

OUR MOVE NEXT



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To those who came before, for all we know and do not know

For those who are with us, for the shared holding that we can and cannot see

For those who are still to come, for what we can only imagine.

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FOREWORD

The immense landscape of unanswered possibilities are painless to ponder when you're not struggling to survive systemic injustice. Manifestations of grace and abundance become more probable when your life is not threatened by the daily violences of a global design built for our failure. Innovative ideas, options, plans and actions for alternative realities are readily available when you are not battling inter-generational traumas of historical dispossession. When our expansive potential is integrated into ecosystems of support; when we are safe to be embodied and attuned to nature, when we are allowed moments of gentle and guided psycho-social release, relief and relaxation, our lived experience are gifts to and from spirit.

By interpreting realities with speculation as a broad narrative device, we lift cultural (and personal) fears and desires that are held in our collective imaginations. By playing them out, by giving them room, by liberating them from the unbridled burden of expectation, we gift ourselves opportunities to observe and be inspired by our deep emotional and spiritual philosophies that perhaps, we barely noticed before.

According to Mark Fisher, "It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism" because we have a deeply entrenched belief that capitalism is inescapable. Many of us fighting inequality are trying to prevent the worst effects of capitalism instead of ending it, apparently because we don't think it is really possible. This inability to see and move beyond the global system of exploitation is rather politely described as a "reflexive impotence". Nice. Mark Fisher, author of among other work the canonical *Crack Capitalism*, is widely viewed as one of the paragons of anti-capitalist thinking and is a white economist from the UK, a bit pissed off with the local reflexive impotence of his fellow Global North leftist bourgeois .

But what does this mean for us, who believe it can end, who want it to end, or are dedicated to the fall of the global systems of exploitation, othering and extraction, but are also subjected to this same bloody system for survival?

We have always been deeply thinking, doing and imagining people. We cannot afford to wait for those with power in the same systems that have historically invalidated our ways of being, to recognise us. In an era of competing world influencers who fight with ideas, we are not just passive consumers of the stories we are told. We are vibrant, complex thinking and feeling people who are already mutually imagining the world as it is. Our communities are consistently told who we are and what is possible.

The myth that attempts to suppress our individual and collective ability to imagine a kind and equitable world is crumbling and it is our duty to grab our freedom and express, trust and embody our inherent wisdom and agency. This "real" world is an imagined world made tangible. We need the safety to trust that this potential is not lost or only accessible to those with privilege. It requires an acknowledgement of our trauma, the coercive power of the global system of imperialism and a recognition of the resources, networks and knowledges we can access so that innovation can be raised from the ground up.

During the crumbling of late capitalism, we need to strengthen our spirits, to act with courage, to deepen our capacity to discern and trust the narratives that are true to us. We can be led by community approaches to our collective difficulties and make/believe our own ideas and build a world that is in tune with nature. This book has been lovingly created and curated as an addition to the varied bodies of work that aim to inspire and support this kind of attentive make believe and encourage the conjuring of alternative imaginations.

Speculative Fiction as a genre and as a potentially transformative practice allows us infinite options in re-imagining the consensual realities that frame our worlds and to then respond to and act on these imaginings. To echo maverick environmental justice warrior Wangari Maathai, one of our continent's most powerful and celebrated activists:

“There comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, that time is now.”

The intent behind this collection and the work reflected within it does not seek to pursue false positives or encourage overt optimism at the prospect of building out of the systemic ruins we find ourselves living within. We come into the work of imagining anew, coming with all we have been and everything we carry, and collectively, courageously visioning with and through it. In the words of the late bell hooks:

“To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality.”

The contributions offered in this book reflect a pervasiveness of speculative fiction interpretations that focus on exploring ancestral connections, spiritual alternative realities, and the generational interrelations between progeny and ancestry from varied African perspectives. We have come to understand the work as possible digital folklore.

Across the submissions, the presence of the spiritual realm, the ancestral plane and new mythologies with touches of science fiction emerged as paramount, revealing the defining power of our cosmologies on our lived experience. The painful and occasionally healing excavation of intergenerational legacies may hopefully imbue the current moment with compassion and momentum towards futures of our own imaginings.

In this anthology, we collectively offer catharsis, cautionary tales, hidden hopes, spiritual beliefs or dreams of the future, past or parallel present. We hope this offering finds a home in the hearts, hard drives and ethereal playgrounds of those who have been building the world, fighting injustice and soothing historic hurts. The extent of what you receive from the creative expressions we have collected, we could only (and happily) speculate. *Our Move Next.*



Inside Worlds

By Vasti Hannie

Vasti is a quiet homebody who dabbles in how words can change people. She has been writing for most of her life although not for a public audience. She is structured and methodical in her thoughts and enjoys fantasy and science fiction in her words.

She lives in Johannesburg, calls Cape Town home and has no intention of leaving Africa, ever.

Her perspective is informed by her work in the development sector in Southern Africa and her terrible addiction to the internet.

Where I'm from the womb is sacred and births more than flesh for madness to mould
Where I'm from the carrier gives more and it is seen and it is held
Where I'm from the harmony between love and lovers is not ruled nor obeyed
Where I'm from the people give what they can where they can how they can

The mythos says a person is made in the moment of intensity
The spirit is forged in the feeling
The womb bends time and space
It creates a human who does not inhale
A human who does not excrete
A human who is present while being unseen
With us and without, within its world inside the womb

Where I'm from the womb is sacred and births more than action figures and warmongers
Where I'm from the carrier has a world waiting to be born inside
Where I'm from the harmony required for peace is not a byproduct
Where I'm from people give what they can where they can how they can

The mythos says a world carrier is to be protected at all costs
The safety is forged in the protection
The womb imbues the world with power
It creates a human who feels safe with themselves
A human who does not seek conflict
A human who is present in peace
With us and without, within its first world and the next

Where I'm from the womb is sacred and births more than it can hold
Where I'm from the carrier is known to be creating and creation needs receptivity
Where I'm from the harmony between receiving and giving is clear
Where I'm from the people give what they can where they can how they can

The mythos says to poison the world carrier is to risk the destruction of worlds
The danger is forged in the fight
The womb imbibes both violence and light
It creates a human in conflict with themselves
A human who sees not hands but tools
A human who is untethered
With us and without us, in this world and the next

Where I'm from the womb is sacred and births carers and carriers alike
Where I'm from the carrier is not in need but in abundance
Where I'm from the harmony of life is felt in abundance
Where I'm from the people give what they can where they can how they can



Lenala

By Ciko Sidzumo

I am **Ciko Sidzumo**, a collector of skills and lover of coffee from Johannesburg. I spend most of my time counting time and the rest of it trying to aid social justice initiatives and the fight for the eradication of gender-based violence and femicide. I strongly believe in the facilitation and deliberate emphasis of community-based solutions for community-based problems. I also believe that, in an effort towards social justice, facilitating the voices and actions of the people in affected areas is key, both in articulating the specificity of issues and finding meaningful and proactive solutions.

Lenala was inspired by the Justice for Miners Campaign and the documentary *Dying for Gold* by Catherine Meyburgh and Richard Pakleppa. The documentary shared the lives of miners who were involved in a class action suit, demanding just compensation for miners who had been affected by silicosis as a result of working in South African gold mines. What struck me most about the campaign were the testimonies of the miners and the pervasive manner in which this destructive polluting industry perpetuated poverty and suffering in gold mining communities and families. Lenala and her family, like millions of others, became imprisoned by this system designed for death.

Art and storytelling are my vices and sometimes they almost satisfy my insatiable cravings for serenity.

For more information about the Justice for Miners Campaign, please go to <https://justiceforminers.org.za>.

Zala Zala Ngantsomi

In hindsight, I knew the mines would consume me. And yet, there I was, bound on a journey to my death.

When *uTata* left we were caught in confusion, contemplating how venomous life had become. We never expected him to leave for the mines; he vowed against it and lead all the meetings that defied it. He would travel door-to-door preaching the gospel of freedom, admonishing the invaders rape of the lands.

He would say, “Why are we disregarding mercy law? What is survival then? What of our death? How do we expect to rest when they rip apart everything that holds us together?”

To those that answered, “We are done, Vena! All that remains is a pitiful husk of life and now you criticise us for doing what we can to endure!”

He responded, “As long as we are alive we are not done! If we sink into those holes then there is no return, no life worth surviving for.”

“Then what would you suggest we do?”

uTata was known as Banu Vena, the people’s leader. He delayed three villages from the feeding trail to the mines. He convinced the people of Nukana, Ayone and Inaala to share crops, arms and care. The invaders failed at every attempt to rupture our hold. Villages as far as the Kileni would whisper tales of our resilience with licks of hope wielding their tongues.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if the famine spared us the wheat or the amaranth. Would *uTata* have stayed if there was the slightest bit of promise after the locusts took the last of the grains? If the rains shared even a litre of water? It was the famine that fractured our freedom. It was the famine that took our fathers to the mines. Took them, and brought them back as starved as they were when they left. Worse, hollow, beyond dead. The cough that finally claimed what was left of *uTata*’s life was cruel. We could taste the stale blood of every bitter blow. His death was his mercy, and for us, a contract renewal, another death sentence.

People think I am delusional when I tell them I can remember the day my brother and I were born. I remember the sharp cold air and the frustration.

I remember my first cry. I was furious because they tore me from my brother. I was his safeguard and they tore me away from him. *uMama* said she was scared when Tena was born. He did not cry, his breath was faint and his body limp. *uMama* said she cried, prayed, cursed, became absorbed in an erratic fury, demanding the life of her son. *uMakhulu* would say she did not know if it was *uMama*’s crude prayers that saved Tena’s life or if it was me. She said when she laid him next to me I turned to him in my sleep, grabbed him and held him. She had never seen a newborn move like that before. She said she watched as life seeped into his body, his hands clenching, his lungs drawing breath, his cry admitting him into the world.

Even on the best of days, Tena was always sickly but he was never weak. His small frame was brittle but his mind was clear and his tongue sharp, constantly stirring trouble. Tena’s trouble taught me how to fight, first the children who sneered at him, then the men who underestimated him. We were strong, we were stubborn, we were fools and we lived joy.

Every other night *uTata* would lean back in his chair, chuckle and say, “What a peculiar gift we share Morai.” Then look at *uMama* with eyes glazed with love, “But how are we meant to deal with such a naughty pair?” *uMama* would giggle and say, “We pretend they are not ours.”

I can’t remember *uTata*’s laugh and *uMama*’s laugh seems to disappear every time I need it, but I can remember the sound of their laughter meeting. I remember the tide it would draw in my belly, the feeling of it swelling to my chest, my throat, filling me with a warmth that aroused a cry of gratitude.

When *uTata* passed, *uMalume* sat with us next to his bed for a week, holding us as we mourned, occasionally seized by his own fits of despair. When the week passed, his eyes grew cold, he sat next to *uMama* and told her that he could not support us. He told her that his wages could barely feed his own children. He told her there was nothing he could do to save us from dissipating. Then he looked at my brother and told him that there was something he could do. That the mines favour men whose families have a history of mining labourers. That he could speak to the site manager’s assistant and see if he could find work for him.

uMama knew that Tena, her beloved son, could barely plough the fields without fear of fainting and she said nothing. I knew that I should have been the one to leave first and I said nothing. Tena knew that his pain was insurmountable on the days he felt the most ease and he said nothing. We all knew

this, and that much more, but we all said nothing. The following morning Tena left with *uMalume* for the mines. He returned six months later but it wasn't a cough that took him, it was his breath. It was faint, barren. He fought to breathe and he suffocated to death.

When Tena was taken, I stopped crying and *uMama* stopped talking. Her eyes grew vacant and her bones sharpened through her skin. *uMakhulu* stopped asking her to eat and started feeding her, praying she would swallow. I'm still not sure if my decision was born of poverty or driven by the desire to leave, to be spared from having to watch my mother die. When I told *uMama* I was leaving for the mines I hoped she would say something, ask me how, perhaps beg me to stay, or erupt in a fit of fury and refuse to have her last child taken. She just stared at me. I looked for her but she was gone. *uMakhulu* gave me the tears I was yearning for but they were in vain. I held her and told her to call for *uMakazi*, take what was left and leave to love others elsewhere. There was nothing left for me there. My world had been painted in a heavy and coarse anguish and there was no colour of joy that could change it.

Passing as a man would be easy, my frame was my father's and my breasts meagre. When I told *uMalume* that I needed his help to get a job at the mines it wasn't my physique that concerned him, only my voice. "It will give you away," he said. "I'll tell them you are mute."

I packed my bags with what remained of Tena's clothes, left my voice and journeyed to my death.

My First Death

As the train carried me towards death, I fell in love with the undulation of the starved golden grass and the dusty yellow hills rippling through the horizon. Perhaps it wasn't love, rather the comfort of knowing that we did not suffer alone, that we were a part of a whole, an organism struggling for existence, and that maybe there was hope for survival.

uMalume slept comfortably the whole way there. His body draped over the insufferable chairs, sinking deeper into them with every snore. He suggested that I find sleep before the rush of the work began. But I couldn't, sleep birthed my fears and embellished my pain. I had no peace there. For sixteen hours I was transfixed by the landscape, my mind churning in a numb trance.

The fog arrived first, thick and stained by a sullied grey that felt like rot, then the landfills crept in. As we approached the station *uMalume* woke, looked out the window, then glanced at me.

"Did you sleep?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"You should have slept," he said as concern wilted his face.

"Nire, don't forget that is your name now," he said quickly and under his breath. "Stay close to me on the platform, and hold your luggage firm."

The train finally came to a stop and people started to move out of the carriages. *uMalume* made us wait until the traffic slowed before we left. As I stepped out of the carriage I was met by the musty cold of the winter morning air that left an acrid aftertaste of *inyongo* at the back of my throat.

We moved from the platform to the clearing. There was a man standing on the scaffolding near the ticket booth addressing the masses. I could not make sense of what he was saying, the distance made him almost inaudible and his language was uncommon. Some words I recognised but others seemed to have been borrowed from other tongues. I looked at my uncle as he listened, humming in response and nodding in agreement. The men started to file into rows then *uMalume* gestured that I follow him.

We walked past the rows of men, confused men, excited men, frightened men, to a group of older men standing in the parking lot. Their gathering was a sight of familiarity as they greeted each other like kin, hugging and laughing. *uMalume's* arrival was met by an elated and collective roar, "Eh! Bra X!" The swarm engulfed him with an ecstatic embrace.

I tried to catch as much of the conversation as I could between the reverberating sounds of their laughter. *uMalume* spoke more of the language I could not place, a language strangely familiar but only belonging to them.

The men looked at me, "*Anabani lo?*"

uMalume responded, "*Ananyana wakithi.*"

"*Anijina?*" another asked speaking to me.

I assumed he was asking for my name and just as I was about to answer *uMalume* swiftly responded "*Jina lai ni Nire, sinakoongea.*"

I had forgotten that I had left my voice to fade with my mother. I had forgotten that its resurrection would be my ruin. I boarded onto the back of a truck with *uMalume* and his friends and we headed for the hostels.

*

The site manager's assistant handed me a bucket with a frayed blanket that smelt of urine, a bowl, a spoon, a cup and a piece of parchment with my details and worker number while *uMalume* negotiated my placement in the hostels.

"*Anadrill, modrilla ana C5,*" the site manager's assistant said.

"*E'ye, mana sinakoongea, natu wa C5 anambulaya. Naomb' anafaka koD3,*" *uMalume* pleaded.

They haggled for about five minutes and finally settled on D2. *uMalume* gave him two copper pieces and a gold nugget which he swiftly tucked in the space between his gum and his cheek. They shook hands and the site manager's assistant went back into the office.

uMalume sighed, then turned to me, "I need you to listen to me, child. I have loyal friends who will protect you in D2 but you must not provoke anyone. Do not stir trouble. Do not fight and most importantly, sleep very lightly. There are members of the Krewem in that dorm and..." he sighed.

"...if they find you sleeping they will strip you, find that you are you and do much worse to you than they would if you were man."

*

Mbenin was a kind giant with a thunderous laugh. When *uMalume* introduced me to him he pulled me into his sweaty, portly frame giving me a warm and winding hug. *uMalume* explained everything that was relevant and Mbenin promised to look after me. Mbenin made me lay my blanket on the floor next to his.

"You will sleep next to me, boy, and they will not touch you. You will fetch my meals and my beer, wash my dishes and my clothes, yes?"

It took a while for me to register a response, hearing my mother tongue from someone that was not *uMalume* was comforting. I nodded and assimilated seamlessly into my new routine.

*

uMalume frequently reminded me to wear a wet cloth around my face.

"Never take it off, no matter how hot it gets, even when it is hard to breathe. Rather struggle for breath in there than lose your breath altogether. You hear me, boy?"

*

The musk was sweltering. It sat on my chest creeping into my nose with a torturous odour that siphoned my breath from my lungs, reaping it from my existence. I coughed in an effort to catch a breath but it only made it shorter, made it disappear in the echoes of the strangling tunnels. I looked back and saw a shadowed trail of men heaving harder with each step. I looked forward and saw hope decompose and in its place malicious indifference was born.

Knocking away at rock with a hammer and a chisel would be difficult on a gracious day in a dance with a gentle breeze. In the stagnant heat with air laced with a dust that coats your skin, your nostrils, your throat, your lungs – it was purgatory. Every strike rippled through my body, burning through whatever strung it together making it whole. I could barely walk after my first day. Every inch of movement was pinched by searing pain after the first week. Numbness was all that was left after the third month, numbness and the kind of fatigue that made me salivate at the thought of death.

In the delirium of heat and exhaustion, I found myself reciting *uMakhulu's* stories. The tale of the man who walked the world with no feet, the tale about the mother with the emerald teats, and my favourites, the tale of the undying. Lost in the rhythm of the hammer to chisel I could sometimes hear her voice as it changed from one character to the next, keeping me company as I carved myself away.

*

Silence was an inaccessible luxury at the mines. If it wasn't pounding or a constant stream of indistinct chatter, it was the inexhaustible cough tightening the chests of all the men. Sports day came with many pleasures and silence was one of them. While the rest of the men piled into the arena to watch the fists, I disappeared to the dorms and claimed the seldom moment of silence. The calm was so intoxicating I drifted into a lacerated sleep. My body plunged into the floor drifting beyond my control but my ears where acutely awake. Nerek and Kwenga walked into the room as I lay there benumbed. *uTata* had taught me enough Krewem for me to make sense of what they were saying.

"Look at the pretty boy ready and waiting for us."

"Mbenin will kill you if he catches you."

“Well, Mbenin isn’t here, and since when are you afraid of old men who cannot even find their own toes?”

“Dont be dense, Nerek, you know that this would start a war we cannot win.”

“But look at him, he is so pretty he looks like a girl. I’ll make him like it.”

“You will leave him alone. Besides he is mute, how brainless must you be to even consider wrestling with the gods?”

A tremor of fear restored my control of my body as Nerek and Kwenga left. Gasping for breath, the sweet of silence decayed into a bitter site of trauma. In an attempt to calm down, I reached for one of *uMakhulu’s* stories. There was something familiar about Kwenga’s caution and fear of my supposed infliction. Something to do with Krewem laws of the beyond and the story of a man who who beat his deaf son to death, only to find that he had killed a god. Again the laws of mercy failed me and I owed my life to laws born to superstition.

*

The site manager’s assistant made us stand in uncustomary rows before our daily shift of drowning in dust. He arranged us according to who he felt was the cleanest and smelt the least pungent. When he was done he bellowed, “*Site manager anafika namuhla, Yeye anabuza mibuzo nini nikundula nithi sawa. Nini sibuzi mibuzo. Nakuzwa?*”

The crowd responded, “*Sawa!*”

A truck arrived and a flimsy pale man stepped out of the car and walked towards us. I had heard of the invaders, the tales never failed to mention their cold eyes, colourless skin and their brutal speech. The site manager walked down the line examining the rows of men then settled next to his assistant. He started barking commands in an incomprehensible language that had no tone or rhythm. His assistant translated as he spoke and the men would respond in unison, “*Sawa!*”

The site manager noticed my lack of response and walked up to me. His eyes were blue, but not inviting like the sky, instead they were inhospitable, burrowing into me, attempting to excavate my anger and incite panic. I gave him neither and stared back at him, burrowing my own hole of inquiry, trying

to distinguish if he was human or a human-like figure. I watched as his anger boiled his blood, flushing his face as he squealed at me in his language. I did not respond. His assistant came running up to us and explained to him that I was mute. Placated, the site manager wiped the sweat off of his forehead, spat at my feet, then walked away.

My last shift at the mines was caught in a wave of anger and disgust. I was disgusted by what I was doing and who I was doing it for. The memory of the invader continued to replay in my head, drilling a dizzying frustration that made it difficult for me to think. I barely felt the tremor that rumbled through the mine. I never heard the men as they screamed caution and called me to retreat. I can’t remember the cave-in, Pereyi told me a rock hit my head and I fell unconscious when it happened. I just remember waking up in darkness. By the sound of it, I counted four of us trapped behind the rock fall. We could not hear the men on the other side of the fall. We all knew we would suffocate to death before they reached us. I lay there on the floor listening to the others as they were caught in panic. I just lay there, grateful for an end.

Beyond The Grave

Lete was the first to die, his panic quickened the closing of his lungs. When he stopped wheezing, I knew he was asphyxiated. The rest of us sat in silence, patiently waiting for the next last draw for breath. As I grew faint, I visualised home. Playing by the lake with Tenea while *uMama* ploughed the field. Knitting fishing nets with *uTata* under the acacia. Milking the cows with *uMakhulu* as the sun rose. I never spent much time imagining my death but I had always assumed it would be under the sun, wrapped in its radiance. I could almost feel it, almost see the residue of its light seeping into the darkness. I could almost see a figure materialise and walk towards me. I could almost hear them talk in a language that sounded like a lullaby. I could almost feel them pick me up and carry me into the light.

*

I never expected to wake up after I died. I had no expectations of death but I figured waking up was counterintuitive. And yet there I was waking up on what felt like a bed with white linen sheets that smelt like lemongrass. Then I could hear people talking in Nommeya, an ancient and noble language *uMakhulu* insisted we learn.

“How many?”

“We found eight bodies, five were already dead when we had arrived. We left them to Mhlaba. Another died this morning, his breath was too far gone for the healers to save him. The last two have had a successful dust extraction and should recover fully.”

“Are they awake?”

“Not yet”

“And Mhlaba? Have they managed to quell the northern tremors?”

“No.”

“Maraji is on her way and should be here in a day or so. Make sure they are awake and questioned before then.”

“Yes, Maa.”

My survival annoyed me. I had been robbed of an end and I was livid, but my frustration did not erase my caution. I was uncertain whether I had been saved or if I was held captive so I remained mute.

Pereyi woke with less discretion. He jerked frantically, looking dour and drenched in a sweaty confusion. His frenzied wake drew the attention of a woman dressed in white robes. I watched through the slit of my eyes as she walked up to his bed, pressed the bridge of his nose and his thenar eminence and he melted back into the bed, calming instantly. Then she turned to me, smiled and walked away.

The next morning the woman came into our room again with two warm meals and some tea. She placed the trays beside our beds then took a chair and faced it towards us. When she was done, she turned to us and said, “Good morning, I believe you have had a good night’s rest. Deputy Nazak will be with you shortly.”

Pereyi and I peered at each other in mutual confusion. Moments later another two women walked into our room. The first was a willowy woman dressed in crimson linen with a bronze breastplate and a white turban. She looked at us and sat down. The second woman was dressed the same but in mustard yellow linens and had a spear with a turquoise tip firmly gripped in hand as she stood by the door.

“Good morning,” the woman in red said as she crossed her legs. “My name is Nazak Chanu, I am the deputy chief of the security forces in central and I need to ask you a few questions.”

She looked at us, anticipating some kind of response but we both stared at her, confused.

“Please eat.”

Pereyi and I sat up almost involuntarily, we picked up our bowls of porridge and started to eat.

She continued, “What organisation do you work for?”

Pereyi answered, “The Western Prospector’s Association.”

Deputy Nazak: “And have they told you what you are mining for?”

Pereyi: “Gold”

Deputy Nazak: “Just gold?”

Pereyi: “Yes.”

Deputy Nazak: “We have it on record that some of you have been mandated by your authorities to look for something else. Do you know why or what it is they are searching for?”

Pereyi: “No.”

Deputy Nazak: “Where are your commander’s headquarters?”

Pereyi hesitated for a moment then answered, “I don’t know.”

Deputy Nazak looked at him with a scolding stare, “This will be easy if you refrain from lying. Eat.”

Both Pereyi and I continued to eat, this time it was definitely involuntary.

Deputy Nazak: “I ask again, where are your commander’s headquarters?”

Pereyi: “They are at quadrant four in Lelara Mine.”

Deputy Nazak: “How heavy is their armament?”

Pereyi: “I don’t know.”

Deputy Nazak annoyed, raised her voice and repeated, “How heavy is their armament!”

Pereyi frightened, responded with a quiver of a cry, “They will kill me, they will kill you!”

Deputy Nazak uncrossed her legs and leaned forward in her chair staring at Pereyi. Pereyi started heaving. His bowl fell to the floor as he gasped for breath.

“I’m not easy to kill,” she said, watching Pereyi choke to death. She sat back in her chair. Pereyi seemed to recapture his breath, coughing and wheezing in his bed.

Deputy Nazak looked at me and said, "You are impressively quiet."
Pereyi, still panting, answered in a rough voice, "He is mute."
Deputy Nazak made hand gestures at me that I couldn't make sense of.
"Where is he from?" she asked.
"Inaala," Pereyi responded
"Can you write?" she asked, and I just stared at her.
"Can you hear me?" She asked again, gesturing and becoming impatient.
"How do you communicate with him?" she asked Pereyi
"We don't," he responded. "His uncle relayed his instructions to him."
Deputy Nazak turned to face the second woman, "Fetch me the linguist and the interpreter." As the guard was about to leave, the door opened and another woman dressed like the guard walked in. They gestured a greeting to each other, she turned to Deputy Nazak, nodded slightly and stepped to the side to make way. Deputy Nazak and her guard knelt and uttered in unison, "Maraji."

She was draped in amber silk that clung to her body like a second skin, her long maroon deadlocks magnificently coiled around her head. She had a glowing marigold mark that took root from her bottom lip and travelled down her centre. Deputy Nazak and her guard stood up as she addressed them, "What have you gathered?"
Deputy Nazak: "Nothing new, we were about to fetch the interpreter to interrogate the mute."
Maraji glanced at Pereyi, then looked at me and said, "I believe you have had quite the journey. No need for the interpreter, finish with the man, wipe him and send him home. The girl will come with me."
Deputy Nazak asked confused, "The girl?"
Maraji looked at her, smiled and said, "Yes, the one pretending to be mute."

*

Deputy Nazak led me to the washrooms, handed me a towel, soap, sandals and some pale yellow linens that smelt like citronella. The hot water seeped through my skin soaking my bones in comfort. I bathed, dressed and then followed her to a platform with an odd carriage that looked like it had been carved from stone, strangely nestled in a concave rock. It hadn't occurred to me to think that I was still underground. The fresh air and abundance of light was a stark contrast to the hot, lightless, suffocating mines that I had grown used to.

Two guards arrived and walked towards the carriage. The doors opened without either of them touching a handle or lever. They walked into the carriage and Deputy Nazak followed. She looked back at me suggesting I do too and so I did. I sat in a seat in the corner and waited as Deputy Nazak spoke to the guards. When she was done she turned to me and said, "Good luck."

Moments after she left, Maraji walked into the carriage with a woman dressed like Deputy Nazak. They sat at the opposite end and spoke a dialect of Nommeya that sounded like a chorus humming a sweet tune. I could not catch a lick of what they said. The carriage door closed, then started moving at an incomprehensible speed in no distinct direction. There was seemingly no engine or driver, it just moved through rock leaving no sound, not even a faint rumble.

When the carriage arrived, the guards ushered me into a building. In the centre of the building was a courtyard that was wrapped in sunlight. I looked up to see the sky beyond what was at least ten kilometres of ground. I could faintly see what looked like trees and suddenly a herd of impala ran across without any cognisance of the world beneath. The guards led me to a room adorned with stained glass windows depicting the most curious imagery that moved with the light and sat me at a coffee table.

"Maraji will be with you shortly," one said and they stepped out.
Maraji walked in holding a clear bottle filled with a pale straw-coloured liquid and two glasses.

"Do you take honey wine?" She looked at me and poured a glass for each of us, handed one to me and sat down. Her eyes focused on me, then she smiled, "You are Vena's daughter are you not? You carry him better than he carried himself. I must admit your father was an impressive man. An honourable man. A resilient man." She took a sip of her wine and her eyes sank slightly. "I hope his death was not too gruesome."

I could not fathom how she knew so much. I stared at her aghast. She continued, "He was a good ally until he wasn't. Nazak tells me he opted for the bacteria. He wanted to make sure he made it home." She smiled at me again, sighed and continued, "I would like to offer you an apology for Tenea's life, I hear he was a sweet boy. It's always unfortunate that the casualties of war are the very people we fight to save. We had managed to send a healer to him but there was nothing they could do. They managed to extract all the dust but his

lungs were severely lacerated. You see, it was a miracle that Tenna lived as long as he did. He is a wanderer, their form is not built to last, but I believe he stayed because of you. I can see why.”

For the first time in over a year my eyes began to sting, then swelled with tears. I could barely keep my chest tight enough to hold the sob captive. “I’m giving you this information because I believe I owe it to you to tell you what happened. But what I need to gauge from you is whether or not you want to know why?” Tears streamed down my face and my nose grew congested. I was forced to take staggered breaths. Maraji offered me a napkin. Even if I’d wanted to take it I couldn’t. I was paralysed by grief. Maraji leaned towards me and said, “I can give you some time if you need, but unfortunately we do not have much.

May I ask, what is your true name?”

My eyes cleared slightly as I stared at her, the woman who admitted her role in the murder of my family, perplexed by the casualty of her admission. I drew together what little was left of my voice and said, “You murdered my family.” She responded, “In short, yes.”

“You murdered my family?” I whispered again.

“I have a proposition for you. I do not expect your forgiveness, but, I need you to realise that we did not act alone, that the retribution that you might desire can only be attained if we defeat the invaders.”

“Retribution? You murder my family and you think I would trust you with justice?” I stood up and started pacing, desperately trying to contain my grief. As I paced I spotted a letter opener on a counter and my mind raced in a blinding rage, willing it closer.

“We cannot bring your family back, and perhaps you are right. Perhaps we are not fit to distinguish between what is and is not just. But we must fight for a future where the laws of mercy govern again so that they can lead us back to a survival that is just.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed.

“You are strong. I admire that. May I show you something?” She stood up and picked an item off of the bookshelf. I grabbed the letter opener and plunged it into her heart as she turned. “I understand. This is an honourable way to

die,” she whispered.

A pain in my chest pinched throughout my body, ripping me apart. My legs gave in and I collapsed into her arms. She held me as she sat us down on the floor. She pulled the letter opener out from her chest and I screamed in pain. I looked down to see that I was bleeding where I had stabbed her. She wiped the tears from my face and asked again, “What’s your true name?”

I looked at her as my body began to stew in seething pain and muttered, “Lenala.”

“Lenala, that’s a beautiful name,” she said. Then she began to sing as her mark grew brighter, enveloping me in its light.

Phela Phela Ngantsomi



Umalaleveva

By Thobeka Veronica Ndlebe-September

Thobeka Ndlebe-September is a writer and musician born in Cape Town. She writes in isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans. Her activism and writing covers a variety of themes such as poverty, education, gender-based violence, human rights and Ubuntu. Her story was inspired by a public lecture on the history of Makhanda. *Umalaleveva* explores historical and healing themes through creative writing.

Isishwankathelo

Kwiincwadi endizifundileyo endingabalula ababhali uS.E.K. Mqhayi, uP.T. Mtuze, uWellington Moya, uGcina Mhlophe abandichukumiseleyo ngeendlela ababhala ngazo, kwaye babe nefuthe elikhulu kumsebenzi wam. Elo futhe ayikoku linganisa kuphela kodwa, lifuthe lokusetyenziswa kolwimi kwanokuzama ukuvelela iinkalo ababengazange bazivelele.

Eli babalana liqwalasela intlalo yoluntu ngokubanzi ngakumbi unxunguphalo ngokomphefumlo, ingqesho, izindlu, umhlaba, imfundo, inkolo, uthando, njalo-njalo. Ukwaqalasela nempilo yabahlokokazi ekuhlaleni. Maxa-wambi, elibali libhalwe ngokusebenzisa isakhono sokubhala intsomi. Oko kukuthi kukho ukuthungelana neentsomi nangona lingeyo ntsomi. Malunga nolwimi, elibali lizama ukuveza indlela ulwimi olusetyenziswa ngayo, kwakunye nendlela olusetyenziswa ngalo kule mihla, kusetyenziswa amagama emboleko. Xa kubhalwa, kuvame ukuba loo magama akekeliswe xa engalandeli imigaqo yokubhalwa kwesiXhosa. Uwakekelisa njani ke la magama xa uthetha? Imisebenzi yooP.T. Mtuze, uWellington Moya, Sindiwe Magona, uGcina Mhlophe, noS.A Dazela ibe nempembelelo kweli balana.

Umalaleveva Nontakumba

Ngaminazana ithile, phantsi komthi woMnga, yadanduluka ingcongconi uMalaleveva isithi kuNtakumba, “andikufuni apha Ntakumba ngenxa yakho mna nosapho lwam siphetheke kakubi kangokuba side sanikwa negama elithi sizii-Tsetse Fly.”

Sihlala sizingelwa ngawo onke amaxesha kuba bambi bathi abalali sithi, kwaye saziwa njengaba mfimfithi begazi. Ngako oko ndithi kuwe “deda mhlalanga endaweni yenywagi.”

Watsho ngesiqhazolo sentsini uNtakumba, phantse womiwa nangamathe. Waphendula esithi “Uyabona Malaleveva, esekhona uSanti ukhoko wethu, ogcwalise yonke indawo kweli khaya, akho apho siyakhona thina silusapho looNtakumba. Uya kubona okokuba mawuthinina, kuba likhaya lethu nathi eli; kwaye wena u-seasonal ngabula makhumsha. Uza manqaphanqapha apha ngakumbi ngehlobo, ufike ube ngugqugqu komncinci nakomdala.

Ngalo lonke elo xesha ethetha uNtakumba, uMalaleveva umthe ntsho, ngame-

hlo angagungqiyo, ethe cwaka. Ethubeni uphendule esithi uNtakumba, “Ubona nje Malaleveva sihlobo sam, wena uchitha nje ixesha lakho ngayo yonke le mbhudede uyitshoyo.

Thina singooNtakumba sitya kuphela iindwendwe ukwenzela zingahlali thuba lide. Zithi zizikrwela apha, zibe zikhwaza umntana azokuzonwaya emqolo.

“Thyini bafondini, isigezo esi asipheli.” Uvakele esitsho uNtakumba ngelixa ethatha ibhanka ebe chophe kuyo phantsi komthi kunye noMalaleveva, sel’engena endlini ethetha yedwa.

Kuthe kanti uNontakumba ukuvile oku kushwanshwatha komyeni wakhe. Kwangoko ube sel’ embuza okokuba kutheni ethetha yedwa nje? Ukhe wadukisela uNtakumba esenza ngathi akamvanga uNontakumba. Phofu uye wakhumbula okokuba, iya kuphela imini, umkakhe esabuzana nalaa mbuzo umnye.

“Hayi mfazi, ndicaphukiswa ngulo Malalevevandini, osuka ngaphaya kwakhe azokundixelela imfitshimfitshi kwakusasa!”

UNontakumba usuke wathula engxamele ukuva unobangela wokuba umyeni wakhe asuke abe lugcwabevu ngumsindo.

“Ubonanje mfazi andazi nokokuba ndiyibeke njani le nto ayithethileyo uMalaleveva.” Utshilo uNtakumba sele erhawuzelela intloko ngesandla sasekunene.

“Iyo! Ezweni!” Uvakele esitsho uNontakumba.

“Ee mfazi, uMalaleveva lo uthi akasifuni thina booNtakumba apha.” Uhambise esitsho uNtakumba,

“Hayi suka! Tyhini! Xa engubani yena ukuba angathetha loo nto? Ndiyathemba umgqogqe iindlebe ezi zashushu.” Uphendule sele eqhwaba izandla, abesele ezibeka esinqeni uNontakumba.

“Hayi wena mfazi, andikhangela ndibe samsa kude, ndimxelele ezinkonkqeni ukuba akho apho siyakhona thina, kuba kaloku nathi likhaya lethu eli. Kwaye akho kwanto ixoxiso ngaloo nto.”

“Nantso ke myenam, umbhadlisile. Xa bekutheni kakade akuxelele loo mfe-

ketho ye mfitshimfitshi?”

“Lumka! Lumka! Khawuphathela utatakho imaga yamarhewu usese nam undikhelela.” Utshilo uNontakumba.

Amarhewu la, ayethandwa kakhulu kweli khaya, ngakumbi nguNtakumba kuba kaloku ubengafani namanye amadoda, uZimasile noZibula abamelwane bakhe, bona babesoloko bezintyintya ngamanz’ abomvu namhlophe.

Kangangokuba esi sibini saside saba ngamalungu aseRhabula church. Nto-leyo amakhosikazi abo ebeyithakazelela kakhulu. Kaloku amalungu alekonzo ebesithi ebambhe ibhotile kaVitoliya abe uMfundisi ebeka ilizwi kananjalo. Yatsho yaphela nento yokokuba abayeni babo babizwe njengooNosimokolo booMahlalashushu.

Ukhuphe icuba epokothweni yehempe uNtakumba sel’ ekhangela nomatshisi ebhatoryini, kucaca ukuba ingxoxo yakhe noMalaleveva imnyusele ngeswekile.

UNtakumba ebesazi kakuhle ukuba umfazi wakhe lo akanantloko, kangangokokuba nalapha ekuhlaleni ebesaziwa njengoPhumasilwe womfazi. Nto-leyo ebesithi akumngxolisa ngayo owakwakhe, suk’ aphenyule uNontakumba ezithethelela.

“Jongapha myenam, andithi unditshate usazi ukuba andithunywa ndingayi.”

Enyanisweni uNtakumba yenye yezinto awathi waziqaphela kumfazi wakhe. Ntoleyo awayeyazi mhlophe okokuba ibibangelwa kukuba uNontakumba lo, into yokuphakamisa amakhwapha wayifunda kokwabo. Kaloku yayinguye yedwa qwaba intombi, kananjalo eligqibelo phakathi kwabafana amane kowabo.

UMalaleveva wafika kwakhe unkosikazi ehleli intlanganiso namanye amakhosikazi omzi wakwaMalaleveva. Wabulisa nje uMalaleveva wabe sele eyokutshona ekhithshini, apho athe walayita iketile khon’ ukuze azenzele impunga. Umfo lo, wayekholwa kakhulu yimpunga. Ikofu yona wayeyiphunga kusasa kuphela. Wayengahluphi ngokumana ethumana nabantu, ibide ibe nguye ozigqatsa phambili ngokwenzela abantu into ephungwayo.

Aba ndaba zabantu bamakhosikazi babehleli behleba uMalaleveva beziphaka zishushu besithi, “Hayi noko, akuthethwa le into, indoda ibe iquzelela

ukwenza iti abe yena umfazi ehleli daxa engayanga kukha zimbotyi.”

Ebeye athi keyena unkosikazi waseMaveveni “Zeziphi ezimbotyi ekufuneka ndiyozikha? Niyakuthanda ukungena iintozabantu nibenixakwe zezenu.”

Namhlanje uMalaleveva wasuka wawagqaya ngamanzi abandayo endaweni yeti amakhosikazi ebehleli nomkakhe uVeva.

Bajonga jongana ababafazi sele bethetha nangamehlo ingulowo emangalisiwe yile jagi yamanzi ane ayisi kunye neegilasi phezu kwetafile. Namhlanje, bafike kwanja zothu’mililo, wokugityselwa ngevazi yamanzi abandaceke. Ntoleyo ebangele okokuba naloo ntlanganiso iphele ngokukhulu ukungxama.

“Eshe, ubhuti sekutheni eza kusigqaya ngamanzi abandayo ngokungathi siphethwe ngu Bhabha no Layiza?” Utshilo uNokhephu sele efin’ingintshiya.

Ukhawuleze waphendula unkosikazi kaMalaleveva, selekucaca okokuba intombendala ayitshayi ngalinqawa yokokuba umnyeni wayo azokudelelwa kumzi wakhe ngaba bafazana babanakwabo.

“Ngoo bani kengoku aboBhabha noLayiza uthetha ngabo?”

“Tyhini! ukhona umntu ongaziyo okokuba uBhabha noLayiza sisiteketiso sokubiza ibhabhalaza!” Utshilo uNokhephu.

Atsho ngesiqhazolo sentsini ephoxayo loomakhosikazi bexhele xhukwane yimpendulo kaNokhephu.

UVeva wayevutha ngumsindo sesisigezo singaka salamakhosikazi. Waye selenazo nendawana zokumana eqwanyaqwanyaza okukwe bulb yombane xa izakucima. Kodwa wazixelela okokubana akasoze abanike lonto bayilindeleyo.

Zathi zakuhamba iindwendwe zenkosikazi, uMalaleveva wayiphalaza imbilini yakhe ngencoko ebenayo noNtakumba.

“Ubonanje nkosikazi, mazi yakokowethu. Ndiyile kwaNtakumba malunga nalomcimbi wokusoloko sicwikilwa zezintakumba ubusuku nemini.” Ndisese ndamxelela okokuba andifuni kwanto ethi Ntakumba apha.” Uhambise esitsho uMalaleveva.

“Iyhoo! Usebenzile Veva sithandwa sam, sakutsho siphumle kukusoloko sizikrwela sizonwaya.”

“Ngelishwa, nkosikazi, uNtakumba undiphendule esithi akukho apho bayakhona bona bengooNtakumba, kwaye abathandisi baningaloo nto.”

“Ubona nje sithandwa sam, le ndima yomhlaba inzima, ingathi kusekude ebhakubha, unjanjoku ixake nePalamente leyembhala.” Uphendule esitsho unkosikazi kaMalaleveva.

Kwasanti

Kusemva kwesidlo sangokuhlwa, abakwaBhangqo, uNosidima umkakhe kwakunye neendwendwe zabo, utishala uMpinga nowakwakhe uNonesi balungiselela ukulala.

Akubanga kudala zicinyiwe izibane kwelo gumbi leendwendwe, ooNtakumba nabo batsho bafumana into esiwa phantsi kwempumlo. Yabanguloo durubhentsu yomcwikilo weendwendwe kuloo matrasi mtsha.

UNtakumba nosapho lwakhe babanenyweba yokuthi iingubo abalala kuzo zithathwe zibekwe kuloo matrasi mtsha apho iindwendwe zazilungiselelelele okokuba zilale khona.

Eneneni akukhobani obekunothi ahlelwe bubuthongo, nkqu nakuloo mashiti esilika ayenuka isiqholo iStay-Soft. Kwakungekho nandize-ndize obenokudlalwa zezo ndwendwe kuloo mandlalo ngenxa yaloo mtswikilondini.

Kwasa zihleli iindwendwe, sezigqibe kwelokuba zicel’ indlela zigoduke. OoNtakumba bona, babekobude ubuthongo ngenxa yokuzityela itheko ngephezolo.

Phantse wonke umhlali welokishi yakwaSanti wayesazi ukuba indawo abakhe kuyo imizi yabo igcwele ziintakumba. Noko kunjalo, yayingekho enye indawo ababenokuthi bakhe kuyo ngaphandle kwalo mhlaba wakwaSanti.

Ezi Tsetse Fly

“Ubonanje ndidikwe finishi zezi tsetse fly.” Uvakele esitsho uMrs Oubaas ephazanyiswa ngooMalaleveva abaphuma bengena kwikhithi lakhe.

Ilanga litshisa kakhulu. U-Oubaas usesitalini samahashe, uwanika amanzi okusela.

“Iyhoo, yaqala inkathazo bafazi!” Utshilo uNkosikazi kaMalaleveva akuva uMrs Oubaas eshawutisa ngeetsetse fly.

“Ndiyithetha ke le nto izol’ oku, kuMalaleveva, ndisithi masihambe endlwini yomfazi kaOubaas, sizihlalele esitalini samahashe okanye ebuhlanti beehagu.”

“Imini inye yile yanamhlanje, asoze ndilawulwe ziitsetse fly emzini wam mna, tyhini yhini na le!”

Watsho evula ikhabhathi ekhangela iDoom yezinambuzane ezibhabhayo uMrs Oubaas.”

Uthe akungayiboni wakhwazela phezulu, “Meri, Meri!” Usabele uMeri, “Medem.”

“Iphi iDoom, Meri?”

“Iphelile, Medem.”

“Kwaza kwathini ungandixeleli, ngoku ndiza kuzithini ezi tsetse fly?” Akakhangela aphenndule uMeri, usuke waya ngasekhabhathini wayivula wakhupha isibulali iTARGET.”

“ZZZZZ ZZZZZZ ZZZZZ.” Watsho uNkosikazi kaMalaleveva ebhabhela ngakuMrs Oubaas obenxibe ilokhwe etyheli ekuthiwa nguVezamqolo ukubizwa kwayo.

Waafika wathi ngcu, wamfifitha kanobom loo mqolo uphandle.

Yekake uMeri, nanko sele ethsuthsuza loo mqolo ezama ukususa loo tsetse fly.

“Nyan, Nyan Meri! Ungathini ukundiflita, jonga ngoku ndinuka iTARGET.”

Enikina intloko uMeri. “Hayi Medem, bendiflita le tsetse fly jonga nangoku inxilile.”

Umalaleveva Nondwendwe

Ukhalile umqhagi njengesiqhelo uxelela wonke umntu osaleleyo ukuba kusile. Wavuka kwangoko uMalaleveva wasingisa ekhitshini eyokuzenzela ikofu engenalubisi. Wasese esenzela nomkakhe obesalele, ikomityi yeti enobisi, waza wayibeka kwitafilana eyayilapho ecaleni kwebhedi.

Uthabathe ibhanka ebisecaleni kothango uMalaleveva waza waya kuhlala ngasebuhlanti bemfuyo yakhe. Nto-leyo ebengaqhelanga kuyenza kuba kaloku wayekuthanda kakhulu ukuphungela ezingubeni.

