? Did you not say that you saw him?’ Maphuti asked.

‘What do you mean where is he? Is he not home?’ Mokgethwa replied half asleep.

‘No. His father is here looking for him,’ Maphuti said.

Mokgethwa did not know where Donald could have gone. He had not seen him since their encounter in the afternoon. Mokgethwa and Donald were best friends. They were such close friends that everyone knew that wherever one was the other was there as well. They were only away from each other when they separated to go to their respective homes. Maphuti told Donald’s father that the boys did not know where was or where he could have gone. Donald’s father was okay knowing that. He was just there because Donald’s mother was the one who was worried about the boy, and he doubt she sleep knowing where he was. He, on the other hand, not mind waiting for tomorrow to start looking for him. ‘You know how young boys are. We were young once,’ Donald’s father said as he made his way out of the yard.

Mokgethwa struggled to fall back to sleep as he started thinking of what happened during the day.

He and Donald always met at the lake a little further after passing the windmill in the fields. Usually, the cattle taken to drink at the lake, but lately, because of the heavy rains, they drank from the small rivers that had formed to avoid the cattle into the deep water and drowning. Mokgethwa enjoyed herding the cattle not only because it allowed him time to be away from society and one with nature he also got to spend time with Donald. They had always been close since they were young and eventually became inseparable as they got older. Even in the classroom they sat together until they got separated

by the teacher if need. Their love for each other could not be explained. Those that did not know often thought Donald was Mokgethwa's twin instead of Matome.

Donald's patience had run out as he explained his frustrations to Mokgethwa while they walked towards the lake. He could no longer continue holding in the secret they shared. They had been friends since Donald's family moved to the village when he was in primary school. They had built such a strong bond that got even stronger in their first year of high school. had gone to the lake as they usually did and as they sat down watching the cows graze, Donald had moved in closer to kiss Mokgethwa. Mokgethwa pushed Donald away after a few seconds, stood up without saying a word and walked away.

The following day in their English class, Mokgethwa wrote 'I'm sorry' in the textbook they shared together: 'Do you like me?'

Donald responded by writing in the book as well. 'Yes, Mokgethwa. We will talk about it after school.' He concluded the conversation before the teacher could notice that they were distracted.

A few years after they had secretly been in a relationship, they had concluded to give in to Mokgethwa's mothers endless requests of him getting a girlfriend. They believed that it would not only decrease the pressure from his mother but it would also take away suspicion of their relationship.

Masetshaba, Mokgethwa's girlfriend, had started asking too many questions. She was unsettled that Mokgethwa not yet proposed that they get intimate even after a year of being together. She had started thinking that Mokgethwa was only playing with her and waiting to leave for university to break it off with her. Donald did not think that Mokgethwa's relationship with Masetshaba would get this far. He had only agreed to it initially to give Mokgethwa time to come out to his family. His relationship with Masetshaba was progressing each day while Mokgethwa was not making any progress of telling his family.

Donald had grown weary of not being able to be open about their relationship. He was tired of people thinking that they are just best friends and was not convinced of Mokgethwa's efforts, thinking he had gotten comfortable with his relationship with Masetshaba. Donald's parents were aware that he had no desire whatsoever in women, but part of them was in denial hoping he will 'try them out' one day and enjoy it. He came out to them the day he had kissed Mokgethwa for the first time. With

Donald being the only child, they were worried that they will not have grandchildren and no one to continue their family name. Mokgethwa, on the other hand, was not ready to come out and let people know about his relationship with Donald and face the consequences with Masetshaba and his family.

Donald ranting about telling the truth or their relationship come to an end reached a standstill by the banks of the lake. An overwhelming feeling took over Mokgethwa, his heart beating fast Donald's words punches in his stomach. He put his hands over his head as he turned away from Donald. He turned quickly, lowering his hands from his head and pushed Donald into the lake. He stood in shock at what he had done while Donald struggled to lift himself above water. Without any thought, Mokgethwa found himself one foot after the other, running as fast as he could away from the lake, not taking a look back.



The people relied on themselves to feed their families. After countless broken promises from the government, they realised that they would starve to death if they did not take action. Each year towards the beginning of summer, they ploughed their fields and planted maize, watermelons, beans and numerous other crops they desired. It was only around the election seasons that the government would want to contribute to the buying seeds and manure and hiring tractors, in exchange for votes, of course. The maize had come out in the fields and it was time for weeding out the weeds around the maize and other crops. The women in the village woke up early, before dawn broke, to go weeding at the fields and check on their crops. They particularly enjoyed this time of the year as it gave them something to do – it kept them busy. They often left for the fields in groups of three or four at. As they approached the windmill, one of the women stopped them and pointed to the lake, not certain of what she was seeing.

The women cautiously and fearfully moved from their path and walked towards the lake. They all came to a standstill when they noticed the lifeless body floating in the water. One of the village women let out a short scream. The body floated face up, eyes opened and a slight pigment change around the face. 'We must go call his mother,' one of the women said once they realised who the body belonged to. of the women began running towards the village.

Donald's mother had struggled to sleep all night. She was very uneasy not knowing where her son could have been and the reasons why he did not come home. She turned over to face her snoring husband and wondered how he could be asleep so peacefully. She woke him up. She told that their son was not yet back and they should get up and start looking for him. Agitated, her husband turned over and faced the other side with his back turned to her. He would not go looking for Donald at that time of the morning; besides, he would come back eventually, and it was still early. Donald's mother laid on her back facing the ceiling thinking of all the possible places he could have gone to.

She jolted out of her thoughts by a loud knock on the door. She quickly got out of bed, wrapped herself with a blanket, thinking that it was Donald, but why would he knock so loudly. Anger and agitation began to form as she walked towards the kitchen door.

She was greeted by a panting woman, out of breath. 'Come quick!' she said, trying to catch her breath, 'there is something you should see.' Shocked, she asked the woman what was going on and if it had anything to do with Donald. The woman nodded and Donald's mother ran back to her bedroom to wake her husband. The three of them left the house.

They were all silent in the car ride to the lake. Donald's mother noticed the other village women as they approached the lake. She ran towards the lake as the car reached a halt and noticed the lifeless body floating in the water. An overwhelming feeling of sadness overtook her entire body when she realised that it was Donald's body floating. Realising that it was too late to save him, she fell down to her knees and began to wail and a crowd started to gather around them.

There was a sombre mood across the entire village as the funeral preparations were underway. People wanted to make sense of what could have happened that led Donald to his dire fate. Rumours went around that he might have slipped and fell into the lake and was not able to swim, therefore drowned. Others said that maybe someone drowned him on purpose as a way to avenge his parents' dealings, 'the best way to hurt the parents is through the child,' they said.

It was rumoured that Donald's father had stolen ten cows from a small farm close to the village they used to live in, with the help of his friend, before they left the village. It was said that he had waited for

the workers to leave the farm later that night, made an opening in the fence close to where the cows were, led them out through the opening and had one of his friends load them in his truck away to his farm in exchange for money. This was all being said by one of the workers from Donald's father's friend. The family had experienced so much hate and threats from the villagers since the cows went missing.

Stories came up speculating what could have happened to Donald but oftentimes they failed to make sense. When the day of the funeral arrived, the villagers prepared themselves and went to show their support and comfort Donald's parents. Maphuti and Matome had given Mokgethwa more time to get dressed for the funeral while they waited for him in the kitchen.

Matome went to check if he was ready in their outside room behind the house. He found him sitting on top of the wood trunk they kept their clothes in, not dressed, looking down at the watch he had in his hands and tears dripping down the floor. 'You're not going to the funeral are you?' Matome said in a low voice.

Mokgethwa simply shook his head.

Matome moved towards him, gave him a soft squeeze on shoulder, closed the door and went back into the kitchen. Matome and Maphuti went to the funeral together. They all wondered how he could bear saying goodbye to his best friend forever. He must have been devastated and heartbroken. Donald was like a brother to him, they were inseparable and now they will forever be forced apart.

Floating

Miriam Gayize

1. The Interview [Ru]

The untouched mango iced tea I ordered stared back at me as my leg bounced beneath the table. She was late, and this rarely bothered me. Yanira Khanyande was on my wishlist. The years of research and shameless social media stalking had led up to this day – I finally got to interview her for our magazine. The waitress who served me returned with an artificial smile and notepad. ‘Can I get you anything to eat?’ she asked as her eyes partially travelled to the drink I had ordered over five minutes ago.

‘The avocado and toast would be nice, thank you.’ The waitress walked away with my order.

I heard the door to the restaurant open and I slowly stood up from my seat as Yanira entered.

She looked flawless in a cream white dress shirt and heels. I noticed the light dusting of make-up on her face that made her even more beautiful. Her short natural hair was the colour of honeycomb which contrasted her pale skin. I contemplated pulling out the seat for her when she neared the table.

She reached out her hand for mine. ‘I’m glad you made it,’ I said in relief as our hands embraced. Her grasp was firm, yet her hand was soft, and our conversation felt the same.

We sat down just as my food arrived, but Yanira refused to order anything. ‘I’m training after this,’ she said with a smile, and I nodded in understanding.

‘I just want to start by saying that you’re an amazing person. I’ve been following your story for so long and having this opportunity is beyond anything I... the magazine could ever ask for,’ I quickly blurted out and regretted it immediately. I looked down at my toast in embarrassment and cleared my throat.

‘I’m always nervous about magazine features but being a part of something that highlights the stories of the LGBTQ+ community is something I could not resist,’ she responded timidly, almost like

she was aware of how anxious I was, and I marvelled at her articulation of words and overall warmth before we began.

My phone was between us and I kept a notepad of my own to take notes of any details of our interaction. ‘You came to South Africa after a tragedy you experienced, how did that affect your grieving process and growth?’ There was a stillness in the air after the question. I felt my throat constrict so I finally allowed myself to drink some of the mango iced tea and take a quick bite of the toast.

‘My father’s passing was sudden, brutal and unfair. I will never stop grieving; the pain never leaves me but being able to express myself and live the way he wanted me to has made me feel a lot better.’

I nodded at her words, quietly taking them in and making sure she felt safe.

‘You started as a model, a career you’ve been very... vocal about.’ We laughed as I said this and I welcomed the change after the first question. I’ve had to deal with a loss of my own and I understood how uncomfortable it can be to talk about.

‘Modelling was absolute shit. All I could think about was swimming and I just reached a point in my modelling career where I unleashed everything I had bottled up. My mom, who was my boss at the time, had none of it and there was an altercation.’ She whispered the last part and my eyes widened. I felt like I was in on a secret, a little scoop just for me and my little journalist heart. It concerned me that she had gone through that. I kept a mental note to ask her if she wanted me to add it to the article. She did.

‘You’ve been swimming all your life. Did you get any backlash as a teen in your community for choosing such a sport?’ I watched her eyes as I asked this and hoped she understood it and didn’t feel under pressure.

She twisted her lips in thought – a mannerism I had grown to love as we connected – before she responded. ‘I think I got more hate for my albinism than I did for swimming. Swimming has always been comfortable for me; floating in the ocean and feeling myself open up to the sky was addictive. I never got to swim competitively though until much later in life, but swimming was never ugly.’

‘I like how you said that. ‘Swimming was never ugly.’ I noted that down for the piece and she grinned from ear to ear.

‘Did you ever come out to anybody?’ I asked. I silently hoped her coming out story wasn’t as harsh as mine because I didn’t like to imagine her in pain or isolated in any way.

‘I did. To my father who was fully accepting, then to my mother, who wasn’t at all. She always questioned my lifestyle choices and the crowd I spent time with. She was very critical and she tried to mold me into something more desirable to the male gaze, more feminine and submissive. It was quite aggressive, a form of conversion therapy that didn’t work. I finally moved and that was the end of that.’

I released a heavy sigh at the shadow of carpet burns on my knees from daily prayer to be forgiven. I was a sinner in my mother’s eyes, the worst kind and she did unspeakable things to ‘save’ my soul. My triggers were awoken. I tried very hard not to make that noticeable. I drank more of my ice tea and willed myself to continue.

We went through more questions. When did you realise that you were lesbian and not just a tomboy?’

