

Bab'aba - Ugly Short Stories

by Julie Ruth Sikelwa Nxadi

(3693178)



A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Creative Writing in the Department of English Studies, University of the Western Cape.

Supervisor: Prof. Kobus Moolman

Submitted: November 2018

Citation convention used: MLA citation

Abstract

Bab'aba - Ugly Short Stories is a collection of vignettes whose function is to colour and collage three portraits of Black women characters; namely, a rural woman (Nozikhali), a township teenager (Zola), and a child/baby (Loli). Each of these stories serve as details in each other's portraits whilst remaining stories on their own. My intention with this collection was to restore some form of abstract equality and right to mystery by functioning within a lexicon of opacity. In the scholarship of decoloniality this is my argument for the legitimacy of vernacular/customised definitions for problems that preoccupy communities/individuals rather than having to always pin ourselves to already existing theory in order to be legible. In the scholarship of opacity, this is a contribution to the argument against the necessity for legibility/transparency (in the first place) in exchange for dignity. I chose ugliness as my thematic district of departure because of its connoted potential to provide richer explorations into notions of marginality and an emancipatory praxis that cannot afford to have in its makeup the potential to seek to eliminate. And though such a liberatory ambition is hard to fantasize about against the backdrop of popular chauvinism in the contemporary landscape of - particularly - South Africa, and the visceral effects thereof and the swift justice needed to attend thereto, I do think that there is merit in hallucinating some sort of doctrine of humanity that ends in dignity for all.

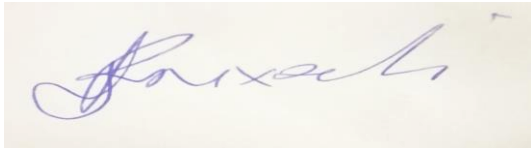
UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE

Key words

The vernacular, Ugliness, Aesthetics, Violence, Marginality, Indigeneity, African Feminism, Vulgarity, Multilingualism, Geopolitics.

Declaration

I, Julie Ruth Sikelwa Nxadi, declare that “Bab’aba: Ugly Short Stories” is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.



November 2018



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

This thesis has been submitted to Turnitin and has been approved by the supervisor

[I will sign]

Dedication

For Duya, Sis'Keen, Thanjelwa, Yeye, Ida, Betina, Zukiswa and always for Linomtha.

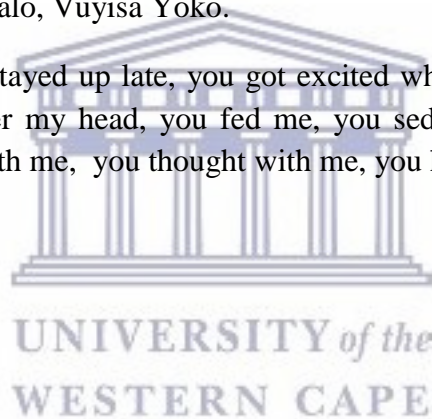
Acknowledgements

This would have been impossible if it were not for:

The Purity Boiz [Dada Khanyisa and Thato Toeba], Mohammad Shabangu, The Centre for Being and Belonging [Athambile Masola and Allan Mbongeni Magubani], Nomalanga Mkhize, Buhle Mtshemla, Fezokuhle Mthonti, Loyiso Qoboshiyana, The Centre for Humanities Research (with special thanks to Heidi Grunebaum and Wilton Schereka), Saleem Badat, Paul Anthony Daniels II, Amanda Hlengwa, Shireen Badat, Lieketso Mohoto, Nwabisa Mtiya, Mongi Khumalo, Vuyisa Yoko.

You listened, you read, you stayed up late, you got excited when I could not anymore, you theorised, you put a roof over my head, you fed me, you sedated me, you loved me, you believed in me, you played with me, you thought with me, you helped me.

You saved me.