Uthe esaphunga njalo, weva ilizwi lisithi, “Malaleveva, Malaleveva”, kwangoko walaqaza ejonga ukuba lisuka phi elo lizwi, kodwa akazange abone mntu. Ufane wanikina intloko esonwaya ezo nwele zakhe ebezisele zibuxuba.

“NdinguSanti, uKhoko wooNtakumba.” Litshilo ilizwi.

Wasuka wangcangcazela uMalaleveva. Phantse kwachithakala naloo kofu. Waathula wathi-tu cwaka, seleminxwa nalualo.

Liphindile ilizwi lisithi, “Malaleveva, Malaleveva.”

“Ndikubonile utshutshisa isizukulwana sakwaNtakumba, usigxotha nakanjalo kumhlaba waso. Mhlaba lowo esabashiyela wona thina Manyange booNtakumba. Mhla nezolo ungcungcuthekisa uNtakumba kwakunye nosapho lwakhe, kuba engavumi ukuqweqwediswa nguwe namahlakani akho.”

Kwesi sithuba, uMalaleveva uxhume wema ngeenyawo sele ephandlwa yiloo santi ingene emehlweni akhe. Sele kuchithakala naloo kofu yakhe ebe sayiphunga. Uvalo lona lwalusithi ndo-ndo-ndo esifubeni engazi nokokuba makathini na.

Uthe esafuna ukuziphendulela uMalaleveva, sefefi luloyiko, suka uSanti wenza isitshingitshane somoya, nesathi sazibhijela kuMalaleveva. Waasuka wema nkqo oku kwepali yogesi uvalo ludlal’ undize ndize.

Wahambisa uSanti esithi, “Akunalo tu kwaphela igunya lokuthabatha umhlaba wakwaSanti. Xa ubagxotha ooNtakumba uthi mabaye phi, bona neentsapho zabo?”

“Andithi ixesha eli lonke nisoloko ningekho kwaSanti, nisemizini yenu

kumahlaha?” Wanqwala ngentloko uMalaleveva evuma oko kuthethwa nguSanti.

“Uyabona ke, ukusukela namhlanje uze uchule ukunyathela, ungaze ube uphinde udlalele ngakwisizukulwana sam ooNtakumba, kungenjalo uya kuyazi into ehlafunwa ngooSanti xa ubanyathela ekonsini. Ndiyathemba sivene!”

Emva koko kwathi cwaka tu zole. Sele kuphele naloo mkhanuko wekofu.

Uvakele ebuza uNkosikazi kaMalaleveva “Eshe Veva myenam, kutheni usuke wampatsha-mpatsha okungathi ubone isiporho?” Usuke wadukisela uMalaleveva okungathi akawuvanga loo mbuzo. Ubilise iketile ezenzela enye imagana yekofu, waba sel’ ethatha namagwinya amabini ewabeka phezu kwetafile. Usese wachopha esitulweni ecaleni kwetafile leyo.

“Hayi Nkosikazi, wena uthetha nje kub’ into ungayazi.”

“Uthinina ngoku?” Uvakele ekhuza, ebuza uNkosikazi. “Nkosikazi, andenlanga ukusibona koko bendithetha naso ubuqu!”

“Owu hayi kanene wena Veva ndilibele okokuba uliqhula. Sivuka nje, wenasele uneentsomi zasebusuku emini. Ulumke ke, ungaphumimpondo.” Etsho ehlekela phezulu uNkosikazi kaMalaleveva.

“Ubona nje Nkosikazi andiqhuli. Ndithe ndisahleli ngasebuhlanti suka ndeva ilizwi lindibiza ngegama. Ekuqaleni ndibe nendawo yokungahoyi, ndicinga ukuba ndiyaphazama. Kodwa lithe lakuqinisela ilizwi ukundibiza selelisithi linguKhoko wooNtakumba, ndaqonda kwangoko ukuba iliwa libhekumoya.”

Emangalisiwe umkakhe naye seleqonda mhlophe ngoku ukuba uVeva lo akaqhuli. Uvale loo mbiza ebeyizamisa yepapa wazawachopha kwisitulo ebesinganeno kukaMalaleveva. “Hayi mandoyiswe, thyini!”

Uye waqhubeka uMalaleveva emchazela ngako konke okwenzekileyo uNkosikazi wakhe. “Hayi inene, ndifung’umtakwethu uMaplanga! Yinto eza kuthiwani le ngoku Veva myenam?” Sele esonga ingalo ezibeka esifubeni.

“Ubonanje Nkosikazi nam ndisamatshekile. Uzuqonde andiyazi nokokuba ithiwani into enje madoda, kuba kaloku andizange ndasiva esisimanga nditsho nakwiintsomi zikaNoquku.”

“Kuya kunyanzeleka okokuba wenze unakonako wokufumana isisombululo salento kwamsinyane, unjanjoku akungekhe ukwazi ukuyisombulula ngokunokwakho.” Ivakele isitsho iNkosikazi yaseMavaveni kumyeni wayo.

Wathi tu, uMalaleveva akabinanto ayithethayo. Kwakucace mhlophe ukuba limyile, akanamagama. “Yinto azakuyiqala ngaphi ukuyithetha kuhlanga lwakwaMalaleveva le? Khona ngubani oza kukholelwa kwimfitshimfitshi yesiporho sakwaSanti esithethayo?”

Eneneni, yintsumantsumane yakwamkhozi le abejongene nayo. Kwaye isisombululo sisinye kukuba enze njengoko ebeyalelwe. Waazikisa njalo ukucinga uMalaleveva.

Akazange abe salibazisa uMalaleveva, wayalela oonyana bakhe okokuba bahambise isazisi seeleta ezichaza ngentlanganiso engxamisekileyo yabo bonke ooMalaleveva eya kuthi ibanjelwe phaya eMithini.

“Makwedini, thathani lamaphetshana niwase kwimizi yonke yakwaMalaleveva.” Utshilo uMalaleveva koonyana bakhe uSicelo noSandile nabathe bacela ootshomi babo babancedise.

“Isaziso! Isaziso! Sentlanganiso eMithini niyamenywa nonke bahlali!”

Bathi bekhwaza njalo, babe behambisa loo maphetshana kwananjalo, emizini nakubantu abasezitalatweni. Yathi ibetha intsimbi yeshumi elinambini sabe-sele siseMithini isizwe sooMalaleveva.

OoMalaleveva baphuma ngobuninzibabo bezokuzivela ukuba yintlanganiso etheni le ingxamiseke olohlobo.

“Sizwe sakwaMalaleveva, mandinibulele ngokuthi nakubizwa niphuthume nize nisabele okokudla umzi.” Wayivula njalo intlanganiso uMalaleveva.

“Ngamafutshane ndingalibazisanga. Sele kulithuba ngoku sizwe sooMalaleveva sishukuxa lenyewe yethu nooNtakumba malunga nalomcimbi womhlaba wakwaSanti. Sisihla sinyuka siquqa nasezinkundleni zamatyala. Isigqibo esithatyathwe yinkundla izolo oku, ngu Mantyi uBhokoloshe sesokokuba, umhlaba wakwaSanti nayo yonke imithi eyingqongileyo yeyethu sonke thina singoo Malaleveva kwakunye nooNtakumba.”

“ZZZZ, ZZZZ, ZZZZ.” Bandumzele njalo ooMalaleveva sesi simanga sithethwa ngu Malaleveva. Uphakame xa kulapho uZibondiwe nobenguMmeli wooMalaleveva enkundleni, selengqina oko kuthethwayo, ngelithi “Esi sigqibo sithetha ukuthi, udushe noxhwithaxhwithano ngomhlaba alusayi kuphinda lubekhona phakathi kooNtakumba kwakunye nooMalaleveva!”

“ZZZZZZ ZZZZZZ.” Baahumzela njalo ooMalaleveva, uninzi lusamkela esisigqibo ukanti bambi bechasene naso, bekwa lugcwabevu ngumsindo. Bambi sele-bekhalaza besithi bazakumfifitha banibona xakucaca ukuba ooNtakumba banelungelo lokucwikila badle ubuncwane obufumaneka kwaSanti kuquka iibhedi, amashiti kunye neengubo!

Undwendwe Lukantakumba

UNtakumba nobehleli nomzala wakhe uBlankethi, bezitshayela umdiza phandle ecaleni kothango, waabona ngokufika kukaMalaleveva, phofu emangele kukuphinda ambonekwakhe oko bohlokana ngalamhla babehleli bexoxa phantsi komthi.

Kwangoko, uNtakumba ukhwaze amakhwenkwe ewayalela okokuba aze nebhanka khon'ukuze achophe uMalaleveva.

“Molweni kwaNtakumba.” Ubulise wenjenjalo uMalaleveva sele ebuza nem-pilo.

“Sibulisile nathi, uSanti usasigcinile. Kungaba nisihambele ngantoni kweli khaya ngensteni kangaka?” Ubuzile uNtakumba.

“Hayi, sithi masize kubonisana ngesaa sigqibo iNkundla eqgibengaso malunga noSanti.”

“Ohh, qhuba simamele.”

“Njengoko nisazi okokuba inkundla ephakamileyo igqibe ekubeni sibe nokuxhamla nxa sisonkethina booMalaleveva kwakunyenani booNtakumba koko kusiwa phantsi kweempumlo. Ekumfifitheni nasekucwikileni abobalele ezibhedini nasezingubeni, ukantinabo basoloko bekhanyisa izibane zabo ben-gayivalanga iminyango yabo.” Wenjenjalo ukuthetha uMalaleveva ngokuzama ukukwakha ubudlelwane phakathi kwakhe kwakunye noNtakumba. Eqonda mhlophe ukuba wayivusa ihagu izilalelelangeni mhla wayegxotha ooNta-

kumba esithi akabafuni kwaSanti.

“Yinile! nalala kusile phandlapha?” Watsho uNontakumba selekucaca okokuba intokazi le idikwe yeyokosa. Kaloku kuthenje okokuba umqhagi ukhale waba-yena sel’ephakama emondlalweni eyokubilisa amanzi empunga yakusasa ekh-itshini khon’ukuze baphunge yenanoNtakumba, ukuze alungiselele ukuxova isonka samanzi. Kaloku namhlanje kwakuyimini enkulu kooNtakumba yokub-hiyozela uSanti.

Oonyana babo babehlala kurontabile wabo kwalapha edyaridini. Kaloku uNta-kumba uyisewabo wayenomhlaba omkhulu phantse kubo bonke abantu apha elalini.

“Hayi inene ndizakuyicela ivuthiwe le yalowam umzi, xa bonke belibele kukurhona ngelilixa isizwe sonke sibhiyozela iziphumo zenkundla ephakami-leyo!” Uvakele esitsho uNontakumba.

“Nkosikazi, uyaluthanda uchuku, yintoni lento wahlala ungxolisana nabant-wana bevuka ngalolonke ixesha?” Ukhalime esitsho ngelizwi eliphantsi uNtakumba phofu ezitshayela umdiza wakhe. Uvakele sel’esithi okokuba ibingenguwo lomdiza awutshayayo ngeba sele kudaloo waba sendimangeni yasebhofolo.

“Sith’aba mama.” Utshilo unyana omkhulu uVelile ephefumlela phezulu, sele-landelwa ngabantakwabo bejonge kunina.

“O, ndiyabona. Velile, besele ndiba kunokuba niphethwe ngumkhuhlane nxana nilala ‘de kuphume ilanga.”

“Kuzoba nje, kube nje, xa sithandaza.
Kuzoba nje kube nje, xa sithandaza.
Xa sithandaza. Xa sithandaza. Xasithandaza.”

Yavumela phezulu intokazi xa usapholwayo luhlangene kwelokhitshi luk-wavuyisana noNtakumba okhokela isizwe ngokungagungqiyo.

Umbhiyozo Efama

Ngeveki elandelayo kwakuhleliwe kwivaranda yangaphambili, nguMalaleveva, kwakunye nomkakhe, bexoxa. Esisibini sasilizwe ngamaweke entombi ezintle

uZoe kwakunye noZazi. Yintseni yangoMgqibelo, emva njekwecala ibethile instimbi yesithandathu. AbakwaMalaleveva abakhangababufumane buthongo-buhlayo ngenxa yokulungiselela umbhiyozo wooMalaleveva kwakunye nooNtakumba.

UZoe noZazi babesele begqibile ukuhlamba kwananjalo benxibile, belungiselele ukutya ipapa kamilimili zebandule bancedise unina ekubhakeni izikontsi nokwenza isiselo sejinger ethandwa kakhulu ekhayapha.

UMalaleveva waya kukhawulela iqela lombutho lakwaMaleveva edolophini, ebazisa kwakhe efama. Kaloku akukhonto ebeyiswele umfo lo, kangangokuba babede bamqhule oozakwabo besithi, nguSuswana sibomvana.

Wonke ubani weza ephethe intoyokongeza kokokwakusele kukhona kuloom-bhiyozo. Kwakungumlisela nomthinjana, ooNtakumba nooMalaleveva kubuk-wanwa. Amadoda esoja inyama ebaswayo, bambi bezonwabele ngokumana bedlulisa ibhekile yomqombothi owenziwe ngunkosikazi kaMalaleveva, phofu encediswe nguMeri ekudidiyeleni nasekuphekeni. Abafazi bona bep-heka oninoni, kuyiyizelwa ziintombi, amaxhegwazana bambi bezitshayela uNombhekaphesheya besitsho ngezivatho eziqhakazileyo. Abantwana bedlala kooswingi, kukhatywa neebhola. Bambi bekhetha ukudada edamini elali-kufutshane apho. “Kanti kunje xa kumanyenwe, uvakele esitsho uJonie sele etshone kanobom ebhekileni.”

“Usebenzile mfo wakwaMalaleveva ukusiphathela uxolo kwisizwe sethu. Kwaye ukususela ngoku, indima yakho ekubumbeni isizwe iyakubhalwa nakwi ncwadi zobugcisa.” Watsho uSheleni ngokuzingca.

“Ndibulela inxaso enithe nasinika yona nomhlobo wam uNtakumba kobu bude bendlela ntozakuthi.” Utshilo uMalaleveva seleyalela ukuba itheko malifane nelinye, bonke bakhulule iibhatyi kwanefasikoti zabo kutyiwe, konwatywe kube mnandi, njengoko kubhaliweyo kwizibhalo okokuba izinto zokuqala zidlule.

Zaavakala iindaba zokuxolelana phakathi kwesizwe sooNtakumba kunye neso sakwaMalaleveva kumhlaba wonke jikelele. Bambi babengakholelwa besithi “Hayi yintsuma-ntsumane yentstomi emini leyo.” Ukanti abanye babesithi “Sukaa, lulwimi etywaleni olo.” Ukanti isininzi sakuthakazelela kakhulu olumanyano.

Kaloku akukho bani obengayazi imbali yokuphatheka gadalala kooNtakumba

kwaSanti ngaba kwaMalaleveva. Nto leyo eyayibangela ukuba esi sibini sijongane ngezikhono zamehlo.

Nangona uMalaleveva engazanga wayithi thsuphe nakubani na into yesiporho, phantse wonke ubani wayenesikrokro sokokuba inkulu into ebangele uMalaleveva abe kanti utshintsha indlela acinga ngayo kwanendlela ababonayo ngayo ooNtakumba, njengabamfifithi bemfanelo zomhlaba wooMalaleveva.

“Hhe bafondini, niyasikholelwa esisimanga soxolelwaniso kweenkunzi ezimbini nebezifudula zijongene ngezikhondo zamehlo?”

“Jonga Bra, thina asikhathalele ziphumo zenkundla ebikade isitya amatyum sibe thina sizwe sooNtakumba sibhekiswa ngapha nangapha ngenxa yooSeason abangooMalaleveva. Inye qwaba into esiyifunayo, kukuzonwaya nathi emhlabeni kaKhoko uSanti” Utshilo uBhekabambhentsele sel’ erhabula kuloo bhekile yomqobhothi ububekwe phambi kwakhe.

“Ee, bantakwethu inye nje into endizokuyithetha mna, yeyokokuba liphelile ixesha lokokuba sibe sidlala upuca. Phofu puca lowo ungasadlalwa nangubanina kulemihla yemile...millenam, khawutsho mninawe yintoni kanene?”
“Hayi bhuti uyakuthini ukusihlaza phakanti kwabantu. Zinkosi, ubhuti uzama ukuthi millennium.” “Tyhini, kwatsho kwasa”, ephendula ubhuti ngokuzingca okokuba uNtakumba ezenalo eligama.

Kwahlaliwa kuncokolwa ngoxolo yinxenye yooNtakumba kwakunye nooMalaleveva. Enyaniswenikona babekho abobabenga kuthakazeleli okukuxolelana nolumanyano, ngezizathu ezithile, kephofu abathi bazigcina kwezo zifuba zabo.



Skin And Bones

By Myles G Heneke

Myles G Heneke (he/him) was born in Cape Town and haphazardly raised all over the Cape Flats and Southern Suburbs. Today he calls Johannesburg home where he has found community and sanctuary with the beautiful people of Melville.

When he is not writing, you might find him drinking beer and playing small bets backgammon at Xai Xai, hiking or exploring a city park while nerdily introducing friends to his love for bird-watching.

His work as a no-collar cultural producer has led him to cultural activism through art, queer radio and curating beautiful spaces as an events chef. Myles is a shy writer and poet. His artistic broodings concern dreams, mortality, spirituality and the tender inner worlds of complex characters. *Skin and Bones* is a small extract from a novella in development of the same name.

Part 1: Bicentennial Woman

Inside the Highveld Aerodrome life has come to some semblance of order. Fresh, converted air seeps slowly down into the urban gardens and the quiet streets. In the city square, massive billboards sprawl into the sky and in their shadows play the free-born children of New Azania. The billboards burst with technicoloured news, metrics about water and electricity and beautiful drone images of the great Aerodromes of The New South. Outside, in the wild fields and urban food gardens, a fine mist settles, while insects and flies go about their daily business. In the window of an Old Earth café sits Aki drinking a coffee. She stares half into her tablet and half out the window at the dark, freckled children playing *skululu* in the street. A vision of the cars and trucks that used to zoom by flashes briefly somewhere behind Aki's eyes as she calmly shoos a bee away from the hot drink in front of her. The coffee is slightly ashy and acidic, an orphaned relic of the coffee produced on Old Earth when the tropics were still habitable. Before the sun became Earth's enemy. Before Aki's bicentennial. Before The Great Disaster.

Nobody could have imagined that The Great Disaster would have affected the world in the ways that it did. Decades even before Aki was born, scientists at a UN conference proclaimed the impending consequences of greenhouse emissions and the Earth's subsequent warming: "profound". Some forty years after the first announcement of a human-activity fuelled Global Warming, Aki – a university student in the early '10s – noted the irony of the rather cool attitude towards the planet's baking fate. Even then, among the leading scientists on climate change, there was no full conception of how deeply the impending ecological disasters would penetrate the everyday life of people and nature. Not least since these were the days when people and nature were seen as distinctly different things. And how could they have known the full extent? The unknowns were unknowns. From Aki's current vantage point it could be said that everyone was in the dark. Everyone except for Wenn that was. Even when COVID-19 struck, claiming the lives of over 200 million people, nobody thought that a concurrent COVID-23 and COVID-27 was possible. Aki remembers Wenn saying something very lofty, though she can't be sure if she remembers it correctly. Still, she scribes it onto her tablet, the best reprise she can muster: the Earth has no human conscience, it is nothing but the total mandate of its changing nature. Like many of Wenn's professions, they appeared, even now, slightly haughty and esoteric. Aki stares at the cloud

doc on her tablet screen and thinks warmly of her friend. The children play on before her, for there is no longer need for five days of "school".

Today almost two hundred years later, Wenn's works are broadly accepted in The New South (tNS). They form the blueprint for its decentralised governance, food sovereignty and decommmodified labour. It's way of life. Although like Marx, Cher and Jesus (for these were some of her heroes), Wenn was not a disciple of her own work. She was, in life and in death, something wild and childlike. Still, she would be glad to observe the total eradication of hunger and inequality in tNS. In lieu of her late friend, Aki is head of The Azanian People's Ecology Arm (APEA) and she instrumentalised Wenn's theories on magik, ecology and politik. It is a strange contradiction that the person who was institutionalised and later killed by the secret wing of The Tech Billionaire's Guild is now seen as some messianic figure throughout tNS and even in some defector territories in The New North. It delights Aki to no end when, from time to time, she sees the youth on the street rallying under Wenn's wild-haired effigies, which remains some consolation. Still, the contradictions of New Earth are strange and difficult. Outside the aerodomes the air is thin and dusty and mostly The New Southern Wilds remain uninhabitable. Aki carries the cross with as much aplomb as she can manage. Still, she feels it in her bones. And her bones are things she has learned to trust. They are over two hundred years old after all: a fractured composition of calcium and connective tissue gusseted together by titanium pins and plates. The squeaks of which make her chuckle and sigh in equal measure. Reminding her always of her inescapable creatureliness.

The hard facts, Aki's bones say, is that Wenn is gone. Gone, without the pleasure of being vindicated (this side of the grave, at least). She misses her friend and on mornings like this, a dull pain radiates somewhere in the centre of her parts. How lovely Aki thinks it would be to walk the streets of the Highveld Aerodrome this morning, conferring with and loving an old friend. But these are ego things. And was it not Wenn herself who always saw pain and ecstasy as life's beautiful fruits, equal and intrinsic to life itself. These are, perhaps, higher thoughts, and today Aki is in need of higher thoughts. Her sleepless work in the Asylum Seekers Network is tiring as much as it is dangerous, but the score for the week was good. She has managed to secure the safe passage of five Turkish youths who are happily adjusting to life in The Krotoa Aerodome, the great Capital of New Azania in what was formerly South Africa.

As she walks through the streets of the Highveld Aerodome, she looks up through its brawny steel carapace at the distant sun in its dusty sky. Aki ponders on how humankind managed to turn the mighty, life-giving sun into the instrument of its suffering. The Great Disaster changed everything, and the massive deaths caused by the three Pandemics coupled with the great migrations of tropical peoples (those who survived) created its own set of unique challenges. And while The Tech Billionaires Guild rules the North, The New Southern ECO Union unifies the governance of Patagonia, Southern Africa and Australasia. Still, tensions with The New North were growing and with it the desire to wield magik and commodify it. The challenges ahead are great, Aki thinks, as she breathes deep into the pit of her stomach in the same place from where the dull pain radiates, but my people are not hungry. As she exhales, her old body, clad in the gold finery and the wrinkled brown skin that contains it, she comes to a serene inner calm. As she rounds the street corner to her ecolodge, she sees Lala's car is already parked outside. It is 7:30am and a very busy day lay afoot.

"You're late." Lala says. Not so much cross as surprised.

"An old witch is never late. She arrives –"

"– exactly when she means to?" Lala grins wryly.

Over the last few months she has been on top of all Aki's obscure Old World references.

"I wish you'd pay as much attention to your volumes on *!xo* and *//angwa* as you do to Tolkien, then you could have been giving this talk instead of me. You'd think this old witch could catch a break!"

The two chuckle briefly.

"Sorry I was just a little slow and sentimental this morning. Decided to take a longer walk. Are we all set for the trip?"

"*Hawu, ma*, what do you think?" she raises her eyebrow playfully and purses her lips, feigning a deep irritation.

Aki smiles: in on the joke and fully aware of Lala's diligence. Near faultless when it comes to her work. They smile at each other and Aki reaches out her hand for the child to help her up the stairs, for maybe one last time she thinks.

Today they will board a ship to New London. Aki is to deliver the keynote speech to global youth leaders for the Y2222 annual Imbizo for A New South's Unified Ecology Strategy, or ANSUES as it is known. As she packs her suitcases she contemplates her speech and the strange fact that the Imbizo is being held in The New North this year. Her bright, feisty scion brews coffee in the kitchen and Aki slowly prepares herself for the full Lala experience. This will

include: a daily itinerary of Aki's meetings, Lala's objections to key points in Aki's writings, a rundown of Lala's weekend shenanigans and the unending vagaries of her many love affairs with the many handsome men in The Movement. Today it would also include travel and accommodation details, a slew of requests to borrow some jewels and outfits from Aki's closet and a requisite smattering of hate for the Global North. The irony, Aki thinks, is that she does not rely on her psychic ability to know this. She simply gleans it from the years she has come to know and love the wild, brilliant young woman who is, at times, a carbon copy of her great-great-grandmother Wenn. The Old Earth adage that you only get apples from apple trees takes perfect shape here. In an effort to change her appearance, Lala shaves her hair to break the striking resemblance with Wenn, the wild-haired icon on every radical teenager's t-shirt and bedroom wall. Lala enters the room with a warm brew. The meeting happens as Aki predicted and soon the two are out the door of the ecolodge, on the underground railway to the verge of the Highveld Aerodome where an e-wagon receives them for their journey through the open veld to the Krotoa Aerodome on the west coast.

The journey is long but not unfamiliar to the two. The air is dusty and the sky shines with a fluorescent cruelty. At least there were no massive duststorms predicted for the day, Aki thinks. Somewhere between her morning coffee and thinking about Wenn, the old woman had noticed a strange shift inside her. It rattles her, as the e-wagon itself wending over potholes and dirt roads rattles her. She gazes out the window as they make their way off the old national road onto a dirt road. The driver in front of the glass partition alerts them on their phones that they can expect bumpy roads for the next hour.

"Last night –" Aki slowly turns her head and shoulders as she speaks over the noise of the engine and the e-wagon's rickety suspension, "I had a full night's sleep."

Lala turns her head, almost sharply.

"Really? You must feel amazing!"

"You would think, uh? Somehow it's more bewildering to not be visited. I guess after all these years I have gotten used to bad dreams and visits from Spirit."

"Well, does it mean anything that I hardly slept a wink?"

"Perhaps things are starting to shift. Yet it's strange that you have still not shown any improvements in your sorcery..."

"Beats me." She averts her glance from Aki and stares out the window instead, while a prickly truth burns on the tip of her tongue.

"Guess we'll wait and see. Though I rather wish the whole thing would speed

up. I fear I'm losing my thirst for everything but sleep. The long sleep!" The two sit quietly. Lala continues to stare out the window. She conceals a tear as it rolls down her face.

In the past four years Aki has begun to feel her age exactly as //gam-sa, the great Shaman of The Khoekhoe had warned her. She had, after all, made pacts to maintain her powers for twenty-eight more years with some darker ancestral spirits. These *amadlozi* who had appeared to her in Kgala, "the place of great thirst", on the fateful night she turned 196 when (from Aki's birth) Saturn would complete its seventh voyage around the sun. As an offering, Aki tributed her long grey dreadlocks and the *amadlozi* agreed to offer her one more Saturn return. This was a generous offer and not to be toyed with. These *amadlozi* were not the benevolent friends and family who visited her in her sleep or in those drunken trances. These were dark ancient spirits with wild faces and unpredictable ways. Aki was told to appoint a new scion within the allotted time. The borrowed time. In their frightening voices on Aki's seventh Saturn return they also forewarned Aki of the conspiracy in The New North to kidnap and enslave Aki along with the other three living Scions from The Orders of *Ixo* and //angwa.

While the threat looms large in the spiritual realm, Aki is also a self-proclaimed bad bitch who is not afraid to employ machinal offense. And all the while the spiritual realm was perturbed, Aki had been in talks with the armies of Izi who had been covertly organising in the underground strongholds of New Patagonia. While not Aki's favourites, the sons of Izi – brutish and uncultivated in the softer disciplines of //angwa – are a fearsome legion known as much for their military acumen as they are known to be the descendants of Izi, Aki's great friend and adversary. A specialised undercover cohort of Izi's men are already stationed in and around London, set to besiege New London's Capitol, should Aki come into any danger during the Imbizo.

The dust begins to clear as they approach the 18 000km² behemoth that is the Krotoa Aerodome. The summer rain slowly moves in, clearing the air as it washes the glass exteriors of the great coastal aerodrome. Lala marvels at the blue skies as it confirms their approach to the ocean. Aki takes the rain as a good omen. Krotoa Aerodome lay on the west coast of New Azania, from where the ship would leave for London. Lala is excited to chart the ocean for the first time. As a child, she had heard from others (or maybe it was one of Aki's unauthorised biographies) that Aki had the unique ability of communicating with these great beasts, but like many stories about Aki, it is not always

clear which ones are true. Added to this is the fact that Aki often appears very tired and mystifying and does not have a lot of time for the Free Borns who seem mostly interested in getting her to perform the glitzy magik of miracles. As Lala understands it, Aki's only interest in magik has come to be the magik of ecological harmony as it relates to the emancipation of all peoples. This frustrates Lala who cares nothing about the people of the North. She sees their tethered lives as the eventual ending of their millennia-long fascination with money, things and the devotion to selfish desire. Aki seems, still, to this day devoted to freeing the people who have caused her so much harm and strife.

Once Lala found Aki drunk on vodka and sniffing lines of mephedrone as she would from time to time. In these moments, Aki would be in her study with dilated pupils listening to music from Old Earth trinkets called hi-fis. Aki would be singing and dancing and reading the poems and stories of her late friends. Here Lala would see the dark, mawkish Aki, "nostalgic to a fault" by her own admission. Lala remembers Aki grasping her in one of these intoxicated trances, saying that the *amadlozi* were haunting her dreams and instructing her to appoint an apprentice so that she could finally rest and pass over to the Arahma, the Realm of Great Mercy. Lala personally thinks that all Aki really needs is to lay off the vodka and mephedrone.

Lala has long dreamed of being Aki's scion. On her visit to Kgali, one night under the full moon, //gam-sa had told Aki that Lala was too young and too concerned with the material politik, and her hate for the North was neither integrated nor continuous with the ways of //angwa, it was however perfectly in line with fevered youth. The old man on the mountain predicted that the child would need at least ten years before she was ready. Lala was angry. She felt she had already earned her keep. Wasn't it Aki who selected her from the Azanian Scion Academy of New South Youth? Wasn't it Aki who called some of Lala's contemporaries "basic bitches"? Had she not proven herself above the precious, earmarked descendants of the late brute Izi? Or Sanu: great fucking mother of //angwa magik, men's libido, martyr of the New First War?

Two days into their ocean journey, it begins to rain. Somewhere around midnight, Aki hears a knock on her cabin door. It is a warm night and the rain drips from the sky swathes of oily diffusion. Thick with tension. Aki gets

up from her armchair, puts on her silk robe and opens the door as her bones churn like the ship's titanic engine beneath her feet. A sign of trouble afoot. Outside stands Lala. She looks scared. Aki swiftly lets her into the warmly lit cabin and closes the door. The massive ship remains poised on the mountainous black waves and it glistens in cold blue under the light of the last quarter moon. Waning.

"What's wrong?" Aki probes, as she fixes her young apprentice a cup of buchu tea.

"I've been having strange dreams. Although I'm not sure you can call it that because it's been the same dream every night for the past week. I did not want to tell you because it goes against the prophecy of //gam-sa and I thought it might just be my fears," Lala says as the old woman passes her a hot cup of buchu tea.

"Well let's unpack it. What are you seeing?" Aki replies, as she reclines into her seat, indifferent to the creaking in her back.

"It's this strange dream within a dream. First, I'm at burial. Everything seems fine. You know – people crying, eulogies, tributes and stuff. Then suddenly I gaze up and black water starts to flow from the coffin. Then I start feeling my bones stretching, which makes no sense, I know! Then suddenly I'm standing on a hill and... I don't know. This part is scary –" Lala stares off trying to regather her thoughts.

"Continue."

"I'm standing on a hill. And around me grows the same black water. It starts to cover the towns and cities around me. Then it swells so high that it starts to encircle my feet. And as soon as the cold black water touches my feet... I –"

"You wake up, cold and loopy. Wondering perhaps whether it was a bit more than a dream?"

"Yes, exactly!" the words sidle out of the young woman's mouth like the guilty admission of a toddler. As she looks up she is startled that Aki is sipping her tea smiling and completely unsurprised. "Aki, what do you think it means? Do you think I'm getting Vision?"

"I don't know. I couldn't know. It could just be that we're on the ocean. It doesn't need more probing, but I thank you for sharing it with me all the same. All I need to know is that we're all set for Imbizo next week. All the intel with Izi is on the cloud, as well as my speech. Let us sleep now. Tomorrow is another day... if we're lucky enough!" Aki's diversion to work and sleep puts the child at ease. The two chuckle and Aki holds the child and whispers "I love you" in her ear. The warm soft creature inside Lala feels safe. It is an uncharacteristically warm-breasted hug and Aki is uncharacteristically earnest. She takes her instruction nonetheless and heads off to bed. Aki begins to pack her

bag, though it contains nothing more than one fresh change of clothes. By candlelight the old witch begins to pen a letter.

Part 2: Born(e) by the Sea

Somewhere around the scatterings of an old self. Around some gangly, buoyant body, floats a small light. It is hard to name, by definition. If it has either thought or volition at this very moment, you could say that it desires to smuggle itself into the airless pockets of the body. The naked figure floats featherly, as it is born by a boundless black ocean. First it goes through a pore under the sole of a callused foot. Up through the long shafts of its legs. Then through the foul hidden pits of its guts. Now up the bright crimson highways – hot with potential some moments ago. Now into the branches of its airless lungs. Hydraulically doomed. The very idea of the body, the sum of its parts, surrenders to its inherent entropy. Its gradual decline from order to disorder. Two centuries of blood-pumping, turbulent life succumbing to this small thing. Out of the lungs the small thing drifts. Out of the mouth and in through the nostrils, pausing briefly to behold the inanimate face. A sympathy? Not likely. It has no sense of separation from this body. It means not to. In some way you could conceive of the body and the small inexplicable thing as one. Poetry might imbue some sentience. But it doesn't really matter. The small thing remains, for the most part, primal in its instinct. It enters the pallid inner cavity of a skull. Until finally through the molluscy creases, it settles in the id. And for one brief moment, the body observes a light. Somewhere behind its eyelids. Behind the eyes themselves.

Now, a likeness of the body begins to breathe. The breath is strange. Not earthly. The new form muses briefly on how it came to this "breathing". How it came to the very word itself. Some sense of an old self occurs to the new form, but the idea does not quite find its feet. Still it orientates itself. It intuits a new realm. It now exists as something reminiscent of something else. Not altogether separate. All the memories are there, but they occur now only as footnotes. The small font footnotes to a muscular Odyssey. And they escape almost exactly in the instant in which they occur. There seems to be no urgent need to grasp at them, in any case. The new form senses its passage. It yields. Like a shift in the phases of matter, it negotiates the infinite expressions of its shape; a kind of shapelessness. A tacit marriage – splitting, emulsifying – like acid and oil.

A fleeting symmetry occurs to it, about its ontology. About its then and about its now. It flashes by like an ethereal blip. There is no time. The need to name, to measure, occurs to it, but only as something vestigial. Time loses meaning. Its urgency. Its fabric. Still the vestigial impulse to name orientates it. In some small way, it structures the sequence into some perceptible narrative. Whether it is finite, occurring in some order, or infinite is neither ascertainable or important. The essence of things here lodge and dislodge constantly. Suddenly, it is neither lost nor confused. Everything occurs to it. Almost poetically. It makes of itself a kind of abstraction. Still it takes a name. Aki. With it, a sex. And the urgent realisation that Lala needs her help.

Part 3: London Bridge

As the ship enters the Port of London, Lala feels her senses stuffed by the smog. She puts on her mask and places the last few personal items into her backpack. She steps out of her cabin as they approach Tower Bridge. The ship horn lets off a drawn out wail as the suspension bridge opens up before them. Lala makes her way to Aki's cabin and finds Aki's bag already packed. She slings it over her arm. It is lighter than she expects. On the bed sits an enclosed letter with her name on it. Next to it, a ring. Although Aki owned many pieces like it, and gold no longer held any value in tNS other than ornamental, Lala has never seen the piece before. At its centre is a round pigeon blood ruby clasped in the mouth of a long-crested eagle. She places it over her thumb and immediately feels how she lacks the kind of gravitas needed to wear the ring. The kind of gravitas Aki always had. In this moment she feels the complete weight of Aki's absence. A hollow, hungry pang resounds in her centre. There is no question in her mind that Aki is gone. Another weight befalls her: the Unified New South would now be looking to her as its spiritual leader as well as its de facto sovereign. She pulls herself together for there is no time for all these thoughts. She slips the letter in her coat pocket, ready to disembark.

When she arrives at her hotel, she finds two police officers waiting at her door. She's panicked. As she makes her way towards them, the larger of the two removes a document. It's a warrant for Aki's arrest. They begin reading it to her. She makes a plea, explaining that she is not the person they are

looking for. The larger officer accuses her of not complying. As she reaches for her phone in her left pocket, the larger of the two officers reaches for the baton on his waistbelt and bludgeons her over the head. Lala wakes up bloodied in a police cell. She has nothing but the ring on her finger. She feels for the wound on her head. The place from where the blood seemed to be coming. There is nothing.



A Mother's Love

By Michaela Woelk

Michaela Woelk (she/her) lives in Harare with her brother and her dog. She came up with *A Mother's Love* while gardening and thinking how amazing it is to grow things. In one sharp moment, the fact that placing a seed in a hole, covering it up with soil and regularly watering it produces life seemed astounding. A simple thing we take for granted. That thought led to others. What if soil could sustain a human life? No, that's too small. The Earth is ancient and full of magic, it could sustain the life of a god.

She combined this idea with the idea of rebirth and re-becoming. Most African countries were forced to abandon their histories and themselves in order to adapt and survive. What if the answer to returning to who we really are lies in returning to the ancient magic inside all of us, inside the very soil we depend on. The simple act of abandoning what one was taught is important in favour of something older can be rebellious.

Activism takes many forms. Michaela hopes to plant seeds of thought in her readers' minds, thoughts that can lead to a reimagining of the world. A reimagining of the present. What if we stepped boldly into the future and assumed there wasn't anything we could not do? What then? What might we accomplish?

For Michaela, even deciding to write in the first place felt rebellious. She has a degree in Environmental Science, not Creative Writing. But a few months ago she signed a literary agent to represent her magical realism story of love in a Zimbabwean setting. What else might be accomplished if victory was simply assumed?

She slept for a thousand years. She grew into the Earth and the world formed around her. She was a mountain, she was a tree, she bloomed in the spring and little creatures buried into her skin in the winter. Sleeping had been unavoidable, she couldn't think of any other way to save Anak, and she could not have carried on if anything happened to her. If Anak had died, Whaea would've burned the world to the ground. No other action would have been feasible.

Some things can never be forgiven.

When she wakes after one thousand years of sleep, her hands move without thought and reach for her child. Her relief to find the babe curled against her breast creates a stillness that makes nearby humans lift their chins to the heavens, *is it going to rain?*

Anak still sleeps. Laying the child gently on the ground, Whaea pulls herself together. By now, her body has fused with the soil and the trees and great focus is required in order to become only herself. The Earth had kept her alive all of this time and for that, she would be eternally grateful, but it is time to be active in the world again. She would not have woken if things were still dangerous for her and her child. What did the world look like now?

Whaea glances around her and sees that the forest does not look the same. That isn't entirely unexpected. What does surprise her is the air. Her first few breaths after a thousand years of roots, soil and insects choke, slicing down her throat and piercing through her lungs. Once she adjusts and the coughing finally stops, she stretches out her arms and smiles as they creak and crack. One thousand years of clasping Anak to her chest has left her muscles stiff and her bones hard.

As she unfolds and separates from the Earth, panic begins to grip her heart. For so long she and the child have existed skin to skin and the absence of the contact is jarring. She trains her gaze on her baby, devours the plump body and puckered mouth with a mother's fierce gaze. Continuing to centre herself, she threads her fingers through her hair. The thick strands had bloomed and delicate blossoms crush against her palms. If only she might see herself. Would she recognise her appearance? Does she even want to?

Her clothes had long rotted away, absorbed into the soil. Running her hands over her skin, she allows her magic to rise to the surface. For now, she is

only testing. Among her gifts is the magic of life-giving. Humans prayed to her to replenish their depleted soils, darken the clouds with rain and heal the wombs of their women. Perhaps that is why the miracle of her daughter exists. If her father had known what her gifts would lead to, he would've attempted to take them from her so that she'd remain unaware of her own magnificence.

He said all power and magic sprung from him but look, here is her child.

Dropping her hands, she leans over Anak. "Wake up, my love."

Her voice isn't what it used to be, it scratches and grates instead of lulls and soothes. Though this bothers her, she knows the roughness will not last. She strokes Anak on the cheek and smiles when her daughter begins to stir. After all this time, she's still just a baby.

For the two of them, time had not moved and their bodies remained just as they were when the Earth accepted them into Her bosom. If not for that graciousness, for the life Whaea was permitted to draw from the ancient flesh, she would have shrivelled long ago. It was from the power she drew that she was able to sustain her daughter's life.

Whaea sits for a long time, watching Anak wake and assuring herself that there is no longer any danger. A thousand years have slid away, but for her only hours have passed since she'd cast the spell.

"One thousand years." Back then she'd whispered the words fervently, slicing her palm and letting the blood fall to the ground. "Let us sleep for one thousand years. And if the danger has not passed, let us sleep one thousand years more."

Whaea closes her eyes and shakes her head. The danger must have passed, otherwise, the sleep would have continued. She runs her thumb across her palm; the cut is still fresh.

"I can hardly believe it worked," she says, to Anak and to no one. "I didn't think I was capable of this kind of magic." Anak opens her luminous brown eyes, long eyelashes fluttering like the wings of a dragonfly. The mother gathers the babe in her arms and grins. The baby gurgles and raises her chubby hands to Whaea's face.

“I must not look that different, then,” she remarks.

The soil she brushes from her daughter’s soft skin is the same shade as her own and the same as the soil. The two share the same eyes as well. Hooded eyes that had earned her numerous compliments and first attracted Anak’s father. Whaea and her child were sculpted by the same artist, from the same piece of rock. There is nothing she will not do for her child.

“But perhaps, one thousand years had been a foolish choice,” she whispers. She squeezes back tears as panic and fear grip her body. What is the world now? Where does she fit? Where does Anak? She’d frozen time around them to save their lives, but what life can she give them now?

Whaea allows herself to wallow in this feeling for a few minutes.

When enough time passes and the negative feelings fade, she reminds herself of what matters. They are both alive and well. She lets her love for her daughter fill her body.

“When I hold you in my arms like this, I feel there is nothing I cannot do. I am the strongest being in the world. There is no one braver. There is nothing anyone can do to change my love for you. There is no action I would not take for your happiness, for your safety.”

Anak gazes up at her, with a serious expression on her plump face. She seems to understand the words her mother speaks. Maybe she can, though she is only a few months old. It is hard to predict. She doesn’t know what children like her are like.

Whaea is the youngest daughter of Oba, the King of the gods and everything that lives and does not, and she had not been born in the same way her daughter had. Her mother, Ayaba, had become pregnant after being intimate with her father. When the time came for Whaea to leave her mother’s womb, her essence had simply departed and reformed. One moment she existed in her mother’s body and in the next she emerged into the world, fully grown and aware of herself. Anak’s birth went differently.

Perhaps the difficulty could be attributed to her ignorance; she had not known how to give birth. Never been instructed in the mechanics of the magic behind the act. She’d not thought to ask her mother to teach her that

particular spell. And so, when Anak’s time had come, Whaea had pushed the child out of her body and she’d emerged as a baby. Half-god, half-human. At that time, there was no other child like Anak in existence. They were not permitted to survive. That Whaea had loved a human at all was already a kind of blasphemy. To become pregnant and give birth was obscene.

But she loves them. She loves Anak and she loves her father. Even now she can’t bring herself to say his name or to even think the sound. Now is not the time for agony. These moments are for her and her child.

Whaea had managed to hide her pregnancy from the other gods but the power and pain she’d experienced during Anak’s birth instigated a shift her father had sensed immediately. As she held the brand-new life in her arms, a sharp tug in her heart told her she would never see her family again. Her father had severed the bond that tied her to her brethren. That intangible thing that made them a community.

She’d never felt such pain, such utter devastation. But, also, she had never experienced a joy that compared to that of holding her infant child in her arms.

The Celestial King had put a target on her back. But he’d not sent the other gods after her, instead he’d sent the villagers and townspeople. Oba, the King of the gods and everything that lives and does not, made a holy declaration that her child be killed and she ostracised from all societies for eternity. And her love had been lost to her; he was the easiest target for the humans.

She is glad she had not witnessed his death, the man bold enough to approach a god and confess his fascination. What had drawn her to him in the first instance? As Oba’s daughter, she was an intermediary between the humans and the gods, and he had come to her with a request from his people. She’d lounged in her temple, the cool stone of her throne erasing some of the heat of the day. He’d dropped to one knee before her, but had not lowered his eyes. His gaze burned, alluring in a way she did not expect from a human man. Intrigued, she’d allowed herself the indulgence of him.

And he was killed for it.

But she is a god, and the daughter of Oba, and the humans had not come prepared to face her and her rage.

But she couldn't fight forever and she would not give her daughter a life of running and hiding. Children of love and gods were meant to bloom free and bold.

So she cut her palm and prayed to the Earth for protection and sustenance. Her daughter deserved a vibrant life and Whaea did not deserve to die for love. Earth existed separately from the gods, before them, and Her origin had always been unknown. Her magic was old and deep. It was the only force that could hide Whaea and her daughter from her father's power. Earth had been sympathetic and smiled at the way Anak tugged at Her branches. So She'd granted Whaea's spell. The spell that was also a prayer.

"Earth," she says now. A ripple of awareness passes over her skin and sends a shiver up her spine. "I hope you aren't insulted, but you seem not to have aged well."

I have not aged in the way you expected, or that I expected, but age does not work in the same way for me as it does for you and the humans. I simply change, but I will always live, in whatever form, even as you all die for the changes you forced me to make.

"I don't understand," Whaea says, rocking Anak in her arms.

Earth sighs. *Yes, you have been asleep for a time. Many things have changed.*

Whaea nods and glances around. "Are we still in danger?"

Those who knew of you are dead, or no longer have the power to harm you.

"Even my father? Even the gods?" Earth must be mistaken, the power of the gods is eternal.

There are new gods now.

"I don't know if I understand."

Know that you are safe and that your magic prevails whilst it has faded from everything else. The other gods, they... aged.