She looked away from me, to the window next to us, and the blush was evident on her cheeks. ‘I liked this girl in high school, her name was Ameena’ – I wrote the name down and continued to listen – ‘we became friends and I always felt like we’d be friends forever. I mentioned once that we should get married and she laughed it off. I think I always knew, even before then but when it truly showed in my feelings and urges. I just finally embraced it.’

We shared a few laughs, and a tinge of flirting from her end. Time passed by as we delved deeper into conversation and it looked like we weren’t saying our goodbyes anytime soon.

‘Aren’t you training after this?’ I interrupted and her light hazel eyes widened at the realisation. She shrugged immediately and it was so perfect to see her fall back into herself and be present.

‘Ah well, I guess I should order something now.’

2. The Confession [Ru]

It was late in the afternoon when she made an order. She devoured the vegan pasta alfredo as soon as it hit the table and I was quite amused – seeing her in a less extravagant appeal was the highlight of my

day. I'd met her a few times before and we'd chatted a little online but we never got to have a full conversation in person – she was either always whisked away to the side of the room or huddled with her circle of friends.

'I have a confession,' she whispered.

I perked up in my seat. I was more of an observer, which was good for my work but human interaction always felt like a mess of body language and figuring out what tone to use, so whatever she was about to tell me made me nervous. It could've been anything and I was afraid I would react badly, or worse, indifferently.

'I'm interested in you, romantically. I've always been interested.' She paused to gauge my reaction. I was frozen in my seat. 'I just didn't know how to approach you,' she continued slowly. 'I've never had to do that and I know that sounds conceited but it's true, so when you emailed me to do this interview, I was smitten. I chose this place because I felt it was quite nice for a date setting,' she giggled, 'and I just really like you.'

'You like me?' I didn't know what else to say. I was infatuated with her and I never in my wildest dreams thought I'd hear those words from her.

Yes, I know this is unprofessional—'

No, I feel the same way,' I interjected, more forcefully than I intended and it visibly startled her. 'I'm sorry. I'm just shocked.' She clearly didn't know how to react. Her eyes darted around the space behind me and her hands were hidden beneath the table.

'I tried to restrain myself from feeling anything romantic towards you because it seemed weird. Being a fan of yours was enough and getting to interact with you was amazing, but I always shut those feelings out, you know?' I was a mess of words and it felt like I was yelling in her face. She looked uncomfortable and I didn't know what to do.

My dating background was non-existent and my entire being involved work and therapy.

'We don't have to talk about this if you feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable. I'm terribly sorry for just cornering you like this.' Her hands were close to mine on the table as she spoke and her eyes had softened.

I was embarrassed and my mother's nails digging into my hair as she prayed maniacally above me prowled to the center of my mind. 'I have to go.' I stood up from my seat, picked up my phone and bag and rushed out of the restaurant with my pride.

3. The Regret [Yanira]

The water's breath worked in sync with mine as my limbs moved steadily over the tides. Floating was a form of healing for me; an escape from the world. As I stared at the sky, more clouds were forming and the inviting blue turned starkly grey. The water was not water anymore; it felt heavy against my body and I began to sink when the water turned quicksand and was dragging me into the ground. I screamed but nothing came out until I was submerged in the darkness.

I jerked awake as my body gasped for air. 'Just another nightmare,' I repeated out loud to myself then whispered the words more softly as I laid back down. My eyes never closed. My mind was stuck on the conversation I had with Ru and this recurring dream. 'Fuck!'

I grabbed my phone from the bedside table and looked through my social media page. There were no new messages from her. My heart sank. I regretted telling her how I felt that day. I should've known it wouldn't go as smoothly as I had imagined. Learning about her was simple: she had been following me since I started modeling for my mother's fashion magazine. I watched her grow from her university days to finally becoming a journalist and telling the stories that would otherwise be ignored or forgotten.

I hadn't lost all hope in being with her because she felt the same way. I restrained myself from having a meaningful relationship for so long because I never committed, but I felt anew in her presence. I felt open to every possibility and I couldn't bear the thought of losing that.

I'm sorry Ru. My feelings for you are genuine and knowing that you feel the same way has given me hope. I completely understand if you don't want to see me again.

I held my breath when the message was sent. I figured she was probably asleep so I put my phone away and settled into bed but I refused to close my eyes.

A notification sounded through the room and I turned my head to my phone before I picked it up eagerly and saw that she had texted me back.

Ru 🌸 :

I've struggled with my mental health for the longest time and alongside that, I've struggled with relationships. I also can't understand how you like me. You are everything Yanira, everything. I just don't understand how everything could see anything in me.

My heart stopped at her words. I've made this so much about myself and what I wanted that I completely disregarded everything she had been open about on social media.

I am so sorry Ru. I am fully aware of your struggles, just made this about myself and I manipulated the situation to give me the opportunity to tell you how I felt. I'm not everything and I apologise for how I dealt with my feelings.

The hopes I had drifted away when a reply never came that night. In the same week, my interview was up. My social media buzzed with commentary and praise from friends. Links to the interview and pictures of my face in the magazine were shared. I wondered if they'd reach my mother who'd been mentioned numerous times.

4. The Session [Ru]

I tried my best to look and sound stable as I sat in front of my therapist on the green plush couch that afternoon. We were twenty minutes into the session and I was able to keep myself from cracking. 'I

saw that you did an interview with that swimmer you like. How was that experience?’ I knew it wouldn’t last long.

‘It was good. Being that close to her, learning about her was good.’ I couldn’t keep the act up for much longer because Dr Jas’s brows raised in intrigue and her pen itched to make notes.

‘Did you speak after the interview?’ There was a long pause from my side of the room as my mind replayed the messages I got from Yanira. I had been soaking in guilt after I’d ignored her for almost a week and my heart couldn’t hold it in any longer.

‘Yes,’ I sighed, ‘it was weird ‘cause she was supposed to leave but she stayed and told me she had feelings for me.’ The room stilled for a bit after my words and I watched as Jas moved slightly in her chair.

‘She told you she had feelings for you?’

‘Well she said she was interested in me, romantically,’ I corrected myself.

‘Okay, let’s slow down here, Ru.’ She gestured for me to slow down before she wrote in her little notepad. Jasmine knew about Yanira and how I felt about her. She also knew I had never been in a relationship and never expressed any interest in being in one. I assumed that my interaction with Yanira must have been a welcome development after all these years of therapy. ‘This woman you’ve admired for years has expressed romantic interest in you... how did you take that revelation?’

‘Well,’ I cringed, ‘badly, to say the least.’

‘Oh?’ She expected more and I felt too embarrassed to continue. I felt like I was back in the living room of the house I grew up in with my afro puffs and blemished face, chanting a Bible verse while having to suppress my ‘sinful’ thoughts as my mother held me against her body and cried as the pastor chanted with me. I sometimes feel like all that torture worked because of moments like these where I couldn’t allow myself to jump right in and feel everything fully.

I quickly had to return to myself to utter my next words. ‘Well I told her I felt the same way but saying that out loud was so overwhelming because of everything,’ I ran my hands over my face in frustration, ‘just everything.’

‘I know, I know. But, do you agree that this is growth? Ru, you told her how you felt, that’s huge.’

I never realised this part or maybe I never wanted to accept it because I had been so comfortable with being alone.

‘I guess I agree? I fled the whole situation after that and she messaged me to apologise. Fuck, I feel so bad for ignoring her.’ The whole process of having to talk about Yanira and everything that transpired made my insides churn. I felt so uncomfortable in my own body and I hated myself for how I reacted.

‘You fled because you felt overwhelmed.’

‘Everything felt too real. Too fast. Too much. I get so nervous to text her back. I just want her to forget about me.’

‘What was the last thing she said to you?’

I retrieved my phone from my bag and found the last message before passing the phone to her. ‘You are everything, Yanira,’ she read out loud and I covered my face as a smile crept in with the warmth on my cheeks.

‘She feels bad,’ I uncovered my face and watched as she nodded at the screen. ‘She clearly does.’ She gave me my phone back and I gladly shoved it back into my bag.

‘This is still growth. You’ve come a long way Ru, I believe you can go further with this. Start off as friends.’

I breathed in. ‘Friends,’ I breathed out.

5. The Friendship [Yanira]

Ice-cream. Ru loved ice-cream. Mint chocolate to be exact. She had a cat named Mint that she got when she finished her degree. She also told me being a detective was her initial dream but realised she had more passion for journalism. She at least got to write about criminal activity in the beginning of her career, which was close enough. I told her this and she laughed. ‘I love your laugh,’ I said. She laughed even more and I giggled, slightly embarrassed at how young I felt. I felt like the world couldn’t hurt me and I was able to enjoy the presence of another girl without being watched or criticised. I bet she felt the same way, maybe more than I did.

‘Thank you.’ I took another spoon of my mango sorbet and she watched me as I salivated at the taste. Under her gaze, I truly felt like I was everything but I instantly snapped out of it.

‘Did it shock you when I called? ‘Cause it definitely shocked me that I was able to do that,’ she said nervously. We had gone to a small dessert bar that she frequented near her apartment building. This time we were seated next to each other, and it felt a lot more intimate. Professionalism was out of the window and I felt comfortable.

‘It did. I would’ve tried to accept it if you didn’t call. I was quite in your face the last time we hung out.’ We laughed. I was glad that we could laugh about it; I didn’t want the connection we were developing to end.

‘I had to get out of my own way to reach out again.’ She paused. We looked into each other’s eyes and I wanted to stay there forever. ‘I’m really glad I did but, uhm, I want us to be friends before anything else.’

I blinked away the trance I found myself in and processed her words. From being pursued by industry women, fellow teammates and men who didn’t want to understand that I had no interest in them, being constantly desired was the norm for me. Now it felt foreign to take it slow with somebody I wanted to smother with all I had.

‘Friends, of course we can be friends.’ I didn’t sound too convincing even to myself but she smiled.

‘Cool.’ She took another spoonful of her ice cream and I hesitantly poked at my sorbet.

‘Did your mother read the interview? I figured it must have reached her somehow, since she’s in the magazine industry as well.’ I flinched at the question. My mother had seen it and sent a few lengthy emails to my inbox. I hadn’t replied to any of them and I wasn’t prepared to do so.

‘She did but I don’t want to taint our little date with the details.’ She hummed and nodded in understanding before devouring the last of her ice cream. I lost my appetite at the thought of my mother and the sorbet slowly turned into juice overtime. ‘Are you gonna finish that?’ I shook my head at her question and she must have noticed I was retreating into myself again – she stood up, grabbed my hand and dragged me outside of the dessert bar.

‘Don’t think about her,’ she said as she held my hands. She looked straight into my eyes as if searching for any sign of my mother. ‘I know it’s hard but don’t let her control you anymore. I’m learning this in my own life as well, and it’s pushed me to be here, with you, to share myself more with the world.’ She turned and gestured to the people on the pavement who were completely oblivious to

what she was talking about, then back to me. 'I'm so sorry that she made you feel less-than you are, Yanira.'

'I... Thank you.' I was dumbfounded at her reaction. It felt like she needed it more than I did and I hugged her. She held me for a few long seconds before we began to walk, hand in hand, to her apartment building and when we neared the place, I didn't want to let go.

'Well,' she said in a sing-song voice, 'this is me.' I sighed when she separated our hands. 'Thank you for—' I kissed her before she could continue and she paused before she melted into the kiss. It was soft, slow and addictive. I wanted to kiss her everywhere and taste her until all I could breathe was her scent.

She parted our lips and whispered, 'Let's, uhm, go inside,' before we entered the air-conditioned building. It was a pleasant feeling against the heat outside. The sunscreen and strawhat I had adorned weren't doing much to help and I wondered how she survived in all-black clothes. I never got to ask.

She signed me in as a visitor and we entered the elevator. Our lips immediately latched on to each other like magnets and she struggled to hit her floor button but she got it eventually. We stopped kissing when we reached her floor and made our way to apartment 403, a clean – too clean – one bedroom that made me self-conscious about my own. There were no dishes in the kitchen sink or counter. The cushions on the couch were nicely propped up and the colour scheme was quite minimalist – black and white with a splash of green from plants. 'I don't usually invite people in here,' she laughed as she moved to take off her shoes and I did the same.