CONTENTS

1. UMAMA: Nozikhali (8)

Umthandazo	9
Inimba	21
Iyeza	25
Ubuthongo	30

2. UMNTANA: Nokuzola (35)

Umthandazo	36
Inimba	46
Iyeza(i)	57
(ii)r	65
(iii)	72
Ubuthongo	83

3. IMVEKU: Loli (90)

Umthandazo	91
Inimba	93
Iyeza	95
Ubuthongo	105



4. Essay

“Over-seen: Opacity, ugliness and the right to fantasy.” An artistic reflection.

5. Bibliography

Babi'aba: Ugly short stories



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

U-MAMA:
u-Nozikhali



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

Umthandazo

Ngweletshetshe yobu ngcwalisa, wa khomba umhlaba ngamatha elanga asikayo, usasi bona na?

Aku ngebi usilibele eziko, mpheki?

Wasiphonononga amandla wathi uyasi qinisa.

Wasi thwalisa amazinki kwisi tshingitshane wathi uyas 'omeleza.

Ise nguwe na nkosi?

'Nto zimbini: awuzivanga ukuphumela kwakho entlontini, okanye weemka kudala wasi shiya sizizisulu zemimoya engendawo.

Sixholwa amehlo ngama xhalanga, nkosi. Sibola iinyama.

Sigqabuk iinyongo

phezu kwee bhedi zethu.

Kuma gumbi ethu.

Ezindlini zethu.

Wa nqaba, Nkosi?

Usa lazi isango leli lizwe ukuthi lijongise ngaphi na?

Ku hlokoma isimnyama, ku dilika iindonga, andiku tyholi yehova, ndiya yaleza.

uMtyholi uvale ngomqolo emnyango, iintsana zii bukele ngapha kwakhe.

Zibukele iintsana, mtriniti, na xa siwelwa ziinyama sishiyeka siingamathambo awazula ngobusuku, akhonye, akhale, esoyiswa yilento kuthiwa bobu bomi, oh yehova, wa sithela?

Nkosi, wasi zimela?

Ubuthe uyasi qinisa, Bawo. Sithi aba.

Siqhekeke iinyeke. Amehlo asinawo.

Sopha iinyawo, Nkosi, sinezi vubeko.

Asikho msulwa. Kuninzi esikwenzileyo egameni lokuqina.

Sithi aba.

Sibabi.

Kodwa xa sino 'ko nyanywa nguwe, bawo, saku jongwa ngubani na?

Hallowed Shield, you point the cutting rays of the sun directly at us, do you still see us?

Have you not left your pots on the stove, Cook?

You examine our strength and say it is to make us strong,

You put zinc sheets on our backs during windstorms and say it is to make us steady.

Could that still be you, King?

It can only be one of two things: You either did not feel yourself convert from discipline to bullying, or you have forgotten us and left us at the mercy of demons.

Our eyes have been plucked by vultures, king, our flesh is rotting.

Our gall bladders are rupturing

On our beds.

In our bedrooms.

In our homes.

Why so scarce, King?

Do you even remember which way the entrance to this world is facing?

A dark curse is thundering, the walls are falling, I am not accusing you, Jehova, I am reminding you.

The true accuser has shut the door with their back, and the infants watch from beyond.

The infants watch, Trinity, as our flesh falls from our bones leaving us to wonder the night as skeletons, howling, crying, defeated by this thing called life, Oh! Jehova, why do you skulk in the shadows? Why hide?

Ubuthe uyasi qinisa, Bawo. Sithi aba.

You said you were making us stronger, Father. This is us.

Our lips are cracked. We have no eyes.

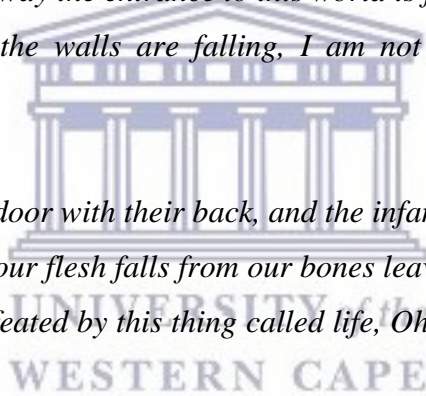
Our feet are bleeding, King, we have scars.