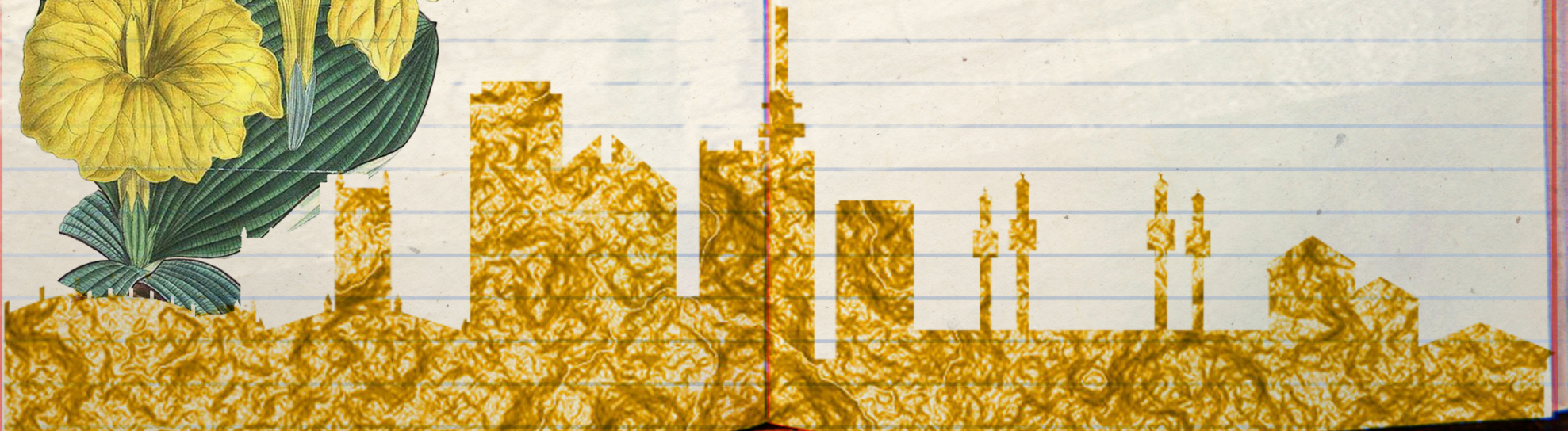
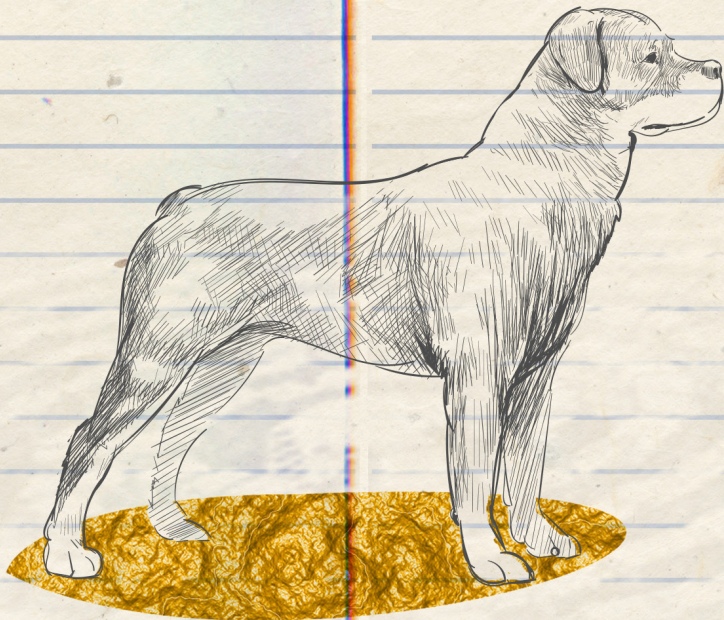
Earth laughs.

"That is incredible." Whaea cannot think of anything else to say. She is happy to be out of danger but also deeply confused by this new world. What will she find when she leaves this forest?

I'm sure you'll be alright.

Whaea nods once more before inhaling deeply and pushing to her feet. At least she still has her magic. If she is the only one with magic, life could be quite good for her and Anak.

She smiles and leaves the forest.



Finding Wunmi

By Oyedotun Damilola

Oyedotun Damilola is a Nigerian who writes contemporary, speculative fiction, and non-fiction about pop culture. He likes to explore various themes ranging from queer, the environment, war, culture, tradition, myth and folklore. He has works published (or forthcoming) by *Reckoning Press*, *Kalahari Review*, *Tor.com* and *Clarksesworld*.

The irking sound from the town crier's gong slithered into my sleep and woke me up again. I lingered on the bed, eyes closed. The activity that followed was the guttural crowing of the cock, bleating of the hungry goat, and boisterous chants of shirtless kids rolling tyres with sticks. Three more actions followed. First, the sky went bleak and clouds melted from coagulation to pave the way for the rain to descend. Second, the sun stretched to its peak and baked those who headed to the stream for an early take of the unperturbed water. Third, Maami came inside and pulled the curtains open for the sun to grace me with its warmth. Again, my guess was as good as yours – the rain drummed on the ground, followed by the yawning of the sun sending the rain back to its cocoon, and Maami did her perfunctory duty. Only this time there was an alteration I didn't see coming. She stopped midway while pulling the curtain, cogitating on her next move.

I had never been wrong in my calculations. None of us were. How could we get it wrong when we were caught in the chain of a time loop? The genesis of this enigma started at the advent of the white-gods. When Baami died, Maami cried so hard that we feared her face would be callused and her eyes deficient of water. I remember that day vividly like it happened yesterday. Maami's cry permeated through the clay walls and thatched roof, springing all of us from our sleep. Baami had finally given up in his battle with the stroke. He was a well-respected man. The whole village came out in a cortege, singing, robed in black, teary-eyed and carrying cypress branches. He was about to be interred when strangers descended from the clouds – milky translucent beings with bulbous eyes protruding from their sockets, sentient antennas all over their heads, bristled feet and mist hovering over them like a sentry. They approached us with an irresistible offer. Now that the memory is fresh in my head, we should have thought of the aftermath of our decision before accepting it.

If I had heeded Wunmi's advice to elope with her, I wouldn't be marooned in this village stuck to the pain and joy of yesterday. When the streaked sun was churned opalescent and yellow with a tinge of dull blue, we all assembled at the village square to hear words from the oracle. His words were the same as they were yesterday, last week, yesteryear. He went on about the blessing gifted to us by the white-gods. We were reminded about not exiting the village. The oracle's words were sacrosanct, seasoned with honey but specious. Yet, you dare not counter him for fear of having your life snipped off by the white-gods. When he was done pouring out his words, we left in silence as though our tongues had been severed. We returned to our huts to wait for the

repetitive process to begin the next day.

Seated on my bed and face up, I wondered if Wunmi found a way out of this miasma. Everyone was scared to go beyond the mouth of the village's fringe. Words from the oracle sang like a mantra. *Out there lies nothing but danger. The dune has grown large jaws. Its enchanting song traps you for the slithering creatures inhabiting beneath the hot sand, waiting for you to walk their land. The sky swathes the denizens with darkness and they bear claws that drill holes in skin. The wild breeze whooshes songs of dread. Trees set traps for intruders journeying through their thickets. You will do yourself a lot of favour to remain here. The white-gods must not be angered.*

The oracle's warning was spiked with searing threats. I reached for my diary and ticked all the activities I had been doing since I became cognisant of the daily happenings. My Rottweiler, Sanga, scampered towards me. Clenched in her teeth were wads of newspaper.

"Good girl," I said, removing the papers from her jaw.

Quickly, I hid the papers after skimming the headlines on the pages: POPULAR POLITICIAN CAUGHT IN A SEX SCANDAL. POPE CALLS FOR CEASEFIRE BETWEEN THE EAST AFRICAN REGIONS. NIGERIAN ASTRO-NAUT BECOMES FIRST AFRICAN TO LAND ON NEW PLANET BELIEVED TO HOLD A WELL OF BLUE SAND THAT IS KEY FOR HUMANITY'S EXISTENCE.

The date on the top left of the crumpled page was 11 January 2040. Sanga was the only one bold enough to traverse beyond the confines of our village and return safely. Wunmi didn't return after she'd left. Perhaps she had become food for the deadly creatures littering other settlements. I had to find out. Sanga's return proved that the white-gods could be defeated. The question that levitated in my head was: how? While I was pondering on this, Sanga brought another item – a wooden flute. The intricacies carved on it spoke a lot about where it originated. It had esoteric meanings and had to be a relic from a forgotten world far from ours. Maami came in, placing a bowl of boiled yam and fish sauce on my table. I concealed the wooden flute under my bed sheet. "Aduke mi. I notice you have been spending the days all by yourself since Wunmi left," Maami said, touching my cheek.

"Sanga keeps me company," I replied.

"You are not getting any younger, Teniola. It's time you come out of your fantasies. There's no life beyond this village. The oracle forbids you to mention it. The white-gods punish those who blaspheme. We should be grateful for this..."

The last words choked her, unable to clamber out of her throat. She left abruptly. Before she exited the door, I left her with some fertile words to germinate on the soil of her mind.

“Maami, you know the oracle speaks fallacies. The world out there is not a prison like the one in here. If no one believes me, I know you do.”

While I spoke, Maami didn't turn her face to me. She didn't admit my words because she knew I spoke truth. She left me alone to ruminate on her words. I pulled out the flute, scanning it the same way a pawnbroker feeds on the details of an item to know its worth, rubbing my hands on the rough interlocked images and turning it upside down and sideways to search for anything that revealed its identity. I turned the first intersection near the mouth of the flute. It clicked, making an unlocking sound. Fear gripped me and made me let go of the flute. Sanga hid under the bed. Standing on the bed, craning to observe the alien object in my room, I saw it already metamorphosed into a key with further strange writings.

“Oh no!” I mumbled.

I pulled up my left sleeve to reveal the scarification on my wrist. I traced the scars, placing the key adjacent to it. They were the same. Whoever gave Sanga this key wanted me to break out of the time loop. I put sliced pieces of yam for Sanga in her calabash. Letting out a deep sigh, I anticipated my departure from this village. My supplies were packed inside my satchel. I checked one last time, ensuring nothing was left behind. The key was placed in a compartment inside my bag.

Night. Sanga's tongue on my face woke me up. I brought out the key. When flashes of the moon forced its way in through my window, it enlarged the key on the wall, exposing the crevices masked within. The images were immersed in turquoise, translucent. It all made sense now – the key doubled as a map. I was no cartographer so cracking it became hard. Mountains, deserts, rivers and settlements dotted all around the heightened image. I shut my curtain. The light from the key vanished.

I got my diary, began to write in it.

DAY 295. 17 OCTOBER 1970.

ACTIVITIES: Same as yesterday.

DISCOVERY: Newspapers from the future. A key, too. I think it's my way out of

here.

INFERENCE: Life exists outside of the wormhole.

CONCLUSION: Again, the oracle is a liar.

*

During months of planning my escape, I had come to realise that the sluice was always half-opened before the dawn took charge of the day. The night was still sleeping when Sanga and I left the village, passing through the sluice. My supplies were intact. I stared back one last time, uncertain if I would ever return. Sanga was ahead. She knew the road since she had been the one bringing me evidence from the future – a G-SHOCK wristwatch, board games, colourful magazines, a microcassette, a diskette, a single sneaker. The wormhole stood ahead, whirling. Sanga didn't stop. She knew it was safe. I followed.

Inside the belly of the wormhole was absolute darkness. Sanga barked. Her voice echoed in a slow, stretching mode. Soon, dizziness took control of me entirely. My body became elastic, twirling, thinning, expanding and compacting. The last thing I remembered was falling into an abyss, driving me down like a train with failed brakes.

*

The smell of dryness and the howling of the eerie travelling breeze woke me up. I had been transported to a new place. The oracle was speaking the truth when he told us about the wastelands spreading outside our village. At least, he spoke a truth for once. A far-stretching asphalt jungle lay sprawling ahead of us. Evidence of life seemed impossible in this place. I wasn't certain if the white-gods had extended their presence here. The only way to find out was to keep moving. Sanga was picking up scent as we kept walking. Before we embarked on this journey I put Wunmi's Ankara swatch at her snout.

At intervals we stopped for rest. The spot where we skulked close to a rock used to be a sightseeing area for tourists who came to the village's emporium to trade. I came across such a place in one of the magazines in my possession. Now it had become a shadow of itself – slanted buildings with bullet holes perforating through them, an aquifer harbouring poisonous salamanders, and jerboas passing through, some sunbathing in the ubiquitous sun. Even the bay might be a frolicking centre for savages and slave hunters.

Machines and debris laid out in waste. Sanga let out a soft whine. “What is it, girl?” I asked, scanning my eyes vigorously for any sight of danger. I looked at my G-SHOCK. The analog time display reversed, time and date racing backwards. The sun sank back into its custard-yellow disk. The sky was covered in a gauze, accentuating streaks of polychromatic images. Day became dusk. Evening switched into deeper night. Dawn ushered in almost immediately without permission to take charge. Strange how all of these epochs passed, yet I didn’t change nor age. An eclipse took charge of the day, finally, settling as the new colonialist. I was wrong. The sun returned to its spot, smiling hard on me.

An abandoned dismantled ack-ack gun suffering in the hands of the arid land began to rearrange by itself. The guffaw of carbines occupied the sky like a flock of birds, strafing enemies below. Ball lightning held the sky in its grip, splaying reddish luminous light. Explosions ensued, blasting of shells rendering soldiers limbless. Sanga and I cowered, gummed our bodies to the rock, praying the rock didn’t receive enemy fire. A huge wave of silence came next. I peeped, waiting for what came next. My G-SHOCK’s time and date displayed 13:45, then 19:10. I ran to a cave that suddenly appeared. Sanga didn’t come with me – a piece of shrapnel stuck in her stomach. “Please stay with me,” I cried, holding her to my chest. I carried her to the cave, avoiding long protruding icicles. A cyclone rose in the midst of the road, sweeping everything within its path. Soon, fog replaced the cyclone. Whatever the white-gods did altered the nature of life, releasing all of Earth’s bodies into the open battlefield. Sanga’s body was getting cold. I felt her pulse declining. She died. Tears from my eyes metamorphosed to ice before sliding to the base of my face. Streaks of violet rays lined the fog. I brought out my diary, with shaky hands I started writing, scribbling actually.

DAY 296. 18 OCTOBER 1970.

ACTIVITIES: War between nature and humans. War between humans.

DISCOVERY: Abnormal coming together of earth bodies.

INFERENCE: A fucked-up scenery.

CONCLUSION: Sanga paid the price. She is dead.

I returned the diary into my satchel, rubbed my gloved hands against each other and tucked them under my arm. Sanga’s mouth was agape. Her skin was gradually getting covered by ice.

*

The cawing of a crow jolted me back awake. My G-SHOCK’s time had returned to normalcy. One would sound demented if he told another that a war took place here some hours ago. Traces of the warring bodies were not seen anywhere, just the view that I saw earlier upon arrival. The cave had been transformed into a shack, perhaps a shelter built by a nomad. I couldn’t find Sanga anywhere.

“Sanga,” I called. “Where are you?”

The neighing of a horse outside the shack grabbed my attention. Peeping through the slit in the door I saw men and women dressed in incongruent outfits. A man wearing threadbare clothes was bound by the hands with a rope. One of the men held the other end of the rope and dragged him as they kept moving. They stopped when a man alighted from his horse. From his look I could tell he was their leader. He went ahead to pee. A younger man wearing a muffler with tinsel adorned on it came towards the leader. Sanga was running with a rabbit in her mouth. It just clicked in my consciousness. The happenings here were diurnal. I had to live here for one day to understand how the time loop worked.

“Where did you come from?” the younger man asked Sanga.

Sanga gritted her teeth harder on the rabbit, snarling.

“I am going to ask you one last time,” he said.

He pointed his pistol to his horse, shot the animal dead.

“You didn’t have to kill her,” a member of the group said.

He shrugged, knowing full well that the horse would come back to life the following day. Sanga ran towards the shack. I was hyperventilating. The oracle had warned about savages roaming the wasteland. He called them the devil’s corrupt seed. I felt my heart almost shut down. I flung the door open, gasping for fresh air. The man who shot the horse looked at me. I raised my hands in capitulation.

My journey to find Wunmi was truncated when the savages took me as their slave. The leader of the group called himself Fox. He couldn’t stop leering at me. I buttoned my top to the neck when I noticed my cleavage titillated him. The savages had carved a home for themselves in the badlands. Many of them lived here. Sequestered people banished from their villages, I thought. A bald girl with piercings on her eyebrow went to pack a handful of alluvium. She grinned at me, sending a message that Fox was her man. Fox called her and

slapped her face twice. She encouraged him to hit her one more time, smiling as he cupped her face in his hand and slapped her bum. He kissed her, then shoved her away. She had become a masochist. People changed a lot after the white-gods visited their lands. Fox showed me around after I promised him I would behave appropriately. Climbing up the hill, Sanga barked at me.

“I will be ok, girl. Do not worry about me,” I said to her.

“Your dog is always looking out for you,” Fox said.

He showed me a bight. Lawbreakers in his community suffered the fate of having their hands tied, being pushed down, and fed on by a carnivorous mastiff. Adjacent to where we stood was a butte. As if he was doing a tour of his settlement to convince me to stay, he showed me a caldera where his disciples were engaging in an orgy. He laughed, basking in his influence. He warned me about the chaparral and said, “If you do not want to be food for wildings, I suggest you avoid that place.”

By the time we got back to the rest of the group, one of his men brought him the newspapers taken from my bag. Fox fed his eyes ravenously on them, thrilled.

“Where did you get this from?” he asked, eyes glued to the newspapers.

I said no word until a smack on my face by his woman forced me to break silence. I told him what he needed to hear.

“There’s a way out of this place. Though the time loop cannot be reversed. The powers to alter it reside with the white-gods. But there’s a pathway. We can leave here to a place where the day doesn’t go on a monotonous repetition.”

Eagerness was mapped out on Fox’s face. He ordered his minions to take me back to the spot where they’d picked me up. My story had to check out. Fox held his Colt pistol, unlocking the cylinder, squinting at the bullets inside, closing it and pulling the hammer. He paced for a while, feeling impatient. We waited for a time before twilight. I looked at my G-SHOCK. The analog time reversed on the display, time and date racing backwards. I knew it was time. The ack-ack gun assembled and all other players in the arena resumed their roles.

“It’s happening,” I said, drawing back.

I ran towards safety when the sounds from a fighter jet filled the air. I picked up my satchel from a dead savage, heading towards the rock. I replayed the scenes from the day before, running away before Sanga got hit again. Fox ordered his minions to chase after me. Sanga and I ran towards the wormhole, leaping into it. Inside, I watched Fox and his men. They probably thought I was crazy going inside this supposed death trap. I muttered some prayers,

hoping they wouldn’t follow me. Sounds of machines permeated from outside the wormhole. I fell into another trance.

*

I woke up at the feet of a cactus plant. Tall trees waved their flowers at me, happy to see a new person. The sun shot faint rays through the clustered tree canopies. There were times I tried to extricate myself from the thoughts that weighed me down like a bag of stones. What could be going on in Maami’s mind? Is her daughter dead? Had she gotten what she deserved for disobeying the oracle? Would she return and atone for her sins when she realised there’s nothing out there? Sanga was curled up a few metres from me, close to an understorey. At this point I must reiterate that I did not think of the consequences of my actions.

DAY 297. 19 OCTOBER 1970.

ACTIVITIES: Savages caught between wars of nature and machines.

DISCOVERY: An autocratic leader is hell-bent on escaping the time loop.

INFERENCE: Deadlier scenes in other places.

CONCLUSION: Death of savages rise. Sanga is alive.

“What if these newspapers and items from the future are the white-gods’ method of taunting me when they realised my eagerness to leave?” I said to Sanga when she came to me.

Our journey since we’d left the village had been a *mélange* of tohubohu as we tried to stay alive in the face of repetitive dangers in an unknown area. A sound nearby awakened my placid state. Sanga’s ear pricked forward, she’d heard it too. Tweeting birds roosted on tree branches, flapping their wings. Lush green gardens spread about. A euphoric place was close by. We went ahead to the source of the music.

In front of me was a bungalow, newly-painted. A silver and yellow decorated paper sign that read WELCOME HOME hung on the oak door. A blasting sound shook the terrain, deafening all other things around it. I checked my G-SHOCK for anomalies. The time displayed was normal. I concluded that this secluded area was given preferential treatment under the auspices of the white-gods.

Sanga stayed back while I went towards the door. She felt it was a bad idea. I knew it was a dangerous move. I knocked twice, repeating the process. I was about to turn the knob when the door opened. A man appeared. Most likely in his late fifties. He had no hair in the middle of his head and tribal marks on his cheeks. He was dressed in agbada with an air of aplomb circling him. Words failed to break free from my mouth. A little girl came behind him, waving at me.

“Daddy can she come in to be with us?” the little girl asked, fixing her gaze on her father.

He nodded, feigning a tooth-revealing smile. I beckoned to Sanga to come inside. I saw the rest of the family: a teenage boy and the man’s wife wearing a red hat askew. Strange as it may seem, they welcomed me with open hands not minding my strange look, smelly body from days of not showering and dirty clothes.

“Please can I use your restroom?” I asked the woman.

She pointed me in the right direction. Sanga was treated to some chicken wings, too busy to notice my absence. Pictures of the smiling family filled the passage as I walked by. The linoleum floor was vibrating from the speaker blast. *Where did he get this kind of floor from?* A door painted in pink caught my attention. I entered, feeding my eyes on the pink colour and girlish items arranged neatly. I stood in front of the mirror and opened a photo album. Happy faces of the little girl in school, at the beach, an eatery and a playground filled the pages. A folded newspaper lay in the middle of the page. It read in thick black print: *Woman and Two Children Die in Flood*. Details of the occurrence were underneath. I turned to the next page and saw a picture of the man with the tribal marks. In that moment, dread throttled me, making me gasp for air. I held the paper with shaky hands. The date the flood killed his family was 20 October 1987. I had been transported to a new year without noticing. It was the same date on my watch. The door flung open.

“You can’t be here,” the man said when he came in. “You have to go now.”

“It’s about to happen isn’t it?” I asked, leaving the room.

“I don’t know who you are or where you came from. But your presence here when the flood comes will alter the sequence. Go north. It’s safe there.”

I stole a few supplies when he went back to his family.

“This is a life of torture,” I said to him on my way out.

“How far will you go to be with your loved one?”

He left me with this question. I acquiesced. He was right. I’d abandoned my family to find Wunmi. I wasn’t different from him. The buoyant sky switched to a drab one. A wild breeze kicked dust out of its slumber. Fissures appeared on the clouds, paving the way for the rain to come. I headed north, moving

fast to avoid being caught in the flood. There was no sign of the wormhole anywhere. I brought out the key, fiddled with it, wondering when it would be useful.

That night when we slept under the thick duvet, I thought of the sacrifices we’d made when the white-gods came. Maami didn’t regret sacrificing her freedom to see Baami every day. Aunt Moremi’s dead daughter came back to her every midnight only to return back to the land of the dead at sunset. Aminu worked with his brother at the farm, though his brother got bitten by a viper at dawn, died and returned alive the following day. The cycle of a dead person going and coming back had a pernicious effect on the mind. The oracle once suggested a way out of the time loop, forbidden by the white-gods. A person could remain dead only if he took his own life. The consequences of this action called for questioning. The villagers feared eternal suffering in the afterlife should they die from eating poisonous drupe.

Sanga was half-asleep. She woke up when she heard the sound of my hoodie zipper closing. Words failed me, escaping my thoughts. When I put pen to a fresh page in my diary, I couldn’t write anything. I wanted so badly to leave this place. An umbra shrouded the light in the sky.

“Come on, girl,” I said. “It’s time.”

Sanga barked. The key inside my pocket emitted iridescent light. I pulled it out. It served as a pointer on our dark path. Dust left the ground in haste. Leaves were hijacked from their trees. They all raced to the call of the wormhole. We followed.

DAY 298. 20 OCTOBER 1987.

ACTIVITIES: A family having a reunion.

DISCOVERY: White-gods used a natural disaster like floods to bring a loved one back to life.

INFERENCE: Mental slavery and madness.

CONCLUSION: Majority do not want the time loop to end.

*

We were transported to a settlement where the metaphysical bodies were in charge of the day. A location where patriarchy stood as tall as a red crest. Two days of journeying into the north was a boon. I settled with a tribe who wor-

shipped the sky at night. The leader of the tribe, Imran, believed the white-gods were the key to saving humanity. He posed as one of those preachers who stood inside buses heading from Mile 2 to Oshodi, telling all who cared to listen about the coming of the Messiah. Beneath all of these traits, I saw in him a man who desired to be brewstered in all areas and against all odds. He was a septuagenarian, gangly, and brown-teethed from years of eating kola nuts. His trove were the many wives he had and his under-age girls given to him as young wives. A knife of infuriation stabbed me at the core of my heart. I wanted to bash his head with a stone until the shape lost its form. As far as this place was concerned, he was the god whose words were sacred.

Men and women genuflected at his presence. He commanded them to deprive themselves, convincing them the white-gods commanded it. I made friends with a boy named Akin. Akin was an ardent disciple of the new religion created by Imran. He, like others, was subservient to Imran. He scowled at me when I asked if Imran truly had the powers he claimed. I noticed his gaze wandered to my bag while we were talking inside the room I'd been given. Opening the bag, I showed him the newspapers, asking if he knew where they came from. His attention was rapt, studious about perusing the contents. "Imran has this, many in his chamber," Akin said. "He forbids us to touch it, or go anywhere near it. He said it's a sin to the gods."

When the sound of the bugle echoed, everyone except me filed out in the open. I waited until the people were drenched in their rituals of paying homage to the sky. Imran didn't keep a guard to man my room. He wasn't certain I had no place to go. I watched his people kneel under the aurora with hues of purple, ash, teal green and pink falling as a cascade. Teenage girls wore white lappas and carried earthen pots. Some were naked, painted in black oil. Imran stood, topless, speaking gibberish words he claimed to be arcane incantations. I snuck into Imran's chamber. There I found miscellaneous items: an inchoate pot of flowers, a musical instrument from the future, a Walkman, a bottle of Cola, condoms, Vamp nail polish and other unknown items sprawled on the ground. Next to an *étagère* was a brown leather box. Stacks of newspapers and other books were stowed inside. I ran my eyes through them. Their dates ranged from 1967, 1975, 1986, 1989, 1994 and 2000. I tucked a few of them in my bag and packed other handy items. Sanga and I snuck away from there into the bush. The wormhole had now become a safe haven, one I took delight in.

DAY 299. 21 OCTOBER 1987

ACTIVITIES: A rustic community pays homage to the celestial bodies.

DISCOVERY: A selfish preacher calls himself god.

INFERENCE: An autocratic ruler who no one dares contravene.

CONCLUSION: Trapped souls and slavery.

*

The map led me to a bus terminal. At this point I was willing to linger there as long as I could. Remnants of torn papers strewn around by the dancing breeze was evidence that the road leading to the way out of there was near. I passed by a fleet of abandoned cars and buses covered in dust. Shards from windscreens lay scattered on the ground. I broke the side windows of some cars, checking for anything that might be useful.

The sunset came, allowing a coalesced mixture of violet and coral to carve a spiral picture in the sky. I reclined on a car seat drinking from a bottle of water and eating biscuits I prayed wouldn't poison me. Sleep took me away in no time.

The roaring sound of an engine quickened my senses. Sanga barked, urging me to open the door. The breeze rose, pirouetting. Sanga didn't stop barking. I moved forward, waiting to see the machine quaking the ground. The engine roar became louder, causing a frisson in me. *What if it's an enemy?* Another thought crested in my head. The machine stopped in front of me. Only it wasn't a machine, but a bus painted yellow with two thick black lines down the centre – a *Molue*. Sanga moved towards the door, barking at it. The door remained shut, refusing to let me in. I brought out the key from my pocket, and inserted it into the keyhole. I looked around for hostiles before going in. The murky smell of newspapers greeted me. There were gadgets, books, and stationery too. Immediately as Sanga and I sat down, the door shut. The *Molue* started and sped away. Laughter filled me inside. Wunmi would be proud of me. I groped to get to the driver's seat. It was on automatic drive. Settling back on the seat, I laughed some more.

The speeding *Molue* made it hard for me to catch a glimpse of the wonders in this place. Papers flew haphazardly into each other as the untamed breeze from outside slipped in through the window. Clapped around my chest was a seat belt. Sleep took over me, again.

I must have slept for almost a day. Greeted by the humming of the engines, I woke, raxed and yawned. The *Molue* was afloat, moving at a normal speed. Looking out the window, night had taken charge. A meteoroid, baseball bat, pair of moccasins, photo album, cassettes, and other items sailed by us. I wondered where they were coming from. A sharp light flicked ahead of us. Intermittently, the light rays shot into the sky. The *Molue* of its own accord obeyed the direction of the light, descending.

The *Molue*'s ignition switched off. A person wearing a black hoodie approached. Sanga ran to meet him.

"Come back," I said to her.

The fear in me started attenuating when I noticed Sanga saw this stranger as a friend. He removed his hood. He was a white-god. He beckoned me to come inside.

"Come inside quick. The portal will soon open. There's something you must see before you leave," he said.

Plastered all over the aureate walls were pictures of smiling faces, notes clipped to the pictures. It reminded me of a crime story I'd read where the detective pinned pictures of kidnapped teenagers on a board. All the persons were brought in by the *Molue*. This white-god made it happen after he was ostracised from his group for being a leftist. He mentioned challenging the council for their insatiable desire to extend the time loop.

"What do your kind hope to gain from imprisoning us in a time loop?" I asked, searching for a note or picture from Wunmi.

"Our planet is dying. Your planet seems habitable. We are not certain if we need your kind in this new world we are building. That's the essence of the loop. When a decision has been made. The next plan of action will take place. I kicked against this decision. Look at where that got me."

I was far too engrossed in the pictures. It felt like I was floating towards the empyrean.

"She talked about you every day," he said. "She insisted I keep sending you various items until you made the move to leave the village."

He pulled out a journal from a box and handed it to me. Tears fell effusively from my eyes, wetting the cover of the journal. With each page I opened, I was ensorcelled by her words. Each annotation at the end of every page spoke about her wanting to have me in her arms again. A picture of Wunmi pouting and leaning on the *Molue* forced a snicker out of me. While I was soaking in the puddle of nostalgia, a quake shook me.

"It's time," he said, giving me a plaid scarf belonging to Wunmi. The happiness in me burgeoned.

I didn't know whether to hug him or curse him. His people were the reason for the problems that befell us. He wanted to make up for his errors. This was why he sent the *Molue* back to bring people who had the courage to leave their communities. I gave him the key but he folded it back into my hand. The key was a pathway to other worlds – the past and the future – and it controlled the *Molue*.

"I hope you find what you are looking for," he said, watching me and Sanga go towards the yawning portal that was getting smaller. The *Molue* that brought us ascended, returning to the bus terminal. The circling portal began to close, until we could no longer see the white-god.

*

My eyes opened when I heard a bird tweeting. Sanga and I were seated at the back seat of a Hummer bus painted white. My head was against the glass window. Sunrays slid in from the glass. Its warmth on my skin felt different, soothing. All around me were Hummer buses. I stepped out. Sanga led the way, as always. We walked, seeing trees with colourful flowers. Some of the petals fell from their branches. A scent of freshness invigorated my body. Plane engines reverberated in the air. Policemen went about their business. A hologram lady greeted passersby, *Good morning, Lagosians. Remember to stay safe, always*. A queue of people were buying tickets to enter the train. Skyscrapers stretched as though attempting to kiss the clouds. Debonair men and women donned in fine attire rushed ahead. This wasn't a lopsided system of administration. It felt like a democratic one like I'd read about in one of my books from the future. A woman held hands with a man, both of them dressed in a batik top of different designs, blue jeans, and black and brown sandals.

A svelte woman was standing with her dog, obviously waiting for someone. A large billboard stood erect, a colourful movie poster. I recognised one of the cast as Wunmi. She had always had a penchant for acting. She had aged, though her eyes didn't change.

"Excuse me, ma," I said to the woman, waving at her dog and keeping Sanga away from misbehaving. "What is today's date please? My wristwatch is damaged."

She stared at me haughtily before checking her silver Casio wristwatch.

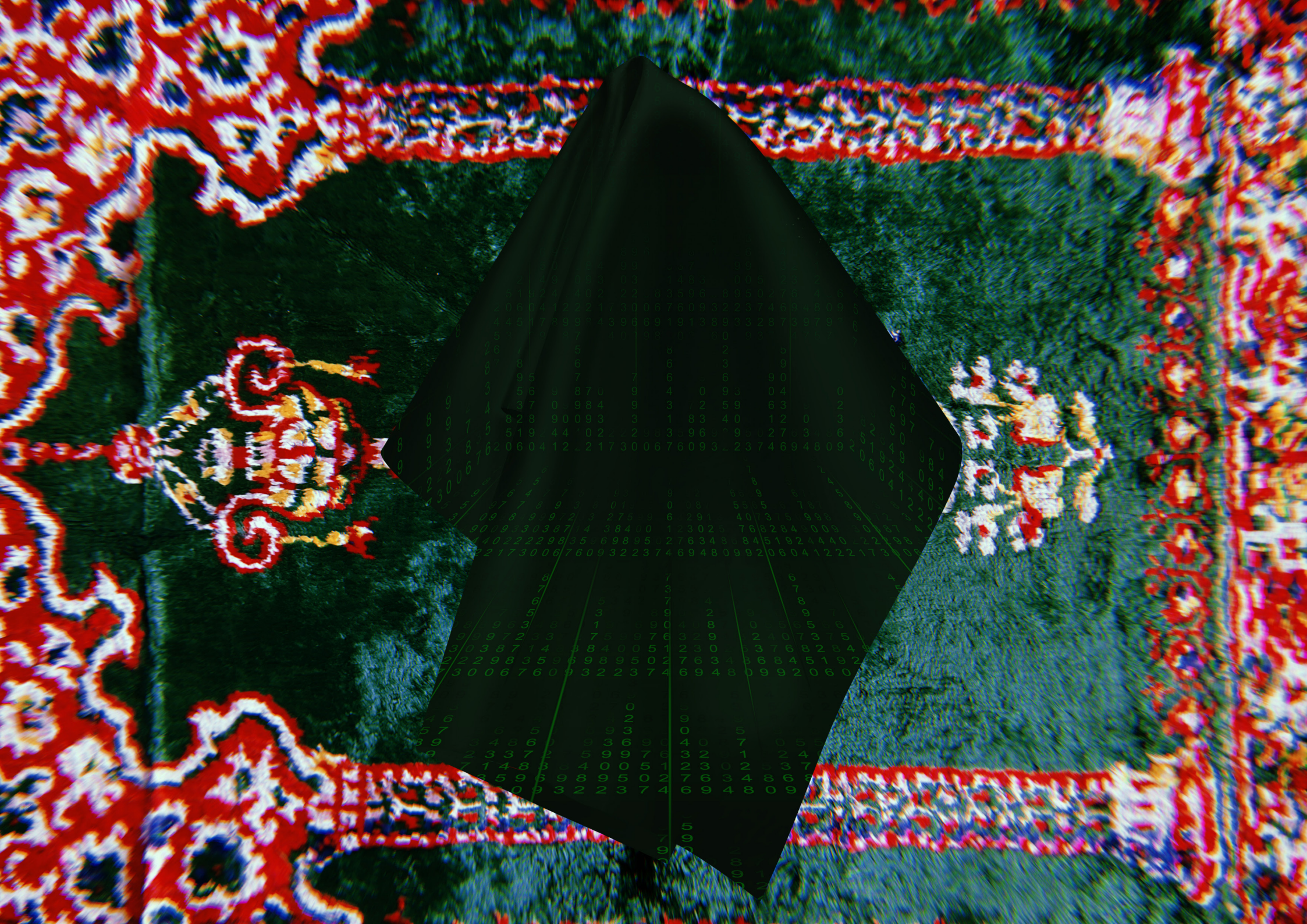
"13 May 2030," she said.

“I made it!” I shouted, acting uncouth.

The woman gazed at me, wondering why I was dressed in such manner. I told her about my mission to find my friend. She laughed, offered to give me some clothes, saying I can't be walking about dressed in this manner. She flagged down a taxi. While feeling the texture of the seat, I asked if she believed in magic. Her response was terse. It seems you have been watching a lot of fantasy movies these days, she said. I asked if she could take me to the location where the movies were shown. She agreed to drop me at the front of the cinema building. A crown of alacrity was heavy on my head. Relaxing on the headrest, I rubbed Sanga's body, happy to find a new home. I muttered a prayer for Maami. I hoped to bring her here when I understood how this city worked. I needed to clean up first. Wunmi had to see me in my best.

Two women locked lips, kissing in front of a restaurant. A guy whose hair was tinted blue wore skinny jeans and posed in front of a graffiti wall while another guy in shorts snapped him. A woman clutched her baby to her back, tied with a lappa. A traffic warden assisted an old woman to cross the road. “What is this place?” I asked. Trying to get a grasp of these happenings. “Are you from around here?”

I ignored her, kept my focus on the road and brought Wunmi's diary close to my nose to perceive her aura in the pages while rubbing Sanga's head. The anticipation of seeing Wunmi was the only desire my heart craved for.



Mahr

By Adelehin Ijasan

Adelehin Ijasan's stories have appeared or are upcoming in *The Best of Everyday Fiction*, *Takahe*, *On the Premises*, *Pandemic Publications*, *Omenana*, *Fiyah*, *Sub-Saharan Magazine*, *The Naked Convos*, *Kalahari Review*, and Canary Press publications. He was nominated for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (2014) and was recently on the Nommo Award long list for African speculative fiction (2021). Adelehin also spends his days peering into or operating on eyes as an ophthalmologist. He can be found at www.adeijasan.com.

Our internal clocks chimed in unison. *Zuhr*. We were in a private train carriage and Zuwaira retrieved her prayer mat and unfurled it with a tenderness. She donned her pitch black hijab and faced northeast, her arms folding across her brass-plated chest.

“*Bismillahi rahamani raheem*,” her speakers purred. She bowed, kneeled, every movement a constellation of moving parts and efficient joints. “*Salaam aleikum warakmatullah*,” she bade the invisible angels on either side and then twisted her neck to look at me.

“Won’t you join me, Aisha?”

“No.”

I stared out at the countryside: a vista of trees, farms and the occasional herdsman and his herd of white cattle. “I won’t pray to a non-existent God.”

“Cover yourself!” she said, getting up and rolling her mat. My burqa had slipped off. I pulled the black chiffon material over my head and tossed it across my shoulders. I have a transparent body made of pure silicone and hydrophobic acrylic... only haute chiffon will do. Somewhere inside me is a machine core powered by uranium and it burns fluorescent white.

“Are you not even a tiny bit concerned for your soul?” She asked.

Zuwaira believed we were already dead-dead, our continued and perpetual existence a blight on the face of the Earth, an abomination, a sin and a debt to Allah multiplying by compound interest every tick of our nuclear-powered hearts. She hoped that prayer was payment for the passage of our dear departed souls into the seventh heaven. Basically, Allah had our souls hostage and we must pay obeisance or else...

We got off at the Ahmadu Bello train station and basked in the familiar smells of incense, agar wood, and *turare*. After all the time spent in the south, we were finally home. Tafira was waiting for us, Baaba’s sagely and dutiful driver; we hugged him tightly and when we pulled away, saw tears in his eyes. He had been more than a driver to us, taking us to school and back, all those years; buying us toffee; and as teenagers, allowing us to smoke shisha secretly in the back seat on the way back from Isha. We used to be Tafira’s girls, but now we

had no warmth and it was like a dagger through his heart.

“*Badamu’a, Tafira*.” Zuwaira held his shoulders and looked him square in the face. “At least we’re here, somewhat.”

He stared instead at a loose thread on her shoulder, avoiding her gaze. He looked like a husk of what he once was, as if someone had scooped all of his insides and what was left was this fragile, paper-thin effigy. The ride home was silent. I stared at the tarred streets of Kano: not much had changed; the *almajiri* thronged as usual in various states of undress and malnutrition. I scanned the area with a magnetic pulse and picked up the occasional artificial limb; there was not a bionic person in the next five hundred miles. Lagos had been different. I’d met Kate and Bayo at a droid club on Admiralty Way, overlooking the lagoon.

“Tafira,” Zuwaira muttered. “You’re not taking us home?”

“Baaba is at the mosque, he’ll see you there.”

“You know we aren’t allowed in God’s house.” I touched his shoulder from the back seat. The poor man was brimming with tears.

*

It was *Mahgrib* by the time we arrived at the mosque. We avoided ablution and scurried into the women’s section. We pulled off our shoes and left them at the door in the bubblegum heap of slippers, sandals, flip-flops and I wondered if we would ever find ours when we got back out.

“*Sannu*,” the women greeted.

“*Sannu*,” we replied.

“*Gidan wa’kuke?*”

It was only harmless curiosity. They were wondering whose wives or daughters we were. I had the mind to drop my chiffon and shock them, but was stopped by Zuwaira’s stern telescopic eyes. We prayed together. I had deleted all the Quran from my mind, but somehow I remembered a phrase from the Fatiha, so I said that over and over “...*maleeki yau medin...*” as I kneeled and

bowed and thumbed an invisible *tesbih*. *Oh, master of the day of retribution.*

There was a man waiting with Baaba in the inner sanctum of the mosque. He had a raging beard and was dirty, but wore his dirt like a cloak, with pride and a certain arrogance. I did not recognise him at once, but I should have. A quizzical smirk hung on his chapped lips as he watched us throw ourselves into Baaba's arms and bury our faces in the plush safety of Baaba's fatherly breasts. I knew that smirk all too well; I'd gotten a few such smirks in Lagos, walking unclad, hand in hand with first Kate, then Bayo, on Kuramo beach. My two loves. The smirk that said, *how una dey take fuck sef?* We were droids, not robots. (Technically, we were bionic humans but the name android, initially derogatory and in homage to the defunct telephone of the 2000s, stuck.) We were people too. Or at the least used to be. Baaba broke my porcelain heart once and forever when he introduced the man to us.

"Zuwaira, Aisha, meet Shekau..."

A toothpick appeared out of his mouth and spun between teeth black and red with paan. "Sisters," he said, and hugged us without our consent.

"A terrorist?" I asked Baaba.

"Ah, that is the language of the infidels." Shekau stepped in front of me, peevish. "The word of Allah is absolute and the word of his messenger, Muhammad –"

"*Sallalau wallehi wassallam,*" we chorused.

"– is divine. I am of the one who sent me," his voice crescendoed, "*al mujahid, al ghazi, kayan aikin Allah!*" He grabbed my burqa and pulled it off in one swift movement, almost to say I was nothing but furniture clad in clothing, and did not dare call him a terrorist. I could crush his windpipe. But I stood there naked in what Bayo had called "my beautiful android glory". Lithe acrylic legs, buxom silicone buttocks and breasts, and a transparent torso that showed the inner workings of my gears and circuits – I let him stare.

"*Bisimillah!*" he gasped finally.

"What does he want, Baaba?" Zuwaira asked. "We are tired from our journey and just want to go home."

Baaba, like Tafira, couldn't meet Zuwaira's gaze. Shekau held up a small device. I recognised it as a viricator. It was useless unless calibrated to the specific frequency of the droid being attacked. A frequency known only to the droid herself or...

I looked at Baaba.

The screech of an electromagnetic pulse rang in my ears and then darkness.

*

In electromagnetic limbo, I dreamed of my time in Lagos. Bursts of light and colour emerging from Vantablack: Kate's ululating laughter echoing within the riffs of Afro fusion music, the rush of waves at the sea and the bright flare of yellow Danfo buses. I dreamed of the whale we once saw, Bayo and I, exploring six thousand miles offshore and twelve thousand feet below sea level. A giant swirling with a ballerina's grace in the blackness of my limbo, corrugated fins the size of houses, a mournful howl. I relived the car accident that severed our cervical bones many years ago when we were drifting Baaba's Tesla at Kano stadium, and heard in excruciating detail all the arguments about the meaning of life that tore Kate and I assunder.

I came to and found we were in a cave of sorts, lit by a small oil lamp. They had chained me to the wall in the most gruesome manner, and Shekau was finishing up a prayer in the corner, counting his *tesbih* and muttering a *hadith*. A small radio blared static and endless rows of guns and ammunition glinted along the wall.

I searched for Zuwaira, sending out a radio wave, 10GHz, and found nothing. I pushed harder, reducing the frequency and increasing wavelength till I found her deep in the cave, multiple walls between us. There was no true wireless communication between droids, but my sister and I had our own version of telepathy: the opening and closing of port connections; binary, *ones* and *zeros*, morse. It was rudimentary but usually enough for our inside jokes when we were around other people. My radiation, light as a feather, touched on Zuwaira. Where there'd usually be the quiet hum and click of connection, I heard a loud feedback whine, a type of internal scream.

"... --- .-- / .- .-. / -.- --- ..- --- / --- ..- .-- .- ..-. -.- ..-." I asked.

How are you, Zuwaira!?

And her response was that unabated screech only I could hear, that feedback whine of unprocessed pain, of a broken heart, of betrayal.

“Zuwaira...”

Men crawled in and out of the inner room from which Zuwaira’s silent screams emerged. One of them was a young boy. Shekau caught his pitying eyes and said to him, “They’re not real women.” He added, “they’re not even human.”

“What are you doing to her?” I twisted around to look at him. He didn’t bother to reply. He crawled over, unfurling his loin cloth. There was no pain, only humiliation.

*

What is it about women’s bodies, bionic or otherwise, that men believed they were owed the right of ownership? What is it about these primal desires that drove men to madness?

“Would you rather my men use real women?” Shekau replied. He had just returned from battle, and blood dripped from a gash in his forehead.

“If we aren’t ‘real women’, why then do we serve this obscene purpose?”

“For that, *Insha Allah*, you are real enough,” he countered. “We are fighting for the soul of all people, against the infidels of the south who persist in sinful western ways, who extend their lives with androids and other tools of the devil.”

“We are Muslim too.”

“You can never be!” he spat.

“Zuwaira prays five times a day, fulfills the zakat and took the *haji*. Are these not the pillars of Islam? Even now, as you defile her, she prays. There’s no place in the Quran where it says an android cannot be a Muslim.”