'I doubt you have any friends, Ru,' I said jokingly.

She moved closer to me and, with a slow smirk, she whispered over my lips, '*You* were supposed to be my friend.' The fullness of her lips against mine had me hungry for the entirety of her. I couldn't stop my fingers from slowly trailing underneath her tee shirt along her waist. She helped me to fully remove her tee shirt before I plastered kisses onto her rounded jawline, her collarbone, her exposed milky brown chest.

We moved into her bedroom where her sweet scent lived alongside the smell of incense that rested on my nostrils. My eyes drifted toward the openness of her room as she kissed my neck and I noted the shoes littered on the floor and the magazines, newspapers and books piled up against the wall. A laptop

sat on her desk with a picture of Mint. I didn't have time to ask about where the cat was because my body was laid down on her bed where she completely undressed me.

I breathed slowly in and out as her tongue flicked and licked between my thighs after tormenting me with a vibrator. My toes curled at how skillful and delicate she was against my wetness and my eyes slightly watered at the feeling. I released a few animalistic moans as I reached my peak and she chuckled before we found each other's lips again.

6. The Water [Ru]

'That feels so good,' I groaned in pleasure and her hands grew firmer as they wrestled to make me less tense. I had never received a massage but she offered and I couldn't refuse. Her hands felt tender against my joints and I never thought that was all I needed to cure me from all my problems but it was.

She finished up and laid beside me. I studied the freckles on her face and ran my finger over her cheek before reaching her mouth. 'You're everything, Yanira.' She blushed and looked away from my eyes that were tethered to hers. The light in the room dimmed as the sun rested and I wanted to watch her body react to my touch all over again but I had an idea that I knew she would love. 'Wanna swim?' Her eyes lit up and she jumped up from the bed.

'Where? Take me please!' I laughed and went to the bathroom to get some towels. She wrapped hers over her panties and bra then walked delightfully behind me as I led the way to the pool.

I was thankful that no one else was lingering by the pool area.. I knew some guys would arrive later in the night with their beers and loud music. Yanira immediately removed the towel and sandals before she dived head first into the water. I could never do that even if I tried. I wasn't much of a swimmer and the water was too cold.

'I've been craving this the whole day!' she exclaimed excitedly emerging from the water.. I smiled at her as I slowly took one step into the pool and sat down on the pool step. She swam toward me and turned her face at me. 'You can't bring me here and not join me, Ru,' she said in a bored tone.

'I feel good here, thank you.'

‘You can’t swim, can you?’ She crossed her arms as she asked this. She was chest deep in the water so it looked hilarious and I couldn’t contain my laughter.

‘Uhhm... I can kinda swim, on the shallow end though. I stay far way from the deep end, don’t wanna fuck around and drown.’

‘Come over here to me. I won’t let you drown. I promise.’ She extended her hands toward me.. I was hesitant for a few seconds before I decided it wouldn’t hurt to be closer to her in the water where she was more comfortable and freer.

She was at the center of the shallow end and I was a bit afraid she would drag me to the deep end for some odd reason. I immediately shut down the intrusive thought as I made my way to her. We were breathing in sync and our chests were only inches apart. ‘You’re safe, Ru.’ She pressed a small kiss on my lips but before she could break from the kiss, I kissed her some more. She whimpered against my lips as my finger reached inside her panties and worked her walls but she stopped me and I immediately released my hand and turned to see if somebody had entered the pool area but nobody was there.

I turned back to her and there were tears in her eyes. ‘Hey, are you okay? Did I do something wrong?’ I didn’t know what to do with my hands. My heart raced against my chest and my eyes darted all over her face. I felt terrified and concerned at the same time.

‘No, no, you did nothing wrong. I’m just... can we get out of here?’ We moved out of the pool and she patted her face dry with my tee shirt before she wore it. We made it back to the elevators and entered a vacant one.

‘Are you okay?’ I was not great with tears. She was still crying, silently but the tears were obvious and glossy against the lights above us.

‘I’ll explain but it’s so stupid.’ There was a lot of emphasis on the p with her accent and I figured the situation wasn’t as stupid as it sounded or stupid at all.

We were inside and warm. I put the wet pieces of clothing in the washing machine and passed her another tee shirt to wear before we settled into my bed. We sat side by side and I took her hand in mine to comfort her.

‘I keep having this dream. Dreams are very important to me because my father visits me in dreams sometimes and the symbolism of some of them have helped with my healing process but in this dream...’ she choked on her words at the end. She continued, ‘I’m floating in the open sea. I can hear the birds and I can see the sky. I’m floating but then the water turns into mud and I start sinking. It’s like that sand’ – I snuck in ‘quicksand’ and she nodded as she sniffed. ‘That sand just drags me in and I can’t breathe. I’m fighting and I disappear inside of it then I wake up, gasping for air.’ Her tears were all dried up but her voice was laced with frustration and a tinge of anger.

‘Well, firstly, it’s not stupid.’ She laughed softly and I rubbed her back as I spoke. ‘And secondly, when did you start having this dream?’

‘A few months ago my mother reached out to me for some modeling opportunity. It came and went as we interacted. I could barely be in the water the night after having the dream.’ She sighed and laid down. I laid down next to her. She was on her back and I was on my side, listening attentively. It felt slightly odd being in my bedroom with somebody else and hearing their voice penetrate the walls I go through my own spirals in.

‘Have you researched what it could mean?’

‘Yes,’ she covered her face and I moved a bit closer to her. I peeled her fingers away and saw the tears in her eyes. ‘I just don’t feel good enough for her. She has something to say about everything I do and it fucking sucks. I’ve been slacking so much in the team recently and I *have* to bring in the gold. I’ve lost myself to her, once again. *She’s* the quicksand suffocating me.’

I was trying not to let her outburst affect me because my own mother was attached to all the inadequacies I felt within myself. It had taken me years to reach a point where I could be naked with another woman, kiss another woman, laugh innocently with another woman without feeling her shadow looming over me and I felt so alive. I wanted the same for Yanira. I wanted her to float freely.

‘Get your phone and go to your emails.’

‘What?’ she wiped her nose and stared blankly at me. I gestured at her phone and she shook her head.

‘Delete all the emails she sent you and write back to her. Tell her exactly how she’s made you feel all these years. Pour out every morsel and I promise you’ll be floating this time around, Yanira.’

7. The Mother [Yanira]

I slowly rose from the bed, grabbed my phone from the bedside table and I held it like it was hot coal.

**Yanira, I am your mother and I made you. I gave
you this life and this is how you repay me?
I will involve lawyers if you do not find a way to
remove my name from this interview. I have a company
and reputation to uphold for Pete's sake.**

I deleted them one by one and I felt myself detach from her even more. I turned to Ru and she smiled in encouragement. I was so thankful for her in that moment as she kissed my temple and left me in the bed with my phone between my hands, thumbs quivering with nerves.

I pressed the option to compose a new email and hesitantly entered her email address. On the subject line, I typed To My Mother and began typing the words I'd bottled up for over four years, afraid that she'd think I was ungrateful, or worse, throw me out because she felt like I was being ungrateful. I cried a few times as my thumbs hit each letter to form one more word. My heart hammered alongside my typing and I paused to breathe. 'You can do it, Yanira,' I heard Ru say at the door and I looked up to meet her eyes.

I quickly ended it and sent it before I could convince myself otherwise then placed my phone back on the bedside table.

'I made us something to eat, if you want...' I got out of bed and walked over to her. She held my waist and kissed my temple again. I enjoyed it so much when she did that cause I always felt complete.

She plated the stir fry she made with mushrooms, peppers and onions with some chicken strips for her and more mushrooms for me. We sat on the couch with a fleece blanket that I hadn't noticed earlier, over our legs and she played a movie.

As I ate, I imagined where my mother would be when she saw that email. I saw her straining her eyes to read before she found her glasses in the dark room she shared with her timid husband. I imagined how she would receive my words and if they'd impact her in any way. My mind drifted to

Ru and the type of treatment she got from her mother. The type that required her to sit in weekly sessions with a therapist to learn how to accept herself for everything she was tortured into believing she wasn't supposed to be.

I thought about my father and how amazing he was. The love he showed me and wanted me to have with another. I ate the last bit of my food and turned my eyes to Ru, whose eyes were fixed on the movie that played in the background of my thoughts. I had already unplugged from it, a psychological thriller about something I didn't remember. I studied her expressions, the intensity in her eyes, the dreadlocks that reached her shoulders and the tattoos that canvassed her arms.

It felt full circle to be with each other in that living room after years of social media lurking and meeting but never talking in depth. I laughed to myself when I remembered she'd asked me to be her friend.

'What's got you all giggly? I know it's definitely not the movie because...' She lowered the volume on the movie then decided to pause it instead and turned to face me.

'No,' I covered my face in embarrassment, 'I was just thinking about this entire day and when you asked me to be your friend.'

'We did establish a friendship and I think that's important even though the sex technically erases it but who follows the rules these days?' I placed my plate on the table and moved closer to her. She placed her plate on the table as well and embraced me. I wasn't ready to leave this place, I wanted to sleep and wake up next to her everyday without fail but I had my own place, a mother to face and a career to redeem before the year met its end.

She played the movie and I closed my eyes as I drifted off to sleep. I woke up in the water with the birds singing and flying above me in the blue, and the familiar cold rush of the tides against my bare back.

I was floating.

*Drift***Caio Simões de Araújo**

I came to associate the beach with death. It's an odd thought, I am now aware. Even then, if I think of it, I knew of all the living things around us, out of sight, underwater, or hidden in the sands. I saw the fishermen depart religiously into the bay, their destiny unknown to me. But I recall they would always come back at times victorious, at times defeated, carrying the spoils of their aquatic labours, whatever was there. There was no bridge back then, the truly massive bridge that today imposes itself on us, marked onto the landscape, seen from everywhere, as omnipresent infrastructure. Before the bridge, before the thousands of tons of concrete, iron and sweat that were pushed on us, before the Chinese engineering team arrived like saviours of nothing, donors of what no one really wanted, there was a sense of adventure, the thrill of when one had to cross the waters.

I took great pleasure in making the crossing on the ferry, a boat so old as I could have imagined then, a prehistoric creature from the depths of the ocean that someone unknown had captured and domesticated. I would run through those rusty doors as soon as I could, desperate to find a place by the edge. Encrusted onto the moving monster, like a barnacle attached to a giant whale, I watched the city go by. It was funny, really. From Maputo, Catembe was little more than a coastal line, a stretch of beach that city people only thought about on weekends, when many of us visited, to play on the sand, to wet our feet, to eat the little fish scorched on the charcoal, the gifts of the ocean. From the other side, the city lost its grandiosity. It was surprisingly flat, contained, like a landscape, really. Even as a child, I did enjoy the change in perspective, the world upside down, seen otherwise. That was what those weekends on the beach meant to me, another world inside my world.

One day, my father died. And what I believed to be safe came quite undone, flooded, soaked, until I found myself alone in the world. That feeling of being adrift, isolated, my body rebirthed as a remote, secret island, untouched. I discovered solitude as a state of being. To be honest, I had always been the

lonely sort. My mother had died when I was three years old, and I had no siblings. My father remarried, but I never got to call his wife my mom. She was not up for that. We lived together in a big flat in Maputo but were also oddly apart. It is hard to explain how one can miss something that one never had. Like it was taken away from you, except it was never yours.

We did not have many family moments, surely not anything resembling that nurturing feeling one associates with home. And I grew up with this underlying loneliness, awkwardness, I could not explain, a fish out of water. At school, I struggled to make friends, good friends, people you carry along. Now, I can barely recollect any of my school acquaintances. I never suffered any abuse, but I was a misfit. Too small, too shy to be hanging out with other boys, and, yet, still too much of a boy to be around the girls. I was mostly left to my own devices.

But things started to change. The boys were growing at a pace I could not follow, the unripened fruit that I was. Someone called me *maricas*,¹ a word I had never heard, and could not register for what it was. That day I got home puzzled. *Pai, o que é maricas?*² He did not explain, but I could tell that he resented me for being called that word I did not know. From my room, I could hear his wife. *Vês, este menino, eu não sei, não, parece que está mais prá lá do que pra cá.*³ I was oblivious to her meaning. Side of what, I thought. Back then, I did not yet know of the border I had crossed. Since that day, my father never lost a certain unpleasant attitude towards me, the discretely annoyed face he came to exhibit at the sight of me. When he died, I did not cry. His wife returned to her parents' house, out of town. She said goodbye forever, remorseless.