We are not pure. We have done much in the name of faith.

This is us.

We are ugly.

But if we disgust you, King, who will look at us?

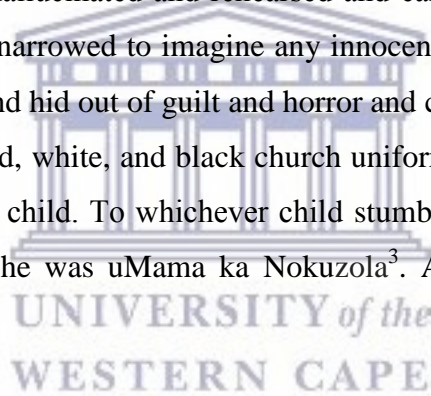


In the beginning was the word. A spine bound in black leather. A thousand stories. Fables. Fictions. Testimonies. Folded and coded and pressed in pages. Sealed in secrecy. Stained: Crimson and resolute when piled together, white and pink and precious when peeled apart - wide open - this time on page 1036 of *Incwadi Engcwele*¹: kwi incwadi kaYohane yoku qala, isahluko soku qala, “Ekuqalekeni, kwabakho ulizwi.”²

They watched her while a thin, stained, cotton cloth hung off of the pulpit’s edge beside her, with faint blue embroidery: *Lauda Fine*. And she stood - slightly away - her right arm stretched towards and her hand just touching the pine pulpit. Poised.

Mid-morning sun spilled passed the jagged remains of a stained-glass window and puddled at her feet. Every detail on her - every crease - precise and anonymous. Fine but common. Seen and seen and seen again. And then forgotten. After all, who has *not* seen a widow atrophying from the tightness of her wedding band? What more is there to be said about the cut of a disappointed mother’s gaze, hallucinated and rehearsed and carried from her own girlhood? And what *of* these eyes - too narrowed to imagine any innocence into - who has not dodged contact with them? And run and hid out of guilt and horror and called it honour?

She stood statuesque in her red, white, and black church uniform, a mother a thousand times over. To a child. To a child’s child. To whichever child stumbled across her path and lifted their face to swallow hers. She was uMama ka Nokuzola³. An annexure of herself to an annexure of herself.



Verse 14:

“Ulizwi,⁴” she tossed the word across the tops of their white bonnets “waba yinyama⁵” she continued her voice crackling through the warm air and then landing in the thatch above their heads like blades in butter. Up in the thatch - in a thousand moments queued into one - she somehow saw the sun. It gushed indifferent pools of light, damming behind objects and not concerning itself with the shadows those objects cast.

¹ The holy book

² The first book of John, chapter one “In the beginning there was the word”

³ Loli’s grandmother

⁴ The word

⁵ Became flesh.

“*Ndiya ku bona*”⁶ something hissed from her stomach and pointed its revelation to the sky. She quickly dropped her eyes. A sea of women before her - plump and blithe in its troughs, gaunt and stern in its crests - ebbed in apprehension. White shawls ironed over red jackets. Neat. Brides.

“Ulizwi” she tried to summon herself back into the room “waba yinyama” but she could not stay.

Her eyes fell to the ground in front of her. A tired, red carpet that climbed down the stage of the old mud church, joined a collage of more carpets, blankets, and found-mats that jigsawed in muted colours, and disappeared under rows of polished leather court shoes. But at *her* feet a paisley rug - chafed down to its hessian thread and held together by the dirt it rested on - began to sink. “*Ndiya ku bona*” something hissed from her stomach and bled down her legs while a convent of mirrors gazed from beneath their white bonnets and began to cloud with concern in some places.