At this, Shekau laughed, a full bellyaching sort of laughter. “It is only common sense,” he said. “You are already dead.”

“Yet here we are.”

He scratched his rough beard with long, untrimmed fingernails. “You are nothing but soulless automatons, sex toys.”

“I do not know of sex toys who struggle.”

“That is true,” he replied gleefully.

*

Soon, I realised I could not sense Zuwaira’s bionic limbs. I was patting down her body in the dark universe of a 2.5 GHz scan and found nothing from her knees down, nothing that bore life. Her limbs were still there, of course, but there was no life in them, no power, no electromagnetic pulse. Then her thighs went too, and then, her pelvis, belly, torso, slowly, excruciatingly, like a skyscraper whose lights were being turned off one floor at a time. I knew what my sister was doing.

Frantic, I tapped. *Please! Don’t! Please!* But her only response was feedback, that scream that was like tinnitus, an electromagnetic groaning of her spirit. It rose to a feverish, defiant pitch, crescendoing like a hoard of banshees, like the crashing of waves, like the roar of a turbine engine.

No! Zuwaira! No!

She would no longer be an unwilling participant in this game of life. My sister was shutting herself down, *forever*. I saw/heard/felt the final bright flare of her soul, one last burst of everything that was Zuwaira. It contained her laughter, her happiness, her hopes, dreams and sorrows. It contained even the nuanced details of her character like the delicateness of her needlework, of Zuwaira holding a crochet hook with the precision of an eye surgeon, threading, threading. And then it was gone. Like a star collapsing into a black hole.

And I let out a feedback whine of my own, a screech of all that I had lost and

could never reclaim.

The men dragged Zuwaira's lifeless body out into the open. She was naked, torn strips of her hijab clinging to her in a desperate attempt to clothe her. I stared at her clenched jaw; at the vein running down the middle of her forehead; at the curl of disgust on lips that still glittered with the lip gloss she'd borrowed from me just days before. Shekau had claimed me for himself, but with Zuwaira now inanimate, the men mumbled, edging towards me.

My blood boiled and I railed against the chains. They had tied my hands and feet in an invincible knot behind me. I stretched with all the strength my bionic body could muster, redirecting all power to my knees and shoulders. I kept my eyes on Zuwaira's face, drawing strength from her defiance. The men jostled, argued about who was to go first. I felt my warning systems go off, 'imminent damage', as my left arm tore out of its socket, my clavicle breaking in a thousand places. I felt every dolour of simulated pain, as metal, acrylic, and synthetic tendons pulverised. I did not turn down my pain sensors. With my left arm removed at the shoulder, I was able to wiggle it through the chains, creating some space. By the time the first of the men was upon me, my right hand was free. I grabbed him by the throat and crushed down, feeling ultimate satisfaction as his windpipe and cervical bones exploded. I tossed him aside like a rag doll. Silence. The rest of the men remained frozen for a second, then panic, as they reached for their AK-47s. I stretched some more and my left leg tore out of my hip socket with more pain than my arm had.

"Allah ya kiyaye!" They cried and filled the cave with bursts of gunfire. Hopping on one foot, I visited them. My hand ripped into flaccid bellies; I smashed soft skulls against walls creating a mosaic of brain and blood; I gouged eyes and pulled entire vertebral columns out of men's backs. They screamed, begged, called me *Shaitan*, the devil. On the radio, a muezzin's call to prayer, granular with static, rose:
"Ashadu an la ilaha illa Allah!"

Some men ran out into the forest and I chased after them, hopping. They stood no chance.

"Hayya ala s-salah! Hayya ala l-falah!"

I bashed them to pulp with the skulls of their comrades. Soon the air was vibrant with the howls and wails of distress from the soon-to-be-dead. I

did not take them out of their misery. I let them wallow in their pain, in their blood, in their shit.

"La ilaha illa Allah," the muezzin sang, sorrowfully.

*

I carried Zuwaira's body to the gurgling brook behind the cave that had served the men for years, providing water for ablutions and sustenance. I held her against my body with one arm and descended into the clear running water. Her head lolled as the water washed over her, over us, cleaning away the dirt and blood and grime. When I had finished washing her, I crawled out of the water and lay with her awhile, watching her beautiful face: somewhere inside me, I hoped Zuwaira had left a piece of herself behind, some backed up gigabyte of consciousness from which she could power up and blossom back to life. I wanted to see her lips move, hear her say "Aisha", in that way only she knew how but it was only wishful thinking. She was finally dead—*dead*.

She was at peace.

I created a sling from our torn and tattered burqas and hung it over my neck. With difficulty, I lifted Zuwaira into this carrier, her legs on either side, her face in the crook of my neck. I found my balance and made my way into the forests, far away from the place they had held us captive. I travelled for hours until I found the perfect spot, a natural clearing surrounded by a grove of ancient baobab trees that curved upward in an arch, like the dome of a mosque. Sunlight filtered through in shafts of light and when the wind rifled through the trees, these luminous beams danced like strobes. I placed Zuwaira on the ground tenderly, and dug. The earth was soft, pliant, and soon I had a grave. I wrapped her up in what was left of the burqa and lowered her into it, placing her on the right, her face towards Mecca as she would have wanted. I rolled up three balls of earth; I placed one behind her head, one under her shoulder and another under her chin according to the rites. The verses came to me as if brought on by the wind herself, by the whispering leaves and the groaning trunks of the ancient baobabs; and the burial prayer poured from my trembling lips: *"Ku tuna, daga kasa kuka fito, daga kasa kuma za ku koma..."*

Remember from earth you came and to earth you shall return. Remember the God, who gave you breath and remember there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is

his messenger...

I covered her with fresh earth and all the power drained from me. I collapsed on my sister's grave and wept. I do not remember how long I remained there, but the sun traversed the skies many times, the trees shed their leaves, the seasons turned, and new life was peeking out all around me in little hesitant shrubbery by the time I eventually stood up.

“... ..”

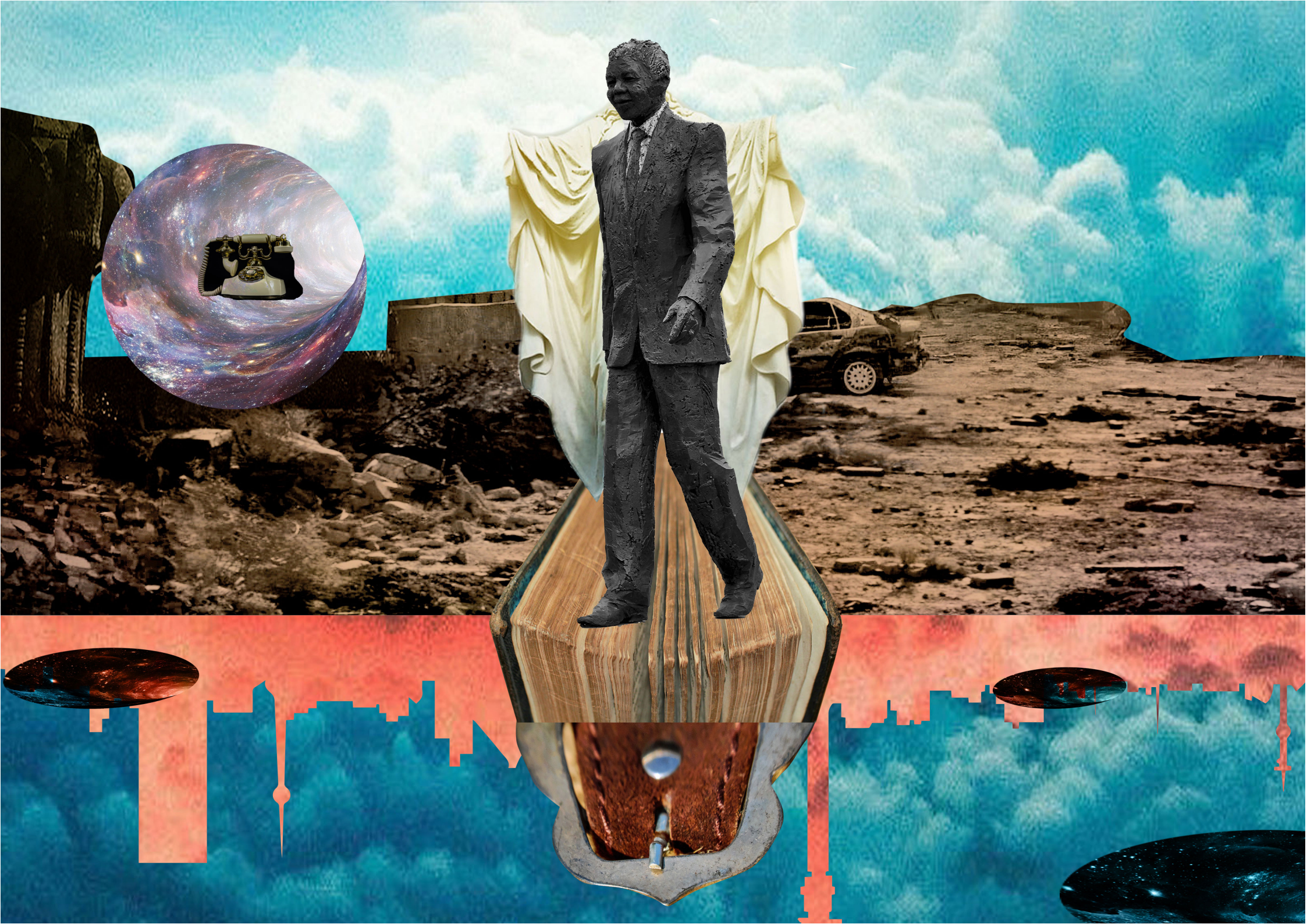
Goodbye, sister.

*

Much later, I stood on the hill that overlooked Baaba's compound. My sister Zuwaira was gone and I wanted to know why. In the villa opposite my father's, there was a *Nikah* marriage ceremony in full swing: colourful horses, tur-banned in-laws, camel-riding entertainers, dancing sword-fighting women, canopies, coolers of bright red jollof rice and at the centre of it all, a little girl, *budurwa amarya*, being given away. I could see her eyes through her veil, full of uncertainty as her father and elderly husband shook hands over the *Mahr*, the bride price. Why do fathers give their daughters to men who would hurt them? What was my father's excuse?

I saw Baaba's car appear at the end of the driveway and turn into our compound. Tafira got out, opened the door for him, and two android girls appeared on the patio to meet them. One of them hugged him, the other took his bags. I recognised Zuwaira and myself, copies. So this was the monstrous bargain my father made, this was the *Mahr* he took. I could see how it must have all played out: to be allowed the luxury of keeping his daughters, he had to give them away. *But Baaba, how could you? Did it not matter to you that we would suffer?*

As they disappeared into the house in a cacophony of Hausa and laughter, my doppelgänger stopped and looked to the hills, one beautifully hennaed hand holding the sliding glass door open. Perhaps she sensed me, an identical copy of our original consciousness. Our gaze locked for a moment. There was no recognition in her eyes, only surprise at finding another droid in the residential hills of Kano. I raised my hand as I began my descent. She waved back.



Siyawa

(What Would Happen if Madiba Returned?)

By Kneo Mokgopa

Kneo Mokgopa is a writer and artist living and working in Johannesburg. Their current work explores scenes of identity-making in Black queer, post-colonial South Africa. Kneo writes a regular column in the *Daily Maverick* titled “Unthere” and also hosts a podcast by the same name where they explore history, contemporary politics and the borders and boundaries between human and object.

“*Siyawa* was inspired by my own experience of living with depression and coming from a family where suffering from depression is common, for many reasons. I think that our depression has something to do with this country and the history we have endured in it. I was thinking through what a state does or should do with a depressed polity. It appears to me that a depressed Black organised society is reasonable to expect after our now inarticulate nightmare of colonialism and apartheid. It haunts us. It rends us. And it swallows us whole. Can something so personal and subjective, so singular and visceral as depression be endemic? How can we begin to see it and know it more clearly? But further, what can we do with that?”

Kneo manages communications and advocacy at the Nelson Mandela Foundation and is a Stellenbosch Thought fellow at the Stellenbosch Centre for Critical and Creative Thought at the University of Stellenbosch.

Our Father

Who art over Mandela Bridge

Hallowed be thy Foundation

Asisebenzi, Madiba, Siyawa. The past is a dangerous place, the present is dissolving with anxieties and the future is barren. We convulse in a breathlessness of meanings to make of this vast and violent place. Have you forsaken us?

Madikizela?

Who can we shoot to end this falling nightmare? If it is a matter of violence, Mama, violence has found us. It has found us hiding in the closet, it has found us at the buckle end of a belt, at the taxi rank, at the police station, at the post office, in our bedrooms, Mama, violence has found us in the air that drifts onto the kitchen table and between our sheets from the Laanglakte mine dumps so, who can we shoot?

Is it ourselves?

Madiba, you said you would return to liberate us from the ANC when the ANC did to us what the Apartheid government did to you, well, Tata, the universities are sellouts. The Russians came and told us they are not Black and we have sacrificed all of our cattle to prepare for you, bawo, to find us faithful waiting here.

We have been waiting for you, here.

For thine is Nelson Mandela Square

Your boutique hotel in Houghton

And the name of the next international civil society coalition for human rights

Amen.

i.

I remember the day Nelson Mandela returned, exactly thirty years after his death. On that day, a hole emerged and swallowed the entire township of Alexandra in a single moment. We had started noticing the holes when they were much smaller, when children were falling in them. Every so often, you would see a news report that another child had fallen and was gone. A hole had taken them.

This one headline read: “Four Children Fall in Hole in Nyanga”.

Four? How can that happen? Holes are not new things. We worked them in the mines, in the Passbooks, in the NSFAS applications, in the vaccine passports, in the wastelands, in the pit latrines, in the shadow of the mine dumps.... What kind of hole was this that could swallow four children in a single event?

That was the sort of thing that could happen to you because you were Black. A hole could just take you. And if not this hole, then, another kind of hole would. At that time, we had reached an unemployment rate of 60% nationally or 85% in the expanded definition. South Africa had fallen into a labour desert. We had reached the end of history.

The holes themselves resemble manholes whose covers were stolen for their recycling value, with black and browning wrought iron at the verge of perfectly circular voids. Voids housed in iron cylinders. They first started appearing in the pavements and side streets. Then, they were in the roads and in the freeways. Each appearing as though they had always been there. We didn't think much of them then, children are children, they don't know the difference between sources of excitement and sources of fear, you know. The holes knew. They varied in size from about the height of a newborn to a large teenager in diameter. In 2024, the biggest one sat at an intersection right next to a Holy Pentecostal church in Zondi, Soweto, and stretched three metres wide. It was responsible for the disappearance of twenty-five children in twelve events over three years.

I remember growing up in Zondi. In fact, I remember the day my parents dropped me off in Zondi to be raised by my grandmother while my parents got their degrees and diplomas. I was two. It must have been some Sunday in '95, '96. I know this because I remember oWesile walking home, their bibles tucked tightly under the arm so their flaking leatherbound covers and

blood-red pages were visible to the world against all of the brown of the pale dirt, the brown-grey of the walls and the sky of dust, colourless from the bits of mine dump blowing in the wind. They're in the house and letting me play in the back rooms with an off-white telephone that's either broken or a reminder that I am not yet a part of this world. The room is small and it smells like warm blankets, mothballs and Pledge. The double bed has a pastel green duvet with white lacing at the frill.

Tililing tililing:

Hello!

-

Can I please talk to Mr Simphiwe?

-

It's Sicelo!

-

Hello Simphiwe

-

I'm fine, how are you?

-

Okay, ba-bye!

-

Tililing tililing....

I don't remember, but I think I went back to ask when were are leaving, throwing the lipids of my legs to the same rhythm of my full cheeks and globe eyes, across the lawn of dust, up onto the blood-red stoep and into the kitchen, but they're not there. Not sitting and standing on the linoleum tiled floor, around the chipboard table sandwiched in a plastic vignette of candy-red apples and yellow flowers against a white backdrop and on aluminium pipe legs. Not in the living room with its carpet made of grey and black square rugs, or on the dusty brown couches with thick, hand-carved wooden arms and legs you apparently had to polish every Sunday or the very meaning of life would cease to hold any truth.

I know this trick and try to run back to beat them to the punch. They are outside, ten paces from the gate already, clasping each other in the kind of desperately quiet, breathless hurry so you have to beg your legs please to maintain. Gogo Vos holds me back as I wriggle my sweet porridge arms, trying

to get free while my mother looks back at me, holding the dagger firmly in her chest. The gate is made of the same wire as the fence, and the latch is a nail bent perpendicular. I can open it myself even, I can already walk even, I can already even ask to not be left behind yet this isn't convincing anybody. They left me here! This is the earliest thing I can remember of being alive.

ii.

Every Sunday, Gogo and I would watch oWesile making their way back home. I would always remark on how properly they wore their uniforms, something impressive and fixed about the waistband, clean and black, creaseless and discreet – like devotion. It seemed to me, in the primordial soup of those years, before language, before lying, before Zuma, before “well-meaning South Africans” and before the holes were *holes*, that everybody believed in God. If you didn't go to the Methodist Church on Sundays then you went to the ZCC or were Seventh Day Adventist, or a Jehovah's Witness, a Roman Catholic – there was even a BlackJew on our street. If your family didn't have roots in the church then you went to Grace or some hot new prosperity gospel that was making everybody faint on television. Only White people didn't believe in God and if you didn't believe in God then you were denying being Black.

We prayed before we ate but we never went to church much, Gogo and I. Sometimes we'd go to the Holy Pentecostal Church a taxi away even though there was one at the end of our street, next to the colossal concrete cylinders stacked in a pyramid on the hip of the intersection. Gogo would take us after priming with polish the blood-red stoep on which nobody was ever allowed to walk unless they did. We didn't wear the uniforms, we weren't baptised, we were family of the bride, family of the deceased. Just trying to have some Easter.

My favourite hymn was “*Tsotlhe Tsotlhe*”.

Tsotlhe, tsotlhe
Tsotlhe diyentswe ke uena
Modimo, Re a ho boka

It made me feel safe; like I was experiencing God's plan and purpose in my life and not flailing in space. In the beaching wave of the chorus, all of my anxiety and shame and fear was washed away. I watched and listened to Gogo

sing that song like it held all of the truth, all of the questions and all of the answers. It was already done. God did it. I sat next to my grandmother who gave me Cadbury Eclairs for every ten minutes I sat still which meant that after four Eclairs I would get up and go play with the babies at the back of the church. I would drag my tiny, puffy denim jeans against the varnish, pushing lightly coloured, wooden blocks in zigzags, eating sopping wet Cheese Puffs the babies would share with me while the sermon got more and more bloated with the name of Jesus, flies and amen, amen, amen.

*uMandela ubuyile Bazalwane!
uThixo uyivile imithandazo yethu
uNkulunkulu uyizwile imithandazo yethu
Modimo o utlwile dithapelo tsa rona
Nelson Mandela has returned [from prison]
Sikukhulekele Mandela*

*But freedom will not rain down like manna, still, we must make freedom now that
we have destroyed slavery
Empa tokoloho e ke ke ea na, leha ho le joalo re tlamehile ho etsa tokoloho joale
kaha re sentse bokhoba
Kodwa ayizukunetha inkululeko, kufuneka senze inkululeko ngoku sibutshabalal-
isile ubukhoboka*

*Ooooo-yinde lendlela esiyihambayo
Ooooo-yinde lendlela esiyihambayo
Watsho uMandela kubalandeli bakhe
Wathi
S'ohlangana ngoFreedom Day!
Hallelujah!*

Gogo had a friend from around who owned her own shebeen, right in her garage. Her bottom lip was as pink as the inside of your cheek and she walked folded over her left leg, her waist wrapped in a colourless old towel, the same colourlessness of the doek she let lay on her head. Sometimes she would bring oranges or mielie meal for us. I didn't like her – she spat when she spoke and her breath smelt like a bottle of orange juice after it's been in the sun too long. She looked like she was being held together with straps of leather and bandages what with her four teeth pointing every which way, her eyes wrinkled and warping unevenly. They would sit at the back, right on the blood-red stoep, smoking and drinking, talking and laughing like their dead husbands

were asking for them back, devilishly, right into the night.

Other nights Gogo would cook *pap* or porridge on the paraffin stove and feed me through gag reflexes and tears, as though I was a bucket being filled with cement. If it was love, her love was thorough and unconcerned. Like, the way she pushed Vaseline into my skin, sitting on her lap after making the navy blue plastic tub of lukewarm water turn cloudy with a brick of green Sunlight soap.

I was four when they came to fetch me, my mom and dad, that's when we moved to Bruma. That's when Mandela finally saved us. In 1997. Of course, he did not save us all, but I remember the day we crossed the mine dumps separating Zondi, Ndofaya, Orlando West, Phomolong and Katlehong from Rosebank, Houghton, Bruma, Kensington and Bedfordview. Uncle Mbongeni had a flatbed lorry that usually carried coal through the townships, exchanging it in woven plastic bags for scraps of food, secondhand clothes and promises but, that day, it was cleaned up because we were leaving the wastelands. Our two large suitcases, about five refuse bags and a room divider our' Pozzo gifted us, my toothbrush with the tiny plastic cap in the shape of a bear to protect the bristles, my jersey, my socks, my pillow, my teddy (Teddy Jakes), my special bowl and spoon, rolls of tissue paper and a double bed we all would share for a while. My mom and my dad, all of us, off we went.

Off, off to Bruma, with its tall trees and rose bushes, marigolds, lavender, bougainvillea and lilies. The heaven of blue sky was so sweet I thought we were in a Verimark commercial after buying the Floorwiz Pro!

All the while, the holes started infecting the township schoolyards and assembly blocks and Blacks fell like tongues ululating. Service delivery has always been a problem in the townships. *iANC hayisafani*. By the mid-thirties, they ran unabated and holes the size of soccer pitches emerged in Khayelitsha. Entire informal settlements were *un-thered* in a gasp. They came from nowhere and they went to nowhere. What we sent down found no end to the nothingness that sagged like a dream deferred. You can't hear your own thoughts falling in them.

When you had lost a loved one to a hole, you did not say they were dead, you simply said ukuthi uyawa. You fall for good when you fall in a hole. There were stories that, when the air was cold and still and the moon's amber glow was dim, you could hear the falling laughing or screaming or pleading in what sounded like sand dunes singing in the wind. Black people fell and fell and fell

into oblivion. Entire communities, falling together. The dogs and the gran- nies and the children and the queers, the bicycles and activists and rapists and lecturers and nyaope addicts, families falling with the room divider and chicken and Stop Nonsense and photo albums flailing their lives out from plastic film compartments in mix-matched chaos. Black people fell.

iii.

When Madiba died, in 2013, we were home. There had been leaked reports that his lungs had suffered a prolonged respiratory infection and that Nelson Mandela was going to die. What does a galaxy do when its defining star is about to die? I had a dream. In the dream, with her hands busy and her lips pursed tightly together, my mother is in the garden, preparing for a cleansing ritual she needs to perform on me. She is collecting sprigs of rosemary to add to the salt in the bathwater for me to wash in so that I will be protected when I go into the dark and inconsolable space that is waiting at the door for me. Cigarette smoke lingers through the air. I notice that the bucket she is carry- ing the rosemary with also has aloe vera leaves in it. When I awoke, my mother was in my room:

“Sicelo? Sicelo.”

“Ma?”

“Madiba *o re lahlile*.”

“What?”

“*O re lahle*. Nelson Mandela is dead.”

Since he passed away, thirty years ago, we have convulsed in a breathlessness of meanings to make of this vast and violent place. While holes dissolved the townships, the suburbs dissolved differently. The unnatural forests that once lined their streets in a blossoming, purple dream of democracy and Human Rights now eclipsed their sun and moon. A syrupy dream became them as they gorged themselves in critical orgies over the Constitution.

iv.

“*Hau*, no Bobbejaan, listen! I was there on Thursday by O. R. Tambo. We were delivering coal. People were coming with taxis, bikes, trains, trucks, others on foot. There were many people, Bobbejaan. They were singing and crying and laughing and dancing and sweating and this other woman was shout- ing, ‘Madiba, give me bread for my baby.’ The other one, ‘Madiba, my son is

in detention.’ The other man, ‘Madiba, give me a special permit to work in Johannesburg city.’ The little girl, standing next to me, ‘Madiba, give me a lollipop.’ The big fat Zulu – the driver from Zola hostel, ‘Madiba, give me a Chevrolet!’ And me, I was there too.”

Mbongeni calls me Bobbejaan. He moved into the maids’ quarters while he was at Wits to be on this side of the mine dumps while he studied engineer- ing. His friends call him Smokey because, well, he smokes a lot of weed. This was the first time he had ever mentioned anything remotely even towards the notion of selling his coal for money. I had always assumed he gave it out freely, from the goodness of his heart to Black people.

“And *wena*? What did you ask too?” Smokey is always telling stories. He tells stories at those big gala dinner events in honour of the Constitution, which is how I thought he made the money he contributed to home when he did.

“Aaaah, *mina*? Boy, wena you think of me how? Hmm? *Mina, mfana nginja, ntswana* I even stood there on the runway when he looked at me, straight square so – point-blank range in the eyes. *Mina mfana ngizubonda mina, mfana* I don’t crack. Cool and calm under pressure! *Mfana phela mina* you must remember *ngangidlale!* iOrlando Pirates *mina, ntswana*, Up the Bucks. *Bangibiza* ‘Last Defence’, Aich!”

We laughed as he made like he was dribbling a ball, running through the gar- den whistling his own encouragement. But I know what Smokey couldn’t ask Madiba for. It’s the only thing all of us ever dream of. It is the only question and all of its answers. The only thing and everything. The holes.

We had hoped that when Nelson Mandela returned, he would reach down into our holes and pull us out. Pull my father out. Pull my aunt out. Pull the flour, milk and eggs out. Pull my grandmother out. Pull our families and lives and stories and memories and histories and futures out, Tata. That’s not what happened when he returned in a daze of dazzling light, lowered together with Winnie on a bed of archangels and celestial clouds at O. R. Tambo Interna- tional Airport.

First, he visited his homes in Houghton and saw Sanctuary Mandela, the old boutique hotel preserving his legacy and heritage. Then he demanded a report from parliament on the state of the nation and opened the Holy Com- mission of Enquiry into the Holes Vanquishing *Abantu*. Nobody was certain

whether he intended the pun or was too dignified to acknowledge it, the way nobody was certain whether he acknowledged the 666 in the “466/64” HIV/AIDS campaign. Over the next three weeks that December of 2043, he went on an expedited diplomatic tour, visiting the heads of states of the world’s wealthiest countries, advocating for a plan to defeat the holes.

When he came back to his country, South Africa, he took his seat at his office at his Foundation. He then started on the ambitious project to fill the holes with the tailings of mine dumps. It was a colossal campaign of engineering and physics to plug the holes flat and plant commemorative gardens in the dirt where the holes once were. As fierce criticism erupted over the *Holy plan*, Nelson Mandela gave this quote:

“One cannot remove a hole, whether they be in the ground, history, memory or identity, by picking it up and putting it somewhere else. Instead, you defeat a hole by suffocating it.”

This became a viral message on the internet as the Jacaranda nests raptured in aubergine, amethyst and even vermilion in some communities as they debated its meaning, wisdom and import. The *Holy project* was off to a good start. As much as we grieved the loss of our loved ones who continue, even now, to fall, we were made to understand that this thing was complicated and difficult.

The big hole in Alexandra was the first to be plugged. The mine tailings were like decades-old flour you put on top of the fridge while you clean the counter and just forget it there, part of the furniture; white dirt tainted yellow with sulfur and lead mixed with mortar and quickly poured over the hole like a cotton swab.

“Nelson Mandela Holy Memorial Park” reads a sign as large as a billboard. Of course, nobody could tell it was so large given the even larger statue of Madiba the ANC had erected at the site.

The Langlaagte mine dumps were the first to be depleted. There were depressions near the base, as though the dump was afraid to let its full weight rest on the ground and held itself up by its tippy-toes which dimpled the earth like a golf ball. The dimples were about the height of an adult mineworker in length. This was when the blood stopped galloping and boiled in place.

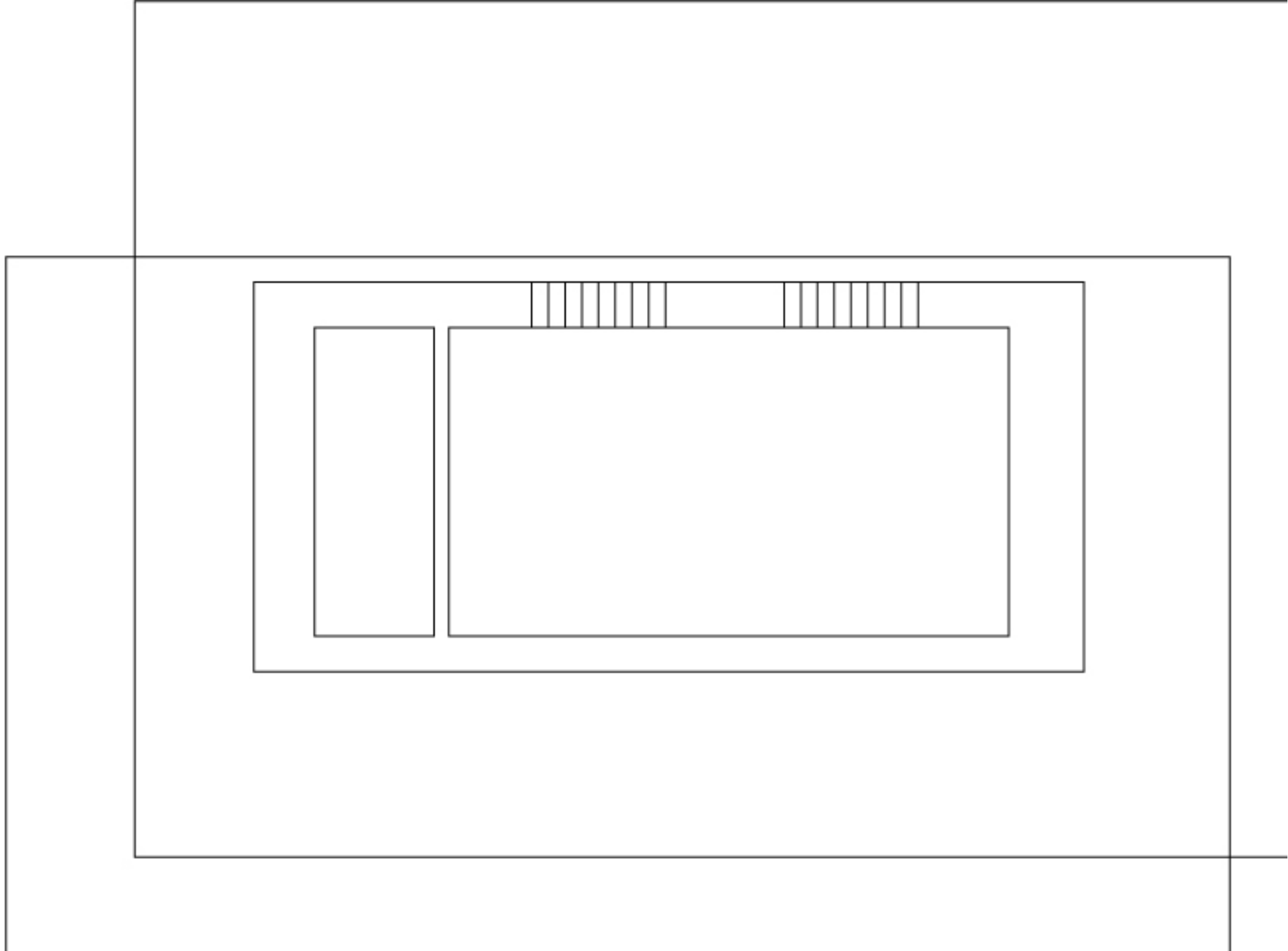
Madiba personally visited the site to discern our worst fears from our horrors. With a broom in his hands, Madiba swept one of the cavities, his frail body seeming not to notice the vigour and tenacity of the work it was doing. Madiba wore a full navy suit as his red tie flew in the wind over his shoulder. He practically dug the depression with that broom.

It did not take long to be clear, while it did take long to be perfectly certain. As the dust was picked up and moved away, it was human remains that were revealed. They were not done dying and still had skin aged into a plastic film over the arches of their cheekbones and hips. Where the skin gave way, there was the discoloured bone of disconsolate red and rusted yellow. Their bodies had absorbed the toxins that seeped down through the mine dumps on top of them. Madiba stumbled backwards at the levy of the grave and fell too.

A forever negotiated itself into the moment Madiba fell. Inside of it, I was falling so rapidly through a hole that my brain surrendered its faculties and sang muffled hymns to the descent. Rosemary sprigs and aloe vera leaves rained in place beside me and I began to see clearly. I was not falling but cocooned in a crack in the world. I was not falling, but the world was haunting me, spinning so violently that it was stripping the fabric of my clothes of the time it took to make them, stripping my hair of the coils of space they wrapped and even stripped my lungs of words to think it all. Its tenses and grammars married me the way bees wed flowers, like it had all of the time in the world to have me, and once it had me, it was gone. Madiba was done falling.

They say he died, again, of grief on the spot. The *Holy project* was never completed. The commission recommended reparations and employment for those who had lost loved ones to holes under very strict and detailed requirements. There have been new reports that holes have begun appearing in rural landscapes, in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape, perfectly consuming entire rondavels. More than that, I found a small hole beneath my bed just a few days ago. It appeared as though it had always been there, with black and brown wrought iron at the verge of a perfectly cylindrical void, about half my height in diameter. A void housed in an iron cylinder.

What I have sent down has found no end to the nothingness that sags inside of there, like a dream deferred. I think I am meant to enter it, again.



The Psychiatric Ward

By Raji Tunde Surajudeen

Raji Surajudeen was born in Lagos, Nigeria where he presently lives. He attended Ojo High School in Lagos and later the University of Benin where he bagged a degree in English and Literature. He has taught the two subjects at different levels around Nigeria. He currently runs a private business and is an aspiring Masters student in Creative Writing. He was shortlisted for the Quramo Writers' Prize in 2020 for his debut manuscript *The Way And The Will*.

Without any stress, the mountain hilltop was surmounted as if it were an ordinary walkway, just as the Lord had relieved the captives and they were like those who dreamed. Her prayers were answered. He followed her down there. At first mama thought he was going to reject the idea so he was not duly informed about his destination. He was only told that they were going to visit a distant uncle who would lend a helping hand to their problems. The uncle may help him secure a job of his choice if he presented himself well. On hearing that, he put on his best appearance since his last visit to Ife. The only difference was his dishevelled hair and beard which made him look more rugged.

It was late in the night before they arrived at the hospital. The signpost at the entrance of the gate caught his eyes. Although it was late and the darkness was overwhelming, he managed to read the lines with the aid of a tiny light bulb located inside the rectangular signboard. The most he could think of was a medical centre, let alone a hospital, or better still, a psychiatric hospital. His most immediate assumption was that the distant relative they had travelled far to see was working in the hospital.

The security ushered them in and directed them to the visitors' quarters where another guard was present. He offered them a room for ten thousand naira per night but mama opted to sleep on the veranda. The money she'd brought wasn't surplus to the extent of being able to pay such an amount for just a night. There were also other people who couldn't be attended to during the day but waited behind for another appointment the next day. Some of them, just like Dara and mama, were unable to afford the money requested by the guards in order to access the rooms. So they opted to sleep anywhere outside just until the next day.

The visitors' rooms were actually meant for those travelling from a far distance for check-ups or those who were unattended to the previous day to use for affordable and lesser fees, but the guards rocketed the fees in collaboration with some authoritative persons in the hospital hierarchy in order to enrich their own pockets. Sometimes it was a choice as rich patients often ballyhooed the guards with money to dance to their tunes, especially when there were many people to attend to.

Mama was given a space on the mat while Dara had to perch on the bench. Elderly women were given consideration first before others. They slept directly outside the reception ward. That was the safest place for those who couldn't afford a room in the visitors' quarters. There was light everywhere

that could deter assailants both human and animal.

Dara was lucky to get himself a bench to roost on. He had to cope with the brooding mosquitoes outside in the open. He knew if he was going to sleep at all, it had to be a one-sided sleep on the flat smooth plank. The night seemed longer as mosquitoes performed praises and worships in his ears. They not only danced and sang, they also drummed at the centres of his eardrums making it impossible for sleep to come. At one point, he had to sit upright and started defending himself against the deadly insects.

In the early hours of the morning, he began to have a sense of what he was there for. Other patients who had more serious conditions began to arrive. Some had both hands and legs chained and were bundled by hefty men to different wards. These people were kept separate from others in a remote part of the hospital. Mama was already inside booking an appointment with the doctor. Dara still had not come to terms with his current sojourn and condition. He began to observe the different levels of madness being demonstrated. Some were severe and very obvious while others were not.

After seeing so much from where he was sitting, he decided to take a walk around the yard. The first person he saw was a fine gentleman. He was accompanied by his mother too, who happened to be an elderly woman. The young man was carrying a pen and a big exercise book. It looked more like a compilation of old and new books. The exercise books were attached together after each book must have been exhausted; he had about six books all joined together to be one. He sat very closely to the old woman who looked overwrought. He was busy solving equations in the book. What caught Dara's eye was the manner in which he held the book and the seriousness behind everything he did. Dara felt everything was alright with the young man until the latter exclaimed without restriction: "Yes, I got the answer! Yes, this is it! I want to go and collect my cars. Those fine cars over there are mine and I will collect them right now. I own that company. In fact, the whole of this place is mine."

His voice roared on until he was interrupted by his mother. "This is what I spent all my money on. Look at what you have turned into," the old woman said in a low voice. She soon began to cry. The woman kept on lamenting in an obvious manner that showed she'd had enough of him.

Dara moved stealthily past them pretending not to have observed anything at all. He just had to make a U-turn at the nearest exit to the road so as to access

the reception area again. There, mama was already outside waiting for him. They had been given a number tag with which they would be allowed in.

The dramas never ended outside the ward and even inside there were more. Some patients were determined to fight the doctors before being given injections to calm their nerves. Awaiting the doctor's call, he began to ponder deep in his mind what could be the major reason he was there? Could it be that he was truly mentally challenged? He tried to equate his own behaviour with that of the young man he saw at the back of the other block to see if there was any similarity. While still pondering, the announcer came to the front again to call the next person.

"Mrs. Ojulopesi!" he shouted, looking vaguely into the crowd to see if there was anyone to answer "yes". Mama was quick to stand up and Dara followed too. They met the announcer who checked that the number tag she was given matched to the one he had. After confirming the genuineness of the tag, he directed them to the next available doctor. Mama walked in front while Dara walked sluggishly behind her.

She opened the door without any hesitation. The doctor was sitting in an arm-chair already waiting for her next client. She directed them to sit right in front of her. Contrary to their expectations, the doctor was a young lady who was about the same age as Dara. Dara had expected an elderly man to be on the seat while his mother had expected anyone older than her to attend to them. The doctor looked plump as she sat comfortably in the office chair. Mama briefly scanned the whole office to see if there was anyone else the doctor was standing in for. Still unable to find anything, the doctor's voice came as a surprise to her to bring her back to reality.

"Good day ma and how may I help you, ma?" Her voice was hoarse, a bit older than her face.

She spoke in the local dialect so that mama could express herself freely. Dara had to adjust himself so as not to disrupt the conversation. Mama explained every incident to her since he'd started smoking. She added that her son just suddenly changed and also spoke of unrealistic experiences.

"Sometimes he would make references to radio programmes calling his name or point to a particular star in the sky and say that it belonged to him. If we tried to correct him, he would call us dummies and illiterates. Later he stopped paying attention to us because he felt we were not of the same cal-

ibre. He said that he had started making friends with rich people who would soon make him rich."

The doctor had to stop her along the way. She seemed to have heard enough from her.

"Okay, ma, I think I have enough reports that I can work on."

She still wasn't convinced by what she'd heard from mama that his mental condition was unstable. She would need to hear it from the horse's mouth. She faced him to have a direct chat.

"Young man, I am Doctor Kemi, and you?" the doctor said.

Dara's answer came simultaneously.

"My name is Dara."

"Is everything mama said about you correct?" she continued.

"No. I am alright. Mama is wrong. There is nothing wrong with me or my brain. All she wants is for me to think like she does and I can't. No! No! No! I can't reason the way she reasons. What I see, she doesn't see and what I hear, she can't hear. What I know, she doesn't know. All I want is just for her to let me be in peace. I reason metaphysically and I don't expect her to understand the meaning of metaphysics. Has she read anything about Plato or Socrates or Wordsworth or Thomas Hardy or Shakespeare or any other?" His voice had risen high.

"Calm down," the doctor added. "Mama said you are schooled?"

"Yes, ma. I am a degree holder."

"But you know I am schooled too?"

"Yes, I know you are a doctor."

"Okay. This is my job which I am paid to do and I am here attending to you for a purpose. My observation is that you are wrong and mama is right."

Dara took some moments to revolt against the reality as spoken by the doctor. He felt he could have had more time to prove that he knew what he was doing but the doctor was not ready for more conversations. She knew the tasks ahead of her and that other patients were waiting outside to be attended to. The brief conversation was enough to make an assertion about his health status. He would be placed on drugs for some months. If there was any improvement after the third or fourth month, he would be allowed to go. In case no improvement was recorded, his stay would be extended.

Her written note was encrypted to be interpreted only by the next person in the hierarchy of the hospital. It was bureaucratic but all must follow due process. First they must go to the pharmacy where the prescribed drugs would be purchased. One step after the other, they progressed gradually until they got to the last thing on the list.

By the time they got to the last item which was accommodation, mama was left with only a token. She had to pay for one week in advance and promised to pay the remaining balance before the one week advance fee was exhausted. After the last payment, there was nothing left to eat. He had to take some of the drugs that same night. Mama had to go to the food seller outside to buy food on credit so that he wouldn't take the drugs on an empty stomach. Mama called him all his pet names before he agreed to take the drugs. First he said he was about to be poisoned and later, he called his mother all sorts of bad names for deceiving him into the hospital. Her resilience paid off when he agreed to take the drugs for that night alone.

In the late hours of the night, she woke up to observe her late night prayers only to realise that her son was still sleeping. The metamorphosed Dara was one who hardly slept at night. Usually that time of the night, he would be awake rumbling like thunder in his room. She didn't want to wake him up and did all her prayers quietly. He didn't wake up from his deep sleep, instead he turned the other direction and snored softly. Her prayers weren't going to be too long because she was tired from walking all day long. In the early hours of the morning, she left the hospital.

By the end of the second week, rehabilitation exercises had fully commenced. He was inducted into the home of the sick. Though he never liked anything about his newly-found home, he tried to conceal his detest as best as he could. One thing he would never accept was the fact that he was abnormal in behaviour. He still believed that everything was normal about him and nature was only being unfair to him. He wasn't the only one who thought that way; almost everyone admitted to the psychiatric hospital shared that same thought.

The antipsychotic pills were first active in his system for some days before he heard lesser voices. Later the echoes of the voices became louder than the effects of the antipsychotics. Howling at night became a regular thing. In the middle of the night, voices of humans turned into those of spirits. He heard different voices wailing like those trapped between two worlds. Some were

yelling for help in order to complete their smooth transitions to the other world while others were willing to relinquish their quests and return to the world they'd left behind.

After the mental drills in the morning hours, he would return to his room to have a quick nap before other activities in the afternoon. He had finally accepted Obi, the young man adjacent his room, as his chat mate. Obi was a spoiled child of a billionaire who had persistently relied on drugs for his sustenance. His parents brought him to the infirmary with both hands and legs chained. He was used to walking with the chains until recently when the doctors were satisfied that he wasn't a threat to anyone anymore. Prior to his sojourn in the psychiatric hospital, he had become so aggressive that he threatened to kill his mother and, another time, he'd caused unnecessary trouble in the street. He had spent more time in the rehab than anyone, making him the most experienced person presently under rehabilitation.

Before they started hanging out together, Dara noticed that a particular guard usually came in to hand over a parcel to Obi early in the morning before the entire hospital was awake. He had tried as many times as possible to know the contents of the parcel but all to no avail. On one fateful morning, Obi's door was ajar and Dara had come back from the rehab centre to relieve himself. On noticing that the door wasn't properly closed, he moved to shut it and then, suddenly, he saw Obi sniffing a whitish substance. Obi's eyes were glowing like those of a wild cat attempting to snatch its prey by the neck. Dara moved unnoticed to his room pretending to have seen nothing.

Obi was highly revered in the institution. His time to leave was approaching. Each time he spoke to Dara, he would emphasise his willingness to gain access to the people of the world again. Dara couldn't help wondering how Obi had been coping with the doctors despite his persistent taking of drugs. The doctors had certified him to be normal and in few weeks' time, he would be allowed to go. Dara wanted to ask him about the magic behind the whole thing and how he had been able to pay off the toughest of the guards to do such a risky job for him. He would do so when they had time to sit together, he suggested in his mind.

In the evening when all the daily activities were over, he called on Obi and they both sat outside to while away time. Dara raised the issues surrounding his new environment and how he had been receiving the worst of treatments from both the guards and the doctors without making any reference to what

he'd seen that morning.

"Everyone wants you to believe you aren't ok," Dara explained.

"And you think they are wrong?" Obi responded briefly.

"But they don't know what I know," Dara continued.

"And you don't know what they know too."

There was a bit pause and Dara almost ran out of words. He managed to speak incoherently, trying to digress from what he was saying. Obi noticed the shift in his voice and decided to chip in more words.

"You see, my friend, let me tell you this. When I first came in here, I was like you complaining of every look I saw, revolting against every act of correction and always making an attempt to run away. I later learnt my hard lesson to always accept their views and see things the way they think are right. Deep inside me, I know they are wrong but I had to let go of my thoughts for another time. If you want to leave this place on time, you've got to start accepting their views of your personality. You've got to start saying 'yes' to their 'yes' and 'no' to their 'no'. The moment you keep contradicting them, they see you as abnormal."

Dara wanted him to continue so that he could eventually ask Obi about the white powder and his relationship with the guard who brought something for him every morning. That would have happened if only Obi had not ended the conversation and gone into his room.