I went to live with my Grandma, who had a small house in the village of Catembe, not too far from the beach where we spent our weekends. At times we did visit her, and I remember how much fun I had then, running after her chickens, holding the little chicks. It was very different now that I arrived, with bags in hand, to stay. For how long, I did not know. But there I was, loaded with things, and yet brutally empty, numb, disoriented.

The first few months are hazy in my memory, just endless days, undifferentiated time, going by, unmarked. The beach was transformed on the weekdays, I found out with some painful indifference.

¹ *Maricas* is a term in Portuguese, meaning an effeminate man, but also used to refer to a gay man.

² 'Dad, what is maricas?'

³ 'You see, this boy, I don't know, he seems to be more that side than this side.' The expression refers to who is out of place, odd, strange.

It lacked that buzz, the pulse that joyful, happy people bring to a place. It was shockingly deserted at times, and I wondered where everyone was hiding. Perhaps because there was nothing else, perhaps I was more aware, or perhaps it was just the remnants of those hectic weekends, but the beach now appeared to me as something of a junkyard. Dead earth.

I walked through the sand avoiding broken bottles and empty cans, plastics of various kinds and colours, debris of other people's pleasures. A burial site that had been devoid of its reverential powers. Abandoned. Forgotten. And I wondered of everything that had lived and died in this place, of the ghosts that were yet to haunt us, the exoskeletons hidden in a pit no one would dare to unearth.

With Grandma, I would learn the meaning of family, even though I was too deeply immersed in my melancholia to realise it as it happened. I kept her company. She pushed me forward everyday with the determination of someone who cannot afford to stop, relentless in their secret mission. There was a comforting monotony in our lives; a tenderness in her ways that was only possible to those who have lived through the unimaginable. I ultimately found a certain solace in my years with her, even if I remained strangely detached, evasive. I tried my best to meet expectations, helping in the house as much as I could, attending school – business as usual. But I knew she was worried, restless, about what would become of me.

A boy raised by his grandmother is seldom good news, I think I must have heard her say to herself. I do not know how much of it was her doing, how much of it had to do with me, but when I was in my mid-teens, my cousin arrived to live with us. Mário was from Inhambane, and I could barely recall having ever met him before. My father had not been in touch with that side of the family, my mother's side. I think he looked down on them, and maybe found himself to be too important, too much higher up, to cultivate such relations. But none of this mattered then, we were all on the same boat, as it were.

Mário was two years older than me, but whoever saw him unknowingly would have believed the gap between us was much bigger. He was not particularly tall nor hefty, but he had the calm, sober disposition of someone who had already lived. An old soul, as some used to say. I was intimidated by him. Me, who was still struggling to hatch out of my childhood skin, hoping to metamorphose into another self. I tried to avoid him at first, but it was impossible. Grandma's house was small, and she

was insistent that we had to spend our time together, that we should get to know each other, and learn from each other.

He had been raised near the beach, he knew the ocean deeply, she said. *Ele tem muito a te ensinar.*⁴

We were both reserved at first, even though I never knew his reasons. We both gave in, eventually. After finishing our chores, we would walk to the beach together, in the difficult silence of strangers, periodically broken by one awkward word or comment here and there. The beach provided a topic for conversation when we were still opening up to each other, when he tried to show me the world through his eyes, telling me of changing tides and winds, of fish and molluscs he had seen, back in Inhambane. He was not too familiar with Catembe, so we also explored the shore together. There was something enduring and contagious about his curiosity, his truly unpretentious desire to know. I could see that he took great pleasure in lying around in the sand, in finding those bits and pieces of aquatic life ashore.

He was once happy with himself for having stumbled on this lonely starfish. Lost, like us. With him, I was reviving my affection for the beach, now seen through his eyes. The odd way he looked at me sometimes, when we hunted for seashells. We were fascinated by the baroque beauty of their curls, their metallic colours, without ever thinking that they were remains of a life long gone. One day, I found a weird shell, long and twisted, charming in its uniqueness. I grabbed it and handed it over to Mário, because I thought that was something that people who cared for each other did for each other. He looked at it with that innocent satisfaction of someone who knew they had received a gift.

As I was becoming fond of his presence, when I was confident in our fondness for each other, I asked him to show me how to swim, or to float, at least. We practiced in the shallow water. He was to hold my body with his arms, until I was comfortable to manage myself, to lay my body against the skin of the ocean, he instructed me. But all I could feel was his own skin, his hands touching my shoulders, my waist, the back of my thighs as he lifted me, as he held me at the water level.

*Estás pronto?*⁵ When he removed his arms, I immediately sunk back, only to resurface, breathless, clumsy. He would laugh at me, but I did not mind. It took us so much practice until I could get myself

⁴ 'He has a lot to teach you.'

⁵ 'Are you ready?'

to float confidently, that I do wonder if I was sabotaging my own triumph, in fear of losing his supporting touch, his arms behind me as I tried to win the ocean.

One day, when I was waiting for his usual signal – *estás pronto?* – I heard instead: *Já está.*⁶ I was floating on my own, even if for only a few seconds before I lost control and sunk, yet again. But this time, as I resurfaced, I felt euphoric with my own sense of achievement, of overcoming a deep-seated fear. Mário was there, smiling at me, clapping in an act of support, of encouragement. Before I could think about it twice, I was hugging him, tight. I could feel him tense, perhaps surprised or in shock, I did not know. As I was letting go of him, he had what seemed as the most unusual reaction. He kissed me. His lips touched mine for maybe as many seconds as I had succeeded in floating. But it was enough to wash away my fears.

I did not know what Mário and I were doing in those lazy days at the beach, when he was my friend and my guide, when he was teaching me how to swim and how to love. But whatever that was, it was ours. For the first time I felt a sense of possession, attachment, to something that cannot be named or seen, something that barely existed at all, but was nonetheless as tangible to me as the shells on the beach. Our kisses were something I soon came to long for, to crave, to cherish. The lingering aftertaste of him, the remnants of sea water and sweat became indistinguishable to me whenever I touched his body with my lips. *A tua pele é salgada,*⁷ I'd tell him, just as I drew random patterns on his chest, running my finger through the stubborn patches of dried sand. Years would go by until I finally felt confident, safe, to return to these moments as relics of a past I accepted was impossible to touch, except as a faded abstraction. A past that has drifted away.

In those days, we lived like this, our lives punctuated by those encounters at the beach, where we simply existed for ourselves, out of time. I found in Mário a sense of kinship I had never experienced, certainly not with my mother, who I could barely remember, let alone with my father, who by the end of his life had become a stranger to me. This was not a linkage dictated by biology either, even though Mário was my cousin. But blood meant little to us, it was a distant idea, or a reminder of remarkable inconsequence. We shared something that felt more profound, thicker, precious. And slippery. We

⁶ 'There you go.'

⁷ 'Your skin is salty.'

had our ephemeral moments. Going for a swim. I would keep my legs opened, and he would dive through them, pinching me playfully as I saw the shade of him move underwater.

He was older, bigger, and better constituted than me, and he liked to show off. We would both dive at the same time and see who could hold their breath longer. He would always win. Except those times when I dismissed our contest altogether and kissed him, our mouths and tongues and teeth playing amid the sea water and the air bubbles. *Mesmo assim eu ganhei, tu tá desqualificado da competição, pá.*⁸ I did not care, I was one with the gentle waves of the bay, caressing his arms slowly, repeatedly. The tiny little bits of seaweed floating around us, the crustaceans and clams we knew were living on the beach, all those invisible creatures that called the shore their home, they were the only witnesses to our amphibian love. When Mário decided to leave the water before me, I would stay back, submerged, watching as he walked ashore. My mouth bubbling, only my eyes and ears above water, like a hippo.

Our moments. They were ours not because we lived in secrecy.

Back then, when most people lived offline, with no cellphones or internet, spilling secrets was a cultivated pastime. Grandma and her neighbours spent their restful hours speaking of others. We could hear their gasps of excitement at juicy gossip, and their sighs of frustration when not sufficient details were revealed. When the aunties left, Grandma would remain, sitting alone in front of the house for a bit, ruminating on the news of the day, laughing by herself. Many times, she would come back inside and find us hugging or lying in bed, my head on his chest. Privacy was a foreign, strange, notion in Grandma's house, and we were well aware of it. We were fine with it. That was not our home. Yet, our moments were ours not because they were hidden, private, but because Grandma did not care to understand, to see, what we really were. We were her grandchildren and that was enough for her to know.

She would often smile at us, genuinely happy that such a beautiful friendship was blossoming between us cousins. *Os dois aqui estão a divertir-se tanto,*⁹ she would tell us. That we were always together, that we hugged, held hands, and shared the bed, that was all small news, nothing out of the ordinary. Only the two of us could understand what we were to each other, it seemed like other people

⁸ 'I still won, you have been disqualified from the competition.'

⁹ 'You two are having a good time.'

were completely oblivious to what we did on the beach, all those times when we sank together, when we drifted into each other. *Esses primos são tão próximos, é bonito de ver.*¹⁰

Years later, I've now learned to appreciate this genuine lack of preoccupation, people's utter disinterest in watching us, in knowing what we did when only the clams were watching. I felt strong, invincible almost, as if I had the power of invisibility.

And then the tide shifted. I could never recollect the precise sequence of events that followed, as I sat on the edge of the bed, still disoriented. I had woken up scared to what I thought was thunder, but was revealed to be something more mundane, something metallic hitting the floor with a bang. I could hear an angry voice, a voice I could vaguely recognize as my uncle's. *Isto não pode ser! O que tem feito esses rapazes? O meu filho não vai ser um maricas! O que vão de dizer as pessoas? Tem de ser separados esses dois!*¹¹ I was just slowly getting a sense of all the noise around me. Sitting there, still in my underwear, white with thin black stripes. That had been one of those humid evenings, and we had fallen asleep together, as usual.

I later learned that my uncle had arrived at dawn, only to find us entangled in what he thought was a disgraceful, compromising, position. He was on his way to Johannesburg, carrying a shipment of something or the other from Inhambane, and had made the last minute decision to pay us a visit. I was peeking from behind the wall, as Mário kept his head down, looking at the floor with the flustered expression of a scolded child. Grandma was trying to pacify the room, calm the temper down, but to no avail. *Não é nada disso, meu filho! Estás a imaginar coisas!*¹² My uncle kept his chest inflated, like a cock that had come to roost and was up for no games. He was swinging his index finger around, violently pointing it towards the others, a frantic demonstration of his manhood. At the time I couldn't understand what was happening: all I knew was fear. My world drying up, the water receding after the flood. Years later, I understood that as a truck driver travelling extensively not only in Mozambique, but also in Zimbabwe and South Africa, my uncle was all too familiar with the likes of us, or with what he imagined we were. While neither Mário nor I had then much of a sense of what we

¹⁰ 'They are such close-knit cousins, it's something beautiful to watch.'

¹¹ 'This cannot be like this! What have these boys been up to? My son will not be a *maricas!* What will people say? They need to be separated!'

¹² 'It's nothing like this, my son! You are imagining things!'

had done, of what that meant for who we were, my uncle knew a bunch of names to call us by: *maricas, xitavane, gay, moffie*, and maybe others he would not care to repeat.

Mário had to pack whatever few things he had. He was to return to Inhambane immediately. Because I was younger and smaller than him, because I had fragile eyes and could not muster the same virility that he exuded, I was to blame. I did not feel we were in the wrong – blame and guilt meant little to me. They had more to do with my uncle’s need to purge himself from any form of responsibility by proxy, guilt by kinship. In my mind I had no space for remorse. I was soaked in a dense sense of loss, of impending dismemberment. Someone I held dear, whom I loved, was about to be exiled from my presence, a whole continent away, that unknown landmass of grit and dust I would not dare to trespass.