Ndiya ku bona.

u-Mama ka Nokuzola⁷ was much younger than life had treated her. She was nearing fifty now, but she had been called u-Makhulu long before she became one. She married at twenty and moved to a village where the women called her u-Makhulu ironically (the humour lay somewhere between how soft and fresh she was beside her staunch, old husband and how deep into tradition and ritual she burrowed to match him). Known to arrive early at ceremonies in the village - often before sunrise, waking whichever family’s ceremony it was - she would work beside women twice her age, chopping wood, peeling vegetables and ignoring their gossip.

On the occasions that her husband would attend, when he was not working or aching from working, he sat in the kraal with the men, basking in the glory of having a wife so diligent that she had become a communal asset, so disciplined that she had become a communal ambition, and so discreet that she evoked desire.

A secret in plain sight.

⁶ I see you.

⁷ Loli’s grandmother.

A thing of envy.

Draped beneath layers of cloth and smoke, hunched over all of those fires, it was easy to forget that she was still tender. Still plump. And for many years of their marriage her husband tossed himself in that succulence, perhaps enchanted by the witchcraft that the villagers quietly accused her of.

“Bathi undi thakathile⁸” he would sometimes whisper.

“Nawe wathakatheka?⁹” she would always respond.

Everything she touched would swell with life.

A parched vegetable patch he had long given up on suddenly burst with colour at the top of their garden, while flowers blushed bashful at their gate, something he insisted only her hands could do.

Only her scent could conjure.

Only her attention could inspire.

For years it was just them, until the birth of their daughter, u -Nokuzola, who finally gave her someone to talk to that was closer to her own age, the women in the village laughed.

The women of that village laughed.

Their husbands laughed too. They laughed at the old man and his bicycle. At how stiff he was. At how simple and old fashioned he was. So stiff and simple and old fashioned and sure that chores were all that a young, beautiful, woman needed while her husband said “Yes, baas” at work all day. They laughed but never bothered to check if she enjoyed being the young bride of this proud old man.

She stood in the silent church - her eyes brimming with tears - staring at the sinking rug in front of her. A premonition, perhaps? The beginnings of madness? Or just another mirage on the arid vista of sleeplessness. A wretched sleeplessness that had lifted the roof off of the church and left her writhing and exposed. What did she want from these women and their blinding white bonnets? What was caught in her throat and muting her words? A confession? What did she expect them to do with that? Understand? Advocate for her at the gates of His kingdom? *These* women? She had known God for a long time but she had known these

⁸ “They say you betwitched me”

⁹ “And you conceded to being bewitched?”

women for longer. These women that called her a child and then a witch and then a widow but never by her name: u-Nozikhali Zitha wamaQocwa, umaZembe, uJojo, uTiyeka, Butsolo Beentonga, uMbiZana, uMabombo. If she was to plead her case to God, these were not the people who could assist her. These people who did not know her by her name. She needed them only when she thought that her child might outlive her. She had hoped that their four part harmonising of H. H. Dugmore's hymns might deliver some form of comfort to her daughter in the event of her passing as only Methodist humming could do. But u-Nokuzola had died a thousand times over. And there was nothing to dress in harmony anymore. u-Nozikhali Zitha did not need them.

She took a deep breath, swallowed a flood of tears, and then said resolutely

“Ulizwi waba yi nyama.”

The ditch that was before her filled.

The thatch that let the sun in closed.

And the tears that had threatened to fall, cleared.

She set her eyes on a young soloist in the front row who took the cue and burst into song:

“Lukhangela kuwe, lukhangela kuwe, mvana ye kalvari, ukholo lwam!”

u-Nozikhali descended from the stage and reached for her Bible and her bag on the empty seat next to the swelling soloist before she began towards the church doors. She stepped out into the warm morning and heard the door open again and a wave of harmonies pour out, “Sithini, sikulandele?”¹⁰ an old voice yelled after her.

u-Nozikhali shook her head and shouted “Hayi, Nono”¹¹ without looking back. She proceeded out of the gate and up the dirt road towards her house, the sun at her back.