One night, Dara thought he was in another trance when he saw the inmates behaving abnormally. He heard one shout "my spirit" and another said "it is mine", then someone else also added in "it is my own" and they all began to fight endlessly for nothing anyone could ascertain. Not even the guards or the psychiatrists for they also believed that their wandering spirits had come home to pay a visit.

His first months in rehab weren't bad ones at all. At least he stopped believing that he owned the stars and the moon. He wasn't hearing strange voices anymore but still hadn't come to terms with his personality. He had no record of who he was before and who he was going to be. The psychologist attending to him made him understand that everything didn't look the way it used to in his mind and that his thinking had been corrupted by delusion. He emphatically told Dara that his condition must be perfectly okay before he would be allowed to go.

In no time, he mastered his new environment. He began to familiarise himself with some unusual behaviours of people. Professor Tella always came on Monday mornings to examine their mental progression. He was an old-school professor of psychiatry with shaggy hair and a shabby brown suit he wore on most of his outings. This spectacular appearance paved the way for a spectacular description of the old man who never saw anything nice in the fashion of the new generation. He was a reputable first-class professor and highly sought after psychiatrist in town. Dara, like others, wondered after meeting him if the name he had been hearing actually matched the figure he saw in his ward. Each time he saw the highly valued professor, the picture of the young man he saw on the first day he came into the hospital kept coming into his mind – the young man who loved solving equations but finally landed among the nuts. The similarities were not far-fetched, he concluded.

Aside from being the home of the psychos, the psychiatric hospital could also be the home of the geniuses – the unfortunate geniuses who were the victims of unproductive society. A society where there were no enhancements to facilitate the growth of the brain. Dara drew a conclusion from the two characters that only a thin line separates a genius from a mentally challenged person; once the thin line is broken, a lifetime of accolades could become a lifetime of ignominy.

"Oh poor souls," he lamented each time he saw young men being bundled into the ward by their siblings – the best brains and the uncommon ingenuity of mankind being suppressed, humiliated and reduced to nothing. The brains that were capable of changing the world, capable of rare discoveries, all roamed in solitude without any direction.

The psychiatric hospital was an institution with many patrons just like grocery shops and other market places. The number of people being attended to in the emergency and rehabilitation wards on a daily basis was overwhelming. An onlooker from afar, seeing the crowds would have wondered what to buy with his or her debit card from what looked like a grocery shop up ahead rather than people needing to be attended to by a psychoanalyst. The average age of the patients was twenty to thirty-five, both male and female, but the majority were males in their most vibrant time of life.

The problem in this society was that there was no place for the youths in the system. The predecessors refused to make transitional plans that would allow them to retire early and place the younger generation in a position to actively

run affairs. The young people who have little or lesser favourable opportunities around them embark on dangerous acts that put their lives in jeopardy. The vibrancy present in them at that moment would definitely not die without being noticed, whether for positive or negative reasons.

He felt helpless about the whole situation of the country. He was not a stakeholder in the governance of the country. If only he were, he would know how to plot the graph right. The country itself was founded on the basis of man-know-man and not on the basis of excellence. He knew that no-one could become anything except if they knew someone who knew someone who knew someone who occupied a big position somewhere. Only if the system of giving vital employment opportunities to the selected few rather than the merited plenty was abolished, would the country begin to have newcomers in the rankings of successful people in the country. He thought that this would enhance practical transition in the development of manpower and also spread the meagre wealth among the qualified, educated and others yearning to become great.

A society where youths are the victims of an unproductive system would lag behind. The youths are the most industrious in all societies and must be given a level playing field in all areas of life. They must be facilitated and well equipped to meet with their counterparts all over the world. The underdeveloped world has a hereditary system of poverty. Poverty which is as a result of deficits created by progenitors who believed in spending on luxuries without a corresponding replacement for what was spent. Nothing troubles the mind more than the fact that incessant taking from the well without replacement will soon make the well dry.

Later, his detest for books began to decrease. He started looking for journals he could lay his hands on but was advised to refrain from hard-core reading in order to facilitate his mental recuperation. At idle times, he started going through some of the receipts of payments that had been made during the course of his stay in there. He calculated every receipt he could lay his hands on and the amount was on the high side. He couldn't help himself when he burst into tears. He went through the doctor's notes to see what exactly she said about him. It was boldly written: schizophrenia and the different drugs she prescribed to be collected at the pharmacy.

His personality had been dissembled. He found it very difficult to associate with the past freely. His new life was that which he had just acquired in rehab. He had nothing to show as an accomplishment in the past other than the fact

that he went to school. This was explicit in his spoken English. He kept on wondering why all the knowledge he'd acquired during his school days didn't just disappear from his brain. Sometimes he groped for some theories and logical philosophies in his reservoir of knowledge in the brain and he still found them intact. This could have been his greatest calamity if all he had learnt for the past twenty years just went off without any trace. Maybe he would have committed suicide.

The doctor later made him understand that nothing whatsoever was wrong with his brain. He was only suffering from delusion of thoughts which made him behave abnormally. This could have been as a result of the hemp he smoked when he was depressed. Ordinarily his brain was fragile and such a hard drug would only make him hyperactive. Thus he would say things that did not corroborate with his actions or correlate with human reasoning. His depressed mood was a factor too.

When their discharge time was getting close, the patients would be allowed to see the doctor assigned to each one of them regularly so as to get the final corrections to their problems. He seized that opportunity to interact with his doctor when she was less busy. On her final note of advice, she warned him never in his life should he try to take any hard drug if he wanted to be useful to himself and family. Most importantly, he must always be grateful to his mother who stood by him during his hard times. He took inspiration from the young doctor whom he had great reverence for as an exemplary youth who had excelled in her field in life.

The behavioural therapist had given him some cogent reasons why he should change environments once he left the institution. It would be difficult for people who were familiar with his mental history to associate with him spontaneously. Majority would think that he had not been properly taken care of. Some would consider his opinion in public worthless. The stigma of mental disorderliness could stay a long time in the mind of people. Sometimes it would last a lifetime.

Mama had visited him at the end of every month. On her penultimate visit, she saw a great improvement in him and thus felt comfortable to tell him about life who had come to look for him twice after he was admitted to the psychiatric hospital. The first time she came, mama lied to her and said that he had travelled to the north with an uncle who lived there in search of a better life. His mother's intention was clear to him as he listened to her in

disbelief.

How on earth was she going to tell Ife that her heart-throb had suddenly changed into a weed smoker and was seriously battling with his health in the psychiatric hospital? Had she said anything like that, Ife would be more heartbroken than anyone else. He knew for sure that it could have been the end of their relationship. Ife hated anyone that smoked cigarettes with a passion, let alone a weed smoker. On many occasions she had publicly abused anyone who smoked around her.

He thought mama had done the right thing not telling her about the despicable acts he had undergone while she was away. Mama even told him that if Ife was able to locate his whereabouts, she was bent on looking for him. The second time Ife came, mama had to tell her another lie that Dara had not returned their calls and that maybe he wanted to make it big before attending to them.

He immediately felt sorry for himself when he heard that Ife had come back to look for him. No-one could convince him that her next visit wouldn't be a positive reunion. "Who knows? Her mother must have given her a second thought about the whole thing," he said, desperately hoping for a positive reunion once he left the psychiatric hospital.

All was set for him to go back home, but mama had to fulfil the bureaucratic process of departure before he would be allowed to do so. The last time she came around, she was given another date for visitation which would be her final one if her son was deemed fit to be released. She was very happy when she saw him behaving in a calm way. The assurance of the therapist that he would join them at home soon made her happier.

The date was going to be a day of joy. Mama had prepared exceptionally for that day. His younger siblings too were so eager to see their brother back home. In the hospital, Dara was earnestly waiting for his mother as well. He couldn't wait to see the outside walls again. Since he had been in rehab, he had never been granted the permission to move outside the walls. It had been six months since he last spoke to an outsider. His interactions had been between other sick patients and the workers in the psychiatric ward.

The only thing more mind-numbing than the therapists' talks, especially the psychotherapists, was conversing with another mentally disturbed patient. They made him feel as if the world had been turned inside out. In the psychiatric hospital, none of the patients believed in the other – in their minds' eyes, every other person was sick in

the head. It would be of no use to establish any proof that they were not since no-one was sane enough to validate the proof of others.

In the afternoon, mama arrived at the hospital. The final release procedure was short. They had to take the file around the whole department for clearance. After the final authentication, a gate pass was given to them which would be tendered to the security at the gate. The old man at the gate didn't take much time to open the small gate for them on sighting the small documented paper pass. Without doubt, Dara was outside again.

He gazed uncertainly at everything around him not finding any spectacular image to fix his eyes on. The gate didn't look the way it first looked when he'd entered. Everything had suddenly changed. Outside was more appealing than it had been in the last six months. For the first time, he saw people moving around, each not interrupted by any enforcement agent. Nothing whatsoever was more interesting to him than the freedom he just gained. It was like experiencing hell before being considered for heaven; the depth of jubilation in his mind was immeasurable.

GALLERY

My work has been largely inspired by M- Archive. M-Archive is a speculative oral history of black futures and black feminism after the end of the world. My work is a response to the mixture of grief and power in the text. African futures in the age of the anthropocene. In addition to Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *M-Archive After the End of the World*, this work was also inspired by Kathryn Yusoff's text 'A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None' which examines extraction and displacement and traces the origins of the current planetary moment to slavery.

I made this piece in response to the book *M-Archive After the End of the World* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and in particular this passage:

“we broke the earth and now we fall through time. deep gashes in the ground. we scale the edges of our knowing...we fell into the archive of our failure. and this is what we found.”

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Amy Wilson

Here is Another World

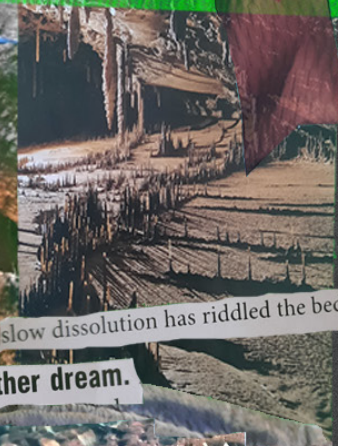
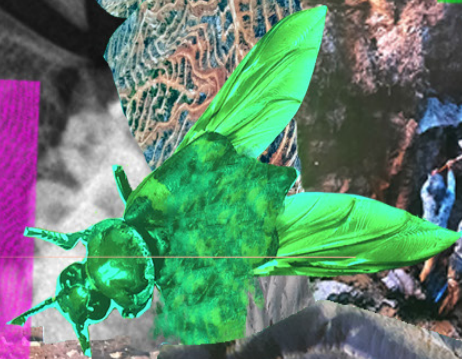
Digital Collage



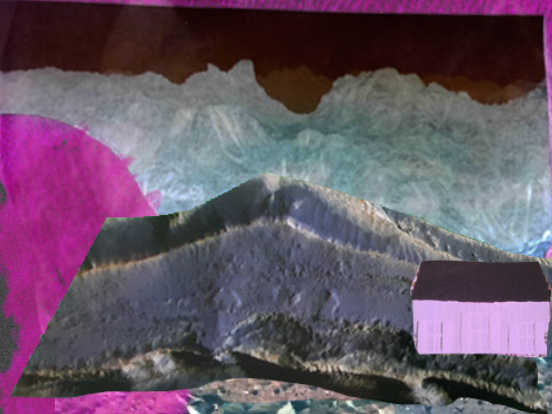
| Actividad | Encargado | Limpieza | Depositos |
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| de | con | de | de |
| Revisión | Fiscal | Accesorios | Viagens |
| | | | |

the earth is still metabolizing
its grief and loss.

After the tunnels collapse on
you, this land will become an
unwilling burial ground.



slow dissolution has riddled the bedrock
Here is another dream.



For the Title Artwork (*Flow Of Universal Change Is In Our Hands*), I used to coloured ink pens and alcohol markers to produce the piece and the idea behind it was to show how we control the flow of events that shape the spaces We exist in by speaking life into our actions and ultimately inspiring change for the better or worse.

I made use of water as a symbol to signify how what we perceive and reflect has the might to destroy but also has the power to cleanse, heal and sustain human life.

Tolo LikaKheswa

Flow of Universal Change is in our hands

Coloured Ink and Alcohol markers



My works are part of my interest in the survival of diverse cultures in our globally connected and fast moving technological advancing society. Black people of South Africa lived and some still live in rural areas and in such areas they are able to freely practice their customs and values.

As the world is becoming connected, it will be difficult for most cultures to practice its customs and cultural values. It is said that the tribe or culture that do not progress soon lose identity or die out. An understanding of this is urgent, if diverse culture are to survive the globalization which comes with multiculturalism. African tribes need to be able to preserve their cultural values. I seek to investigate ways that could help me preserve my Xhosa culture in the social advancements of the future. In the drawings I entered I envision how life will be for us Africans in about 50 year to come, all the drawing I entered come from my sketch books where I openly express these thoughts.

Malwande Ngcingi

Waiting room 2020

Acrylic and newsprints on canvas, 64 x 90 cm



In setting this work, I chose insects, birds and machines. With insects I associate them as small people who live with all their movements in a big world. Birds are principally at the top of the food chain apart from animals such as lions and tigers. Birds are sometimes an associated symbol of the state for strength, prosperity and resilience, like the eagle. But take the Cuculidae – this bird has become a myth in my country as a bird that carries news of death, also this bird leaves its eggs to be incubated in the nests of other birds.

The other bird, which is sometimes a Cuculidae bird too, is larger than the parent bird whose eggs are deposited, so it is like a parasite for other birds with a diet that exceeds that of the birds that incubate them. For the machine to be a rule of thumb for modern industrial civilization, which over time has its benefits and drawbacks, where the machine in technology if used wisely can provide goodness for every human being who uses it but if this becomes greed and misunderstanding, it will become inequality and the destruction of civilization itself.

The proletariat and the steel fangs – this is about the life of lower class society trying to live in the face of class differences . The steel fangs represent upper class society and is a class clarified as government, bureaucrats, elites, mass organisations, parties. A big difference between them is, for example, in running the government system, whether it be as a dictator or an aristocrat, the elite will sometimes image himself, who is more than the lower class, making him arbitrary in acting in social life. However, this is the life of all (both proletarians and elites) who are still trying to be able to fight for life, and will survive the savage conditions of the times that never stop, all of which will have a turning point in fighting for their rights and obligations as human beings, and all of them will continue to eat each other in the cycle of the wheel of life.

Fazar Roma

Proletariat dan Taring-taring Baja #6

Watercolour on paper. 21,8 X 14,5cm



Rizah

Robokhoi



2020:

This piece was made during the first couple of months of lockdown in 2020. A deeply disturbing and fearful period. My activism comes in the form of finding inspiration within difficult circumstances, as well as in the clues & gifts of continual ancestral, ancient & futuristic gifts passed down to us through art. Art has given life to those who have suffered the most & longest throughout time. "Tna Na Revival" is a vision of the persistence of indigenous rhythm & art. The communities who are the most oppressed, have influenced the world with artistic gifts. The Revival is the idea that these principles may persist, develop & thrive where it is most needed.

Grant Julius

"Tna Na Revival"

Mixed media & digital illustration




All of my work comes from an appreciation of the past, as well as an attempt to manipulate historical events that have subjugated people like me. Along with an attempt to unpack history, I also enjoy randomness and the randomness of how things are connected in life.

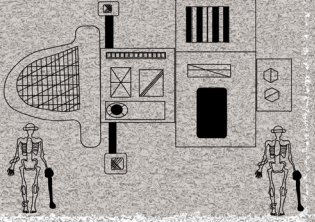
I try to express this in my art, and I am working on developing my art into a distinctive style. The name of my artwork is "Hello. Wait for me". The name is meant to imply the journey of someone through time, not wanting to be left behind. There is also meant to be a line of communication implied through the ships illustrated and the other futuristic elements.

Atlas


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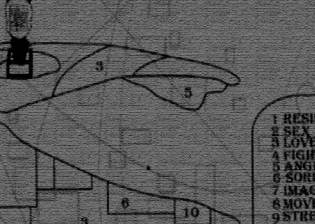
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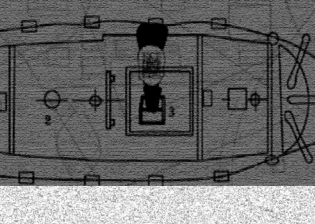


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 2 SEX
 3 LOVE
 4 FIGHT
 5 ANGER
 6 SORROW
 7 IMAGINATION
 8 MOVEMENT
 9 STRENGTH
 10 DIFFERENCE
 11 LEGACY



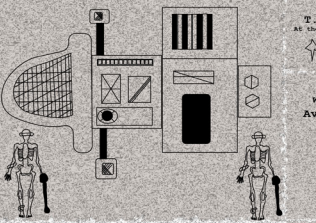
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ARTIST BIOS

Amy Wilson

Amy Louise Wilson is a performer, writer and co-founder of the Lo-Def Film Factory, a pop-up experimental community cinema collective. She studied Drama at Rhodes University, Shakespeare and Performance at Leeds University, followed by an Honours degree in Acting at the University of Cape Town. As an actor, she has played leading roles in numerous local and international film, television and theatre productions including major international TV series *The Book of Negroes*, *Of Kings and Prophets*, and the BBC/Netflix series *Troy: Fall of a City*. Her 2019 solo lecture/performance *Other People's Homes* was developed at Maison Sacree in New York. As a writer, she won the 2020 Distell National Playwright Competition for her play *Another Kind of Dying* which she adapted into a 360 film, screened at the Electric Africa Virtual Reality Festival (2020). Her Virtual Reality experience *The Subterranean Imprint Archive* has been shown at the University of African Futures at Le Lieu Unique, Nantes (2021), the International Film Festival Rotterdam (2021), MUTECH Montreal (2021) and will soon make its Swiss premiere at the Geneva International Film Festival (2021). She was selected as one of this year's artists-in-residence with Transmediale, Akademie der Kunst (Berlin) and Goethe Institut Slovakia. She is committed to facilitating collectively-minded, radical and subversive storytelling.

Fazar Roma Agung Wibisono

I am a painter from Bandung, Indonesia and I studied Fine Art at university. After graduating I worked at an art gallery in Yogyakarta as a painting artist with a contract for seven years. Now I am a freelance painter. Initially, I practised my art on paper as well as on canvas using watercolours, oil paints and acrylics, then started painting on other media such as skateboard decks, milk cartons and other used materials, and sometimes worked on wall murals. As an activist, I get ideas from daily news, the surrounding environment, the social life of the community, as well as looking at aspects of living things, animals and plants that exist in the surrounding environment to become material for creative ideas which I then process in my work.

What inspired/provoked your art? What you are reflecting on in your piece?

In setting this work, I chose insects, birds and machines. With insects I associate them as small people who live with all their movements in a big world; insects survive in large colonies (also insects as if drawn as colonies of humans with low standards of living who move under the system, as well as other stronger human civilizations). Birds are principally at the top of the food chain apart from animals such as lions and tigers. Birds are sometimes an associated symbol of the state for strength, prosperity and resilience, like the eagle. But take the Cuculidae – this bird has become a myth in my country as a bird that carries news of death, also this bird leaves its eggs to be incubated in the nests of other birds. The other bird, which is sometimes a Cuculidae bird too, is larger than the parent bird whose eggs are deposited, so it is like a parasite for other birds with a diet that exceeds that of the birds that incubate them. For the machine to be a rule of thumb for modern industrial civilization, which over time has its benefits and drawbacks, where the machine in technology if used wisely can provide goodness for every human being who uses it but if this becomes greed and misunderstanding, it will become inequality and the destruction of civilization itself.

Grant Jurius

Grant Jurius is a full time practising artist born and raised in the Elsies River suburb of Cape Town. He started pursuing a career in art in 2009. Mostly self-taught, he attended drawing classes at Art B. Gallery in Bellville Library in 2011 and Jill Trappler's Artsource drawing classes in 2012.

Early exhibited work includes a series of charcoal drawings of urban architecture titled, *The Unseen*, at Artvark Gallery in Kalk Bay, 2011.

In 2012 Grant received the Lionel Davis Award which provided an opportunity to attend a three month residency at Greatmore Studios in Cape Town where he later exhibited the resulting work with fellow resident artists. He participated in Thupelo Workshops in 2012 and 2013 where he exhibited the work that culminated from those workshops.

In 2013 he co-founded the interdisciplinary collective, Burning Museum, and later joined the Future Nostalgia music archival and DJ collective.

The Burning Museum collective worked with obscured narratives based on the history and heritage of segregated people. Integrating archival imagery evoking nostalgia of lost or displaced communities affected by various forms of violence against people and the spaces they inhabit. The collective made work that was mostly installed or painted in public spaces, as well as exhibited work at the District Six Museum in Cape Town. Other exhibitions and public activations include showing work in Benin; Dresden, Germany; the CA2M Gallery in Madrid, Spain; and an exhibition at the MoMo Gallery in Cape Town that corresponded to a retrospective at the same time and venue of former exiled artist and photographer, George Hallett.

Future Nostalgia is primarily a DJ collective who work with sonic archives looking back at cultural revolutions through music and art. With Future Nostalgia, Grant has exhibited illustrations and artworks based on celebrating cultural icons and the collective has attended residencies at the Mahogany Room jazz club in Cape Town and curated music for live music events and art exhibitions, including for renowned South African artist, Sam Nhlengethwa. The collective has also performed at the Zeitz MOCAA and Iziko museums.

In June 2013, Grant exhibited a body of work titled *Nothing New* for his solo exhibition at the Black Box Gallery in Cape Town. At the end of 2013, Grant launched an initiative named “The Street Is The Gallery” which focuses on mural painting, community projects, street art and cultural tours centred around graffiti. The tours were associated with various established tour and events companies between the years 2013 and 2018. Activities relating to graffiti tours and murals have led to design exchange programmes in Denmark, as well as a mural commission in Hagen, Germany, and mural projects in Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

In 2019 Grant decided to focus full time on his craft as a muralist, painter, illustrator and graphic designer. Since then, he has done illustration and design work for events (posters) and musicians (album art & events posters), as well as been hired as a graphic designer and illustrator for academic research institutions.

Grant’s current development as an illustrator and painter along with mixed mediums is largely informed by all these experiences. He has pulled ingredients from past projects into focus with a loosely themed direction titled “Son Of A Mantis”, a concept generating ideas around indigenous heritage, ancient myth and how that reflects in contemporary society with an approach of looking back at the ritualistic nature of drawing, wall (rock) painting and storytelling.

Atlas

My name is **Atlas**, I live in Cape Town and I am trans non-binary, with my pronouns being they/them.

My artwork is meant to be a reflection of time and travel. It is about travelling through dimensions of slavery and colonialism into a fantastical world of a space where history and the future meet.

I used Adobe illustrator and I am trying to become a multimedia artist. Working with digital art, writing and video, I would describe myself as a traveller. I believe that I travel daily through different times and spaces. I believe in radical rest, resting your brain and body and dissociating from the heaviness of the world.

My activism is mainly centered around gender as I am drawn to the ability of transcendence through gender. Through my activism around gender and queerness, I also try to learn about identity and how identity is produced and sustained. I am passionate about learning about the past and thinking about possibilities of the future. All of my work comes from an appreciation of the past, as well as an attempt to manipulate historical events that have subjugated people like me. Along with an attempt to unpack history,

I also enjoy randomness and the randomness of how things are connected in life. I try to express this in my art, and I am working on developing my art into a distinctive style.

The name of my artwork is *Hello. Wait for me.* The name is meant to imply the journey of someone through time, not wanting to be left behind. There is also meant to be a line of communication implied through the ships illustrated and the other futuristic elements.

Malwande Ngcingi

I was born in 1992 on 7 January in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. My name is **Malwande Ngcingi** and I am a Gauteng-based artist. I live and work in Ivory Park. My formal arts education started at Saturday art classes at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) in 2009. I completed my BFA at Tshwane University of Technology in 2016. In 2017 I was one of the twelve finalists for the Our Community, Our Future Competition held by Rainbow Media and Di Sarro under the Art Residency Projects Award. I was a featured artist for the Emerging Painters show at the Turbine Art Fair in 2017. I have exhibited in several local galleries, as well as the Pretoria Arts Museum.

Process of creating:

I like creating using my experiences, background, imagination and surrounding. In this manner I create metanarratives with my own realities. I always aim to create through my personality and its powers. Art allows me to see things as I wish and not necessarily as they are, and so I escape that reality by tapping into my world. I can go back in time or to the future, I am able to fuse the past and the future by depicting objects and subjects of both timelines together. I learn about the past and I juxtapose it with technology's gadgets and machinery. This is how I create my reality through canvas and paper, visualising the future.

Parts of interest in creating:

My works are part of my interest in the survival of diverse cultures in our globally connected and fast-moving, technologically-advancing society. Black people of South Africa lived, and some still live, in rural areas and in such areas where they are able to freely practise their customs and values. As the world is becoming connected, it will be difficult for most cultures to practise their customs and cultural values. It is said that tribes or cultures that do not progress, soon lose identity or die out. An understanding of this is urgent if diverse cultures are to survive the globalisation that comes with multiculturalism. African tribes need to be able to preserve their cultural values. I seek to investigate ways that could help me preserve my Xhosa culture in the social advancements of the future. In the drawings I entered I envision how life will be for us Africans in about fifty years to come. All the drawings I entered come from my sketchbooks where I openly express these thoughts.

Tolo LikaKheswa

My name is **Tolo LikaKheswa**, birth name Siyakha Mduli. I am a visual artist, illustrator and graffiti writer from Dimbaza, King Williams Town in South Africa and who is currently residing in Gqeberha. I make use of both traditional and digital media to produce my pieces but I very much am passionate about street art since it offers a platform to connect directly with the public through the installation of murals. It is through this passion for the work that I have dedicated my efforts to grow as a creative by way of collaborating and sharing skills and knowledge with practitioners across different creative fields while engaging with a broad and dynamic audience. The scope of my work is based on social and global change with the focus ranging between empowerment and awareness. I consider myself an activist using art as the driving vehicle and instrument to connect my ideals to my plight of better and safe environments for people who come from a background that is tarnished by a history of violence and poverty.

For the artwork *Flow Of Universal Change Is In Our Hands*, I used coloured ink pens and alcohol markers to produce the piece and the idea behind it was to show how we control the flow of events that shape the spaces we exist in by speaking life into our actions and ultimately inspiring change for better or worse. I made use of water as a symbol to signify how what we perceive and reflect has the might to destroy but also has the power to cleanse, heal and sustain human life.



Upside Down Frown*

By Jarred Thompson
*after Sara Ahmed

I am a writer (he/him) and literary studies researcher and educator, living and loving in Johannesburg. My activism exists at the intersection of storytelling and the possibilities of critique that exist within them. This involves writing stories that centre BIPOC peoples in nuanced and sophisticated ways while finding spaces to dream about alternative ways of being in the world. It also involves narratively confronting the heteropatriarchal, capitalist human paradigm that is a real threat to humanity's queer flourishing alongside non-human species and ecosystems.

Upside Down Frown was inspired by an article I read about the future of cranial implants that may be able to help with various neuroses, such as anxiety or chronic pain. The story emerged from exaggerating this technology into the future and imagining what possibilities such an invasive technology might have in the hands of questionable state machinery.

The story reflects on the ambiguity of happiness, and wonders what the happiness industry might look like in the future, where technology has become both saviour and master. *Upside Down Frown* speculates that, in the future, technology might connect us in such integral ways so as to flatten our differences, our histories, even causing us to forget the intergenerational scars that form part of collective identities. Based in a kind of oblique utopia, the narrative questions by what means national ideals of "social cohesion" become possible, and who do they ultimately benefit?

Cassandra stood above the man on fire. He was laid out on a table in her corner office, along with the other photographs. As she circled them, deciding their order, she rubbed her lower back. There wasn't any pain there anymore, thanks to the electroceutical, but even so, she sometimes found herself massaging the area, remembering the throb that was once lodged there.

His name was Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk who set himself alight on 11 June 1963. Tony had shown her the photograph in high school. It was the monk's complete composure throughout his self-immolation – the way fire sprang from his flesh like a horned animal – that drew her breathless silence then. Tony was always showing her things she wasn't ready to see. On the day she saw the photo, she'd gone home to read up on eye-witness accounts of 11 June. A line from David Halberstam, a journalist, stood out to her. *Humans burn surprisingly well*, it read.

The monk's photograph would be one of the last in the series, she decided. It would come after an image of white crosses stuck askew at the bottom of a barren hill. This photograph, shot decades ago in Marikana, was a reminder of the claw-and-dagger place the world had once been. It was a story of men being sent into Earth's airless belly and returning to the surface, with a wheezing desire for a bigger share of the sun. And then, being swatted away like flies, those men had had their bodies pulverised and pressed into the crust of the Earth, permanently.

Images like these didn't fare well with the public. The wide-spread adoption of social cohesion electroceuticals made the museum's exhibits superfluous, according to the Department of Happiness. Despite that, Cassandra was grateful for the invention of the small cranial implants, made from hundreds of electrodes packed into a few cubic millimetres that listened to the oscillations of an individual's neural network in order to pinpoint the emergence of sick circuits, altering them before they caused further distress.

She had succumbed to a sick circuit back in university when, after a long night of drinking, she'd fallen down a flight of stairs. Her back injuries resulted in months of achingly intense physiotherapy. Even after the muscular tear had healed, the discomfort in her lower back remained. Like the never-ending echo of a scream. The pain-memory prevented her from sitting on hard plastic chairs or doing backbends in yoga, or even from being held by a would-be lover on a strobe-lit dance floor. Before the fall, she'd always

been a risk-taker, inclined to push her body to its drinking limits, but ever since, she had recoiled into a sober existence. When medical experts began touting the ability of electroceuticals to rewire pain pathways in the nervous system, she was eager to suture the chasm that had emerged between her body and mind.

Hey, Cass. How's the selection going? A voice note from Audre came through the speakers of the office.

"I just have to pick a few more and we'll be ready. Send message," said Cassandra.

Are you hundred percent sure about this? was Audre's reply.

She left Audre's question unanswered, sliding the photographs back into their plastic sleeves and locking up her office.

*

Whenever she took the bicycle lane past the Department of Happiness she would stop briefly outside the mammoth glass building to watch the people sitting quietly in the lobby, waiting for their name to be called. The department provided in-depth life narrative analysis for all citizens. Using its vast archives and teams of researchers, it produced thousands of life reports: detailed leatherbound journals documenting the exact steps an individual should take to reach and maintain their happiness. It was obligatory for every citizen to receive such reports at the beginning and end of every decade. Every report came with a barcode that, once entered into a vitality keypad, provided the recipient with enough capital in one's vessel account to sustain themselves as they worked towards the directives outlined in their report.

Cassandra balanced herself on her electric bicycle with one foot on the curb, the Department of Happiness metres away, checking her wristwatch to see how much she had left in her vessel account. It was enough to see her through the museum's closure. She knew she would have to go back to the department once the work at the museum was completed to get her new life assignment. She was dreading going back. Though the building was an architectural marvel – made to resemble a giant glass egg, its outer panels refracting sunlight into rainbows that streamed across the lobby – she couldn't bring herself to sit in that queue and watch the same nature documentary that had been showing since the department's inception.

The documentary, *Unicellular Saviour*, was the poster child of the post-climate epoch. There was hardly a person alive who hadn't watched the story of how the engineer-

ing, and global distribution, of a bioreactor, fuelled by a strain of algae called *Chlorella vulgaris*, added an extra fifteen minutes to the doomsday clock by soaking up billions of tons of CO₂ from the atmosphere, simultaneously providing barrels of biofuel for vehicles and factories.

While hanging out with Tony and his lovers, she sometimes tried bringing up her hesitancy about going back to the department for a new life assignment. She always received the same stunned reaction from them. Thinking about it, she imagined superimposing their surprised faces onto the people who had witnessed the death of Thich Quang Duc.

Yes, she thought, their faces fit right in.

She'd been living with Tony for three years. Their apartment stood opposite a new electroceutical surgery that was open six days a week. Tony worked at the surgery's reception. He really believed in the new technology, never wasting a day to report back on another success story. "We're featuring this rehabilitated coke addict on our website next month. Cass, it's a breakthrough for this patient. They've been to psychotherapists and some well-known clinics, but nothing has killed their craving like the electroceutical. They're practically a new person," said Tony, pouring wine for Lebogang, Keano and Aanya.

Cassandra listened as she ate Lebogang's shitake and kale pasta, secretly craving a toasted bacon and egg sandwich. Tony was the on-the-go type, always with an eye for the next big thing in tech. If it wasn't for him, Cassandra wouldn't have known about the science behind electroceuticals. Though she never mentioned it, she admired how much faith he had in technology. Her faith never moved past agnosticism, though she couldn't deny that when technology worked in humanity's favour she felt her commitment to faithlessness waver.

"Tell me again babe, how does it work?" Keano asked Tony, leaning his head on Aanya's shoulder. Aanya played with Keano's curly hair with one hand while twirling Lebogang's pasta with her fork.

"Well, the implant detects the rising of a craving in the reward centres of the brain. Then through electrical stimulation, or inhibition, it squelches the neuron pattern that's driving the addiction," explained Tony.

The rest of the table looked at him blankly, but Cassandra had already heard

this many times. "Think of it like this," she began, "...if our behaviour is patterned by the firing of specific neurons in distinct, synchronised ways, then each time neurons fire one after the other it's sort of like codes for the behaviour, or the memory, or the feeling. Right, Tony? Is code the right word?" she asked.

Tony was beaming. "Someone's been listening," he laughed. "But that's pretty much it. Think of the brain like an orchestra playing a symphony while following multiple conductors. The trick with electroceuticals is that they tone down certain conductors over others. So if some musicians are stuck playing an allegro movement, then the electroceutical reminds those musicians of other, slower movements they can play, or directs them to follow a different conductor."

"Keano should buy one for his neighbour," said Aanya, clearing the table.

Keano got up to help Aanya while Lebogang shifted over to where Tony was sitting. Tony kissed her, their tongues lingering in each other's mouths. It didn't make Cassandra uncomfortable. She was accustomed to the four of them being intimate like that. They called themselves a community of love and would often proposition Cassandra to join them. But, for her own reasons, she preferred living on the outside, looking in. That amount of love coming at her, from multiple people, all with its own shades of ambiguity, insecurity and fantasy was too much. Loving one other person, besides yourself, was complicated enough. "What's up with your neighbour?" she asked, finally, getting up to help with the dishes.

"Oh Jehovah, he's a dying species that man. Believes in the missionary position and the sanctity of procreation over anything. And I mean *anything*," said Keano.

"Geez, do people like that *still* exist?" Cassandra thought of her parents, wondering whether she should contact them. It didn't take long for her to decide against the idea. It wasn't because she didn't love them – she'd been sending care packages, filled with their favourite treats, at the end of every month. No, it was because they hated her living arrangements with Tony and his community of love. The threat of hellfire was more real to them than any new post-climate change, free-love movement.

Lebogang reached over and stroked Cassandra's hand. "Believe it, girl. But, you know, I feel sorry for him. No part of the world he's lived his life in is left intact. Boundless creativity, the kind that touches everything, even sexuality, scares these uncles," she said.

"It's like the games kids play in sandboxes. When you change rules mid-game, it's enough to get anyone's back up against the wall," said Aanya, wrapping her arms round Keano's waist and swaying to the jazz music playing in the background.

Cassandra wondered whether her museum was an outdated sandbox. Was that why it was being shut down? She had been meaning to tell Tony about the closure, but it was hard to get him alone these days. "I'm gonna run a bath. It's been a killer of a day," she said.

"Go ahead babes, we'll clean up," said Tony.

*

It was a few minutes past midnight. The community of love was sleeping over at Keano's. She appreciated it when they left her alone in the apartment, but this was the wrong night to be alone. Thoughts about the museum's closure and the conversation she'd had with an official from the Department of Happiness circled like mosquitoes around her ears. The official, a pangolin-looking woman, informed Cassandra that the department's nationwide implantation of an electroceutical designed to "heal inter-generational scars on the nation's psyche" was picking up speed. It had been decided that the museum's archiving directive would no longer be required.

This "social cohesion project" would, according to the official, render museums obsolete institutions and an unproductive way of engaging history. "The past has too much emotional baggage anyway. And this nation-building electroceutical is all about giving our country's collective memory a good spring cleaning," the official had said.

Cassandra remembered feeling powerless standing in the air of the pangolin-woman's certainty. Lying in bed, she replayed the scene, watching herself walk the official out, down a long corridor of granite sculptures of liberated slaves, past multimedia installations of mothers keening at the feet of police officers and an immense painting of birds perched on a wall of barbed wire dripping blood and sinew.

She turned over in bed trying to shake the memory loose, only falling asleep when the visual of the official, smiling widely while getting into her car, blurred and blackened.

*

Three months passed. Most of the museum's artefacts were being transferred overseas to the few countries that kept museums open – for the time being. Cassandra stood at the window of her office and watched the robotic sweepers glide up and down, cleaning a pavement that was already grime-free. Across from the museum, a large electronic billboard advertised, in bright neon purple letters, the nation-building project of the Department of Happiness.

*An electroceutical for every citizen.
Do the right thing. Protect your neighbour.
Heal yourself. Heal the world.
Sign up! Never feel overwhelmed again.*

She looked beyond the billboard, resting her eyes on the skyline, made up of a labyrinth of reinforced glass interspersed with solar panels. All the skyscrapers had been refashioned into high-rise, botanical forests; greenery bloomed from out of every window, and when gusts of wind swept through the city whole buildings rustled. It was some consolation to her that sections of the museum would be made into indoor gardens, while other floors were being annexed into meat labs where lamb, poultry and beef would be grown from test tubes.

The more inevitable the closure, the less potent her reasons for fighting to keep it open. Why re-traumatise people with humanity's sins, she wondered. The world had moved on, the old crises of race, gender and money were entertaining parables for kids at school. The older people, who still remembered these issues, no longer held the reins of power, or their minds for that matter. Most of them suffered from Alzheimer's because of the mercury they'd inadvertently consumed in their food when they were younger.

Maybe this was why she had loved her work at the museum. The job of remembering was never complete because history, even when written down in large tomes, had not been adequately compiled. There had to be a place, outside of the mind, where people could go to remember, not themselves specifically, but the human spirit – overwrought, tortured, pummelled and still, enduring.

Cass, we need your exhibition label. Is it done? Audre's voice reverberated in the office, snapping her out of reverie.

"Almost. I'll send it to you by end-of-day. Send," she said, a beep from the speakers acknowledging her voice. She walked over to the bookshelf and pulled out a red, leatherbound book: the life report that she'd received from the department a decade ago. The pages were firmly uncleaved from the book's spine, unread, and when she opened the report to the summary section she heard the spine flex and crack, as if waking to an old pain. There was one paragraph she was interested in rereading.

The citizen has a proclivity for the past. Attracted to the documentation, and interpretation, of the meaning of past narratives for the present. It is advised the citizen pursues curatorial practices in line with the millennium goals of healing inter-generational scars. The citizen is encouraged, however, that by the end of the decade she should move beyond such proclivities towards the understanding that forgetting is its own cure. It is the Department of Happiness' view that sins of the past are best buried and not spotlighted on walls, especially since crises of the past are innocuous in the post-climate era.

When she first read that paragraph a decade ago, she was grateful the department held very little political sway. But shit, do things change, she thought, sitting at her desk and pulling up a holographic word processing document that floated above the desk.

The cursor flicked on and off, patient, as if it had all the time in the world for her self-pity. She didn't have the time; Audre needed her curator write-up, but she didn't know how to capture what her work at the museum had meant, what this last exhibition might mean for the future.

"Pull up zoom-in fractals," she said and the screen morphed into a Koch snowflake: a fractal made from an equilateral triangle multiplied by itself, over and over. The screen zoomed into the snowflake's edges, revealing an endless perimeter of an identical repeating pattern contained in a finite area. This is it, she thought, reaching for the small of her back.

*

Cassandra sat with Aanya on the couch. They passed the lips of a hookah pipe between them, smoke flavoured with watermelon and mint filled the apart-

ment. Tony and Lebogang had gone to see Keano at the electroceutical surgery; he'd been booked in for an implant that promised to ease his depressive episodes. All Keano's doctors said that his was an especially resistant case. Each new psychiatric drug administered seemed to throw his brain chemistry into more tumult and this implant was the very last resort in a long line of therapies. Both Cassandra and Aanya were hoping that it would work.

"So, you're all ready for the final exhibit?" asked Aanya, pulling on the pipe and filling the lounge with the sound of its watery gurgle.

"Just about. But honestly, I can't help but feel cheated. Like the work I've put in has been for nothing. And now with more people getting incentivised to receive the social cohesion implant I'm worried about the future of feeling. I'm worried that things will become - flat."

Aanya was quiet. She got up to change the head of the hookah pipe, pulling out a small bag of weed and sprinkling some into a fresh hookah head of bub-blegum shisha. "I didn't tell you but... I got the social cohesion implant two weeks ago."

She knew Aanya was building up to something. It was part of the reason they'd stayed behind while the others visited Keano. Cassandra wasn't angry, she wasn't even surprised. Below her bedrock of calm, however, there was a vein of disappointment she tried to ignore. "This is the future, right? No more generational trauma passed down to children. No more history," she said, mumbling the last phrase through a mouthful of smoke.

Aanya nodded, unsure. Though she didn't let on in front of the others, she liked Cassandra, so much that often, while in Tony's bed with Keano and Lebogang, she found herself wondering what reveries Cassandra was having in the next room.

The mixture of marijuana and tobacco settled into their bodies gently, lulling them. Mixed in with the instrumental piano in the background, both women fell asleep on the foldout couch. Later, when they woke, Tony's door was closed, and the hookah pipe had been cleaned and placed in the corner.

"They must have not wanted to wake us," said Aanya, rubbing her eyes.

"Probably." Cassandra noticed how close she'd gotten to Aanya during their

sleep, close enough to smell the watermelon-scented smoke in her hair. "I should get to bed."

"We can stay here," said Aanya, a tender light in her eyes.

"I've got to be up early."

"Sure," said Aanya, reaching for the throw and covering herself.

Moments later, Cassandra sat on the edge of the bed, door closed, wondering whether the vibe between them was just in her head. It had been so long since she'd felt the urge to be touched by someone. Ever since she had been in remission from the HIV, she'd decided to give herself time to find out what that meant.

Living with the condition for a good part of two decades and then suddenly being declared free of it, even momentarily, made her want to take her next steps in love carefully. Her hopes of being free from the virus had been dashed years before, when another supposed cure was introduced to the public. She had started slumping back into old habits, excessive drinking, random virtual hook-ups via apps that made one believe they were sleeping next to someone when, in fact, they were alone in bed.

When the supposed cure proved to be a red herring, she couldn't bear to share the burden of dashed possibility with anyone, not even the community of love. None of them knew about her health issues, and she wanted to keep it that way. Hope was a burden best carried alone.

*

The Affect Museum Presents: A History of Happiness.

The sign above the entrance was bold, each letter receiving a different colour. People streamed into the exhibition space; invitations, advertisements, emails, and social media messages had gone out to the many affiliates, companies, individuals, artists and institutions that had supported the museum over the years.

Cassandra stood in a corner, glancing over her exhibition write-up which had been uploaded onto the VR glasses each person received upon entering. The glasses walked people through the exhibit in exquisite detail, providing hyperlinks to videos, podcasts, articles, and other images and commentary connected to the photographs displayed on the walls.

Any history of happiness is a history of exclusion. Cassandra's words flowed up on the VR glasses she had on. She stood in front of Thich Quang Duc on fire and clicked on a hyperlink, revealing an image of the monk's scorched heart, preserved by fellow monks as a holy relic, and later stolen by the South Vietnamese government.

From the murmurs and side glances she was receiving, she was unsure as to whether it was hitting the right notes. As head curator, she'd be judged harshly if the museum's final exhibition wasn't well received, it might affect her next life assignment.

She walked over to another image, trying to distract herself. The etymology of "hap" in "happiness" means "chance", like in the word "happenstance". And though any history of happiness is a history of those excluded from sharing in that happiness, there is always a chance that happiness can be stumbled upon in the unlikeliest of places. She stood in front of an image of a baby girl being thrown from a burning building by her mother. The photograph had been taken mid-flight, the baby girl floating above a group of strangers, all standing in the street with arms outstretched, desperate. She clicked on a hyperlink – video footage from that day. The baby had been thrown, and caught, so quickly that if the person taking the video hadn't had their camera out at that very moment, the world would have missed it.

The murmuring in the room got louder. It became harder for Cassandra to concentrate. The commotion broke loose of its restraints when a strange nausea overcame people in the crowd. Suddenly, a man from the Department of Happiness ran across the floor and puked into a steel dustbin. Then, like the contagiousness of a yawn, more people started throwing up, some not even managing to make it to a dustbin.

Cassandra moved on to the next photograph.

But, of course, a desire for happiness felt by the wrong type of person, in the wrong circumstance, has often led to tragedy. Especially when that desire, that dream,

upsets the happiness of others. A pre-conditioned happiness that has been engineered out of the spoils of spilt blood, fractured bone, closed mouths. She stood in front of the photograph of the hill at Marikana, afraid to click any of the hyperlinks attached.

Sometimes a photograph needs no further evidence, she thought, taking off the VR glasses. Security were escorting people out, pools of vomit being stepped in and streaked across the white-tiled floor. Audre rushed towards her, panting. "Cass, the exhibit is making people sick. We should shut it down."

"Not yet," said Cassandra, her eyes falling on the pangolin-looking official from the department standing, unmoved, in front of the last photograph in the exhibit. "Wait here."

Cassandra walked over, careful not to step in flourishes of orange and brown vomit on the floor.

The official still had her VR glasses on and was seemingly immersed in the image in front of her.

Cassandra put on her glasses once more.

Happiness seems to be situated outside of us. It is something we are after. Something we want inside us, but something that cannot be held onto for very long. It doesn't seem to be a permanent state and so to strive for it solely, above all else, seems too simplistic. This exhibit is about discordance, chaos, and, I would venture, the betrayal of our invested hopes in people, institutions and the objects we surround ourselves with in order to feel comforted and secure. In order to feel that we are, indeed, on a road to somewhere.

The official took off the glasses. There were tears in her eyes. "The social cohesion electroceutical is important for the healing of intergenerational trauma. For the relieving of the emotional burden of history so our offspring can be born stress-free, their nervous systems unfettered by the wounds of their great-great-grandmothers..." As the official spoke, her voice remained composed while her face contorted into a weeping knot.