I only remember crying. I cried until I could no longer tell what I was crying about, if I was finally mourning the loss of my father or of my escaping love. Like water spilt on the earth floor, it disappeared, vanished. I cried until I was exhausted, until all I could get myself to do was to rest my head on Grandma’s lap, forever understanding what it meant to be again alone in this world. I remember Mário and his father standing by the door, ready to leave. I remember our last hug, that strange moment, the last fatal embrace. I kissed him on the cheek. He had also cried. His skin was salty, as always. Days later, I found the long, weird shell I had given him under the bed. I cried one last time.

I didn’t see him for years. Memories of him grew increasingly hazy, faded, eroded by the time now passed, rain and waves, sediments of feelings now gone, the rock formations I could no longer climb.

At 16, I was sent to live with my aunt in Johannesburg. She had migrated a long time ago, as a young child, when her father still worked in the mines. It was unusual for miners to bring their children at all, but she had health problems that could not be attended to back in Maputo. As a child, they were concerned about her chances at life, but she had persisted in spite of bad expectations. Whatever illness she had had in her youth had left her incapable of having children. At times I wonder if that was the source of her affection towards me, but I think we were both in severe need of each other, even if we did not know one another, not really. Aunty was like no one else I knew, she was free. Always with

that warm sincere smile that one associates with gratitude, perhaps the gratitude one feels for survival, after all.

A few years prior to my arrival, she had married a cheerful, nice, Nigerian man. Together they ran a clothing store in Jeppestown. The place was packed with what they sold as Mozambican and Nigerian fashion. It's all made in China, aunty told me. Life was difficult at first, suffocating even. The first winter was particularly painful. I could barely pull through the arid cruelty, the memory of a glacial time we as a species long to forget. And I thought that Johannesburg was an infinite dryland, a desolate, uninhabitable place, where no one would have settled had they known the risks. Yet, the truth was they had. They still do.

With time, I learned to appreciate, truly admire, people's determination to make a life in this place. To grow roots after the cold recedes. And not like a seed kissed by water, as it organically sinks itself into the soil. There is something more meticulous here, the effects of human desire. Of their own volition. Perhaps this is what makes of Jo'burg a singular place in the world, a city feeding on our stubbornness, our attachments.

As the cold dissipated, so did the harshness, the sense of estrangement I had felt diluted into the repetitive niceties, the familiar boredom of the everyday. I started to help out at the shop, organizing the stock, cataloguing the new arrivals, arranging pieces on the shelves, placing them on the mannequins. With her know-all smirk, Aunty said I had a good eye for this. I did not know what that meant, but I was glad. Not because of my new-found talent, but because I felt oddly seen. I suppose she had heard of my problems, and she did all she could to keep me interested, invested in something that was not my loss. *Lead us not into depression.*

I lived in a spare bedroom. I could not complain of lack of space. There was plenty. The city spread out for kilometres on end, the reclining body of a titan would wake up one day, to our ruination. I wondered if I would ever get to see all of it. Yet, it was surprising how little we did travel or moved around at all. We had everything at home, two TVs, a CD player, and all the vanities people associated with living in this place. There was no shortage of amusement either, given the eclectic mix of colourful characters in Aunty's own social universe.

At home, we spoke a combination of languages, the primordial mother tongue of mankind, with probably some made-up words in the mix. Aunty and I rarely travelled to Maputo, we got everything we needed here. I did not complain. I missed Grandma, but at the same time I did not want to resurrect the past, not yet, at any rate. To revive my time at the beach, the memory of what had been taken from me, washed away by the tide as my footprints on the sand. That was my offering to the spirits of the ocean. From time to time, I accompanied Aunty to Park Station, at times to pick someone up, or to collect a parcel with all sorts of things from Mozambique. But they could never bring what I wanted. What I wanted was in another time.

The summer months brought with them heavy rain, and with it I understood I could make this place my home. One can never forget one's first storm in Johannesburg. The sky shifting, crinkling as the heavy clouds arrived to claim the earth. We retreated in humility, forever thankful that we did have shelter, and yet easily forgetful of those who didn't. At night, the pitch-black sky above us was torn apart by lightning, a message being written, the elements alerting us that the end was near, that the waters would soon descend upon us. I wished I had paid more attention to our priest, because I could never tell if the storm was a prelude to the apocalypse, the great flood rebooted. *The sea will fall upon us, the earth will become sea, and we will perish.* In those moments of climatic excess, I felt like there was nothing else, like time had stopped. This place was all there was. *We are at the end of the world, and for that we deserve the future.* And then, nothing.

There is no greater silence than the silence that follows the Jo'burg thunder. That feeling that you are still alive. I eventually found great comfort in those nights, in that turning point when the storm fades into drizzle, and you know that the planet has given us another chance. Life begins anew. You wake up more alert than you once were.

The summer was also when we frequented the public swimming pools. Yeoville. Zoo Lake. There was so much excitement, joy, as kids splattered water everywhere, families reconciling in the shallow, washing away the little quarrels of the week, friends sharing jokes no one else would understand, pushing each other into the water, or climbing on each other's shoulders. I watched those friends and wondered if they also shared the same bond, the aquatic intimacy, that I once had. Before I knew what

gay was, before I knew there was something called queer, before I knew there were many like me, too many to count, really, I was never certain of the plausibility of our existence.

I still asked myself whether what had happened between Mário and I had been a singular anomaly, never again to be repeated in the history of men. I think Auntie could see my discomfort in front of other guys, the unease of someone who is faced with their object of desire, but without knowing what this desire was. Luckily, she was never the pushy sort, I think she valued her own freedom too much for that. When I clammed up, she met me with a smile. *Não te preocupes, não precisas ter medo, tu não és como os outros rapazes, querido, um dia hás de entender, um dia hás de achar o teu norte.*¹³

One day you will find what you lost, what you know should have been yours. One day I did. The tides will change and leave no rock unturned. But at that moment, it was us, in the pool, submerged in our own complicity. The water reached her belly button. We hugged. That slippery sensation, the familiar smell of shea butter and sun lotion. And then I knew I was home. The water was my home. I looked at her and I could feel my eyes tingling a little. Maybe it was the chlorine, or maybe I was just overwhelmed, drawing. *Vai, meu filho, nada.*¹⁴ *Go, my son, swim.* I let myself fall, backwards, immediately feeling the warmth, the sun's touch on my face. I was reminded of the Catembe beach. I closed my eyes, and let myself drift.

[A note from the author of 'DRIFT': *This short story is a fictionalised combination of elements of life history narratives I collected in Maputo since 2019, when I interviewed dozens of queer people for the project 'Archives of the Intimate: Queer Oral Histories of Maputo', commissioned by the GALA Queer Archives and sponsored by the Governing Intimacies Project, based at Wits University.*]

¹³ 'Don't worry, no need to be afraid, you are not like the other guys, my darling, one day you will understand, one day you will find your way.'

¹⁴ 'Go, my son, swim.'

Moving Sands

Lazarus Kgageng

The sun was scorching hot. The kind where one sees illusions of dancing water paddles ahead of them and grey shades of sun rays passing by on the ground, seemingly visible yet untenable. This was September's experience of the heat. His back had streaming tributaries of perspiration from the heat absorbed by the black knitted jersey he wore. Carelessly, he crossed the main road to the taxi rank on the other side. He did not look to the right and the left like he was taught in primary school. All he wanted was to amble to the nearest bench and sit down before he met the ground. Unfortunately, the ground beneath him spun and trembled. His head felt awfully light and his limbs boneless. He felt a slight chill in his spine. He started to walk irregularly, his feet lost balance and gained confusion. The confused steps commanded dust from the ground. Slowly, his body plummeted to the ground. There was a certain audible cry of degradation from his fall, the sound that saw every passing individual halt in concern. The commotion at the taxi rank became stagnant as everything fell into silence. Panic rose around the taxi rank. The women by the cooking stalls screamed in concern carrying their hands over their heads.

After a few unbearable moments, a man in a midnight blue suede suit bolted from one of the stalls towards the collapsed September. His blazer flew with the excruciating hot breeze with its colour reflected by the mocking rays of the sun. He looked like one of those uncles from Johannesburg, the ones who only visited during the Christmas season. Disregarding the delicacy of the fabric of his trousers and his shoes, he knelt down and scrupulously ran his index finger on September's neck, searching for a pulse. 'He is still alive, somebody bring some water!' he cried out to the frozen figures. The rich uncle noticed an undone leathery necklace strung to a small oval glass bottle the size of a walnut hung on September's neck. Fixing his raptorial gaze on it, he noticed that there was something

in the water inside the glassed walnut bottle. He hinged the necklace back on him and put it inside his weathered knitted jersey and realised that he only wore the jersey without any t-shirt.

A taxi driver came running with a bottle of iced water which had started dripping from the ice melting. The rich uncle snatched the water bottle without any murmurs of gratitude and poured the water ostentatiously on September's face. After two attempts of showering September's face with the iced water, September moved his eyeballs. Their movement was visible even though his eyes were still closed. Everything happened while the whole taxi rank watched the spectacle in panic. Everyone was either biting their nails or carrying their hands over their heads in hope. Realising that September was gaining consciousness, they carried him to the stall where the rich uncle had emerged from.

September finally prised his eyes open. They were upturned hazel eyes punctuated by exceptionally long eyelashes and finely assembled eyebrows. Strangers towered over him, faces portraying concern when he opened his eyes. One of the women, in a greased apron, asked him what his name was.

'September,' he answered wanly, holding his head. His other eye pursed as he registered the pain from the fall.

In distress, the woman cried, 'Oh my God, the ground stole his senses. He thinks we are in September when we are actually in October!'

'No, Aunty Mai,' the rich uncle said to the woman in the greased apron after letting out a few giggles. 'I think he means his name is September.'

Seeing that everyone was not convinced, he looked at September and searched for clarity. The rich uncle's eyes were white and full of life. They twinkled with mischief but had a shade of tenderness in them. September nodded indulgently. Finally convinced, Aunty Mai urged the assembled audience away from her stall. September tried to stand up but he still could not find his feet. Anchoring him down to the withered mattress he was laying on, the rich uncle asked Aunty Mai to prepare him two takeaways. Shifting his focus back to September, he gave him a glass of sugar solution after had hinted to him that his lips were dry. Shamefully, September ran the back of his hand across his lips.

Feeling that brushing his lips did not cut it, he licked them while his head hung in between his shoulders. At length, September finally took the sugar solution, gulped it then handed back the glass without maintaining eye contact.

With a coy grin, the rich uncle said, 'By the way, I am Aubrey Masinga.' He held out his hand in an introductory gesture, accompanied by an incandescent smile that seemed to have made the fog of despair around September dissipate.

Flustered, September's hand trembled as he held it out in trepidation before he finally shook rich uncle Aubrey's hand. His voice trilled and his eyes searched for certainty from his surroundings. September could not help himself but ask, 'Aubrey Masinga? As in, Masinga Complex?' September pointed to the complex across the main road.

After looking at where September was pointing at, Aubrey allowed himself a giggle and nodded.

'Goodness me, it is a pleasure to meet you, Sir. I am delighted! You once chose five matriculants from my alma mater, Ramaila High School, and funded their studies.'

September sat up right on the mattress to add another hand which firmly shook Aubrey's. He could not help but show his admiration. His eyes suddenly glistened and his voice became alive. With kindness, Aubrey proposed to drive September after he noted that he was still weak to use public transport. Aubrey emphatically voiced the injustices of public transportation. Aunty Mai also agreed with Aubrey in her imperative and persuasive gaze. Feeling cornered by both Aubrey and Aunty Mai, September finally gave in and reluctantly agreed to be driven home by the rich uncle.

Their drive to the township was characterised by silence since Aubrey decided to put on soul music. Aubrey's hands drummed on the steering wheel, his head cocked to the beats. When he realised that September was also lip-singing, Aubrey asked in delight if September also listened to soul music. With his lips pursed, September nodded significantly and looked away to avoid smiling. Aubrey continued to sing with intonations, his fingers still drumming the steering wheel, occasionally leaving it to clap his hands in the air. September enjoyed the show. He did not believe it, that he was in the same car with the wealthiest young man of Lephalale. The man who owned countless complexes and a few luxurious recreational spaces in Limpopo.