She shook her head at her own forgetfulness.

Of course she enjoyed being her husband's wife. She would never have expected that anyone would open her gate, walk across her yard, knock on her door, and ask her if she enjoyed being a wife to her husband, but if they would have dared to do so her response would have been “Ukufa.”¹²

¹⁰ “What shall we do, shall we follow you?”

¹¹ “No, darling”

¹² “To death”

She could not be sorry for marrying that man, she would not be sorry. What was there to regret when she toiled the same in her father's house as a girl? More so.

Before the hairs in her armpits had even coiled she was a mother to her three younger brothers, a servant to her demanding father, a minder to her father's thirty chickens, and a punchline to her uncle's twin boys who were working for her father to avoid working underground in Secunda. She was all of that to all of them from the moment her mother died until the moment she stared into the eyes of the man that would become her husband when she was twenty years old. In the eight years after her mother's death, she cooked for more mouths, washed more clothes, and started more fires than she would ever have to in the twenty years of her own marriage. There were more temperaments to manage in her father's house, and oh the temperaments of men are a cumbersome thing to manage. Her little brothers who lusted for manhood even though they were still smooth as pebbles. The burly, smelly twins with their dimwitted jokes and their unrelenting laziness. And then her father, a stout and heavy handed man, full of lectures and rules and disapproval.

She could not get used to their tough overalls swooshing between ice-cold water as she rubbed stains from each of them until her fists were raw. Her mother made it seem so easy, but she was not her mother, she felt every fibre. And she wondered, constantly, what it might be like to not have to be so much to so many people.

Her father thatched houses and rondavels, but as people began to use more zinc than thatch, he had to travel further away for longer stretches of time on jobs. But when they worked close enough, u-Nozikhali would bring them food during the day using the opportunity to see what roofs her father had been putting over other families' heads.

One day her father stood barefoot, his bull hide whip that he so randomly and liberally used resting on his right shoulder, and his mud-splattered trousers rolled over his thick calves. He lectured the twins on the dangers of being soft men. Spitting out the remains of a nail he had gnawed to dust, he listed the things that women of today would expect from them: Money. Strength. Virility. Calloused hands.

"Uku-Zola¹³" she muttered under her breath as she set their food on a rock.

But they did not hear her.

As her cousins manicured the dry grass and her father preached to them about manhood, u-Nozikhali imagined herself in the small house that they were

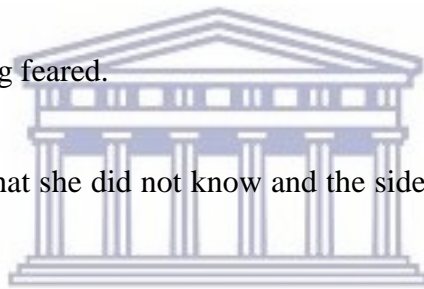
¹³ "Peace"

thatching. And its size suddenly did not matter. It only mattered that she was there alone. Alone. In a house of her own. Waking only when she was fed up with sleep. Quiet only when she was finished laughing. Alone.

But only widows and witches lived alone and so she would just have to imagine. Imagine being alone instead of inundated with the details of the desires of all of the men and the boys around her. There was not a side to men that she did not know, and she was not sure that she liked any of them. She did not hate them. She was simply tired of them. They were all so clumsy and self-centred. It was quite boring. They had no sense of humour or sense of adventure. They were plain and unchallenging. All of them. Even her favourite brother who was eight years old when she married, was more demanding than he was adorable. She was just tired of them, but she still could have stood to stay had the scarcity of jobs not turned her father rancid. But in the long spells of nobody needing the old and expensive trade of thatching, he fermented in the yard, busying them all with his restlessness and a sadism that was not fueled by anger.

Just a preoccupation with being feared.