Was this what implanting social cohesion did to people? Cassandra imagined the electroceutical inside the official's skull, working overtime to down-reg-

ulate the circuits that might cause her to remember the wounds of history, embedded in her body. Her body was rejecting the control imposed on it from the outside.

The official, unsure of what was happening, wiped her tears and walked off. "I will see to it that no one is subjected to this garbage," she shouted back, her tears falling into puddles of vomit.

Cassandra considered the last photograph in the exhibit, taken decades ago, during a global pandemic. It was an overhead print of the river Ganges. In it, corpses had washed up onto the river bank, like flotsam heaved from the guts of an ancient god. People were pulling bundles of flesh from the water, trying to put names to faces, while covering their own with masks.

She scrolled down the screen of her glasses to read the last paragraph of her write-up.

A fractal, though thrown into chaos, once magnified, always returns to an inexplicably ordered pattern. It is this that is so remarkable about life. That it can be lost so utterly and then regained. This exhibit, then, is about situating the weight of tragedy on the same scale as the weightlessness of bliss.

*

A month passed. It was the day of the museum's closure. Cassandra sat at her kitchen counter, redacting parts of her life report.

The citizen has [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] meaning [REDACTED]
the citizen pursues [REDACTED]
healing [REDACTED] scars. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] end [REDACTED] beyond [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] forgetting [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] sins [REDACTED] are best [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] spotlighted on walls [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

She closed the report as Tony and Keano walked out the bedroom, both sullen. "What's the matter?"

"Aanya. She's broken up with us. Says she needs to find herself. Whatever that means," said Tony, sitting down at the counter.

"I thought she was happy," said Keano, rubbing his head. The scar where his electroceutical was implanted had healed. He seemed better, thought Cassandra, although it took him longer to get excited over things that he typically enjoyed. Even the news of Aanya's departure seemed to reach Keano like a never-ending interlude between movements of an opera. Or maybe it wasn't like that at all. Maybe Keano's electroceutical fed the neural concerto of the break-up into larger networks of perspective. She couldn't decide which was better: fixation or detachment?

"She just needs space, I'm sure. Everyone needs to be alone for a time, right?" said Cassandra.

The guys looked at her weirdly, almost accusatory. As she left the apartment and headed for the museum, she told herself Aanya's leaving had nothing to do with her.

She hadn't expected to take the route past Aanya's flat. What was the point of riding past if she didn't check in on her? She knocked and knocked, but the door went unanswered. It wasn't until she got back on her bicycle that she spotted Aanya coming round the corner, a life report in her hands.

"You've been to the department?"

"Time for a new life report," said Aanya.

"What does it say?"

"Inconclusive. I have to go back for more tests."

"Oh...did you hear what happened at my exhibition?"

"I did. Crazy how they're spinning it to make it seem like it's your fault. When the electroceuticals were faulty."

"That's just it Aan, I don't think they're faulty."

"Let's talk inside," Aanya drew her phone and ordered the kettle in the flat to start boiling. "Kettle's on. Want some coffee?"

"Can I come over tonight? There are things I need to say, things you don't know."

"Me too." Aanya put her phone away, wanting to touch Cassandra, but holding back.

As she got back on her bike, Cassandra wondered whether she'd given herself to the past too fully, letting herself be hardened by it. Why not share her hope of permanent remission with Aanya? Why not indulge her faith that her parents might, one day, accept her friendship with Tony? Why not be seen holding another's hand, in the light of an uncertain sunrise?

*

Later, as Cassandra entered the lobby of the museum, she came upon Audre standing in front of a small crowd. Some of the people she recognised from the final exhibit. One by one, strangers came up and thanked her for reminding them what it felt like to be overthrown by sadness and pangs of regret. Her attention was pulled in so many directions that she didn't know how to feel.

"Cass, there is someone that wants to meet you," said Audre, escorting her through the crowd towards an androgynous individual in a floral kaftan.

"Darling, is *this* the genius behind A History of Happiness? I'm Khumbula and let me just say, I am *thrilled* with the work you're doing. It's a fucking travesty that this museum is closing. But listen, there's a couple of people I know who'd be keen to sponsor a nationwide tour of your exhibit before it disappears. Let's stir shit up, darling. Stir!"

Khumbula's enthusiasm was infectious. Here was a slim chance to have her work shown to a broader audience and then, who knows, spark conversation, a movement against forgetting? She thanked Khumbula graciously and excused herself to the bathroom.

Locking herself inside a cubicle, she keeled over, clutching the small of her back. An unfamiliar joy surged through her body, straining to find its exit. Her breath became too slippery to catch.

Suddenly, Thich Quang Duc appeared in her mind. How readily his body merged with the fuel he doused himself with, she thought. How instantly his ghosts charred and cindered. Humans do burn surprisingly well. But only because we haunt, and are haunted so well.

Cassandra wiped her eyes. In the bathroom mirror, she prepared her face for the crowd.



Of Pilgrims And Liquor

By Xabiso Vili

Xabiso Vili (he/him/they/them) is a multi award-winning performer, writer, new media artist, producer and social activist from the Eastern Cape, currently based in Johannesburg. His writings explore his inner world relating to the outer world. Xabiso has been published in various anthologies and has performed on four continents. He is currently involved in researching and creating methodology for how the writing process can be utilised with new technology mediums as a therapeutic method. His activism stems from using writing and performance as a tool to interrogate society and various oppressions whilst working towards imagining solutions for said oppressions. His debut album, *Eating My Skin*, was released in 2016, followed by his one-man show *Black Boi Be*, his first poetry collection *Laughing In My Father's Voice* released in 2018, and he co-authored a Young Adult novella, *The Deep State Interchange*, in 2021. In 2019, he was awarded a Digital Lab Africa Prize and created the Augmented Reality exhibition *Re/Member Your Descendants* which examines how young South Africans relate to their ancestors and descendants. This premiered in Paris at the New Images Festival, alongside his first Projection Mapping installation *Chosi Chosi* as part of his residency at Cité Internationale Des Arts in 2021.

He recently won the Poetry Africa Slam Jam and will be representing South Africa at the World Poetry Slam Championships in Brussels in 2022. *Of Pilgrims And Liquor* imagines a world where our daily physical protests are linked to our own spiritual journeys. In this piece, our protagonist goes from being an external spectator to being well within the fray. What do our spiritual journeys look like, what consequence do they have to our physical existence? These are some of the questions *Of Pilgrims And Liquor* asks as we slowly unravel the thin veil between here and there.

I get off the bus carrying all my shit, looking grimy as fuck, feeling and craving some death. The Greyhound drops me in front of a church. On its steps, there is a disintegrating man selling hard-boiled candies and loose cigarettes. I carve my way out from all the fluttering men offering to carry my luggage for a small fee. They've been known to take lives as recompense for their labour. I go towards the disintegration, toss a couple of coins his way and slide one cigarette into my mouth and the other, behind my ear. I ask him:

Where's the closest bar?

He points, fingers gnarled, knuckles quaking, towards the clock tower, which is in front of some luscious greenery. I take this to be the university.

Walk that way, you'll find something you like. Mind the cops, they smell blood these days, he says.

I thank the old man for the advice, light the ciggie with the torn up box of Lion matches he proffers. Lungs burning, I heave my bag higher onto my shoulders, button up my coat and follow the stench of death, looking forward to what it's got to offer.

I check a spot called The Mad Hatters, I've been walking five minutes, passed seven churches, started to think I was going spotty. Papa used to call Mama's spottiness holy. Mama told to me avoid this little town, with its forty-something churches in its eighty-something kilometre radius, she knew the Lord would catch me here. Maybe she was afraid of what unholiness I could get up to in a place so heavily guarded.

I figure, Jesus ain't drinking at a place like this. Shows what I know. The spotty don't admit they're spotty, do they? Just make churches out of beer bottles, call themselves artists, drunkards, addicts. I like this place despite the three white boys causing a ruckus at the table next to mine. The cold amber comes quickly and I can see the war from here without becoming a casualty. You can't turn yourself into a sacrifice too early on a pilgrimage like this. That comes later.

The Mad Hatters is across the road from the clock tower and its greenery. I'm just watching it tick, listening to the music of breaking glass and screaming children.

Sasi, sasitshilo, sathi lo ngunyaka wethu.

What a wondrous choir. My hand keeps flapping towards my ear. I'm trying to smoke less, so I keep fighting.

Not yet, I tell my demons.

I've read pilgrimages call for fasting. I order another brewskie instead.

Before I left, I was all hunky-dory. All suit-wearing, Ogilvy-working, advertising to the masses, convincing them to buy shit they didn't want, all down and dirty in the pretty infested Jo'burg streets. I ran with the pack, fuck it, I led the damn pack. Cash to blow and blow to spare. But this honey – in one of them colonial conqueror Kitchener's pubs, you know the type, all Voortrekker architecture with overpriced Windhoek lager and filled with the new-new black elite dressed in that new-new hobo chic – that's what this honey was wearing.

I thought I'd get a little kiss-kiss going with her. From the moment I saw her sway in, I was already sauntering towards her. The boys keeping a chorus of wolf whistles chiming behind me, in rhythm to that "Koze Kuse" joint. Her jeans were struggling to keep it together, but with the help of my friend tequila, this quick tongue Grandpapa blessed me with and a too-hot summer, I was sure to end that futile struggle real soon.

My game had never been so smooth. I fed her what she needed to hear, baby.

She was all

Rhodes Must Fall,

I was all

fees must fall too.

She was all about

intersectionality,

I was like

the revolution will be queer, black woman-led.

She started to gander that your boy had some schooling. Tried to trip me up, right, on some

fuck fuckboys

yes please fuck me

said I. She started giggling because your boy is slick with the humour. Everything was going just dandy, got her in one of those quiet corners, those hand up your thigh corners, singing to her:

I can't feel my face when I'm with you.

I'm about to pull the finisher, the closer, when your girl starts tripping. Her eyes were all aflutter, her hands clenching into fists like she's rioting. Her pupils dilating, rolling back into her head. Telling me, *your ancestors are calling.*

I'm trying to slide away because your boy ain't got time to be dealing with some honey's acid comedown. She clutched my wrist in an almighty death grip. Called me by my clan name. Now I'm listening real close because ain't nobody call me that since Grandpapa died. Tells me, *your guardians have abandoned you, you've strayed too far, been deaf too long. If you don't go searching, if you don't start fighting, they're going to take everything.*

That's what brought me here, to The Mad Hatters. I didn't leave immediately after. I mean, I left the honey at that pub, made my excuses to the disgruntled fellas and went home to the good ol' sky rise in Sandton and slept like I was chasing demons. But I didn't go a-searching 'til much later.

As the third beer arrives, I'm thinking about where to start searching for some ancestors. So deep in thought, I almost swallow my beer through my nose when I hear the first explosion.

Sizonqand' amapolisa, qand' amapolisa.

Down the road, there's smoke streaming out of a church I haven't seen yet. The three white boys next to me, looking as raggedy as I feel, start tsk-tsking.

There they go, burning shit again, they say.

I see some hundred black kids running out of the church, crying and screaming and throwing bottles and bricks.

Qand' amawewewewe.

This is where the chorus was coming from. I think the beer is getting to me because I swear they look like Mama and Grandpapa.

This country is going to shit, man. I must move to Australia, no one cares about okes like us here anymore. It's a direct attack on people like us who work hard for our money, the white boys continue.

A canister lands between the kids and releases another explosion with enough

tear gas to scatter the entire crowd. Now I can see the police behind them firing rubber bullets at all of the scurrying bodies.

If I had my rifle, I would show them. We built this country. It was better during apartheid. They must just go back to where they came from, the white boys comment.

The white boys notice me sitting next to them for the first time.

What do you think, bhut'? they ask.

I put down the bottle I was about to hurl.

I'm just looking for some beer and my ancestors, I respond, putting on that smile Grandpapa taught me to calm down the cops during his time.

Cop cars are surging all around the crowd. Anybody the pigs can get their trotters on is being thrown into the back of them.

You aren't like those blacks, you've got a good head on your shoulders, says one of the white boys.

He's tall, blonde and goes to the gym a little too often. I clench my bottle again and wonder if I can take him out before the other two get to me.

I know where we can get some beer and girls that'll make you forget your ancestors, says the shorter, fatter, redder white boy.

I unclench my beer and say, *I'm game,* with my Grandpapa's smile again.

We pay our bills, jump into the back of their bakkie and drive past black children in police vans singing my Grandpapa's struggle songs like confessionals.

Qand' amawewewewe.

I light my last ciggie, *Here's to not being a sacrifice,* I say.

But the white boys don't get it.

After that night, I stayed away from Kitchener's and its too-suave elite. Tried to forget all about that honey too, and escape to some darker drinking holes. Found myself puking in shebeen toilets in Soweto, still seeing her eyes rolling up in the bowl. Grind-

ing on questionable women to “Shumaya” in Tembisa *chesa nyamas* but still feeling that death grip every time I got close to kissing, hearing Grandpapa every time I got close to fucking.

I still ain’t met a man fast enough to outrun his demons. I’ve met enough that have tried. The thing about straws and camels’ backs is that you never know what that last straw is going to look like. When my phone started a-ringing I was sleeping next to this mountain woman, naked in all her whiteness. You know the type, hills for breasts, tastes like the last time you died, reminds you of your mother, suicide and all the shit you’re trying to run away from. It was a too-cold winter, so I skipped work for this woman. Nestled real close to her putrid warmth. Thought Mama was calling me because she knew. So, obviously, your boy was real scared.

My boy! she a-crackled through my cracked iPhone. I tried to figure out why the fuck my phone was cracked whilst trying to figure out who the fuck I was talking to.

Mama? your boy asked.

Still couldn’t figure out where the crack came from.

You need to go home, my boy! she screeched.

I took a swig of the Windhoek on the bedside table. There was a cigarette in it. I swallowed anyway.

What time is it? I asked myself.

There was way too much light a-shining into my skyrise.
How are you calling me? Your boy asked Mama bear because I cottoned on that they don’t let the residents use the phones in the spotty house your good-good boy lavishly sponsored for Mama.

The time is God’s work my boy, you need to leave it alone. The Lord has told me He sent an angel and you ignored her death grip.

That’s what Mama said. At this point, you can tell your boy is mad confused. I didn’t realise I said that time shit out loud. Also, how does Mama know about my sexual conquests? Also, when the fuck did I crack my phone?

My boy, you’re thinking too much. Mama cottons on.

I didn’t realise I wasn’t speaking.

You always think too much, she continues, *but don’t worry, Mama is here to think for you. I bought you a ticket, it leaves the park at 7pm – you have four hours little bear. I have to go, you need to go find your grandfather.*

Grandpapa is dead, mother.

It’s too late. I’m speaking to a dead tone. Mama’s spottiness is acting up again.

I sigh. Mountain woman wakes up.

What’s wrong? she’s asking.

It sounds like she’s drowning.

Why is my phone cracked?

I shove it into her face.

It isn’t.

I look at it.

It isn’t.

I echo. I look at my received calls. The last one is work, four hours ago.

Mama’s dead, I remind myself.

What?

My Mama’s dead, I repeat.

She apologises like it happened today, I’m too busy checking my messages to correct her. There is a Greyhound booked for seven tonight.

I had the strangest dream, white girl is trying to comfort me, *you were walking through mountains with a woman that looked like you. I think you were trying to find an old man that looked like the woman that looked like you... What are you doing?*

Packing, I respond.

She grabs my wrist, pulls me back to bed. This is the thing about straws: sometimes they look like death grips.

I’m cracked, I think.

Work calls. I switch off my phone.

These white boys have brought me to a mountain, they’ve been feeding me black label quarts and I am drunk. I think that if they kill me here, at least it’s a good place to go. There’s a backpackers behind us. This is where I’ve checked

in my bag. Might as well spend the night, there's a music festival a-happening tonight, *drugs and girls galore*, they tell me.

We're sitting by a lake, skipping stones, watching the sunset and all that white-white shit. The white boys are pulling out a jar of mushrooms, soaked in that golden honey brew, all purple and sticky.

These might not help you find your ancestors but it'll sure help you forget all about them, they tell me.

I chew them like the time Simba ate his first big bad bug, swallow like my throat is clogged and wait like I'm anticipating the second coming.

It takes about an hour for these babies to kick in.

The white boys are a-rambling.

That's alright, the music is starting anyway.

I mumble and stumble away.

It all starts off real slow, revellers tinkle into these wild lands. They've set up three stages. I'm sitting at the acoustic one, watching the flames dance offbeat to the chords of somebody singing bad-bad Adele. Or are the chords wrong? No one seems to notice. The white boys weren't wrong; the women here are glorious and plenty but your boy can't seem to light that spark to make them swoon.

It's the music, I tell myself.

I get up to explore some other stages. There's one playing that doof-doo these white-whites love. Some mix of Bieber's "Sorry". It's in a tunnel but you gotta go underground to really get that bass banging in your eardrums. This was a bad time to do that, that's when my hour was up. Everything started melting in there, the bodies were nothing but shadows. White smoke swirling around them, swallowing everything. I started bumping into the wind, cold as tears, picking up speed. Everything a blur, men in masks smoking levitating ice machines, long pipes sticking out the necks of men too tall to see the top of. Strange lion beasts with dragon bodies floating at the base of the men's necks. I scrambled out the other side of that tunnel and found myself clutch-

ing at earth and rock.

Mountain.

Your boy scrambled up that recognisable thing quick fast, I left an avalanche behind me, that gravel gnawed my fingers raw but your boy made it to the top. Standing there, I could see the entire festival. Nobody else could see the lights in the distance.

I watched the fire approach slowly, still doing that offbeat dance. The revelers down below were unaware, I couldn't warn them. I didn't know how long I was in that tunnel, but the festival was in full swing. The fire was coming quicker now. The music getting louder, the revellers getting wilder.

Sasi, sasitshilo.

The air itself started shimmering in front of me. I picked up a bottle, hoping to throw it down to get somebody's attention. This was a dangerous thing. Just as I was about to throw the bottle down, I heard the singing. The white-white music was drowning it all out. But now I could hear it, my grandfather's struggle songs rising from the fire.

Sathi lo ngunyaka wethu.

Your boy couldn't see it before, but now the fire was upon the festival. The black kids from the church had arrived, brandishing blazing sticks and revolution on their lips. The rebels were here and the revellers could hear it now. The revellers all started huddling together, nobody thought to shut off the music. They'd be damned if they let their party end just when it got started.

Is it too late now to say sorry?

The rebels and the revellers faced each other, exchanging a few curses but keeping just enough space between them for nobody to get hurt. Whilst that doof-doo was fighting with them struggle songs, the land beneath me gave way and I found myself a-tumbling down that mountain, baby. Towards all these ready-to-fight masses, but the shimmering air ripped itself apart. Another almighty death grip was around my wrist and I was pulled into nowhere.

Come on, boy, what you playing around for, you're late!

Mama? your boy asked.

Who else, let's get going!

She was already dragging me behind her. I coulda sworn I was back in that tunnel, but there was no white smoke no more. Just figures standing around that I thought I recognised. The lion-headed dragons were closer now. They stared me down with giant eyes that disappeared into the beginning of history. We walked on a path that would appear golden before us and disappear into darkness behind us. I thought I could hear the chanting of old throats that had grown hoarse from storytelling.

Mama, where are you taking me, where are we?

Didn't you come to find your grandfather, boy, come on, don't ask questions you already know the answers to.

Why'd you bring me here?

You brought yourself here, forgot yourself, forgot us. You've let some other wickedness into your heart, my boy. But your Grandfather is going to fix all that.

I couldn't respond, your boy was stunned. We came upon an old figure sitting on a log, stooped over the longest pipe I'd ever seen. It trailed off into the sky and created a cloud around the two moons that stared down at us. The log was placed in a circle of other empty logs, as though there had been a gathering here from a time long past.

Tata, Mama said, here he is.

She looked at me with tears and a longing in her eyes.

Don't go, said I.

I love you, you hear, but now you must speak to your Grandfather, boy.

Grandpapa slowly looked up at me.

Who is this? he asked.

But Mama was already gone.

It's me, Grandpapa.

Grandpapa looked at me strange.

I don't know you, leave this place, you're not meant to be here, you have no place here, he said this, pointing at me, fingers gnarled, knuckles quaking.

Grandpapa, it's me, little bear, I pleaded.

My little bear isn't here, now I told you to leave, I won't ask a third time.

I was falling down the mountain again. All a-tumbling and arms akimbo, still holding that bloody bottle. I landed right in the middle of those rebellers and revellers. All of them looked at me confused about where I had come from.

Grandpapa never did ask more than twice. I was done. I had come all this way, only to be forgotten. I had forgotten them so they owed me nothing.

I could hear the sirens blazing in the distance. Someone always called the cops when black people arrived.

Sizonqand' amapolisa, qand' amapolisa.

The rebellers and revellers went back to their shouting match, my arrival forgotten. I looked down at that bottle, my fingers wrapped around it so tightly, trying to mimic Mama's death grip. I couldn't believe any of this. After everything I had been through.

My first tear landed on my knuckle, my second on the smooth surface of the bottle. I looked up, the rebellers still singing Grandpapa's struggle songs. The police pulled up behind them with their blue and white. I threw that bottle as hard as I could at the revellers. It didn't hit anybody, just shattered on one of their speakers.

That's when everybody gained some courage. Blazing sticks were dropped and fists met cheeks. I sat at the foot of that mountain and wept.

Yes, fuck you, I cried.

Cried until the police fought their way through to me, picked me up.

Yes, he started it, this one. You think you're smart, neh, you're just a little boy, these cops were saying as they jostled and threw me into the back of their van and shut the door.

There was another person in there, singing silently to themselves. I didn't want to deal with anybody. I looked out the back of that van at the fighting bodies. I was still crying when I recognised the song the other person was singing. I looked at them.

Grandpapa, I choked out.

Oh, it's you Andile. Where have you been, little bear? I've been waiting for you.

That's when he turned to smoke and songs of revolution drifted out from the mist.

Nqand' amawewewewe.

My tears stopped. Another bottle hit the window. I leaned back in my seat, buttoned down my coat and smiled, humming along as the fires started outside.



Dying To Live

By Khoigxam

I am a writer and social commentator who resides in the village of Suurbraak in the Western Cape in South Africa where I divide my time between doing absolutely nothing, writing, gardening and making furniture. Over the years, my activism has evolved from working with youth at risk, to public art and theatre, until what it currently is and what I refer to as actionism – which is simply a way of being more self-sustaining and living the change I would like to see in the world. My hope is that through this very real example, others may be inspired to adjust their own ways of living to become closer to nature and the source of what they consume.

With *Dying To Live*, I am exploring the intersection between fiction and a reality that is becoming increasingly more bizarre in its absurdity. I've discarded the dogged belief held by so many that “things” will get better despite all evidence to the contrary. My aim was to express my grappling with my own mortality in confrontation with the ill-conceived morality that suppresses the widely held desire to end it all, or to be more precise, to have it all end.

Finally, it is my hope to give a more meaningful insight into the struggles faced by so many South Africans who remain overlooked and largely voiceless.

The cracked, uneven linoleum is hard and cold beneath his knees. He leans forward with hands cupping the fluttering flame of the candle stub stuck into the neck of a squat, old perfume bottle.

Shivering on his thigh is a curled, black and white photograph taken who-knows-when of a burly unsmiling pale man alongside a woman wrapped in a blanket and sitting flat on the floor.

It is a picture he found in the rubble of a house in Woodstock. He did not know the couple nor their story, just like he did not know his own parents nor theirs.

The origin lies buried in ages long-forgotten. He rocks back and forth as he whispers to the many ancestral spirits crowding the room. Concealed in a rolling bank of cultural pollution, a by-product of ideology, dogma and fear. The old electoral posters and newspaper headlines retrieved from lampposts and that line the walls look on disdainfully. In the distance, a chorus of dogs bark as a motorbike growls by. Barely discernible echoes persist amid the noise. Imagined ancestral memories that span the ages: freed of the shackles of recorded history's deadly viral narrative.

The flame sputters and burns low before spitting back to life.

A spirit resonance recalls all that remains suppressed by convention: an insidious violence of a completely different sort. Events of the past swept away under carpets of complex weave upon which no one is allowed to tread – designed to hide the minefield of inconvenient truths and conspiracies that shape the epoch.

In the corner, a makeshift bookshelf groans under its stacks of words. The scab on his wrist begins to peel back as he rises and wipes the grit embedded in his skin. The photograph falls to the floor and the movement extinguishes the flame.

The light of metaphor is extinguished to preserve the yoke of ignorance. He strikes the last match and carefully relights the candle. He stands still, stumbling in the dark, doggedly believing with unshakable faith in the same flat-earth-philosophies that murdered and enslaved his forefathers, that continue to assail him still. He stands slowly, careful not to stir the air as he moves. With the heel of his left hand he rubs the empty eye socket where once his left eye used to be.

Occupied by distractions, seeking desperately to be entertained.

On the stool which also serves as his table, he sits and looks at the wall where he would have liked to have a window. He turns away from the brutal face of our collective reality, bowed by the weight of surviving another day, every day. He takes the last crust of bread from a packet and holds it between his hands as if in prayer.

All of our noblest aspirations reduced to an unchanging rhetorical discord where dissonance is seldom tolerated and routinely crushed. He takes a bite without any relish and chews dryly, slowly.

Allowed only to sustain the manufactured illusion of a legitimised democracy. Exclusively serving profits used to maintain the malice of institutional poverty. He takes a sip of the unsweetened, tepid tea from a plastic cooldrink bottle, the last teabag suspended. From outside the wind whispers through the ill-sealed eaves.

Ruled by laws interpreted to ignore the crimes of the masters and to protect them from the injustices visited upon the multitudes. Assimilating ill-perceived notions of dignity from a morality that justifies its own murderous intent. He places the last piece of bread between his toothless gums and chews as if in pain. A staccato tattoo of gunshots in the distance makes him stop, he holds his breath and turns his head with a wide eye unseeing. He exhales. He swallows and looks at the curled photograph on the floor.

No birthright, no justice, just burgeoning inequality. Terminally exiled from humanity: quarantined and isolated, alone on its deathbed. He shifts his gaze to a haphazardly framed image of Kratoa torn from a textbook. And yet, there exists countless fragments devised by greater minds. Proposing alternatives and possibilities that could resuscitate the parent in intensive-care, but the solution requires more than we are willing to forsake.

Alongside Kratoa, an image of Autshumato from a pamphlet for The Strand-lopener Pub.

Instead, we spend billions to patch and repair the fortresses of privilege and subjugation. Scrabbling in the rubble with lofty concepts reduced to nouns and obscured by adjectives, we salvage the detritus to build more shanties upon the same shifting foundation of tenure denied. No change in sight.

His body is wracked by a coughing fit that extinguishes the candle one last

time.

He says his goodbyes while his last breath lingers. Soon, he knows, he will bid farewell to his ragged idealism as the last hope fades. The keening wind picks up and a loose piece of plastic flaps persistently against the roof.

Left like so many to accept that the only release from suffering is death. The gift of mortality grudgingly granted for the price of yet another mask that he can ill-afford. He will die alone inside his draughty room that is all he calls his own. Buried without witness he will go, easily forgotten.

The grey light of dawn sneaks in beneath the door and through the cracks as he awakes on the stool that serves as his table and now his bed.

And so each day he tries anew to forgive you by forgiving himself. He buries his face in his hands in an attempt to prolong the uniform darkness of night. Even though he knows not what else to do within the ramshackle confines of his own misunderstanding and trauma.

He stands slowly and steps into the threadbare and dirty overalls, crumpled in a puddle on the floor where it was discarded the night before.

Knowing that he will never forget. He steps out into the freezing dawn and feels the warmth of his urine on his bare feet.

He wonders when he will become the human being that he expects everyone else to be?



Chibanda

By Masiyaleti Mbewe

Masiyaleti Mbewe (she/they) is a queer futurist writer, photographer, sometimes YouTuber, African feminist and TEDx alumna.

She has written for People's Stories Project, *The Namibian newspaper*, Sister Namibia, Tagged Online and *AMAKA Studio*. Her fiction has been longlisted for the Short Story Day Africa Prize as well as the Kalemba Short Story Prize for Zambian writers.

Their work revolves around the use of various mediums to navigate and negotiate the construction of alternative African futures by examining and experimenting with the use of language in conjunction with the visual and spatial representations of African people in popular culture.

Her academic research, photographic work and creative fiction also aims to explore traditional African technologies in the spiritual context and the digitisation of African futures.

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I came into this world wrapped in pieces of my mother's flesh. My umbilical cord, still tugging at her insides, coiled itself tightly around my neck in loose loops of blood.

My first cries were muffled by my mother's angry palms. They pressed down on the slit of my mouth in limp attempts at smothering. The night blistered on; its heaviness cast long blankets of dark shadows that swallowed my mother's silhouette as I thrashed in her arms.

I was brought into this world carelessly, hidden behind the shrubby greenness and the long sharp points of a thorn tree.

I was also brought into this world in the splintering raptures of my mother's shame.

Films of bile pooled up inside my mother's mouth. She spat out the bitterness into a patch of grass nearby and with the aftertaste, in one quick flash, her blood became hot with a blooming swirl of evil. *It would take no time at all, she thought, I could choke the air out of these little lungs and plop this child into the stillness of the Zambezi River and no one would ever know.*

Her mind danced in this until the evil passed and she could not bring herself to empty herself of me once again. She sat shivering into the clockwise turn of an hour and only after a long shudder cut through her bones did she stagger onto her feet and into a wobbled walk.

My mother limped straight through the field like a dart in the night, her chitenge soaked in our blood. She carried me sloppily; her hand stretched out away from her in repulsion, my foot wrapped in her fist, my head bobbing violently until, finally, she walked past the cold ashes of a *mbaula* and into a hut in the middle of a compound.

On her side, her breath rattling with the knocks of old age and uneasy sleep, an old woman woke up to the large planets of my mother's eyes. Stuck in their orbit was a fear a blood-red hot that promised to burn everything.

I cried then, announcing myself, and the old woman knew instantly what her daughter had done. In one fluid movement, the old woman went to my mother's side and slowly coaxed me out of her fist and into her arms. It was then that she saw the giant yellow eye in the centre of my forehead.

Knocked back by a fistful of shock, *Kupuluha kubu tuku*, she said, birth is painful.

#

My Grandmother is gutting fish at a makeshift sink. She's sitting on a cowhide stool in the compound underneath a brightening sky and between her feet are two deep steel buckets toppling over with brim. The fish is swarmed by flies, a thick green slime coating the scales.

"Bokuku?"

Hmmm...

"Tell me about the day the *mfiti* came."

Iwe! How many times do I have to tell you this story, nanga simumvera?

She turns away from the fish and looks at me. I'm standing beside her now. There's a sharp blade in her left hand which she puts down to tighten her chitenge. She lets out a mischievous chuckle.

Wayamba! Nanga nintau yo pumula? Ok – nkala apa!

I do as I am told and sit down at her feet and listen.

#

After you were born, it didn't take long for everyone to find out what you were. It made people scared. For your one eye, we got so many other eyes. People were always looking even though we tried to keep you hidden. One night, tinali mtulo – I smelt the smoke before I felt the heat! I shook your mother awake and she started to scream and as a result, you started to cry.

"But, Bokuku, weren't you scared?"

Ha, iwe! It takes more than a little fire to scare a witch like me!

"So, what did you do?"

I prayed to the god of flames.

“The god of flames?”

Yes, the god of flames, and they whispered back quickly; they were thirsty. While the blaze ate through our thatched roof and embers began to fall, without even thinking too much of it, I grabbed the Gillette razor, the one I kept at my bedside and I sliced my hand open! I let the blood pool mu mpasa.

“Tsssssss, wasn’t that painful, Bokuku?”

It probably hurt much less than burning to death!

She seemed appalled that I’d even ask.

“So, then what happened?”

The god of flames told me that they were happy with my sacrifice and they whispered right into my ear that the fire wouldn’t hurt us.

“Mmm?”

Now, at that point, your mother was still screaming. The large glow of the fire was dancing in her eyes. I wanted to slap her with the back of my hand to snap her out of it but I remembered I was bleeding.

“Then?”

We just sat.

“You just sat?”

Yes, we just sat! And we watched the fire. Watched it eat through everything but us; its licks felt like faint tickles on our skin. When the flames were dead, hoping to find our disfigured bodies, the mfiti trembled where they stood. Shocked at our untouched skin. Incensed, they demanded we hand you over for ritual.

“Ritual?”

Her eyes were warm when she continued.

You were not the first nor will you be the last of your kind. The mfiti believe that the gods are angry when they send children like you and that these children have to be given up to satiate them, to show that we have understood that they are angry.

“Angry? About what?”

Everything.

“And then?”

I refused to give you up, of course! Oh, I was ready to call up any other gods just to save you and the mfiti knew that. Too afraid to challenge us...

“...they banished us to the edge of the village?”

Yes, they banished us to the edge of the village. Where the red earth meets the black earth and the forest begins.

#

When I die, do not bury me. Drag my body into the middle of the forest and gently lay my back against the biggest tree. Do not look back when you walk away and do not ever try to come back and find me. Do this and no harm shall come your way when I am gone.

It’s a dream except it isn’t.

Bokuku’s bones are probably hollow and off-white by now. Her flesh eaten away. No marrow left to flake.

#

If I chewed my *nzimbe* long enough, past the ache of my tongue (sliced open in peeling) until all the sugar was gone and what was left was a sappy goop of white phlegm and if I turned my head to the right of the village and spat, the spit would land at the gates of the settler camps.

The *bazungu* came here, to the edge of the village, long ago and built walls

higher than our expectations. They built a mine and in the centre of their camp, a great big factory that coughed up plumes of green smoke that snaked into the air and into our lungs. As if imitating mosquitoes, their generators hummed low and hard and lights as yellow as my eye would glow in streaks of ZESCO immunity while we stood in the pits of darkness.

The camps swelled – ate through bark and green. Like the vomit of a greedy child, everything the camps no longer needed wound up black, slimy, faulty and in the Zambezi. My mother’s only sin was swimming in the river while I swam in her and, for this sin, she sat alone in a field and pushed out a child that looked like me. While we resided further into the forest like your drunk uncle’s hairline, I could only imagine that the babies born on the settler camps were not born still, that they cried instead of gasped for air with two eyes lovely and symmetrical stuck in their skulls.

#

When I was twelve, a new planet cracked through the horizon, its body unorbiting. It rose in silver slowness, hovering over us like an overbearing parent.

“This is Kailuka Musonda for Radio Zambezi and this is your 5 o’clock news. Today’s headlines – Experts at the Zambia National Academy for Science, Space Research and Philosophy are failing to understand the sudden appearance of the planetary body they have come to name Mwezi II. Spokesperson Dr. Alfred Mwale had this to say when questioned about the planet, ‘Obviously we are as baffled and shocked as everybody else but we at the ZNASSRP are doing all that we can to work out what caused this phenomenon and what we can do to investigate a way forward. We are working very closely with nationals in the settler camps all over Zambia to help us navigate and monitor the situation, thank you.’ Dr Mwale had no comment when pressed further about the many zeppelin sightings in settler communities or how communications with other international space stations were going. In other news, pupils at the Namatama Basic School in Livingstone have prepared messages for what could be Zambia’s first extraterrestrial visitors, they –”

“CH–Chibanda! Zimya chilimba!”

The static sizzled as my mother’s voice whipped into the room. I nearly dropped our cheap radio. I looked back and quickly blinked away from her, aware that the slow milky film that would cover my eye and pull back expos-

ing a pus-like yellow sclera would make her sick.

“Are you going out tonight?”

My mother asked me this not because she cared that whatever was out there would get me or that I’d die but because, over the years, she had sunk so much into her shame that she has had to rely on the one thing she hated the most – me.

“Yes, Ma.”

“You know not to call me that!” she spat.

She brushed past me on her way to the other side of the hut where she kept large gourds of fermented *munkoyo*.

“It helps me sleep,” she used to tell Bokuku. What it really did was help her drown.

Once the sun set, I prepared for my night out hunting. I made sure my tools were sharp and that there was enough food and water left for my mother while I was gone although I wasn’t sure she’d climb out of her drunken pool of misery long enough to find it.

When it was time, I stepped out into the night air and caught myself staring at the new orb. Between its white light, the crisscrossing of zeppelins and the harshly yellow glares of the camps, I felt uncomfortably seen. Quickly, I emptied my mother’s waste bucket behind our hut and placed it back in her room.

“I hope you die out there today.”

I ignored her and I dug myself further into my hunting cloak. I whispered desperate prayers to the wind gods then, “Gods, go before me. Take me to the cane rats and bring me right back.”

#

Over the weeks, I watched everything spiral. While I hunted, avoiding the river because there was more than just slime there now, I thought back to the husky voices that snapped back and forth on the radio:

“Those bastards at the ZNASSRP are hiding something!”
“Now, this is nothing more than propaganda!”
“Then explain why all the anti-terrestrial resources are not being distributed fairly?”

I'd seen the giant posters curling around tree trunks during my hunts, “GET YOUR ANTI-TERRESTRIAL IMMUNITY SHOT AT YOUR NEAREST CLINIC.” I'd thought nothing of them. Besides, I was too busy trying to hide the fact that I was finding more and more cane rats that looked like me, rats with singular eyes, yellow and peering. I crushed their heads and grilled their meat as if nothing was wrong.

“The ZNASSRP is doing all that it can considering the fact that the organisation has never dealt with an issue quite like this, I'm sure that even you can admit that? I mean, almost 40% of the population has received the immunity shot!”
“Immunity to what exactly, Dr Banda? Out of the 40% how many of the shots were distributed outside of the settler camps? And furthermore, what does Anti-ET Immunity even mean?”

It was true; many villagers shuffled past our hut in the early hours of the morning on their way to the nearest clinic. Lines looped outside of the clinics like mosquito coils, the never-ending glare of the new planet boring into the back of their necks until one by one they were turned away. It was either the doctor wasn't in, the doctor had just gone for lunch or that the immunity shots had not yet arrived from the academy in Lusaka.

#

A madness as slippery as oil descended the day the others finally fell from the sky. Like all sinister things, it happened in the dead of night. There were more zeppelins than usual and I was on my way back from a hunt when the sound of something ripping open cut through the air. Terror soaked through me like rat blood and instinctively my head turned towards the sound. The new planet was shifting, slicing open. The ripping got louder and from the hole in the sky, sickly thin silver droids began to hover towards the earth.

I heard the voices of the villagers begin to stir so I crawled like a lizard up the nearest tree and hid among the monkeys. I watched the ground and then the sky, my yellow eye a pus-like ball that bounced back and forth in the darkness. The dead cane rats dangled from my neck and shifted with my breathing as men burst out of their huts, their hands gripping the blades of their machetes while women and children screamed in anticipation. I thought back to my mother; I'd left her lying on her side

and whatever little love there was between us could not make it past the trees. I accepted all too quickly that this night was the last I'd ever see of her.

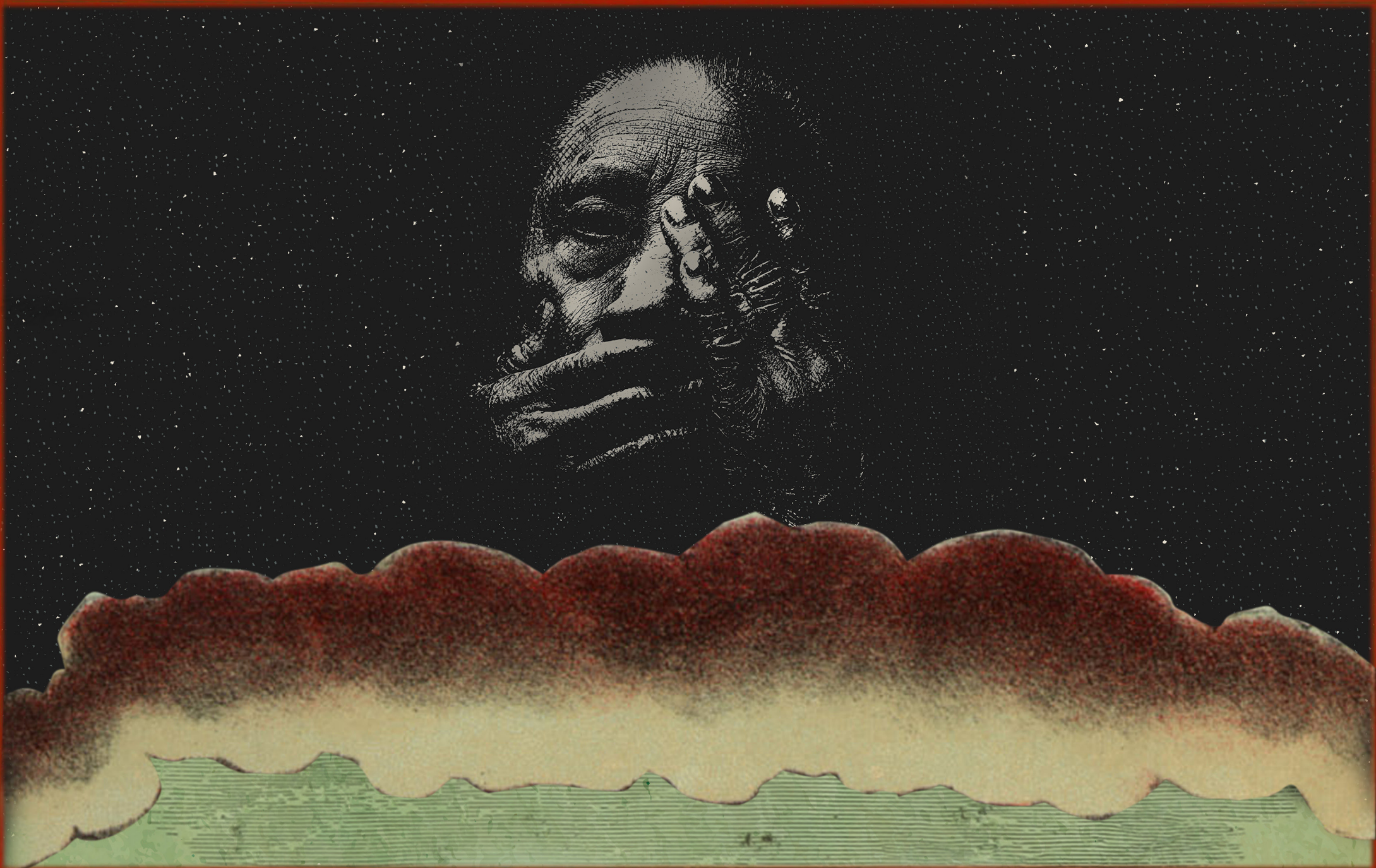
In a brilliant blaze of blues and greens, streaks of blood orange sparks and hearty amber rays, the settler camps went up in flames. The zeppelins and droids zoomed past, dangerously close to the village but in the same apathetic way a baby might contemplate breaking a toy. Slowly, the machetes were lowered and we all watched in realisation. As if shackled by invisible wire and in groups of two, trails and trails of *bazungu* were led into the gaping orb, disappearing into its silvery interior.

Gun shots, screaming and the sound of withering babies accompanied the ripping and the blaze.

But then, a sound as strange as the sight of a one-eyed child sitting in a tree wiggled its way out of me and like the many days before I'd had to drag my Bokuku's lifeless body into the forest, I laughed.

#

“This is Kailuka Musonda for Radio Zambezi and this is your 6 o'clock news. I— can confirm that the— the others have left and they've taken everything— but us...”



After Dark

By Vuyokazi Ngemntu

Vuyokazi Ngemntu is a writer-performer whose work encompasses elements of storytelling, physical theatre, social satire and ritual. Her activism is rooted in a sense of outrage with the prevalent universal subjugation of black people, particularly intent on subverting the normalisation of violence against women and children. A writer, healer, mother, independent bookseller and jewellery-maker, her latest achievements include having her poetry incorporated in a production called *Okwe Bokwe*, which featured at the National Arts Festival main stage in 2019 and was nominated for a Fleur du Cap Theatre Award under the Best New Script category in 2020. The recent selection of her stage play script *Blood Bonds* for the 2021 Teksmark Festival saw the work receive rave reviews and officially marked her directorial debut in theatre.

She currently makes a living as a ghostwriter of web novels and gets a kick out of the anonymity it offers while releasing her agenda-fuelled writing for the rapid consumption of the virtual market.

She'd been out of sorts for months now. Nothing the doctor prescribed seemed to help. Even the hard liquor she loved guzzling straight from the bottle did little beyond giving her the most foul hangovers. As a result, she'd been dismissed from her job as a cashier at the general dealer and fallen behind on her rent by two months.

Yet the same thing happened every night: she'd get into bed at 9pm as usual, ready to fold yet another terribly mundane day back into whatever box it could fit into, hoping time would ship it off to a far away place. Instead, it would start with a feeling of dread that would culminate into full-blown anxiety.

One minute she'd be taking slow, controlled breaths in through her nostrils, holding for a count of five, then exhaling through her mouth until her lungs were deflated. Nothing. The lump in her throat would just grow into a mountain, at the centre of which her heart seemed to beat like a voodoo drum. Noticing the heart's unsanctioned relocation, her chest would be jolted by painful spasms. By then her ears would have started ringing, causing her to feel as though a sharp, metallic weapon was being scratched against a stainless steel surface by someone with a lot of time who happened to reside a breath from her eardrum. Her skin would respond by feeling raw, as though something had set its nerve endings afire, jolting waves of agony through it and into her entire being. Like she was somehow tuning in to every misery the world was rapidly producing as it turned.

Overwhelmed, she would try to scream but find that her voice would not let her. Instead, tears would stream down her eyes, ineffectual in washing away any of what she was feeling. This way she would convulse in bed, ribcage collapsing as the sensations escalated from the sting of nettle to the lashings of a sjambok. She would plead silently, lobbying every known ancestor and every magical being to put an end to her pain, if not indeed her life, synonymous as the two were at that hour.

With no reprieve in sight, she would suddenly feel as though her bed sheets were strangling her, whereupon the only logical response would be to kick them off. Still afflicted, she would try sleeping on the floor, where she would thrash, twist and turn, and continue like that for what seemed an eternity, until the old woman would appear.

"*Phakama!*" the faceless crone would instruct.

Any attempts to ignore this instruction would be punished. More agony. An increase in the volume of the sound in her ears. Even the floor would suddenly feel icy, leaving her no option but to get up.