Attempting to strike a conversation, Aubrey lowered the volume and asked September where he was coming from before he fainted.

‘I went job hunting. I have to look for temporary work so I can get my younger brother clothes for Christmas and budget for my long-time dream.’ September’s face became gloomy, all the happiness seemed to evade him. ‘My mother’s dream, I meant,’ he added, looking at his nails.

Politely, with his focus still on the road, Aubrey suggested that he could come and help Aunty Mai at the rank as one of the women who owned a stall had died and they had not found a replacement since then.

A lump formed in September’s throat. He perked on his seat to look directly at Aubrey. ‘Aubrey, are you pulling my leg?’ His eyes glistened with unshed tears, his voice clipped with gratitude.

Aubrey reassured him that he amicably meant well and urged September not to feel as if he was finagling his way through life. September found himself breathing heavily with his mouth open in an attempt to push away imminent tears.

Aubrey parked the car in front of the yard September had pointed out. A shack stood in the middle of the yard, in the far corner was a toilet loosely built with planks and covered with black sail. They fell into an awkward veil of silence. His voice oddly gentle, September broke the trance and offered his gratitude. He apologised for the haphazard streets and the potholed roads leading to their township. ‘Don’t worry yourself, September, this car is a beast. Plus, it has been long since I visited the township. I missed its corrugated air.’ An innocent grin mustered by admiration for the township escaped Aubrey. Seeing a teenage boy regard the car with caution at the gate of the yard, Aubrey asked if September knew him. ‘That is June, my younger brother. He prefers to be called Juju.’

They alighted from the car. Realising that his brother was the one who came with the beast that parked in front of their yard, June romped to them and gave September a light fist on the arm.

‘So, you’re riding beasts forgetting you left your brother home with an empty stomach?’ Juju chimed with his eyebrows raised sternly to different heights. After a moment, they both laughed and Aubrey noted the passing shade of love bonded by enigmatic forces.

‘Anything to get a break from your adolescent tantrums is an opportunity worth being pursued by me, my dearest brother,’ September said sardonically. This made June narrow his eyes in disbelief. June was almost as tall as his brother: his head could rest on September’s shoulder when they stood next to each other.

‘Anyway, June, this is Mr Aubrey Masinga,’ September started by way of introducing the men to each other. ‘He offered me a lift home after he helped me in town. Mr. Masinga, like I said earlier, this is June, my younger brother.’

With disbelief painted all over his face, June approached Aubrey and took his hand. ‘Mr. Masinga, it is my pleasure to meet you. My brother has always dreamt of opening a diner in one of your complexes. Well, the one here, to be accurate. And, you can call me Juju.’ His eyes were lit with admiration, his cheeks flushed. He kept shaking Aubrey’s hand frantically while he grinned from his brother to Aubrey. September had to break the awkward scene by taking June by his shoulder and forced him to stand next to him. Aubrey showed no signs of concern; instead he laughed like he was used to such moments. September mouthed the words ‘I am sorry’ to Aubrey who grinned and dismissed them by cocking his head. Aubrey told Juju to go to the car and take the takeaways he had asked Aunty Mai to prepare. Without hesitation, Juju jumped at the request.

He took longer than expected in the car. When he closed the door, he licked his index finger and pressed it on the ground, put it back into his mouth with granules of soil, then pointed the finger to the clear sky and whispered some words into the air. He did that whenever he achieved anything he considered a milestone, like when he would ascend the pavement used as a podium to receive his academic awards at school. He murmured his gratitude as he walked past them to the shack. Aubrey found himself grinning at his behaviour; September looked infuriated. He waited for June to be out of sight before he could say anything.

‘I thought those were yours?’ His voice was low but sharp. Aubrey looked perplexed by the sudden change in their atmosphere. ‘I know I fainted and you helped, thank you for that. But that wasn’t an invitation to take me and my brother as your next little charity case,’ September hissed.

‘Wait, no. That is not what I am doing here, September, okay? I just thought you might be hungry, that’s all,’ Aubrey said in a mollifying tone.

‘Next time, don’t think. Ask first. Goodbye.’ September turned to leave but Aubrey took him by the hand to stop him. He took out a card from his wallet and said, ‘Is it okay if I give you my card so you can call me or my assistant?’

September hesitated as he weighed the gesture before he took the card. Their fingers touched and ignited emotional sparks which made them lock eyes. They were fixated on the spot; nothing mattered around them.

‘I am sorry if I upset you,’ Aubrey offered, almost whispering.

September was mute but alive. He did not say anything but his eyes kept blinking as he looked at Aubrey until Aubrey broke away and left.

The next morning, as June was preparing to go to school and September to go job hunting, a knock came on their door. It sent trills all over the shack. Surprised as to who was knocking so early in the morning, June scampered to answer the door and found Aubrey. Parading like a peacock, a droll expression on his face, he let his brother know that ‘his man’ was at the door. September felt his stomach flip. He fidgeted around the kitchen before going to the door.

‘Aubrey, I did not know you were coming this morning,’ September said, with his hand scratching anxiously at the back of his neck. ‘Come in.’

‘It wasn’t my plan to ambush you guys. I figured I might have left my business journal here yesterday. I searched everywhere for it but couldn’t find it. Have you seen it by any chance?’ Aubrey asked dubiously.

September nodded stiffly. His focus was dazzled by Aubrey who wore a simple white golf t-shirt with the logo of his company embroidered on the upper right of his chest and blue slim fit designer jeans. The outfit was adorned by white sneaker boots which had a blue line running on the sides.

June reminded his brother, snapping him out of his trance, ‘Remember you always tell me that when a second chance presents itself I must grab it without a doubt. Here is your second chance. I told you he would be back.’ He pointed to Aubrey with his eyes as if Aubrey was not even in the room, then looked at September with a childish grin and said his goodbyes.

‘So, you guys talked about me after I left?’ Aubrey smiled.

‘He could not stop talking about you. And he kept making assumptions about what truly transpired.’ September disappeared into the room that was closed off by a floral curtain – his room – and he emerged with a leathery red notebook with golden lips. He handed it to Aubrey painstakingly, cautious to not have their fingers touch again.

‘Do you guys even talk about your interest in...’

‘Men?’ September interjected. ‘Yes, he knows I am gay. I told him when he was a bit young.’ His voice was cracking. September and June always spoke about September’s potential boyfriends and June’s potential girlfriends. They gave each other advice. They were friends before brothers, the respect was mutual.

‘My gaydar told me the moment you opened your eyes in my hands. It went *ting ting!*’ His eyes were affirming, as was his appraising gaze.

September took a few steps away from Aubrey.

Respecting his unspoken wishes, Aubrey did not close the gap between them. ‘Can you come with me so you could start at the stall immediately?’ Aubrey asked.

September arched his brow.

‘Look, I am sorry, but after you told me you needed a job and you have been searching for one without luck, I spoke to the Stall Association Committee at the taxi rank and they agreed to give you a week trial to see if you would survive. You have the liberty to decline the job though.’

A week passed. September was given a six months contract to have his business operate in the stall after he proved that his cooking skills had the ability to bring in profit. After a month, he had started feeling as a part of the Stall Association. Being the only man did not limit him nor discourage him. He was open to learning and he observed what the customers asked for, and delivered. That was the secret to his accruing profit and customer base. A picture of his parents hung glassed in a wooden frame on the wall of his stall, visible for every passing individual to see. It ignited conversations between him and his customers while he prepared their takeaways. Feeling threatened, some women started thinking that it was a charm he used to entice customers. His stall would be busy from the morning until he knocked off in the evening; it became the preferred food stall of Lephallale, holding down most of the taxi drivers, the passengers and contractors of the nearby lodge. This made September cook three rounds of his meals a day with June helping him after school. They took the remaining food home and packaged some for Aubrey, who would come and pick them up in the evenings.

He was a frequent visitor at their shack; he and September went out on a few dates.

Seeing how the women's attitude had started to be frigid towards September, Aunty Mai started showing concern.

One day Aunty Mai sat with September and ignited a conversation. She asked September where he had learnt to cook. 'My mother taught me the way around the kitchen. She owned a small diner for mine workers back in the township and I used to help her after school. I fell in love with cooking and I have been looking for a chance to start my own diner too, as a tribute to my parents. My mother wanted to own a big diner here in town.' September's hand rose to rub the glassed walnut which hung inside his t-shirt. Reading the puzzled look on Aunty Mai's face, his hand pulled the necklace out to show her.

'Is there something in the water?' Aunty Mai moved to get a closer look.

September nodded. His voice cracked nostalgically through an explanation. 'Yes, there is. It's sand. Sand footprints to be precise. My mother owned it. It has the footprints of her parents inside it. We added theirs as well as mine and my younger brother's when she handed it to me. She believed the ocean water has the power to hold the spirits of our ancestors alive to guide us through life. Now I feel like she is guiding me.'

Responding in a glum voice, Aunty Mai offered her compassionate condolences and further explained how Aubrey had suffered after his father was assassinated by the bereft family members of the men who were killed by the accidental fall of the wall while they were building one of their oldest shopping centers in Lephale.

'I did not know Aubrey lost his father in such a tragic manner.' September was sympathetic.

'Most people do not know because he did not share the same surname as his father. His father was Billy Ronde, 'the assassinated evil man' as he is now known. My poor brother planned to compensate those families.' Aunty Mai's face sank in nostalgia and deepened melancholy.

'Billy Ronde?'

Aunty Mai nodded her head.

'Your brother, Aubrey's father, is the man that left my mother and us, and those other families to die of hunger and poverty instead of compensating for the death of our fathers?' September was on his feet, pain and hatred sewed to his eyes. He fidgeted around the stall trying to wrap his head around the

infuriating yet unfortunate discovery he had just made. His world came crumbling down around him. His eyes brimmed with tears.

He shook his head in repudiation of what Aunty Mai had just told him. Aunty Mai followed him around as he briskly emptied the stall of his belongings with tears streaming down his face. Out of possible options to try to calm him down, she called Aubrey and told him what had transpired. Leaving the pots with his scrumptious food, September scurried amongst the women who watched with delighted expressions as he left. They did not even attempt to stop him from leaving. One problem was out of their way.

Aubrey came to their shack a countless number of times but September wanted nothing that was associated with Aubrey. The pain of losing his father, which he believed was the pain that led to his mother's death, had resurrected to pester old wounds, and it ate through him again. The wounds gained new lives. The trauma scored a resurgence. The pain felt new all over again.

'I do not want to see you nor talk to you anymore. I should have known all this was too good to be true. Me...You... My parents are surely turning in their graves! I have disappointed them while they were still alive with my sexuality, I cannot curse their souls by dating the son of the man who led to their deaths. Please, Aubrey, go. Just go. And never come back,' September told Aubrey when he went to see how he was doing after finding out the truth. The trauma streamed down his face with his tears and snot. He felt vulnerable. His eyes were sunken from crying. He felt defeated and robbed.

Aubrey listened with guilt ripping through his chest. Without a word, thinking it was better that way, he left.

On Christmas eve, September managed to buy a Christmas tree and decorated it while June was out. For the first time, June came home and found presents underneath the tree. There was a note from his brother: September had gone to a temporary catering job that night; June should not wait for him. Failing to battle and defeat the throat-cutting excitement and suspense, June knelt down and started ripping the gifts naked.

At the absurdly glamorous fundraising event September was waitering at, strange faces waltzed about and bumped into him. Only those decent enough murmured their apologies. He kept searching

with a sense of longing, to see a familiar face. His heart was deceiving him and he was allowing it. This made him angry and weak at the same time.

Towering a tray of flute glasses with bubbling champagne above the heads of the guests with his hand, his precise steps halted when he saw Aubrey. His heart sang in both pain and joy. The joy was excruciating, suffocating. Everyone in the room seemed to disappear, making a clear tunnel for them to see each other. They caught each other's eyes. And again, nothing around them mattered but their obvious need for each other. Aubrey wore a fine, slim black suit with a snowy white shirt and a black bow tie. The suit had white stripes on the sides, commanding an imperial look. His neatly cut hair complimented his magnificent face. They locked eyes; each dove deeper into their world. Into their souls. Aubrey had forgotten about his colleagues who shared regards and pleasantries with the flock that came their way. He extricated himself and took two steps trying to close the space marked by the pulsating desire between them. They were brought back to the present after a lady bumped the tray September held and threw awfully tight-lipped curses at September. Her hair imbibed the champagne indulgently. She was dripping in champagne while September knelt to pick the shattered glasses.

Overwhelmed by the unspoken disgust of the guests, September bolted out of the room. Aubrey abandoned his colleagues and went after him. He called out to him and with a feeble halt, September turned and howled at Aubrey to stay away from him.

'Look, I know I am the last person you want to talk to but just listen. I am sorry for what my father put you, your family as well as the other families through. I didn't know what happened until Aunt May told me after the conversation you had.' He took September's hand into his but with much greater force, September broke from his grip. Raising his hands in a placatory manner, Aubrey carried on in an emotional whistling tone. 'I have made arrangements to compensate all the families that were affected. Even you and June. It might be too late but at least I am trying to right my father's selfish wrongs. Yes, I am my father's son but I am sure not my father's mistakes. I love you, September. I cannot begin to explain what that means but I know for sure I do not want us to end like this. Please, forgive me and give us a chance.'

After waiting for a reply that took forever to come, Aubrey gave in to his failure to persuade September of his intentions.

‘Number 13, Calorado Street. 30 December. Be there.’ September wiped his tears with the back of his hand. ‘Now, let me be alone.’ His face was unreadable but Aubrey nodded and walked away.

30 December 2018

Aubrey found September and June outside Number 13. September’s arm was folded around June’s neck who stood in front of him, his head rested on September’s shoulder.

‘Moving Sands Diner, huh?’ Aubrey announced his presence from behind with his hands buried in his pockets.

June offered a grin.

‘Yes, our Moving Sands,’ September read the steel embossed name boldly alphabeted on top of Number 13 as his free hand rubbed the glass walnut which now hung over his shirt.

‘Aubrey, thank you for helping me out when I was at my lowest. You gave me a chance to turn my life around even though circumstances turned sour along the way. In a way, you affirmed me and allowed me to believe in myself. Now, from the savings I made at the taxi rank stall, I managed to deposit and sign a lease to my diner,’ September said politely, gratitude painted on his face as he looked straight into Aubrey’s eyes.

Aubrey took both of September’s hands into his and rubbed them gently with his thumbs and grinned painfully.

‘After my heart was ripped multiple times without any penitence shown,’ Aubrey said, ‘your presence evoked the energy to try again. You brought the truth which would have been kept from me for a long time. You gave me the chance to fix where my father had failed and rectify the unfortunate events that left you and your family badly affected. You gave me a second chance. You made me a better son of my father and a better man altogether. I appreciate and love you, September.’ The atmosphere was humid with affection and heartfelt gratitude.

September asked politely. ‘Do you want to be part of the moving sands in my water?’

Comically, Aubrey twitched his eyebrows in agreement.

‘And you are leaving me behind?’ June complained.

Aubrey tugged him under his arm and the three of them walked into the newly branded diner. It was to be opened the following day. They stood before an elongated rectangular wooden box filled with the white sand from the beaches of the Cape which stood a few steps from the entrance. September instructed Aubrey to make foot-prints on the sand, pinch some from his footprints and sprinkle it into the large oval glass bowl filled with ocean water, which stood next to the wooden box. Then he asked him to denote his signature on a white board with a permanent marker. At the top, the board was written, **Moving Sands Family**. September took the glassed walnut bottle from his neck and meticulously let three drops into the oval glass bowl.

‘Now, you are part of our family,’ he said and kissed Aubrey softly on the lips with June giving them a round of applause.

Wasted Salvation

Thomas Alfred

Our lips met. There was sharp, sudden electricity.

Why did it take so long? Was it always that easy? His hardened hands pushed against mine. His eyes were deep, swirling pools. The thin layers of corrugated iron, protecting us from the wind howling at midnight, began to shudder. Shudder with that same charge, like from the tall pylons.

Then, as if God had seen our crime, this impossible bubble rose to the heavens. The wind cut into the room, with bright lights, blue, white. In an instant, he and I were strewn across the dune. My stove, my blanket, were scattered onto the sand. The white and yellow whipped through the wind. My small world was shattered in an instant. This was sin.

The back wall of the house was caught by a sudden gust, the metal made impact with a cop's leg. He shouted something I didn't hear. Then they began firing. The metal sheet sailed over the dune, over the highway. I looked around my crumbling home. It was gone. *He* was gone. Without my knowledge the blue piece of metal continued its flight, landing in the ocean. The police's blood mixed with the churning sea, and made a red foam.

The middle seat was hard, I could see the metal of the seat sticking out from underneath the yellowed foam. The taxi was hot, the windows foggy. The R390 hidden in my shoe made a lump that pushed my foot skew. Normally, I'd try for the window, you can breathe better there. But today, I didn't care. Every minute we rolled away I was a little further away from *there*. A little closer to something else. To where I was going in this taxi.

I looked around at everyone else as I waited. Who else was escaping with me? I watched my fellow fugitives. There were men and women, one small baby. I heard her mother talking on the phone. The

child was going to meet her dad today. Most of us were travelling alone though, it was the same fare for everyone. The minibus was going from Butterworth to Khayelitsha, Cape Town. I couldn't stop looking at the sea whenever we drove past, there was always a colourful chip packet I could spot dancing in the water. The waves scared me, but today, I thought, I might be able to conquer them.

The day burnt on, the seats stank of stale sweat, I had to keep changing where I put my legs to stop them from bruising against the metal.

'Not much longer now,' I would lie to myself every fifteen minutes or so. I untied my left shoe.

Long after the sun had set, and the fires of the lokshini had been lit, we arrived. Butterworth was far now.

I needed to find Ncadiswa's place. 44 Gcada Street.

Nomsa's braai was on the main road, next to a fence made out of old tyres dug into the ground. Two big braais were burning. I could smell the meat cooking, beef and chicken. I thought about a way to get R20 out of my shoe without anyone seeing me. I found a dark corner and sat. The floor was wet but I was able to get a brown Madiba out. I felt like everyone was watching me, but nobody could be. Who was I? A small boy from far away. I handed over the money to one of the men manning the fire.

'Ufunani?' he said. *What do you want?*

'Chicken.' I put out my skaftin and he gave me a thigh and some pap. I couldn't eat here though; I needed to find Ncadiswa first.

Some streets had lights; some lights were broken, some buzzed on and off. Darkness swallowed me. The maze wound around, up and down. As the night grew colder, the streets grew emptier, my backpack grew heavier. The skaftin had never felt so valuable. If every street I turned onto was different, I'd find Gcada eventually? Right? I had to.

After lefts, rights, and turning round again and again, everything looked the same. Yes, I'd seen that Kingsley bottle before? Or was it a different one? That man in the blanket, he was familiar, or was he someone else? Being lost like this, I was begging to be stabbed. There would be no wounds today. I'd come too far. I wasn't dying tonight, not here. Not without a fight. As I tiptoed sore feet around the grey puddles of Section 3, I started fading. I wasn't finding Ncadiswa tonight. My stomach was shouting at me. I saw dunes through an alley – the safest place to spend the night.

Halfway through the corrugated valley, shadows started moving. I saw something metal in someone's hand, just in front of me. I ran up the dune. I wasn't the only pair of feet I could hear. As I scrambled up the sand the men following me seemed to peel away.

'Gijima mfazi!' one shouted. *Run, woman!* I was running into their trap.

Not without a fight. I wouldn't let them take my hope from me.

As I reached the top of the dune I turned left. I had to try to stay balanced while running along the ridge of the hill, going back meant death. I tripped, and ran, and tripped, and ran, and ran, and ran. My toes rubbed raw against my shoes. The tsotsi voices were swallowed by the silence of the sand. I thought about stopping, to catch my breath, but my legs wouldn't let me. I couldn't see properly and my mouth stung of salty tears. My calves began to scream. My feet grew heavy, my knees buckled and I fell. Something fleshy broke my roll. I listened for those chasing me and only heard the wind. I was alone. I felt my eyes collapse, as I positioned myself under some bushes. I pulled out my food – it was the best I had ever eaten. I knew I needed to eat but I was still shaking from the stress, but I forced it down, both savouring the taste and gagging on each bite.

When the sun snuck into my eyes I could feel the wet on my skin, under my clothes. The sky was on fire, but the ground was still cold. I looked at the lake in front of me. It made my bones chill to think I was so close to drowning last night. If I had rolled a little further I would've fallen straight into the lake. This place was full of white flower cups, made orange by the sun off the lake. If you looked close you saw yellow spears in the center of each cup. There were also heaps of metal scattered in the reeds; long drops and broken houses – all a bit different. I wasn't the first person to sleep here.

Salvation.

I was alive.

In daylight it was easier to see things. I found Gcada Street, it had small houses, four or five of them sharing a pit toilet. Ncadiswa had a few housemates. She spoke how I thought she would speak. Her face was just like I remembered it. She was the daughter of my mother's friend. She had left

Butterworth to come do nails in Cape Town. She told me where she lived last time she visited, and she knew why I was here. We both knew what happens to boys like me at initiation.

She wasn't happy to see me because she knew she'd have to let me in. She wasn't happy that I didn't tell anyone at home that I was leaving, or that I ran away from ulwaluko. She did seem to care that I was alive. She was no longer the cool schoolgirl who brought me sweets from her tuck shop. Her face looked older, like a tree battered by wind. She put bread in my skafin, gave me a gas stove, cooking pot and half a bag of White Star maize meal. Then, after telling me what she could, she told me she couldn't help anyway else. There was a man like me, a metal worker called Spensa whom Ncadiswa had met in her time here. As I stepped away from her door I heard her say, 'Ungabuyi ngaphandle kokuba uzinzile.' *Don't come back until you are settled.*

I nodded as I walked away, promising that indeed I wouldn't come back to bother her until I had settled. My feet were still sore from all the running.

Now to find Bra Spensa.

I knew I was getting to the right place as the bark of the angle grinders grew louder, the smell of burning metal filling the air. After explaining who I was looking for, the man at the entrance stuck his head through the crack in the flimsy door.

'Bra Spensa!' he shouted. To me he said, 'Linda apha,' as he walked back into the workshop. *Wait here.*

Bra Spensa looked strong, but thin. He had a gut, and walked with his powerful arms swaying behind his stomach. After hearing that Ncadiswa had sent me, he told me he could help me build a shack for R400, and could also loan me the metal for another R400. I asked if he had a trolley to collect metal. I let him know I would be back before sunset. He took the R20 out of my hand and I tugged my new trolley to salvation.

The men here were just as harsh. Just passing them, they would whistle and say, 'You're too pretty for that.' One even called me 'Trolley queen.' Not many of them made threats. I was careful. I just stayed quiet. I got to the sand dune I was looking for. Just tucked behind the shacks on the other side of the hill was the lake bordered by destroyed shacks, people used to live here. I couldn't get the small plastic wheels up the sand. I carried the trolley to the top of the hill and dug it in. I walked into the

field of flowers where I had spent the previous night. The litter of metal looked like treasure. I began collecting and carrying scraps to the trolley. The day grew hot, my hands cut and the loads smaller. The metal stank of soil and shit.

I looked at the field of green and realised how much emptier it was than when I started. My stomach was empty. Plain brown bread had never tasted so earned. I stood up, legs feeling stiff from sitting too long. As I stood, something caught my eye. In the pond, I saw a sheet of long blue metal, unbroken. I could see the pile of metal on top of the hill. The metal in the water was double the size of most of my pieces. It was mine.

I rolled up my pants, and I began to feel my heart in my throat. I took off my bag, shirt, and shoes, and hid them under everything else. I waded into the mud. As my ankles were sucked down, the heat of the day was gone for an amazing little bit. The sand sucked in my feet and I didn't like it. I got more absorbed with each step as I waded forward. My arm stretched out to grab the metal. With a few more steps I could just reach it. I grabbed it and tugged. It didn't budge. It came slowly loose as I leaned back, pulling with all my weight. In a flurry the metal came free. I fell backward into the murderous water as the metal closed my coffin. The water filled my nose and ears.