"Follow me!" the old woman would instruct.

Together they would negotiate their way out the closed window of her rondavel, the old woman muttering some incomprehensible words that would allow them passage. Nomfazi was always terrified. The old woman was always impervious, if not a little annoyed. The old woman would lead her down the dirt road, passing as they did the houses of neighbours nestled comfortably in sleep's sweet embrace. Her envy would be short-lived, for as soon as they reached the giant tree down the road, logic would abscond.

It was there that the old woman would sing a mythical song in a guttural voice that would shutter the gates of her ward's consciousness. Thus subdued, her body would begin to feel weightless. As though it were something she had the option of leaving behind. And that's exactly what the two would do: travel as something lighter. More perplexing is how she would feel a wave of electricity hitting her before their two formless selves would merge into one thing. The feeling would leave her exhilarated. Together they would walk into many houses, whisper suggestions to the ears of sleeping women and make their way out so they could repeat these actions again and again. She could never remember the exact words they had whispered. Nor the faces and particulars of any of the women. All that would linger was a blurry sense of the urgency of the messages.

The mornings would be confusing. She'd wake up tucked neatly into her bed, for starters, no traces of the pain she'd felt prior to the escapade. Instead, she'd be groggy and desperate for sleep, limbs droopy with a kind of lazy stupor that begged for inertia.

By midday there'd be news of a woman whose actions had sent the tongues of gossips wagging: one woman had beaten her abusive husband purple with a broomstick, having endured similar treatment for all twelve years of her marriage. Rumour has it that the Mr Phakade in question magically transformed into the kind of loving husband he'd promised to be when he was still courting that daughter of the Mpinga clan.

Many were the women who secretly sought Mampinga's counsel, hoping she would tell them what *murhi* she'd used to turn her brute of a husband into the docile, obedient puppy he'd become. Pity that, save for the sjambok, she too had no response.

Another had packed a bag and left her strict clergyman and abiding wife parents, leaving a note to say she had fallen in love and was eloping with an older woman.

“*Yhu, inyala elingaka.* What a disgrace!” neighbours would be heard commenting. That such a well-bred woman would so openly defy tradition was surely a sign that the spinster she contorted with had bewitched her.

“*Umlalisa nenyoka,*” went the only logical explanation; for how else, if not indeed through the enchantment of a snake, could a woman get another to share her bed? It’s not like they were capable of procreation, right?

One woman permed her seven year old’s hair, made the child a pretty tutu on her Singer, painted his nails to match and walked defiantly down the street with the delighted boy, giggling and enjoying bubblegum-flavoured ice cream as everyone stared with mouths agape!

“*Istabane?*” the neighbours shrieked. How dare there be allowed to exist among them a homosexual? What was this woman thinking, allowing her child to deviate from what is right?

By the end of the day, there would be no end to similarly bizarre stories all across that small village. More memorable was the story of a band of nine elderly women, knobkerries and whips in hand, who had stormed into the local watering hole, tore at a known sexual predator and left his lifeless body outside, daring whoever wished to take issue with them to come forth and fight them. They were met with a shock-induced silence, later to be immortalised in the stories that would dare and fail to reduce the incident to urban legend!

MaMbhele, MamSukwini, MaKhoza, MaMqoma, MaMyirhaa, MaSkhosana, Mme Chuene, MaNdlangisa and MaMqadi Doon gained notoriety throughout the neighboring village.

“They castrate men and use their members for potions,” some claimed.

“No, not potions but actual talismans, which they wear around their necks.”

Oh, but only those who dared molest women and children, fans of the troop would defend.

Even those who had yet to meet them propagated their legend. So widespread was the story of what they had done to that obstinate Cirha that men feared to even put a foot wrong, lest they be reported to this band of elderly female vigilantes.

For months this happened, until it was suspected that the women of the town were possessed! Some insisted on sitting in the kraal, drinking beer and smoking tobacco with the men instead of tending to cooking fires, polishing the earthen floors of their huts with cow dung and fetching water from the river.

“*Andifuni,*” one new bride retaliated when her father-in-law demanded that she cook him porridge at 5am, as was the custom for such a woman to tend to the needs of her new family and display exemplary housekeeping duties which would justify the seemingly exorbitant quantity of livestock her family was thought to have demanded in exchange for her.

Many were the rumours of irate men who had demanded their cows back from their in-laws, whose daughters they renounced as unmarriageable and obstinate.

Some invited priests to lay hands on these women, convinced that this form of exorcism would banish their new, devilish mettle for good. Interestingly, there were no reports of the success of such attempts. Instead, the women grew bolder and more brazen with each dawning day.

Some threw off their doeks, styled their hair, exchanged their German print skirts for bodycon dresses and made their way to the city in pursuit of “anything but this!” Others, though terrified, raised their voices for the first time, leaving everyone stunned at how resonant such voices were, having only ever been known to speak in squeaky, breathy tones and, at that, only when spoken to. The older women would frown in disapproval, the men would caucus in exasperation while the girl would secretly wonder if there was any connection between what was happening around her and...

Whatever the answer, Nomfazi knew better than to share her concerns with anyone, lest she be tried and sentenced a witch in the unforgiving court of public opinion. And so she lived, revelling in the chaos unfolding around her with each morning and what it could mean for life in that dreadful place while dreading each sunset as the harbinger of midnight!

There was one night in particular which left an indelible mark on her spirit. The old woman came to her as an ant and instructed her that they were to embark on a journey. She did not ask where to but allowed herself to be transformed into that smallest of insects.

He looked so peaceful sleeping there; his face was particularly serene when they crawled across it, the old woman sprinkling greyish dust over his eyelids.

“Why are we doing this?” she asked, though she knew better than to expect a response.

Instead, they crawled back out through a crack in the wall and changed back to their human forms when they reached the magical tree and made their way back home under the cover of darkness with expediency.

The next morning, while purchasing supplies from the general dealer to refurbish her humble abode, her heart skipped a beat when she recognised him. The same perfectly congruent face she’d crawled over, with skin the colour of polished mahogany, staring back at her from across the counter as she surfed through her purse for the last of her meagre earnings from the job she’d recently lost.

Suffice to say that the two of them were instantly drawn to each other by something akin to an electric shock that was spurned from one body and resonated in the next, the moment their eyes met: he from sheer enchantment and she from a serendipitous sense of epiphany.

“*Uxolo*, I didn’t mean to stare,” he apologised.

“No bother, I too was wondering where I know you from.”

“Bathandwa.”

“Pardon?”

My name: Bathandwa Nkambule.”

“Lovely meeting you.”

“That’s it?”

“What is?”

“Well normally, the appropriate response to someone introducing themselves is offering your name in return.”

“Right, sorry. Nomfazi.”

“Last name?”

“Just Nomfazi.”

They concluded that encounter haphazardly, both nursing the distinct impression that theirs was not a coincidental encounter. Whilst Nomfazi was at great pains trying to figure out why the old woman had engineered her meeting with Bathandwa, she wasn’t particularly perturbed.

After two weeks of pining for her and hoping to no avail that she’d show up again at the shop, he sought her out and showed up at her doorstep bearing a basket of fruit. Having ascertained that she was single, he knew there was no risk of an altercation with a disgruntled lover.

“*Hay’bo, wenzani apha?*”

“I thought I’d come pay you a visit, since I’m off duty today.”

“Presumptuous much?” she said, stepping aside from the doorway so he could enter.

His initial steps towards her were tentative, as though reluctant to submit himself to her iridescent aura. She too found herself deflecting his attention.

He would visit a good five times before she found herself looking forward to being in his presence, until one night it started to rain torrentially while they were having supper and she asked him to stay.

That evening, she found that her walls were crumbling rapidly, along with the mask of self-sufficiency she always wore. Surrendering to the tenderness of the moment, Nomfazi found herself wholly susceptible to Bathandwa’s touch, her skin exploding, the sensations rupturing through her and immersing her in sweet agony.

At first coy, she eventually allowed her inhibitions to recede in favour of her repressed yearnings, the latter liberated by passion as their two bodies each harvested pleasure from the other, voracious in how they satiated their hunger each on the other.

In a choreography of volcanic heat, they pulled, tugged, grabbed, bit, licked and yet found other ways to devour each other, both evidently breaking fast from a perpetual impoverishment which was finally finding respite in that delicate moment. This way they succumbed to the adulation, their limbs flailing, their bodies drenched in the nectar of lust, animalistic in how they gave vent to their pleasurable moans and gasps, their true natures unbridled under the cover of darkness, and with nothing but the waning candle on Nomfazi's bedside to bear witness to their nakedness. It was a beautiful dance of two silhouettes gradually merging into each other, two flames flickering, and burning well into the night. The more of each other they consumed, the more they yet desired, until that cascading emotion gushed through them and burst through their bodies in a crescendo of ecstasy so monumental and yet so exasperating that they clung onto each other firmly as the flames in their centres flickered wildly, burning from both ends, waxing and waning until they were a molten mess of musky, sticky flesh.

Her dreams, when they came, were different that evening. Instead of the old woman, she heard a chorus of voices calling her name, summoning her to meet them at the edge of the veil between this realm and the next.

"Yiza, sikulindle!" they urged, until their chorus of implorations took on an incantational quality which pulled her by the spleen and compelled her towards them.

When she reached that meeting place, she found a crowd of about thirty women, all bathed in an incandescence which gave them a seraphic quality that made her as fascinated by the sight of them as she was frightened to hold their gaze.

"Welcome to the circle!" gestured a voice she had thought herself finally rid of. The old woman, despite her age-appropriate arthritic form, glowed with a strength that belied her fragility. Instead, she exuded the calm and grounded aura of a leader seasoned by time.

"Who are all these women?"

"Look at them and tell me that you don't know them."

Regarding each face carefully, there was something of a vague recollection that would spurt through her mind momentarily and die instantly despite her attempts to kindle it. She might as well have been attempting to start a cooking fire with wet logs! The only thing akin to remembrance she could grasp at was in their eyes: the keen sense of knowing, the spark of fire behind each gaze and a nondescript melancholy that aged them despite some being in their mid-twenties – these created a curious resemblance in the sixty eyes that stared at her questioningly.

"They are your sisters. We activated our awakening together. These are the women we've been visiting. Remember?"

And just like that, the memories came flooding back: the mother of the little gay boy; the girl whose boyfriend tried to force himself on her; the woman with the emotionally unavailable husband; the stripper cornered by a lascivious customer after work – they were all here, though she found her recollection vague when she tried to locate some faces in memory and found herself wanting. Like her, the women were an amalgam of some of society's down-trodden, dispossessed of both their voices and their human dignity, stripped of their sense of agency.

"Why are we here?"

The last thing she needed was a pity party.

"There is more work to be done, many others to activate."

"It's not my responsibility. I have enough problems of my own."

"How dare you? Were you my problem when we first met? If I recall correctly, you were ready to commit suicide with rat poison on the night I came for you –"

"I didn't ask you to."

"Bullshit. You literally said 'If anyone out there can hear me, please save me!' That's when I was sent for you."

“Uthunywe ngubani?”

“The Mothers, of course.”

“So what do you want with me?”

“The others. We need to gather an army by morning.”

No sooner than the words were spoken, a portal opened up in the middle of the floor. A circle with a spiralling pattern in its centre formed, iridescent neon green in colour, sparks erupting from it like a faulty appliance that threatened to explode any minute if nobody pulled out the plug.

With that, the old woman gave her a bottle with a liquid solution, which she instructed her to drink.

“UVuma, seawater, river water and rainwater.”

“What for?”

“To aid your vision.”

Nomfazi gulped down the solution, while the other women chanted something she couldn't make out. The more they chanted and clapped their hands, the more meandering her thoughts became and the more rapid the visions.

A lioness. An army of women carrying spears. A fireside gathering. The old crone branding her underneath her left breast with a symbol that signifies Nomkhubulwane, their protectress of women and children...

The chanting pulled her back. Her eyes were covered with a glossy film of tears. Something in her coalesced to whatever was to unfold.

The women all hugged her, offering words of affirmation and a shield of sorority. They held her heart gently with each caress, each nod.

“We haven't got much time. Tonight's blood moon will take ninety days to revisit us,” said the woman, making no sense that Nomfazi could deduce.

“Where are we going to?”

“Stop asking questions. Take this,” the old woman said, handing her a small brown paper packet with what looked like dust in it, though it smelt like lavender and something wooden and peppery.

“Masambe!”

One by one, the women jumped into the portal, disappearing no sooner than they set foot in its centre. When all the other twenty-nine had gone, the old woman reached out her hand, summoning her reluctant charge.

“Come! We need to visit seventy houses and activate just as many women.”

Before she could question the crone, the two were sucked into the portal's orbit as soon as the old woman stepped into it, sliding down a cylindrical abyss until they landed on the floor of a cold room with a thump, flat on their bottoms.

The other twenty-nine women were there. What was this place? A dormitory of sorts, judging by the rusty metallic single beds lining the floor, all with teenage girls sleeping. A girls' school? Wait... the picture of Jesus on the wall, the colour of the girls' bedclothes, the blankets – all these looked familiar. It was the boarding school Nomfazi attended when she'd been in primary school, before her father murdered her mother.

As soon as she realised this, a wave of panic assailed her. This is the last place she wanted to be: this room where the caretaker had... No! She could not even confront the memory, let alone breathe, asphyxiated by the cries she had muffled on that terrible night, fearing his threats as much as she did God's condemnation when her attacker assured her it was her due for enticing him with her womanly wills, despite being ten at the time.

It hurt too much. This is where she had first started wishing to be taken away. Where she had started harming herself, hoping death would rescue her. At first the razor cuts on her wrists were discreet. As long as she pulled her skirt down, her schoolmates and teachers were none the wiser. She'd pretend nothing had happened, keeping quiet and making sure nobody heard her wretched cries around 3am when the pain would prove unbearable.

The caretaker never visited again, never visited *her*, that is. And nobody ever spoke up: not the girls to each other, and certainly not to their house mother.

Nomfazi turned to the old woman, tears falling down her face, shoulders collapsed with grief and voice hoarse as though that man's grimy hands were fixed around her neck again.

"Are there more girls like me here?"

"You know there are."

She closed her eyes and found that she could walk around the room with ease that way, never once bumping into anything.

There were ten girls in total – that's how many he had violated. Nomfazi's rage seethed at the thought of the caretaker doing to these girls what he once did to her.

"*Vuka, sisi.* You've got nothing to fear anymore. It's time to fight back. *Vuka!*", she whispered in each girl's ear, sprinkling on their eyelids some of the dust the old woman had given her.

Each girl awakened, the other women pulled them out of bed, embraced them and oriented them as best as could be done with such limited time.

"*Ningobani?*" asked one girl.

"*Singabafazi,*" answered the old woman, her knack for stating the obvious causing nothing but annoyance and further confusion, the girl never having doubted that the disruptors were women but instead having expected an enlightening response that would help her make sense of what was happening.

When all ten were roused, the old crone led them to the caretaker's room, which was detached from the boarders' quarters.

Leading the procession, she and five of her charges began to tie the caretaker firmly to the bed so that even if he were to wake up he could not move. Firmly secured, they doused him with a mixture of *inqwebeba*, *umathithibala*, *umbezo nomreteni*, the corrosive sting of the mixture burning through his skin and causing him to break out in welts and hives that blanketed his skin in torturous pain which made him lament his fate as soon as he woke up, screaming and begging for the protection of his ancestors against what he termed

"witches of the night come to kill me".

"Tonight you're gonna pay for your actions," Nomfazi said, not caring to ascertain if the now-balding caretaker recognised her or not.

The old woman blew a mixture of *isiphaphetho* and *izizwe* on his face, commanding his spirit to the pits of purgatory with stern incantations. His body writhed and convulsed on the bed, the potion fracking through it and yanking body apart from spirit, which the old woman captured into a vial which she sealed promptly and deposited into her satchel. All that was left was the body.

They doused him in methylated spirits and said good riddance to him. The old woman lit the match, throwing it on his body and setting him afire. All were as deafened to his pleas as he had been to those of his victims. The fire was cleansing and nauseating as the smell of charred flesh filled the air. When all that was left was dust, the old woman drew a circle in the air and the portal appeared.

They landed in a mud hut with a woman and her two daughters. The girls were carried away in their sleep, the mother awakened and told that her brother-in-law would never hurt her, having seized that widow's assets no sooner than "dust to dust" was pronounced as the shovel covered his brother's coffin with loam.

The next house belonged to an elderly woman whose son was known to squander her indigent grant and leave her to subsist on the mercy of neighbours. The women took her along too.

There were eighty-one of them when they were done. Together they travelled through the portal and landed near the giant tree where the nine women who had gained notoriety for their vigilante justice awaited them in a circle.

"Everyone here knows what persecution feels like. Most have cried for justice until their voices were hoarse and their throats sore from the effort. Tonight, we will arm you with the tools you require to save many others. One way or another, the world will be a safe space."

The crowd roared with gusto at the old woman's words.

"What about the law? Surely we'll get arrested if we go around burning men?"

“You mean child molesters!” Nomfazi cut in, striking the woman across her face.

“Enough! Violence is prohibited here. She is not the enemy.”

Nomfazi deferred, her jaw clenched as tightly as her fists.

“These nine women are the custodians of justice. We answer only to them. Do as they tell you and leave the rest to me.”

There was silence as the new recruits eyed their supposed progenitors with curiosity and reverence. Their red gowns inspired admiration, while the symbol embroidered on the left side of the gowns’ chests proved similar to that branded underneath the recruits’ left breasts. A cult then?

“No, a sacred sorority,” answered the old woman, having divined Nomfazi’s thoughts.

Not sure if the two weren’t synonymous, Nomfazi found that she was at ease with the idea of a feminine justice league.

Over the next three months, they would recruit more women, until the number rose to one thousand. On one particular evening, Bathandwa felt her convulsing in bed and was convinced she was having epileptic seizures.

He tried what revival measures he knew, burning impepho and chanting her clan names as she’d recited them to him a few nights prior when he’d asked, but found that it could do nothing to offer her relief. Instead, she fell into what he feared was a dream trance that might propel her to slip into a coma, all the while shaking her and calling out her name, trying to rouse her from that fit.

It was 4am in the morning when she finally came to.

“Are you alright?”

“Uhm... good morning... yes, of course. Why do you... how long was I out for?”

“It might as well have been a decade.”

“Did I freak you out?”

“Just about. Good thing I don’t scare that easily.”

“Have you ever witnessed anything like that before?”

“I’m still not sure what I witnessed but my mother *waye sisangoma*. Her trances are part of my most vivid childhood memories.”

For the first time, someone had languaged what she was experiencing and Nomfazi was surprised that she’d never likened what she was experiencing to *intwaso*. Not once had she ever considered herself as someone with what many termed a “spiritual calling”.

Yet were prophetic dreams, trance and seances not symptomatic of just that? It was all too overwhelming to even begin to make sense of.

“I don’t know... “

“How long has this been happening?”

“A few months now.”

“And you’ve never thought to seek help?”

“*Ndiyoyika*. This is all too unusual. Nothing makes sense. It’s as if my dreams bleed into reality.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’re not the one being possessed in your dreams and compelled to galivant across dimensions serving some kind of ‘higher purpose’ nobody has bothered to explain to you.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“What are you saying?”

“That I’ve been through similar.”

“And what made it go away?”

“Submission.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I gave in to the unknown and let my spirit guides lead me where they must.”

“And you weren’t afraid?”

“Of course I was. But that was part of what I had to submit to – my fear.”

“You speak as though you had no choice.”

“You can choose to embrace what is or to deny it. The latter leads to pain and chaos, while the former leads to liberation and tranquility.”

“I just want to lead a normal life.”

“But you’ve never been normal.”

Flashback: her looking at the picture of her parents that her grandma kept in her Bible. Why can’t grandma see that *mama* and *tata* are dancing? Surely she too can hear them laughing?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“*Thokoza*,” he says, cupping his hands, genuflecting and clapping them twice as he speaks the word.

“That’s a northern thing I don’t like.”

“What is?”

“That random strangers step up to me and say that word.”

“What’s so offensive about it?”

“I’m no sangoma.”

“But you carry the gift.”

“And I need the return address for it, thanks very much.”

“Look, I’m not trying to concoct you anything here, just... “

“Good. Now please shut up and hold me.”

His caress soothed her anxieties away, each touch lathering her with a warm feeling of molten bliss that nearly succeeded in making her forget. Nearly, but for her sudden hollering, her constricted breathing and the kind of talk most would dismiss as incoherent, uttered as it were in a language foreign to her region. A combination of rapid gasping and heavy breathing and incoherent speech came thundering from her vocal chords in a torrent of heavily-punctuated verse, from which Bathandwa managed to deduce what Nomfazi’s soul mandate was. She was to lead a revolution that would catapult the town into unrest before it eventually spearheaded progress. Her new name? Zanempi: Harbinger of War.

“Who told you all this? I don’t understand?”

“The old woman.”

“What old woman?”

“The one who visits you frequently.”

“You met her?”

“In a manner. She spoke through you.”

“So what happens now?”

“You allow her to lead the way and trust that she has your best interest at heart.”

“But *ndiyoyika*.”

“Good. That means you’ll always be in tune with your intuition when you travel.”

“I don’t much like travelling with her.”

“You’ll learn to.”

“Where do you go?”

“To a desert city where children rule over adults.”

“That’s strange.”

“You’d be surprised at how vast ‘normal’ is.”

“Will you help me figure it out?”

“Only as far as the old woman allows.”

“Fair enough. Now please, can we change the topic already?”

“What would you rather talk about?”

“It’s too early to talk. Kiss me.”

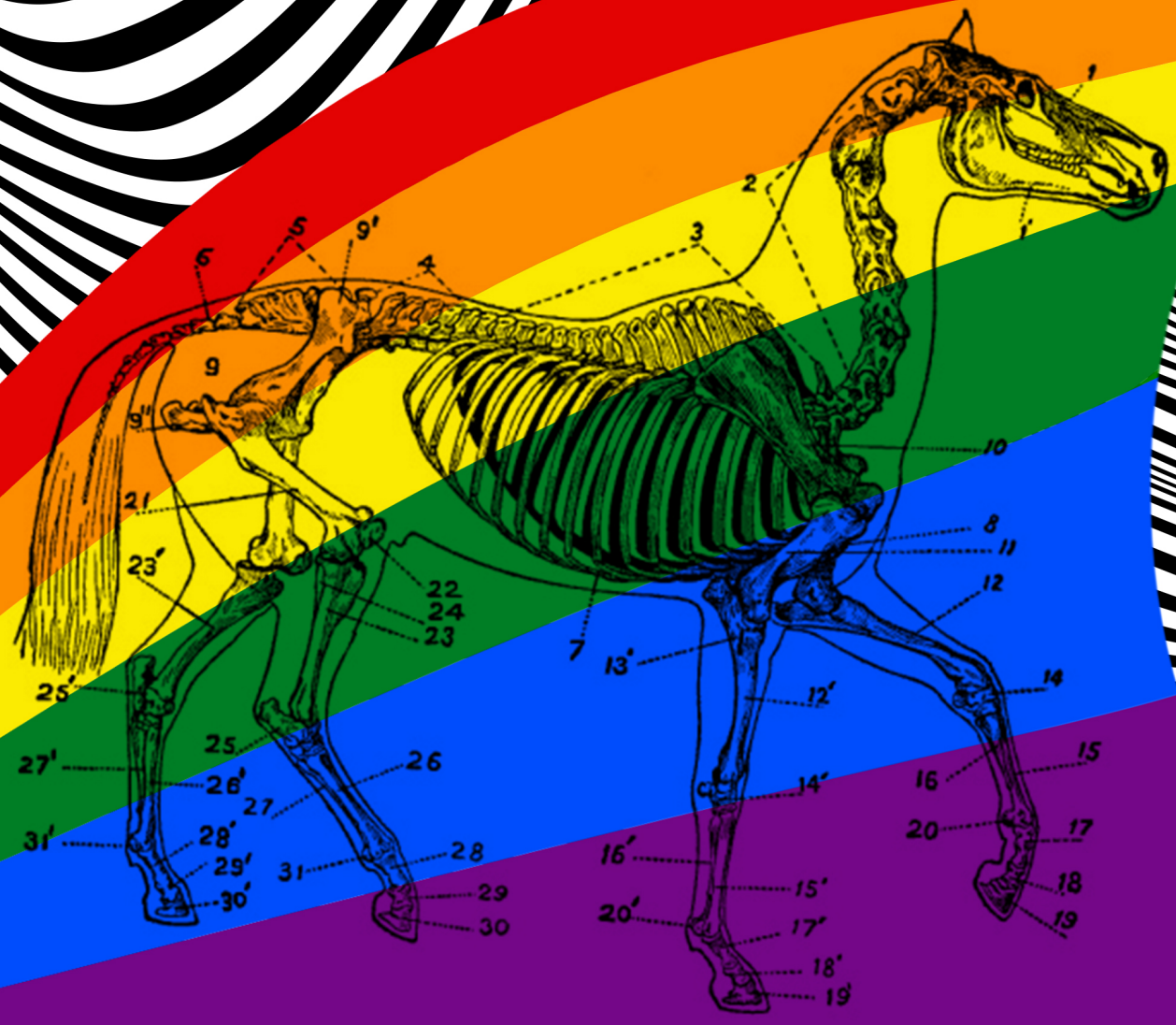
The morning brought with it the kind of tranquility she hadn’t known in a while. Bathandwa went off to work at the general dealership, promising to return in a few days.

What did this all mean? Why her? Had the old woman truly possessed her in the manner that Bathandwa had described? She herself remembered nothing of it, unlike the times the old woman would travel with her.

And this new, burdensome name – time would tell whether or not she’d be able to live up to its promise.

Premonition: Nomfazi is flanked by hordes of women, all carrying weapons and heavy artillery, marching through the town, defeating anyone that dared oppress women and abuse children, carrying the latter to safety and recruiting the former to novitiate status in her army. The old woman places a crown of thorns on Nomfazi’s head and hands her a gold-plated spear, while the others ululate in approval.

The future was certainly going to be interesting.



A Unicorn Shape-Shifter

By Chulumanco Mhlali Nkasela

My name is **Chulumanco Mhlali Nkasela**, the Queer Pussy Politica. I am a gender non-binary queer activist with the pronouns they/them. I am currently a student at the University of the Western Cape, majoring in Philosophy, Women and Gender Studies, and Political Studies. I served on the #UniteBehind inaugural secretariat for three years, an organisation that was set up to tackle state capture in South Africa. I have also served as spokesperson of the Black People's National Crisis Committee, a black conscious organisation that tackles the injustices and oppressions suffered by black people because of the colour of their skin. I have a strong scholarly inclination and have had some of my works published, both in creative writing and contributions to feminist and broader political discourse, nationally and globally. I was recognised by the *Mail & Guardian* as one of the Top 200 Young South Africans in the Civil Society category in 2020. Towards the end of 2020 and into the beginning of 2021 I worked with the

Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education to produce the isiXhosa translation of the *Pocket Queerpedia*, a booklet of a glossary of terms used in and about the LGBTQIA+ community. I currently serve as the current national spokesperson for Fight Inequality Alliance South Africa, an organisation that aims to fight inequality globally.

I would describe my activism as one that is grounded in using my existence and body as a constant and continuing protest and problematising problems. On my vignette *A Unicorn Shape-Shifter*, I am exploring themes of African spirituality through a queer character that is able to merge herself into nature and transcend time by being able to exist in different spaces in time simultaneously. The piece is about the discovering of identity in race and sexuality, being in touch with one's ancestors and their ancestral roots, and being one with our spiritual and natural selves. The story I tell is of a world where one is free to experience this awe-worthy way of life where time and space have no constraints and existence is beyond physical. My story paints a world that is free, almost farfetched when looking at our everyday lives.

Emrhawuleni, a new world comes to life, as a young queer woman – a unicorn – calls out to her ancestors. She comes from the tiny village of Luthuthu, in the east of the Cape Colony in now South Africa. She had always been a bright girl, one who knew way too much for her own good. She'd experienced violence at a very young age. Hers was a story of oppression that became a figment, but the existence of self in itself was questionable. A story of violence. A story of suffering. A story of survival. A story of hope. A story of healing. A story of conquering. *Pale e sa ngolwang, pale esa nahanwang, pale e a lerato, lerato le sa tlwaelehang. Lerato la matla le sebeti. Lerato lasebele.* A story continuing. A shape-shifter of time. A different human form. A being who could love and be with a couple – an expression of love so unconventional – and the breaker of monogamy chains: a unicorn.

She had the ability to move between worlds in a transcendent state of being, both beginning and end, big and small, alive and dead. She was the work of the gods, the highest honour bestowed by the universe. In the spiritual world *ngobugqirha* and in the queer world, she was a unicorn at the same time. Her existence was in a time that existed before time, a time unaligned. Her body carried the spirits of warriors, her voice reflected the screams of lightworkers and healers, and her demeanour was that of a seer. Her existence transcended simple human logic. There was pure awe at her magic as her feelings of *déjà vu* and her existence seemed to be aligned with the very moment her beautiful mother carried her in her belly – it was a destiny determined for her.

Uphahla ubulawu, ebiza amaQwambi, isizukulwana sezizukulwana zika Togu, ooNgconde, ooPhalo kaTshizwo, ooGcaleka nooRharhabe kaPhalo, ooKhaWuta kaGcaleka, odlebhud-lebhu, ozithende zikhulu. She beckoned her forebears to come be in her presence. They were living in a time adjacent to hers. A time where they were both present. Zihlwele zasebukhosini, sacholo esicikozwe ngosiba lwenciniba yivani booKhaWuta. Yivani maQwambi, ndivuleleni indlela. Ndiboniseni ukukhanya.

She screamed and begged for their presence because in her time of somatic existence, she never thought her voice would ever be heard, her words listened to and her existence matter. Her cries bellowed and echoed through the walls of her world and bouncing off of its corners were the cries of an African woman, *umntwana womgquba wasebukhosini*. She has seen things beyond herself, felt things beyond herself and heard things beyond herself. Her being was the cardinal sin. She could never be worthy of the gift of life. She was born to be a slave, to service, to give and to never get anything in return. But in her hands lay her freedom, in her words lay her liberation

and in her thick accented voice lay her complete emancipation. In her existence lay a gift that surpassed all. At the crux of her essence is the Kei River, iNciba. Her beauty contaminated and poisoned by the white settler, she held her sanctity, for it could never be corrupted.

“HHHLLL! EEEHY! HHHEEEYY! MAKHOSI!!”

Uvalo noloyiko olwalumphethe at the prospect of being omnye uNongqawuse. Isiqalekiso ngoku nesiqalekiso kwizizukulwana ngezizukulwana zikaNtu. Oh, but she was not a blueprint laid out with its lines okwamanzi eNciba ebunzulwini basemathunjini omhlaba. Her spirit intertwined with that of Queen Modjadji – the Rain Queen – and was felt in the tender breaths she took, but she strained as she groaned trying to bring together worlds. As though in constant communication with her lungs, it was through the laboured breaths that her ancestors were speaking. Blood rushed through her veins in a breathtaking red at her command, with every flick of her fingers it was directed okwempehla ityhutyha umzimba ngonga inenkenkqe. She is in full control of her being, in the present and in the past. She is a beautiful creature of the Nile, with Mkabayi's blood of power in her veins. She is blessed with the intelligence of Queen Makeda and the strength and royal prowess of Queen Nzinga. Her being was of shape-shifting, no gender boxes, and full of love and magic. Idlozi.

A unicorn.

Isinyanya.

A rainbow.

Modimo.

Umnyazi.

“CAMAGU!! MAKUDEDE UBUMNYAMA KUVELE UKUKHANYA!”

So, in this moment of establishing communication between her and her spirit guides, she transcended the physical world and was slowly piercing the veil *yangaphesheya*.

“Ndiboneni maQwambi. Ndiveni maQwambi. Ngenelelani emzimbeni wam nindenze ndibemnye nani. Camagu! Camagu! Nina bokhokho abakhulu. Zinyanya neminyanya yomzi kaTshizwo, ndivuleleni indlela.”

She bellowed as *ihlombe lezihlwele lihlokoma, lizongoma okwezulu emiqolombeni ekubetheni kwelwimi lakhe*.

Her tantric screams hailed from the deep rivers and valleys of beautiful Azania. She hailed from Africa, the mountains and green hills of Nubia. Black, queer and woman. A lightworker. Divine feminine. A kaleidoscope that made her a unicorn in its truest sense. She, able to move in between realities,

moved between worlds too. She was a creature of the most beautiful galaxy, worker of stars whose words brought together the two opposing sides of the Kei, *phesheya kweNciba nxamnye nendalo*. One and the same, the Transkei and the Ciskei. One considered to be a shape-shifter in the belly of the Great Limpopo River, Naledi – a signalling shooting star across the Serengeti – breathing life, making life and maintaining life. It was a necessity that seemed unnecessary. Her very existence was an existence of protest. No one dared to speak about her. She was a taboo, and she needed to change that. She needed to change that and demand validity for her identity and her sexuality. She was not a dirty secret and didn't want to be kept like one. She didn't want her existence to be an existence denied because all her life she'd been denied the right to exist, the right to be and the right to being. She always thought of how she could overcome this, wanting her magic to overcome this.

She could consume you in her magic and her sensuality. She had an ability to form part of man and woman, as though made for each other. In unison, all three. She was a lightworker, one that truly brought happiness, love and abundance hoisted in her rainbow-coloured tail and sparkling white coat. She brought a happy place, a feeling of contentment, trust, and passion, and she was a woman able to infiltrate the bond between a couple and transform it beyond heteronormativity, transform it to a place that felt right – a place that became home. She was a unicorn.

Umrhawule ugcwale uxhaphile ngumsi, her groans and voice coming out almost in an effort that was painful but passionate.

“HEEEYYYYIIII! UMMMM! NDIVENI BOKHOKHO! NDIVENI BOHOLOMI! NDIVENI MAQWAMBI AMAHLE!”

She was a recurring dream but was not the same. *Iphupho lemvuelelo, iphupho lobomi. Lefifi telesedi.*

With her powers summoned, again with that groan that almost brought her back to life as we know it, she was kept in a transcendent state.

“HHHEEEYYYYI! UMMMM! MAKHOSI! “

Thunder clapped at her mighty magic that brought back the dead, in the sense that she could talk to the dead. Those who had passed from this time into another time, linear or not, she could communicate with them. They were always on her radar. She lived amongst them, breathed amongst them, and ate amongst them. So how could they be dead when she could experience them? When could she feel them? When could she see them? When could she hear them? She felt a lot easier, something she never thought was possi-

ble, a love that was not of this time and a love that gave her a love undefined. It was a love she felt from her ancestors and a love she felt from her people. *amaQwambi, ooKhaswuta, ooPhalo.*

But that is not all it felt like. It felt like she could hold the whole world just by beckoning. She could have the whole world heed her voice and follow because everyone was ready to relinquish their sexual desires and fantasies as they so rightfully deserved to do. She prided herself in doing that, in creating such a space, a space where her kind were safe and free. She was the unicorn. She was the attention and the love, and the understanding and the care. She loved the rainbow and the beauty. And her kinds loved that. She was at a state where existence was something that she loved and adored. Her existence was the epitome of queer and erased. At this point, she had claimed it back. The taboo of being a unicorn *nobungoma*. At this point, everyone saw her for who she was, and she had her eyes dead set on black liberation and freedoms of black people, on queer freedoms and existence. And it was so close she could taste it. So close but yet so far. So close and wholesome. So close and fulfilled. So close and realised. So close and almost an experience. So close and almost tasted. So close and a dream. A dream of an existence.

An existence so wholesome.



Into The Wasteland

By Oyedotun Kolawole

Oyedotun Kolawole is a writer of Nigerian origin. He's a teacher by profession and a poet who also delves into dark fantasy and speculative fiction. He finds solace in writing about culture, religion, myth, the queer community and the transmundane. He has a chapbook published by The Lens Media. You can find him on Instagram: [@_weirdo_writes](#)

You wake into reality of a war that has been going on for long. *The light-eaters are man's greatest enemy of Kyrax. We must send them into oblivion.* As a green-horn, you ask questions. Mother says you are precocious, always engrossed in finding out new things and how they work. Like when you were four, she took you to the machines' lab. She got tired of answering your questions when you didn't know how to bring them to a halt.

The elders expatiate on the need for togetherness. *We are all that is left of mankind.* That is a blatant lie. Fellow cadets like you do not believe this. They too know there are people living outside the confines of your community, jutting with sharp objects and booby traps for intruders and plunderers. But you don't dare question the elders, the commanders, or the senior cadets. Your mom is there to answer all your doubts.

Getting prepared for the day you will prove your worth to the clan, showcasing all you have been taught from the day you enrolled into the Junior Combatant Division Class, you plop on the chair, praying that mother has made your favourite meal. Silence wafts through the house while you both enjoy the meal. The only muffled sound is the slurping from Jin, the dog. You are urged to start a conversation with mother to ask her about how the light-eaters came to be. Now is not the right moment, you mutter between chunks of food in your mouth. That question is for another day. Instead, you ask her what lies out there in the plateau.

Mother's words are perfunctory. *Out there is no place for the weak. Evil men, malevolent bots, deadly creatures are lurking in the corner. Remain here. You have everything here at your disposal.* These words drown into your stomach along with the crushed pellets of yam and omelette you are feasting on. You are expected to eat the words hook, line and sinker. Some things are best to be left alone. Inquisitiveness will pave for an adventure that will get you in trouble. As a junior cadet, you are not allowed into the weaponry encasing EMPs and relics used to kill the light-eaters. At least you have been shown these weapons in prints and projector slides during *WEP 101: Introduction to Weapons*. Learning about how to use these weapons is the least of your worries. From pages to pages you have devoured materials and manuals about parts, angles, repairs, vantage positions they work better from.

Sixteen, your best friend whom you met on the first day of class, tells the others you are way too smart to be a junior cadet. Little does he know that smartness is not enough to face the enemy waiting to pulverise the clan and

feed what is left of them to scrawny vultures. Sixteen prods you to use your mother's influence to access places where you can't reach. You look beyond the walls of the classroom. What you really want to do is bring an end to the war between humans and machines. Such disparity could be breached if only you are given a chance.

*

Every day after class you spend the rest of your time in the library studying the light-eaters. Combing for facts your forefathers missed when compiling tales about them. *The enemies we are up against will not hesitate to rip you into shreds once they see you,* General One-Eye says. The light-eaters are flying squids, metal-cased neurons possessing appendages that suck the life energy out of bulbs, batteries, electrical appliances with life in them. Voracious predators who do not get tired of draining anything and everything that has an ounce of current in them.

Leader of the second clan, Immgy, was the first to encounter these machines when he went hunting. How could he have known that they would follow him back to your settlement? They didn't hurt him after scanning him. Immgy wielded a spear, a bow and arrows in his quiver when he sighted them. The horde came towards him, searching for a live current passing through him. Nothing of interest shone on their faces. You recline on the chair, cogitate on what Immgy did afterwards, tracing your finger on the text of the book, adjusting your glass as though an Easter egg was concealed in those pages. After a deep sigh, you go back to studying.

News of flying creatures ripping dead cars apart rang into the village's hearing. Your clan didn't have much, just electricity to power bakeries, water turbines and bulbs. The creatures made their way into the village eventually, pillaging on power sources. Good men died that day. The books you read umpteen times didn't say much after that.

You check the new information section for new entries on the light-eater, but it seems no one has a penchant for knowing about them. Everyone wears survival like a costly pendant around their necks. While you put your brain to work, pattering your feet on the ground, ruminating on all you have read and heard about these dreadful creatures, you begin to wonder on the authenticity of this information. Something must have prompted them to leave their abode for yours. Perhaps, a more sinister predator has taken over their home,

leaving them to source for greener pastures elsewhere. Humans are also in the food chain, you figured. Why is it your home they decided to invade? Your kind are peaceful folks, toiling hard to make a living. Not intruders who shanghai people into doing things against their will. Mother's words bob in your mind: We live in a violent world. Shoot first, ask later kind of world.

It's not only the light-eaters that threaten your peace. There are the komodos who invade in masses. Gnats who swarm at dry seasons, leaving infectious bites on their victims. Sandstorms migrating levitating red sand to our settlement, blinding the careless ones. Survival is key. Kids are trained to protect themselves. There's the M'bayas, too: human enemies more brutal than the light-eaters. These outsiders used to live with us. Their group was found near the ridge of the dead hot springs, binging on the little supplies they had left. Some of them were dispersed among thickets, camouflaging among shrubs and towering tree branches. We welcomed them with open hands – the key to destroying the light-eaters was to create a formidable force. Trouble began when these boorish fellows demanded a place in our lands, stretching the need to an authority. The inevitable demand for this yearning brought us to a gridlock. Weapons, fists, teeth, blood on sand, cries, death, had to solve the discrepancy.

The last we heard about the M'baya people, they now live in caves, wearing mismatched outfits, feeding on raw meats and whatever their entrails crave for. Sixteen joins you in the library.

"I know I will find you here," he says, sitting beside you, making gurgles after a sip from the water bottle. He too doesn't believe the approach you devised in dealing with light-eaters. You are only meant to weaken them with the EMPs, then dismantle their casing and rip out their nucleus before their serrated teeth spring back to life. He does not believe in catching them, studying them, knowing why they do what they do. After explaining how you intend to achieve this, Sixteen reminds you that these predators are not silvicolous where you can pick them up, place them in the lab, and study them. "They will strike you before you move an inch," Sixteen says, facing you to make it sink into your subconscious.

*

You wanted to know more about how the light-eaters are being hunted. You volunteered to join the few who loaded cartridges into bullet racks. Mother warned against how strenuous it would be, adding it to school work. It wasn't

so hard convincing Sixteen to also volunteer – he is a soldier you can take to war.

One-Eye gathered all of you in clusters. You all remained still after arranging yourselves, hands behind your backs, chests up, unblinking eyes. His voice shoots through the armoured tanks towered behind him. The moment he passes by you, he recedes, scans you thoroughly, puzzled as to why someone who looks this frail was allowed to be here. He is told you are the daughter of Madam Bones. One-Eye snickers, then moves ahead. He continues his lecture.

"Out there is a jungle. The monsters we are up against want to take all we have, as do we. Your easy job –"

There was murmuring among us.

"– your job is to make sure the rack is never out of bullets. If your soldier has no firepower, he dies, and so will you."

These words cause a stir in your heart. Later lessons bring you in contact with the cartridges. A euphoric feeling runs through your veins. The first rule of attack is to watch your brother's back. The light-eaters' senses are heightened when they perceive an iota of electricity from miles away. Once this scent is picked, they come flying in full acceleration, gnawing at the battery supplying power to the machineries. They are distracted by colours and sounds. Yellow destabilises them, this explains why all the armoured tanks are embellished with yellow spray cans mixed with a touch of black. You raise up your hand, keeping it from wobbling.

"What!" One-Eye responds, sauntering towards you.

"General, I would like to know why the color yellow is an Achilles heel to the machines?"

One-Eye snaps a carrot in his mouth, chewing aloud to vex all of you. He moves away, thinking of his response to you.

"Machines... right. That's what you call them," he says at last.

He stands in front of you, asking if you know the story of how he lost one of his eyes. You can't tell if it's a rhetorical question, so you keep your rigidity intact.

*

Once there was a group, fortified with weapons, heading out for scavenging. It was hard tracking the light-eaters since they hovered in air. Evidence of them could only be seen as the sight of damaged machines. This group ran into the

M'bayas, who salivated, delighted by fresh meats for inside their broth. The few who believed in their sprinting ability ran towards the forest. Marvelled, their pursuers withdrew from following them. A few feet into the forest, one of them fell into a pit filled with yellow ochre. In the process of falling, he injured his left eye on a spike along the rough edges. This junior cadet, in pain and with a bloody eye, started to climb out, placing hands on the slits of the cylindrical hole. Upon climbing out, he caught a glimpse of the light-eaters, those ferocious beasts he had been warned about. Each of them moved away, finding the cadet doused in yellow repugnant. He moved towards them, instead they fled, flying a distance away.

*

It all made sense now. You think you are ready for the action. In the heat of your first outing, Mosaic-49, the team you are merged with, comes out from the latch of the roof in the armoured truck, attacking the light-eaters with their glistening spears coated in yellow. You watch as they speared their heads, plunging in deep to where their power sources emanate from – this way they can no longer steal electricity.

You are happy after your first outing. Unlike your classmates, you have been out there in the action. From inside the tank where you locked and loaded, you saw the light-eaters. They are everything One-Eye described. Mother is happy to see you back in one piece. She thanks her Chi for your safety. When you alight from the vehicle using an insulated battery the light-eaters can't detect, she tells you how proud she is. Certainly, you know it won't be an issue if you do not go into research and examination like her. That department, too, is good for the generality of the clan. If only you can catch one light-eater alive. Just one is all you need.

Seated Arabian-style on your bed, textbooks sprawling in front of you, a calculation on how to go about your suicide mission is staring at you. The challenge is you don't know how to bring it into realisation. You are still brainstorming when you start to feel drowsy and fall asleep.

*

Kyrax is marooned under Orion's eye, basking in lush green towering plants, ebullient waters from the fissures of the rock, and under the aegis of the goddess, Kyri. The first denizens of this habitat were stumbled upon by Immgy

while he and his brothers travelled looking for life outside of their home. In his accounts he told of digitigrade beings with ocelot faces, spiral beads and corals dangling on their necks. They wielded long spears adorned in silver dust. Their whole bodies too were covered in the silver dust, dotting sparkling light when the moon came out. These esoteric people didn't speak your language, but they had sophisticated weapons that interpreted for them – the light-eaters. Immgy returned to the clan with items that aided the village's work. One of such is the penlight that is encased in the room of relics of your forefathers.

Immgy told of a place better than the settlement you live in. His brother, Hairoo, leader of the Okuta tribe kicked against migrating. A kerfuffle erupted between them, until a truce was reached. Immgy took his family and followers who believed in his cause.

Midway on the journey, smoke billowed from a distance – invaders, Immgy thought. These brutes were insatiable marauders. It turned out it wasn't them. The light-eaters had gone rogue, feeding on the electrical sources the denizens of Kyrax used. Immgy and other warriors faced the light-eaters. It was as if the plunderers were oblivious of Immgy and his people. Great-grandmother's daughter, Kofo, was skilled in all things electrical. She devised a new way of cloaking the electrical currents away from the light-eaters. *Someone must save mankind.*

The light-eaters migrated, and your people were left with a herculean duty of rebuilding your home. Foes attacked your people at intervals after they got to know that the ocelot-beings had all been killed.

*

In honor of the fallen soldiers, Immgy and the people who found Kyrax, a day was picked to appreciate their sacrifices. Mother dons a lace suit, sparkling with jade. One-Eye is adorned in his usual iron-studded jacket. Junior cadets hold some wasabi and red orchid, placing it at the iroko tree, appeasing Kyri, the goddess. Other tribes join in the ceremony. Mother says the enmity between the Okuta tribe and yours is not enough reason to refuse your invite. There is feasting and beatitude etched on the hearts of all. You whisper into Sixteen's ear. You both leave, sit on the hills, watch the sand dunes from afar as it forms and crumbles on the wave of storm.

“Have you ever wondered what lies out there?” you ask. Sixteen has wandered far away. It takes him time to reply. “I have always wanted to find out by myself,” Sixteen says. “But you know we can’t leave. Only senior cadets are permitted to leave Kyrax when they go hunting or scavenging.” He is scared. You are too. The village population is increasing by the year. What happens when the population size explodes: there will gradually be a dearth of water, food and spaces. Nobody is seeing this. No one has envisaged the ripple effect of the safe haven that has become a fortress. “I have to go out there,” you say, voice lingering in the cold. “We can’t stay here till eternity. We need more grounds.”

*

The room holding the EMPs is only accessed by senior cadets. One-Eye has the key inserted in his left patch. School is on break. A germane requirement for you to proceed to the next class, build your grades. Dr. Pposi Lobo, a specialist in *SVE 101: Introduction to Safety*, hammers on the rules of safety before scavenging. The paunch man repeats umpteen times: *Scan the area. Watch out for hostiles waiting to steal your supplies. Save bullets at all cost. Bullet materials are few in the factory. Use your spears. Watch your back. Be observant not to let the M’bayas follow you here.*

You stand in front of the mirror. The squabble you had with mother is still eating you up. Why did she make a big deal when you said you will be going into combat rather than research? She reminds you that she knows what is best for you. Perhaps, she is right. What she doesn’t know is that you like to be where the action is taking place. No. Your main purpose of joining the combat team is to use the EMP on a light-eater, shut it down, and bring it back alive to study it. A fool’s decision, one that will get you ostracised from the clan if found out. One-Eye’s words sound in your head: light-eaters are connected to each other, like strands they are tethered, communicating to one another about a new source of electricity. Once you bring them to our base, others see through them, sucking out electricity insulated from prying eyes.

*

Two tanks file out of the gates. You have been out here in an armoured tank, never on foot. A crater has punctured the ground, the driver swerves the tank beside it. Sixteen and seven students are with three senior cadets. One

of them has the EMP. No junior cadet is permitted to handle an EMP. *Such firepower is not meant for kids.*

“Can I touch it?” you ask when you can’t get your eyes off it.

The man holding it snickers, then shoot you a grin.

“This is no play thing, child. This device in the wrong hands and we are in deep shit,” he says.

He is right. You should wait your turn until you are a senior cadet.

“Incoming,” the driver says.

Voices sneak into the tank – M’bayas. They begin to dart stones at you all, broken bottles, and bottles with fuel inside and cloth set on fire. The tank jostles, leaving you in perpetual fire, while shifting into the pothole. Second safety rule of scavenging – never leave the tank – it is the safest place when under an attack. Junior cadets are not trained for this type of assault. These rogues follow your tank, hurling stones. None of them can come closer, the tank has jutting, twirling blades to shred any intruder into pieces. They retreat, cursing when you enter the area of the light-eaters.

The area is not what you envisaged. In truth, you were not expecting a warm welcome out in the wasteland. Flaccid trees had lost their vigour, drowsy, living their last. Even their tan leaves were akin to the walking dead, deficient of blood. The air paced all about, singing a repetitive dirge for the ones who had gone. Ravens cawed, roosting on what seemed like a dead animal. The skeletal structure gave its identity as a buffalo, or not. Ruins of unused decayed metals bathed in dust and cold and heat pierced your heart. The atmosphere had zero concern for the inanimate. You create a picture of this place, stowing the scenes in a secluded area of your heart.

The mission is to scavenge within a short radius. Iron scraps are the main items you need for weapons. A senior cadet is holding a Browning. The guns cannot go around for lack of bullets. Once, the light-eaters attacked the tank after a careless senior cadet radioed One-Eye about a group of Komodos heading their way. This static was immediately picked by the light-eaters. By the time One-Eye and a group of combat cadets arrived the scene, to their surprise nothing was left in the spot. Both humans and the tank had disappeared. The only creatures fit enough to carry a tank are the light-eaters. One-Eye concluded the M’bayas carried the bodies, cooking them in a feast.

“Quickly kids, pick what you can find,” the leader of the cadets said.

A few minutes into the hunt, a buzzing sound crept into your hearing.

“What is that sound?” Sixteen asked.

You all remained still. Calmness helped you to cloak against the enemy. All the appliances in the tank had been shut off. Yellow colours shone in the sun. A small light-eater flew past you into the woods. Your satchel was half-filled from the gathered supplies when there was a rustle in the bush. There was a pause. The light-eater that passed you is tossed to where you stand. Its casing is separated from the rest of the body.

“M’bayas!” A senior cadet shouts.

Your heart is about to jump out when you gaze on the men and women wearing mohawks, brandishing clubs and spiked weapons. This is not the plan you had when you came for scavenging. There are two options: fight till death or surrender and become hostages. This way, the clan would be compelled to trade a large chunk of their supplies to get the cadets back. You freeze. Sixteen and the others leaned against the tank, about to enter. Senior cadets ordered you to quickly get in. Death stared you in the face. *We could use the help of the light-eaters*, you wish. From inside the tank, you see the senior cadets fighting to keep the enemies at bay. Something has to be done. You switch on the radio. The static will be picked up by the light-eaters, even when they are soporific.

Whirring travelled from afar. The warring lots maintained their stand, waiting for what was approaching.

“Light-eaters,” a M’baya wearing a mohawk shouted. The rest of them headed back the same way they came. *What have you done?* Hundreds of them clung to the tank, drilling holes into it to steal their food. The driver started the engine and the light-eaters kept the tank at a standstill. The senior cadet with the EMP brought it out, pressing the power button. In seconds, all the light-eaters dropped to the ground, lifeless.

“Now what?” a junior cadet asked.

The tank was damaged, unable to start. The M’bayas would return to scavenge what was left. We left the tank, taking only the needful. Walking without a radio to signal One-Eye and the clan, we kept walking, *blind*. Down a landslide, noises of grinding and humming machines could be heard. You carry a light-eater in your bag, unscathed. The senior cadets say you are nuts for wanting to study this thing that will kill you. Incredulity is pockmarked on their faces. An enemy should be killed, not studied, they remind you.

The sound you heard earlier is a factory. Light-eaters are littered all around, working. A man donned in a white lab coat is checking a gas tank in front of him. There are many gas tanks. You have seen it before in your biology textbook. People are inside them, it’s cyronautics.

“Who is that?” is the question that leaves you in awe. The light-eaters are not harming him. He controls them. A senior cadet tells his colleagues he identifies one person in the human tank; it is one of the cadets that went missing after an attack.

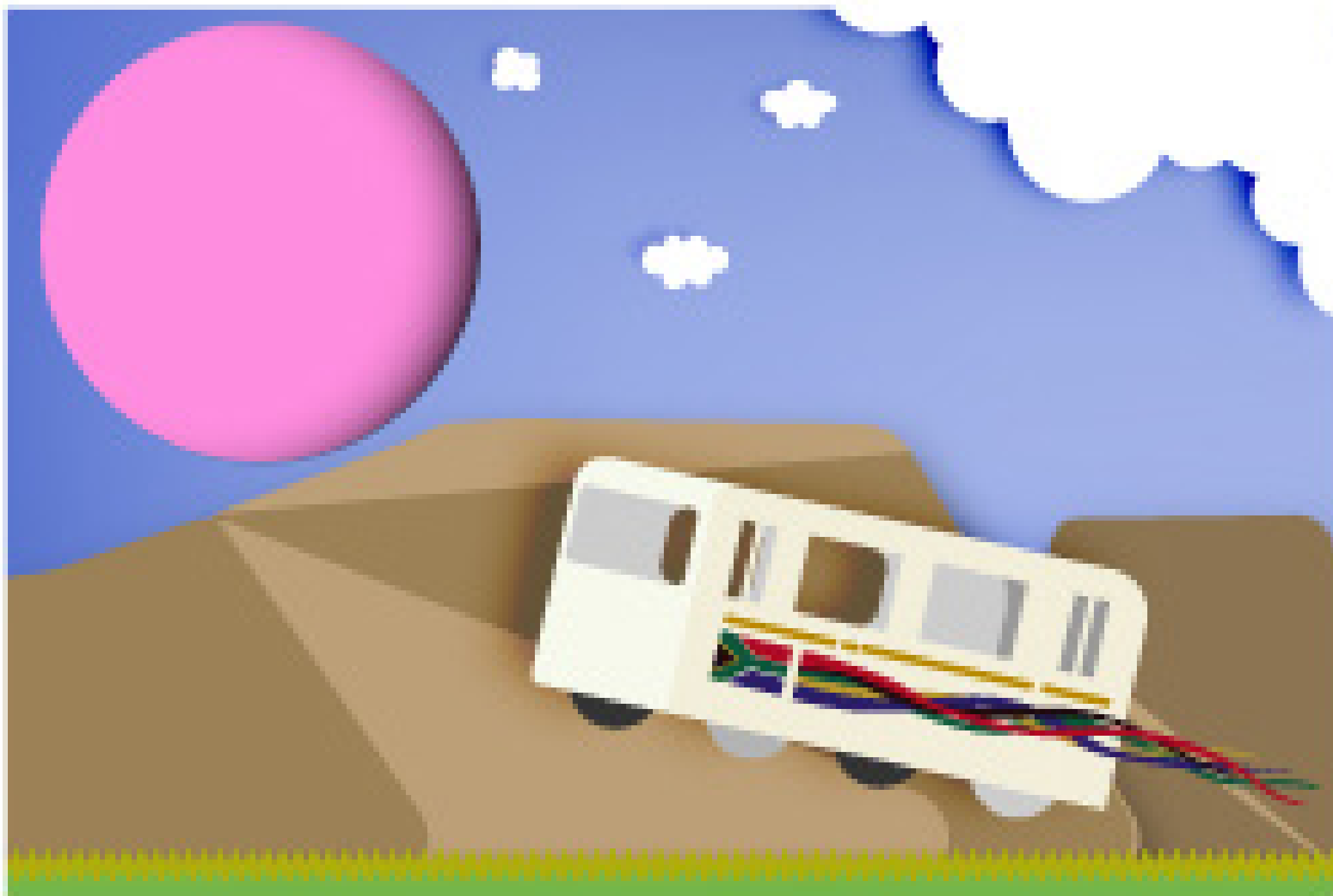
You are beckoned to follow behind them while they enter into the building. Sixteen’s grip on your hand is firm. The EMP is with the senior cadet. Lead is processed in the machine. Bullet casings are built in a rack. Machines are working simultaneously.

“Welcome!” the bespectacled old man in the lab coat says. “I have been expecting you.”

You don’t know what to make of it yet. All the cadets think it’s a foolish idea. Still, you step forward to meet the man, drowning every fear drumming your mind. If the light-eaters didn’t harm him, it means they can be tamed.

“I am John. Be calm. You are safe here. My workers won’t hurt you,” he says.

You are more interested in him, his knowledge, inventions and, of course, the light-eaters under his care.



A Quantum Leap

By Mabel Mnensa

What would a world where African progress had not been robbed by the ravages of colonisation look like? Would we still have the illogical man-made borders, would there be less self-hate, would it be a less war-torn space? *A Quantum Leap*'s Somalian taxi driver, Lucky, is based in an African-immigrant-hating Cape Town and is willing to take the leap of faith in search of a world with such possibilities.

Coming from a long line of nomads, **Mabel Mnensa** has a base in Cape Town and is an avid reader, writer, poet, knowledge curator and once marketing manager who believes in the power of stories. Mabel believes that stories have the power to effect positive change, a notion she critically explored in her Master's dissertation on South African oral tradition and one she hopes to reimagine through her own pieces of speculative fiction.

For the longest time, Mabel ignored her creative side thinking corporate was the way to go. But in 2017, after the writing bug refused to be ignored any further, she picked up the pen again and dared to start writing.

Since then her debut children's picture book, *Kantiga Finds the Perfect Name*, was published and she has worked on various other children's stories with Book Dash and Nal'ibali. Her short story *Jozi's Calling* was published in the award-winning anthology *Joburg Noir* in 2020 and *What the Body Does Not Forget* was included in the Women's Month edition of the *Imbiza Journal for African Writing* in 2021. A lover of trivia and finding innovative ways of sharing knowledge, Mabel is currently in the process of distributing a Pan-African Mzansi board game, *Half Tiger*, that she has spent the last two years testing and tweaking.

Foot on the accelerator for two minutes straight, Lucky managed to speed through the traffic lights from the Shoprite in Mowbray all the way to the lights at Groote Schuur Hospital. Bobby was doing more than your average *gaatjie*, head out of the window, he was bellowing in counts of eight, “Mowbray, *Kaap!*” Patches of sweat joined the dried crusty circles on the armpits of his t-shirt. At that moment you could not tell if his pores *sweating*, heart *speeding*, jaws *grinding* and general twitching were from the taxi ride or the infamous dream killer that answers to the names Tik, Crystal, Meth, Ice or Glass. Bobby was feeling a high he had been chasing ever since, in the quest to fit in, he had reached out to finally accept the smoking lightbulb and tasted his first fumes of Tik. The wind grazed past his head as the fifteen-seater Quantum taxi hurtled down Main Road. The high was so pure, he began to see a circular rainbow growing ahead of them.

“Check, Lucky!” he shouted over the well-timed hoots at the taxi driver, “They weren’t lying, it’s there.”

Lucky, glaring ahead, bloodshot eyes stuck on the growing circling colours, just nodded.

Later they would both swear they saw a red tarred road, lined with evenly cut grass and the shape of Table Mountain looming through the middle of the circle. The sun was still out too, it just seemed a bit brighter on that other side. “It was a beauty. Like a movie, I swear on my brother,” Bobby would say. The four paying passengers in the taxi could neither confirm nor deny the story, as with hands clutching their worn seats, three had their eyes shut tight, praying to gods they had long forgotten. The fourth, a student, sat head to the skies relishing the high. The passengers’ eyes opened only after a loud bang vibrated throughout the taxi. The vehicle waddled over a pavement near the Cape Town Science Centre. Some god had answered someone’s hurried prayer. The Quantum taxi braked right before the Centre’s battered wall. “*Vokken naaier!* He just *vokken* swerved into us! *Vok!*” Bobby shouted, bringing everyone in the taxi out of the spaces they had retreated to converse with their reacquainted gods.

The four passengers scrambled out of the taxi. The now wrecked vehicle slowly disappeared into the smoke coming out of its loose and tight places. They found Bobby, the *gaatjie*, fighting with a red buff man leaning out of the window of a Hilux double cab pick-up truck. The Hilux had, with one swerve, put an end to their streak.

The sweating man smirked behind his phone and focussed on Bobby and the

Quantum.

“I’m going to make you famous then we’ll see who’s a *naaier*.”

The wail of a siren belted down the road just as Bobby was going for a spanner in the taxi’s boot. The few cars still on the road forgot about the cool liquids and warm bodies waiting for them as they stretched their necks to see the wall’s latest victim. Lucky, the only one left in the smoking Quantum, had been quiet throughout the furore. Everyone thought he was dead. Once the approaching sirens and their tyres screeched to a stop, he finally lifted his head from the steering wheel. Lucky pushed open his smashed door, the Hilux driver had been intentional. The bloody driver climbed out, wiping his dripping eyes.

“We were so close,” he cried.

He slumped by the side of his Quantum and, in between his cries, spoke in what some hushed *is Somalian*.

“*Hawu*, these are my friends!”

“They drive and act like *amaColoured*.”

“*Sies*, man.”

#

The four passengers, after giving their details to the traffic officer, got into another taxi and shook their heads as they drove away from the mess. They would all tell their friends about a drug-fuelled taxi ride from hell that they had barely survived. They would laugh and marvel over how they were alive. They would go on with their lives forgetting about the incident, all except for the student, Siphon. He could get neither the very angry *gaatjie* nor the broken driver out of his head. Having mastered the ways of finding and ducking the sultry licks of fire, Siphon was unable to walk away from smoke, no matter how suffocating. His curiosity was fanned by the familiar billows of death he had felt absent in that Quantum taxi. There was none of the fever, claustrophobia or delirium he had absorbed in the shack fire that had killed his parents when he was twelve. Despite the haphazard speed, the wobbles, or the bangs that night, Siphon felt they had not even been close to death despite the other riders’ fears. His close shave with death aside, Siphon also knew a story when he saw one. That hell ride in the Quantum had all the markings that had been covered in the very first lecture he had attended for his journalism module at CPUT earlier that term. The range of emotions shared by the driver and *gaatjie* hinted at it and he was curious.

After that evening, he would be on the look out for the duo on his way to and

from his gig at the bookstore in Cavendish Mall. His enquiries were dismissed and met with laughter. “Those crazy Somalis should share their drug supplier with us. I wish for a high like that.”

“They’re probably at Pollsmoor prison.”

“This is the *Kaap*, my *laaitie*, they aren’t the first.”

Sipho thought he got his first breakthrough in his second year of searching. A *gaatjie* squatting on an upturned crate, leaning on the taxi’s delicate sliding back door, nodded as he counted the coins Sipho had given for his taxi fare. “Ahhhh! Lucky and Bobby. *Vokken* legends.”

“Where are they?”

Sipho chewed on his lower lip, eyes dropped down, avoiding eye contact as he always did.

“You cannot do something crazy like that and go on with your life, you check. Especially if your owner is *mal*, crazy. Lucky... no one has seen him, he is probably at Pollsmoor prison.”

“Mowbray, *Kaap*!”

The *gaatjie* stopped to shout out into the growing darkness, hoping to convince someone to choose their taxi.

“Mowbray, *Kaap*!”

No one signalled for them to stop. The taxi cruised down Main Road. Sipho liked the time he travelled, before the incident he used to close his eyes and imagine he was in a cockpit flying a plane as the taxis would speed down the empty roads.

“...and Bobby?” he asked.

The *gaatjie* laughed.

“This *laaitie* is asking about Bobby, driver,” he said to the driver who also joined in the laughter.

“Bobby’s gone, my man. He is a Tik zombie. Like the others – no flesh, swollen eyes and *vokkol* care. It’s a shame.”

Sipho stopped searching for the two after that, he focussed on his studies and work. Life wasn’t that bad. His campus, the bookstore and the ride home gave him just about enough opportunities to feed his need to chase the smoke in receding horizons.

#

Another year passed, Lucky and Bobby were gone from Sipho’s thoughts as he became preoccupied with a future that remained hazy. One evening, like

any other, he loitered around the empty mall after work, thinking about his future and whether he chose the right focus for his BTech degree. He was not ready to mission to town just yet. He was finding his room suffocating, and the stress of life outside of university, without NSFAS and financial security, left him paralysed. He could not think of what a plan B would look like. All his applications for internships had been ignored and none of his submitted stories had been accepted by any publication.

He finally walked to the Main Road, heading to the unofficial bus stop outside Cavendish Mall. It was almost 8pm. It was going to be a long wait. The usual crowd that rushed out the mall to escape from their last shifts had come and gone. Sipho would have to wait for the stragglers to fill up any taxi he found. An unscratched Quantum taxi with none of the usual cacophony of stickers parked by the curb. He climbed into its front seat. The *gaatjie* jumped out. “Rondebosch, Mowbray, Cape Town!”

At least the taxi was not blasting any music. He let out a heavy sigh that almost masked the rumbles from his stomach. He tried to will his tummy to quieten down, it was probably upset that he had again given his packed lunch to a possibly homeless aunty he met every now and again in taxi rides. Whenever he would hand her one of his sandwiches, with their thin layers of peanut butter, she would murmur a rhyme-like chant. She would also roll through a chain of beads wrapped around her fingers, tapping them to her chant. He would whisper a thank you into the air, unsure if that was the right thing to do. He settled into his seat, took out the book he was reading, *A Man of Good Hope*.

“Ah. Good book, that one.”

Sipho looked up to find the driver looking down at his book. Sipho smiled, nodded and paged through the book to find where he had left it. He was tired and not in the mood to talk.

“Yeah, a friend of a friend is actually in that book.”

The driver’s Somalian accent crept through, in the way he clipped his words. So he really wanted to talk, Sipho sighed quietly and shut the book.

“Really? Who is your friend?”

The driver’s hazel eyes lit up underneath his cap. His well-trimmed beard, the type that Sipho had dreams of one day having, glistened and he smiled. “The main guy of that story worked with a friend of my friend, Farouk, for a while. Farouk was one of my first friends when I got to Cape Town, we are from the same tribe. You see?”

Sipho nodded.

“Farouk is also gone now,” the driver said looking down. “To Canada, my

friend,” he added quickly when he saw Siphó’s raised eyebrows. “He finally got the asylum status he had dreamed of for his family. Here your people do not like us. We have two choices: blend in like Bobby over there who now believes he is coloured or, if you are lucky, you leave to Europe or America. The third choice, which I refuse to accept, is you stay as you are and one day you get killed by people you thought were your friends.”

“Why are you still here?” Siphó asked in an almost whisper.

“I could have gone but my brother,” he gestured outside with his head, “and I are on a different mission.”

Siphó nodded. Trying to be discreet, he again stared at the driver. The shadow his cap set on his face made it hard for Siphó to see the driver’s features. Siphó knew by the way his heart had begun to beat that this could be who he had been looking for, for the last three years. He wondered how he could approach the subject that had been weighing on his mind ever since he had tumbled out of the smoking taxi. When he had felt almost as alive as the moment when he had been dragged out of the shack, aflame, at age twelve.

He looked back into the taxi and saw he was still the only passenger. It was really going to be a long wait.

“What’s your mission?” he managed to blurt out.

The driver let out a sad laugh.

“I wanted to find my mother’s first son so I came here to this hell. It took two years of walking, begging and hiding to get to Cape Town. I had to find him. I had to tell him both our mother and father had been caught in crossfire between the warring factions. Him and Bobby are the only people I have in my life. Everyone said he had moved here and was now called Mo. I searched high and low for him. No luck. Then someone told me I had a tribesman here and I got introduced to Farouk. Farouk just gave me a sad look and said, ‘You just missed him.’ But Mo, always so clever that one, had left a note on how we could join him.”

A long moment of silence passed, all that could be heard was Bobby around the corner.

“Last ride home! Rondebosch, Mowbray, Cape Town!”

The driver sighed.

Siphó nodded, wondering if he could find a way to record the conversation without the man he was sure was Lucky noticing.

The driver continued with his story. “Farouk said Mo had been trying for years and years to find a gateway he had heard of. This gateway opened to a reality where history had been on the side of people like you and me. Can you imagine what a world like

that would be like? Maybe we’d all be one? Maybe Africa would be one country? Maybe I wouldn’t be Somalian or you South African? Maybe we would not have to keep fleeing our homes? Okay, I can see I am boring you. But this gateway! It’s our way into our own history. But it’s coded. Some very smart people managed to figure out the map and code. Even though they left clues for us to find, it is hard to figure out. But Mo, my brother, was always so clever, he cracked it. He believed the gateway to take the quantum leap – that is what he called it – was right outside where that fancy Science Centre had been built. He wrote it all in his note. To take the quantum leap: One, your stars had to align. Two, you had to be going at two hundred kilometres per hour. Three, someone had to be shouting out the window ‘Mowbray, *Kaap*’ in counts of eight. And most importantly, the taxi, it had to be a Quantum, not one of the cockroaches pretending to be taxis.”

Siphó chuckled, “Ooh, like *Quantum* Leap! My uncle used to make me watch that show, did you know that the main actor –” Siphó curbed himself when he saw the blank look on the driver’s face. “Sorry, you were saying, the taxi...” “Yes. Four! The Quantum needed to have six people spread throughout the taxi. The driver, the *gaatjie*, if you have one, and four passengers. Five, you had to hoot twice at each count of four to open the gateway,” he gestured with his hands. “And then... at the right moment, you had to make a long hoot, BEEEEEP, to be able to go through it.” The driver searched through his pockets. “And, obvious, the vibe had to be correct.” He pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from his pant’s back pocket and unfolded it. “See. This is the note Mo left for me.”

Siphó leaned over to look at the piece of paper the driver held out for him. It was written in Arabic, it made no sense to him but the smoke on his horizon began to get closer and closer.

“Are you Lucky?” Siphó asked, moving back to his seat.

The driver jumped, shoved the paper into the pocket of his closely ironed thobe. He leaned over, hands clutching the steering wheel.

“Who are you? How you know my name? Who sent you?”

“Wait! Brother, wait!”

Siphó leaned in again, trying to find the words to calm the driver down. “I was in a taxi, erm, a Quantum, three years ago, it went down the Main Road in Obs like a plane about to lift off before a white man rammed into it. I was not sure what had happened and looked everywhere for you – Lucky and Bobby. But no one knew where you were. Some said Pollsmoor, others dead, so I didn’t know.”

“Oh!” Lucky said, taking off his cap and looking closely at Siphos. “It really is today,” he whispered to himself. With his cap off, Siphos could see three deep scars on his face and wondered if it was caused by that ride and whatever happened afterwards. “So you were there, my friend? We were so close. I blame Bobby.” “Yeah, I could feel something great was happening that day, it felt like I was getting onto another frequency,” Siphos whispered, not sure if he was even lying at that point. “Fucking Bobby! Sorry, I mustn’t swear. It will ruin everything. We are doing it, today. You joining, yes?” Siphos just looked at Lucky. “That’s why you are here, no?” A slow, smouldering nod, that was all Siphos could give. “This is it! You’re the sign! You’ll make this work, this time. We should have gone through last time, everything was going on plan. Ummm... when I look back I see it is the curse that stopped us.” “Curse?” Siphos asked.

#

“Yeah. So earlier that day we had a load from town. Along the way, we see an old man who is too old to be walking by himself. The *oupa* had just missed his bus. You know how impatient these bus drivers are. An aunty feels sorry for him and asks if we can stop for the *oupa*. He does not want to come, he says he is going to Groote Schuur Hospital, and he can only take the bus as it drives all the way up and he has a bus ticket. The aunty says it is fine, ‘I will pay for you.’ I say, ‘ok’. Bobby helps the *oupa* in. When the aunty pays Bobby the R50 note, Bobby refuses to give her change. ‘To go up the road to Groote Schuur you must pay R50. Just in case the police stop us.’ Hey, my friend, my brother likes money too much. And he is my brother so I cannot embarrass him in front of the people, so I say, ‘Yes, the *gaatjie*’s right.’ The aunty makes a sound with her lips. ‘Greedy sinners like you will suffer and you will never get what you seek,’ she whispers before she begins to chant in a very low voice. With her right thumb tapping the colourful beads wrapped around her fingers, her voice soars up into the skies. It sounds like a song. I can barely hear but I know the rhythm. I have heard people talk about The Curse before.

‘Sorry, aunty. Please stop.’ I beg her, looking at her through the rearview mirror. I know she hears me. She opens her eyes, grunts and closes them again. She returns to her chants. ‘Aunty, don’t do this. We are believers in Allah, we aren’t sinners. My brother did not know what he was doing. I’m sorry. I’ll pay you back.’ She ignores the notes I try to hand her from my pockets. She does not stop. I get scared, angry. ‘Out, out, out!’ As soon as I see a free spot on the road, I tell Bobby to give everyone back their money. I drive Bobby and me back home and make all the prayers and movements I know to try to undo the curse. I wash myself. ‘Wash and pray,’ I tell Bobby. I want to tell him that I should leave him but I just pray harder. I thought it was enough. That was the evening I was supposed to do the leap. It is one of those things you just know, I couldn’t move the day.” Siphos was still, scared that if he breathed Lucky would stop talking and the smoke would disappear back into nothing. “We were so close, my friend. The portal opened and it was just as Mo had written. We had been trying for years and years. And the portal finally opened. Then that guy broke everything.” He snapped his fingers. “Just like that, it was all gone. The police were taken care of but the owner was upset and we were out in the street. Had to start from nothing. At the spaza shops again. Selling loose cigarettes and biscuits just so we could get another Quantum. Look at us. We are fighters. You’re here! Today the stars align.”

#

“Mowbray! Cape Town!” Bobby shouted, banging on the taxi as he jumped back in. He flashed a smile at Siphos who was staring at the deliberate tongue wide gap between Bobby’s top teeth. *Obviously Bobby would have the passion gap*, Siphos smiled. “Forward, Lucky!” Bobby shouted, slamming the sliding door shut. Lucky turned the ignition and the Quantum dashboard lit up, alive. Lucky slowly drove into the empty road, foot on accelerator, he soon flew down the road towards the city centre. Siphos turned to the back. There were three other passengers inside the taxi. “What if they don’t want to go to the other side?” Siphos whispered. “There is nothing waiting for them or else they would have been home already, no?” Eyes on the road, Lucky smiled.

Sipho bit into his chewed lip, closed his eyes to silence the fire growling in his tummy.

Lucky glanced at him and laughed, “Anyway who would not want to go to paradise?” Again focussed on the road, Lucky cruised down the empty streets of Newlands leaving a trail of smoke behind.

“Mowbray, *Kaap!*”

Bobby’s head out lapped the wind. But they did not stop for any of the people who waved their hands desperately on the quiet pavements. They reached Mowbray and passed Shoprite, Lucky stepped on the accelerator.

“That was certainly two hundred kilometres per hour,” Sipho thought, head reaching to the stars. He wondered what would be if Lucky and Bobby’s mission was not just fuelled by Tik and broken dreams.



The Plant Cyborg Collective Meets

By Denisha Anand

I work within the intersections of race, conservation, plant practice and restorative justice. My creative work draws from my practical work as a restoration project manager, where I restore fynbos vegetation in spaces that have experienced racialised neglect. As an artist, I use multispecies futurism and elements of sci-fi bound to the core of ecology to imagine a world beyond the Anthropocene that comes to be through the healing abilities of plants.

My activism is centred in healing, I think all activism is. As much as I strive for justice in all that I do, I think the essence of my work aims to restore both place and person and in doing so one automatically addresses issues of race, gender, apartheid town planning and marginalisation.

In my piece, *The Plant Cyborg Collective Meets*, I imagine a future beyond the Anthropocene, a future of the coming together of humans and plants as cyborgs to co-create a free, fruitful and fluid existence for all bodies. This piece works with the allyship of plants to practice world building and to think beyond the limitations of what we know to be possible.

My name is Pa-Cha and we welcome you to the tree time adoption of the Plant Cyborg Manifesto. Our message comes to you from the depths of our roots and hopes to create a safe and just space for your transition from human to beyond human. There are four agenda items that we wish to share with you during this meeting of vegetal bodies, and we hope that it will provide you with comfort and hold you as you grow into the plant cyborg of your wildest and greenest dreams.

Agenda:

1. The methods and lenses that assisted with the shaping of our becoming in the Planthroposcene
2. A personal account of a transition from girl to plant cyborg
3. The Plant Cyborg Manifesto to guide future transitions and homemaking in the Planthroposcene
4. Closing with internal dialogue

1.

We have grown a world through collective care and multispecies allyship and have done so through unpacking the material of the Planthroposcene as a post-humanist, multispecies, feminist reality. The Planthroposcene is a worlding concept by Natasha Myers but also seeded through collective thinking about more-than-human worlds.

The Planthroposcene is where the word human is done away with and we become the oldest and newest versions of ourselves as more-than-human. We become plant-like or we become the plant. We become one with their ways.

We move slowly and, as desired, we feed off of a source of life that is almost infinite and we give as we take. This is automatic – it's genetic in the Planthroposcene. We live in community and our relations are the visible succession and invisible rhizomatic abundance we make of life after the ruin. We live a black feminist way of life as photo-synthetic bodies, an affective, inclusive and intimate reality. Our bodies are our own, our beauty is diverse, and we're pretty and peculiar. Race and class have fallen and we are free of those constraints. We encounter other barriers, but we involve to solve them.

2.

Seeding the Planthroposcene by girl-child, Pa-Cha:

The post-humanist despair that we grew out of was a capitalist, white supremacist

and white feminist landscape of hopelessness. We were brown bodies who spat seeds of thought and imagining into eroded barely-there soil as we walked along burnt and haunted urbanised verges, catching taxis and many a morbid feeling.

The seeds we spat, grew.

The combination of our saliva, the seeds (apples, naartjies, watermelon, spanspek, num nums, dagga and more) and the soils of the ruin created the chimera that is us as future vegetal beings.

We grew us. Rain came, lots of rain, almost flood-like and then the sun appeared. Germination happened. The old ones of us died in the water. It was loud and painful, typical of birth. Their bodies – white, capitalist bodies – fed us while we were sprouting and becoming.

Becoming more than human.

We self-organise, it's the chaos theory, it's in our DNA, and the code came from that spitty-seed material. I do think that our human intention enveloped the process of becoming these more-than-human species. We all spat and scattered different seeds. Other seeds remained dormant, waiting for their time. They knew, so maybe it wasn't just our intention that enveloped the becoming. Something more than us may have played along?

I am now a vegetal body.

I don't know what I know but this familiarity feels good to me. I feel at home in this plant body and community. I recognise the beings around me as kin, the land and I are inseparable, there is a belonging that has been satisfied.

I think through sensation and with my roots now. I longed to be rooted, and now I am. An odd-looking ericoid with feelings and thoughts, I don't feel pain. I know this because my friend has thorns and when they dance, I get jabs. They're apologetic with soft scents. The absence of pain has allowed me to be more of me in this world. Pain doesn't exist in this body.

Involution makes more of me.

I have involved over two seasons. Involution means I have grown with my community; it's not possible to grow without them.

My leaves do not fall, they just shrink or expand with water. I am also able to communicate with water and other beings now. I have started feeling more. My roots have gone deeper, and I am living with geophytes below ground. It's dark and wet and intimate down there. When it's wet, I have urges, urges to make more of myself. Without thinking, I do, and I feel my branches become weighted with buds. These buds bloom, and the water tells me that my buds blush – they're pink. I imagine that I am pretty and that I attract beings who want me for me and who want me for them.

I speak in flowers and tropisms.

I have developed multiple ways of communicating. It's not a language. My form is open to multiple interpretations because my world is safe. Perceiving my form and existence, our collective existence is a sensorium and an experience. There is no bipolarity in our experience; it's a messy spectrum of endlessness.

Genetic memory from seed.

I have been growing and settling in. The trauma from seed started coming back, and it was vivid and demanding. I felt it when my flowers began to senesce for the first time. I felt something that I couldn't recognise. It felt suffocating, like when my roots are overly saturated after the rains. But this was in me, in my tissue. I felt vibrations, and the vibrations became stronger and louder. This felt like memory. I remember memory, memory was feelings, and I could feel memory. Bad memories. I could feel my plant physiology rejecting the make-up of these sensations. They attacked my ability to feed myself and to give to my community. My flowers dropped and I stopped feeling the haunting.

Vegetative and resting.

Resting is my life. I produce what I can and when I can. As I give, I take. My community reciprocates; it's who we are. I sit and grow and make leaves to be with the sun. I thrive, and wait for the wetness as a signal for new buds and flowers.

3.

A Plant Cyborg Manifesto:

As vegetal beings, we wish to grow a slow world.

A world that is characterised by multiple ways of showing care. Care can be displayed through the shape of our flowers to build relationships with different species, scents for the sake of a pleasance, fruiting for feeding, and for sexual pleasure etc.

Our bodies are for us and for community building.

We belong to the land and the land belongs to us. That land cannot exist without us; we are inseparable.

Resting is homeostasis. Rest is consistent and constant.

We produce to feed ourselves and our community. We live for an affective ecology.

We draw from memory of seed to world a black feminist existence. Race and the pain of race is memory that reminds us of what not to involve with in the Planthroposcene.

Our bodies are not gendered. We make flowers, fruit and seed from sex.

Sex is a collaboration but also individual.

Self-organising builds the Planthroposcene.

4.

In closing, we would like to open the floor to internal dialogue with the parts of plants that you have already become. Sit with them and listen, feel and involve yourself in your becoming with them. We are all at different stages of this becoming and can offer support to one another when we tune in to the frequencies that connect us beyond the human.



Tyala Kwakhona

By Sanelisiwe Yekani

Sanelisiwe Yekani is a theatre practitioner, performance lecturer and writer based in Johannesburg. Her pronouns are she/her. She graduated from Wits University with an Honours Degree in Performance and Television Studies. Since graduating, she has performed in a number of touring and Johannesburg-based theatre productions. Some of these include her role as Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (2018), directed by Neka Da Costa, and her role as Volumnia in *Coriolanus* (2016), directed by Nicola Pilkington and Rohan Quince. She has toured with The Well Worn Theatre Company for the shows *Plastocracy* (2017) directed by Kyla Davis, and *Burning Rebellion* (2019) directed by Joni Barnard. She also played the role of Tseli in Zakes Mda's play *Dead End* at the Joburg Theatre, directed by Makhaola Ndebele (2020).

She is the playwright of a children's play titled *Zwelitsha* (2020), which was part of the ASSITEJ SA In the Works playwriting programme in 2020. She wrote and performed in the theatre production *Ndikho* (2018, 2019), directed by Sinenhlanhla Q. Zwane, which has been performed at the Joburg Theatre, the Wits Theatre, POPArt Theatre and at the UJ Arts festival.

Yekani's poetry and her plays are a reflection of her activism; her work reflects authentic South African narratives, addresses various forms of oppression, and it responds to the ongoing femicide culture. She uses different art mediums to tell local stories.

Tyala Kwakhona is a poem dedicated to the radicals and change-makers of the world. There is a common trend of appreciating or celebrating radicals only once they have passed on. This work celebrates and strengthens the radical while they still have the opportunity to continue planting the seeds of their desired harvest. This is a work that acknowledges the courage that it takes an individual to disrupt the status quo. It is an offer of tenacity; a praise poem and letter of adoration dedicated to the radical or visionary.

Vuka Qhawekazi,
Vuka Qhawe.
Vuka Kumkanikazi,
Vuka Kumkani.

Jonga, nali ilanga livela;
Idlulile imvula.
Bekuyizolo ngoko
Xa ubusiwa entabeni.

Intsha lemini,
litsha nelithuba.
Vuthulula ezozinto;
Qhiza loo magqabi.

Lendlela ineentshaba,
Kodwa lonto ayithi woyisiwe.
Lendlela inameva,
Kodwa lonto ayithi lala ngol'hlobo.

Tyala kwakhona,
Namhlanje uzalwe kabutsha.

Vuka Qhawekazi,
Vuka Qhawe.
Vuka Kumkanikazi,
Vuka Kumkani.

Ina, yombhatha nalu'thando;
Isekhona imfudumalo.
Bekuyizolo ngoko
Xa ubuhleli ebumnyameni.

Naku ukukhanya,
Nanku nomvuzo.
Vuthulula loo magqabi;
Qhiza ezozinto.

Nd'yavuma lendlela inde
Kwaye neminyaka ihambile,
Kodwa lonto ayithi libala msinya;
Lonto ayithi xhoma izandla.

Tyala kwakhona,
Namhlanje uzalwe kabutsha.

Ndithi bamba Nto yakuthi;
Nantsi imvuselelo.
Phakama Mzontsundu,
Izalwe kabutsha lemini.

Creative Team

Franc Summers dedicates her times, energies and labours of love held in *Our Move Next* to her late grandmother, Cecily Jean Gow, who passed away from cancer in May 2021. She remains evasive in bios so that generations to come will think she was a badass. She is more frequently referred to as Sarah, by those who know her. Franc has no children or pets and is survived by the wondrous creations she doesn't name in bios. Further curiosities will need to be closely studied in the legacies of work she leaves behind.

Kelly - Eve Koopman is a writer and change-maker and perhaps, with some shyness, would describe herself as an activist. With a background in theatre, has played many roles and worn many costumes. She is committed to exploring the expansive and rich symbioses between creative expression and art and social justice work. Kelly- Eve is an *Atlantic Fellowship for Racial Equity* alumnus and was also proudly a member of *We See You*, the queer collective who occupied a Camps Bay mansion at the end of 2020 during the Covid Lockdown period in South Africa. Kelly - Eve Koopman has written and published a number of works, including her debut memoir *Because I Couldn't Kill* published by Melinda Ferguson Books, longlisted for the Sunday Times National Book Award this year, she is also the co-curator of the publicly acclaimed LGBTQI anthology *They Called Me Queer*. Kelly - Eve currently works in TV and film and continues to create and facilitate opportunities for radical imagination work across different forms and modalities.

Shameez Joubert is a conceptual designer, with roots in the Eastern Cape. She is particularly interested in creativity, its expansive potential, and Design For Social Change. She has a penchant for pixel clicks, poetry, and things that make her snort-laugh. You can find more of her work at www.shameezjoubert.com.

Vasti Hannie is a writer and organiser. Curious about the ways we are shaped by information and interested in navigating social data, Vasti spends most days trying to figure out South Africa. Having a hard go of it, here in this international pandemic, she is grateful for the escapes that speculative fiction have brought.

Zacharia Mashele is an artist and activist. He is passionate about multimedia communication and believes in building solidarity among communities through the power of storytelling. Zacharia holds a BA in Journalism from the University of Johannesburg, has specialised in photojournalism and documentary photography while he kicks off his modeling career.

Kelly Smith is a Capetonian jack of all trades and master of fun with eighteen years' worth of writing and editing experience under her belt. After obtaining a Bachelor of Journalism degree from Rhodes University, she spent a few years as a travel journalist writing about South East Asia for South African publications before returning to Cape Town.

In 2014 she launched the first African chapter of international literary performance art event, *Naked Girls Reading*, which has chapters in over twenty cities across the world on four different continents. *Naked Girls Reading Cape Town* was touted as a "performance art sensation" on e.tv prime time news, featured in *Elle* magazine and *The Sunday Times*, and was part of the Cape Town Fringe Festival in 2017.

Kelly is also the co-founder of the Unofficial Pink Party, a Cape Town social event launched in 2014 in celebration of the LGBTQIA+ community and which is listed on *Lonely Planet's* Top Choices list. In 2019 she became part of the Raunchy Renditions collective that launched a live storytelling event themed around sex where storytellers' personal stories are specifically curated to promote sex positivity that's not framed in a cisgender heteronormative way. The event has featured in *Fair Lady* magazine and *The Daily Maverick*.

Kelly has a deep love for travel and books and had the privilege of working as a senior communications consultant in Bali in 2017 at the Ubud Writers and Readers Festival, known as one of the top literary festivals in the world. She also moderated panel discussions with South African and international authors at the annual Cape Town Open Book Festival in 2019 and for the festival's podcast series in 2020. She has most recently had her creative non-fiction published in *Prufrock* journal, *They Called Me Queer*, an anthology of queer South African stories, and had the pleasure of editing *Our Move Next*.

Find her on Instagram: [@kellysmith007](https://www.instagram.com/kellysmith007)

Sibongakonke Mama is a Johannesburg-based writer who grew up in Gcuwa and Cape Town.

Her current writing interests are alienation, quiet, hybrid forms, and movement between the spiritual or metaphysical and physical worlds.

Her writing has appeared in various South African platforms, including the *Mail & Guardian* and *AmaBhungane*, and is forthcoming in *New Coin*. She has worked as a journalist writing for the *Cape Argus*, *Weekend Argus*, *eNCA* and producing current affairs programme, *The Big Debate*.

She also works as an arts administrator, having run the programme for South Africa's erstwhile top jazz club, *The Orbit*.

Sibongakonke has just completed an MA in creative writing at the university currently known as Rhodes. She holds a BA from the same university, and an Honours degree specialising in investigative journalism from Wits University.

Mphumzi Nontshinga hails from East London, a small city in the Eastern Cape. He is the first person in his family to pursue a career in the arts. Mphumzi is a *Fleur du Cap* Award Nominee and a *Standard Bank Ovation Award Winner*.

This triple threat actor not only believes that acting is his passion, but he has surrendered to the fact that it is also his calling. He is a Creative Entrepreneur who recently founded his branding and voice consulting company called *The Resonators Circle*. Having a great command over his home language isiXhosa, has afforded him many opportunities of being a voice over artist, writer and translator on numerous projects.

Mphumzi was also selected as one of the six finalists for the *DALRO Arts and Culture Trust Scholarship* out of 180 candidates, nationally. In 2018 he travelled to Haikou, China, to perform at the 70th International Theatre Institute's Anniversary under the direction of Prof Geoffrey Hyland.

Selected roles include Juan in Lorca's *Yerma* directed by Geoffrey Hyland, *Imbeleko/Inimba* directed by Lulamile Bongo Nikani, *Fahfee in Sophiatown*, directed by Clare Stopford, Zwelinzima, in *Iyazika* directed by Mandla Mbothwe, Howard Barker's *The Castle*, under the direction of Puleng Stewart and Mncedisi in *Umsi*, by Thapelo Hlongwane. He also portrayed the character of Baylor in Sam Shepherd's *Lie of the Mind* directed by Geoffrey Hyland. Nontshinga portrayed Zwelakhe 'Zwi' Nkedama in the 2018 Standard Bank Ovation Award winning play, *Sainthood*, directed by Tiisetso Mashifane wa Noni. He had an opportunity of starring in the biographic movie of Poppie Nongena, directed by Chris Olwagan, which premiered in cinemas at the beginning of 2020.



Our Move Next is a collaboration between Heinrich Boell Stiftung, Backyard Pitch Productions and a host of writers and artists.

Our Move Next is a speculative fiction anthology or possible digital folklore from African activists and activated storytellers and artists. Invitations to contribute to *Our Move Next* were widely and publicly broadcast for those who identify as: activists, cultural workers, healers and organizers to share visual or written ideas, representations, poetry or stories exploring realities unbound to a racialized heteronormative capitalist patriarchy.

We hope that the anthology presents a similar invitation to you, the reader, to claim the time and space to imagine boundlessly, without preface or apology.