Nobody seemed to notice that my pants were wet when I walked back to Bra Spensa's workshop. People just got out of my way, everyone just doing their thing. Everyone was going somewhere or selling something. I could hear chickens clucking, I could smell them too.

Spensa wasn't happy with the scrap I'd gathered, but he brought me into the shop anyway. Helmets hung on racks; there were piles of metal everywhere. The place was empty – most had knocked off.

'It's not enough metal, mbuzi,' he said as he walked belly-first through the courtyard. 'You understand?'

'So, you want more than R400?'

I wheeled in the cart behind him.

'Only R200 more.' He began picking through the iron. I started to panic. Where could I get more cash? He seemed to notice something was wrong.

‘Lalela, you know Ncadiswa. I’ll give you time to get the money,’ he said as he picked up two pieces of metal and began to position them together at different angles. ‘You have enough for three walls here. I’ll sell you the wood to connect them and enough metal for the rest of the shack. Come in the morning and we’ll go by the highway and put it up.’ He closed the front of the mask he had put on earlier.

I left the welder to his work and headed back to the one beautiful place in the kasi. After digging my burner into the ground, I cooked my pap surrounded by plants and I saw the Transkei. The green fields and the cows I looked after. Pap was the only thing I would eat for days. Not any longer – I was far away from there now, far away from elders and bin bag tents. I was going to make this life better, somehow. I was so excited about the chance of this house, my house. I sat in front of the pap, but I couldn’t eat. The excitement rolled in me like waves of the sea were in my stomach. I couldn’t sleep either. In the dark white bulbs began to sparkle off the water, their rippled image in the water rocked me to sleep.

The seat covers in Bra Spensa’s bakkie were itchy. The stuff for my house were in the back of the single-cab. He pulled off the main road. I chose a spot for the house from where I could see the lake. I knew that men aren’t supposed to like looking at flowers, but these ones were too beautiful. ‘This is exciting for you!’ Spensa put his hand on my shoulder, then he rested it on the inside of my leg, in silence. It was like he wanted something from me, and he didn’t even have to say it.

He nailed the structure together after burying the metal in a small trench. He’d cut two of the walls slanted along the top, one of them was that blue piece. He nailed the skew roof along the top. He sent me to go get the door from the bakkie.

As he tightened the hinges I gritted my teeth. I readied myself to ask for forgiveness. The R350 was outstretched. ‘It’s all I have.’ He was not pleased.

‘Sho, ntwana.’ He glared at me. He paced around on the sand for a minute and then his mood changed. We made eye contact and he raised his eyebrows.

His belt buckle came undone and I took his manhood in my mouth. Silence was my response. A R50 blowjob. He finished and left, and took R200 with him.

I had R150 to my name, and despite the sin I owed him.

My mind would not stop racing. I thought about nothing but him. As I wandered the streets, demons invaded my mind. The neon piles of garbage felt like pictures of me, loud and dirty. The thoughts felt cursed. Cursed to loudly return. Every object made me think of him. Every stink was his smell. Every piece of white, clothes on drying lines, or paper scraps on the roads, was his vest. Every stomach was his paunch. Every man was him.

God! I was being punished. The sin had rotted my mind.

I tried to think of other things. Anything else. My brothers, my father, Mama. The smell of her cooking. Holding her hand when we sang the *Masithi* in church.

The streets were busy, people chatted, lighting *gwayis* that they bought from a gogo sitting on a bucket. The men would smoke after service. Back home, Ma would take us home and bake bread. Then, that isinkwa smell hit me as the gogo opened a purple-lidded bucket. Amagwinya. I could sell amagwinya!

I spent R90 on getting a bucket, yeast, oil and 2kg of Golden Cloud flour. I prayed that keeping an active mind would help to get rid of the thoughts of him. But I knew I was making the vetkoek *for* him.

After my first dry, windless night I woke up early to mix the dough. As I was kneading my stomach felt like a pit, looking at the half empty bag of flour didn't help. These had to come out right.

As I pinched the balls of dough into shape, I saw the crack of dawn under my door. People were waking. The first few dough balls touched the oil and I was taken back to Ma. The smell of isinkwa, of idombolo. The after-church smell. The dough balls flipped in the oil, the same colour as honey. Once my bucket was full there was already a steady noise from the streets. The noise was mocking me. I turned onto the main street, and I couldn't have made it ten steps before I was asked for one. As I pocketed the silver, another stopped in front of the open bucket.

'Two.'

I took his coin as he picked out the ones he wanted.

‘You have change for R10?’ a customer asked.

‘Where’s your mince?’ another asked.

‘Sizwe has Aromat, you must get,’ I was told bluntly. I didn’t know who Sizwe was.

They were popular. They were successful. By the end of the day my container was almost empty and I had R42 profit in my pocket.

I counted the silver circles slowly in my hand, putting them into a can whose top I had taken off. Forty-two rand wasn’t anywhere close to where I needed to be. I ate the last two wet vetkoeks for supper that night. The room was small and cold. The air rushed through the cracks in the ceiling when the wind picked up. But the floor was clear of the wind, and rain too. I would be dry, safe, and alone tonight. I needed to buy a new candle tomorrow.

I felt my sleep end with water pooling in my ear. The wind and rain had dripped from a nail in the roof.

I reached for the stove in the corner. I had balanced the box of matches on the burner. I made the dough by stove light, lowering the flame when I mixed to save gas. The amagwinya rose and cooked perfectly. I had to eat the first one, I felt like I was wasting money but my stomach forced me.

This time I was ready with my full bucket before the sun was in the sky. I got to see the white and yellow burning orange. It was so beautiful I think I cried. The streets were still very quiet, damp clothes with holes in them flapped loudly in the wind. I even saw the goat I’d only heard yesterday. The same men from the first day were standing under the sign for Nomsa’s braai. The tall one was in front of a braai, making fire. The other was leaning over a pot, cooking what smelt like pap.

‘Uthengis’ amagwinya, mfana?’ the skinny one said. *You sell vetkoeks, boy?*

I didn’t know what to say.

‘Voetsek,’ the short one chirped.

I walked further down the road. I took Aromat and candles from the spaza. The man wasn’t at the till and I could hear shouting coming from behind the shelves. It was muffled but I could work out

that something was wrong. The candles, yeast and spice were in my hands, there was nobody there. Nobody was going to stop me from leaving without paying. I took two plastic bags – one for my money, one for the stuff. Then I ran, straight past Nomsa's, the goat, and I hid the free prizes in my shack. I took the Aromat with me.

I had missed the beginning of the bustle, but I had the spice. The vetkoeks went fast. The coins in my plastic got heavier. I walked the streets, and anyone, everyone was a potential customer. Umkhulu with a gold tooth, children begging their mamas for one, or using the rand they'd saved. Some people brought me empty skaftins and bought five, ten, twenty. When I was selling to one of the kids, he gave me his one rand, and a shell. He darted off, and I looked at the gift he handed me. It was small, not longer than my pinky. It was a sharp, spiralled horn. It was a pale white, with flecks of yellow through the inside. A treasure.

I kept the shell close for the rest of the day. The hot sun and heavy bucket and selling wore me down. My feet hurt and so did my back. In moments of pause and breathing, the tiny beauty in the palm of my hand offered me a taste of salvation.

I must have made 250 vetkoeks to sell and when my bucket was half done I had R160 in my plastic. I found myself walking past Nomsa's again. The boys were braaing now, but an old Ma was sitting behind them on a crate, scolding them.

'I told you that you must make amagwinya. You boys don't listen.'

I stopped and listened.

'Unamanga.' *You are lying.*

'What are you looking at, boy?' the fat one spat at me. I wasn't able to force the words out.

'Ngane,' MaNomsa said, 'how much for the rest?' She pointed at my bucket and smiled with her three teeth. MaNomsa bought the rest, she stood up and went to fetch a container. I emptied my bucket out into hers. She put a tightly folded R200 in my hand. Before I had time to realise what had happened, my bucket was empty and I had the money I needed.

'If they like it,' she pointed at her customers, 'I want you to make more for me.'

I had the money I needed. *Spensa's money.*

I clutched the white-and-yellow cone the child gave me earlier as I approached the workshop. By dusk, things were quieter. The man at the door wasn't there. I hit the metal a few times. A gnarled welder came to the entrance, every part of him carried his weight; his stomach, arms, face.

'What is it, boy?'

'I'm here to pay Bra Spensa.'

'Give iklipa. I'll give it to him for you,' he smirked.

'Hayi uyahlanya! Call Bra Spensa.' *You are crazy! Call Bra Spensa.*

'He's not in.'

At that moment Spensa's characteristic white vest led him from behind the door. 'Hamba, Malume,' he told the man. Turning to me he asked, 'You have my money?'

'Yah.' I held out the notes with my left hand, right hand tense. He took them and counted.

'Sho,' he said, turning back into the workshop. I clenched my fist, swallowed hard and forced myself to speak.

'Wait, Bra Spensa.' He stopped but didn't turn around. I spoke softer, 'Ndifuna ukuxoxa, I know you can't talk here but, come to mine tonight. Ndiyakucela.' *I want to discuss something. Please.*

'Sho.' He disappeared behind the door.

I looked down at my right hand. I was bleeding, the shell had cut into my skin.

The evening went so slowly. I heard everything, every siren, wheel screech or shouting person. I felt as though I was sinking into my four walls. I couldn't leave. I couldn't miss him.

The yellow-and-white horn turned in my hand as my candle burnt down. The flame began dancing the way it does when the wick has lost its fuel. The door cracked open.

'You came.'

'I had to wait until late. The cops are out tonight.'

I stood. I felt a small spark as I took Bra Spensa's hands in mine.

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1. **Emma Babikwa** is a 24-year-old queer Ugandan. He's a social justice zealot who doubles as a plant Dad and a perpetual sky gazer in his free time. On nights when he can't sleep, he reads and writes poetry.
2. **Abeke Bello** was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria. She is a lawyer, writer, and editor whose work explores complex human emotions and themes that navigate identity, love, and womanhood.
3. **Tebogo Manthata** is a Johannesburg based creative and changemaker passionate about placemaking and storytelling through diverse mediums. An avid reader, writer and architect, trained at the University of the Witwatersrand, Tebogo is always seeking to explore and interrogate the insidious margins that operate in our society and how social justice can be provided for those who fall outside those margins. Driven by an insatiable journalistic instinct, Tebogo strives to unearth uncharted narratives and discover stories in the most unlikely places. His writing revolves around issues of queer visibility, mental health, social justice and the intersectionalities therein. When he isn't drawing, writing or running an inclusive art gallery from a historic house in Troyeville, Tebogo can be found daydreaming over a hot cup of chamomile tea.
4. **Keratile Moses Israel** was born in 1998 in Gaborone, Botswana, where he was raised until the age of 16 when he moved to a boarding school for his senior year. It was there where he developed a piercing fascination with the literary arts which led him to start keeping a story journal in which he wrote various short stories and poems as an interesting hobby. Later, Israel would attend the University of Botswana to do a course in English and African Literature and Linguistics in pursuit of his literary interest, where he is currently enrolled for his final year. It was his commitment to his passion for the arts and his love of reading that motivated him to enter several online writing competitions including The Blood Beat Series call for submissions. It was here where Israel received his biggest exposure and where his first ever short story, *The Calling of the Lake*, was published.
5. **Merle Grace** is a dreamer, teller of stories, believer in small things and owner of a dog named Max.
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13. **Caio Simões de Araújo** is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research. He is the creator of the Podcast Series *Talking Queer: Archives, Activism and Creative Disruptions*. As a research consultant for the GALA Queer Archive, he has been curating archival collections centered on LGBTIQ+ oral histories from Maputo (Mozambique) and Luanda (Angola).
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15. **Thomas Alfred** is a fiction writer who lives in Johannesburg. His writing has a focus on inequality and class. He honed his love for fiction in playwriting during high school. His early work includes an award-winning performance of a self-written play titled *Tempest X* at the Festival of Excellence in Dramatic Arts in 2018. Three years later he penned *Wasted Salvation* which will be his debut publication. He is currently studying a BA Law in Politics and International Relations at the University of the Witwatersrand, and hopes to create an impact helping marginalised communities, and give platform to the lived experience of those who share his sexuality.

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