There was not a side to men that she did not know and the side that she married was the side that she could live with.



u-Nozikhali's court shoes clapped against the arid earth beneath them as she turned onto the long road that pointed toward her house. The sun began to bake her in her church uniform and without giving it a second thought she reached up and pulled the white bib from her shoulders and then the bonnet from her head. A thousand curls unfurled as she folded her bib and bonnet into her bag and her head cooled. As she walked, she reached up into her hair and pushed her fingers around on her scalp. She felt herself wake up from a sleepless slumber that had shaded her eyes for longer than she could stand to admit. Something tingled just beneath her skin and her whole body yawned.

She thought of her husband.

Of when they first met. She had hitch hiked to Grahamstown to look for work while her brothers were at school and her father and cousins were away working on a house. Her father had insisted that school would be little more than an inconvenience to her, but he had never

said anything to her about work. So she found herself at Whitely's Butchery and as she confidently walked through the open door, a voice met her with a warning:

“Ntombi, lichala lamabhulu elo!¹⁴”

She looked up searching for the voice's owner.

“Ona atheni?¹⁵” she said cheekily back.

The voice chuckled in shock as she continued into the butchery. She felt something against her chest and looked down to find a thick, hairy, pale arm barring her entrance, but before she could shove past the juggernaut, two slender hands appeared gently clasped over it. Soft and dark and wrinkled. A coward's hands, her father would have said. She followed the long thin arms and found a man. A man old enough to be her father but not mean enough. There was a faint blue ring around the dark brown puddles in his eyes. His face was elegant and angular draped in skin so soft she could feel it with her sight. He wore a white overall with white gumboots and red soles. And he smiled.

He turned his smile to whoever owned the arm blocking her, cocked his head to the side sweetly and said something in Afrikaans that made the arm shake with laughter and eventually allow him passage to escort her out.

“Ntombi, ndi the kuwe licala lama bhulu eli” he said gentle and amused.

“Nda buza mna ukuba ona atheni?” she responded with no hesitation.

Outside he laughed at how cheeky she was, warning her never to test the patience of madmen. He tried to show her the entrance for non-whites, but she turned her mouth in an exaggerated frown, shook her head, smacked her lips and told the man that she was just there looking for work and that the butchery had squandered its chances at having her. The man laughed again. She had never made a grown man laugh before, she had barely seen one laugh before. He pursed his lips over his teeth trying to stop himself from grinning but his cheekbones gave his smile away. She looked at the man. She looked directly into his eyes. She had never looked into the eyes of a man for that long before. She wondered what would happen. If he would stop her. If he would tell her how disrespectful it was to look so deeply into the eyes of an elder.

He did not.

He simply continued to nod and smile as he began to walk away.

“Hayi ke -¹⁶” He genuflected as he turned to leave.

¹⁴ “Young girl, that side is for whites only”

¹⁵ “What is so special about them?”

¹⁶ “Well then”

“Wena bhuti?¹⁷” She spoke just loud enough to hold him, fully aware that she had relegated him from elder to peer with a single word, “Awu dingi mntu woku ncedisa endlini? Mhlawumbi umnka’kho uya dinwa ngumsebenzi wendlu? Ndiya cinga inoba inkulu indlu yenu¹⁸” She sang so sweetly that the man flinched.

“Oh.” Sincerely. “Hayi.¹⁹” Shyly. “uMama we khaya waliflayithela eli²⁰” He turned to look at her.

“Oh,” she gasped delicately, “Zabuhlungu ezondaba. Nowam utata ungumhlolo.²¹” She dropped her eyes “Inoba awudingi ncedo nabantwana ke?²²” Gently.

“Abantwana,” he whispered. “A-a-sizange sibe nathamsanqa lokuba nabo²³” he stammered.

In the moments that unfolded between them she prepared her brothers, all three, her father, short and round, both of her cousins, and her father’s wretched chickens, all in a line, and she said goodbye. To the things she liked about them, to the things she did not. She said goodbye, and she was not sorry. She looked into that man’s eyes, and she said goodbye to whatever came before the moment when she learned that she could be worshiped, feared, and wanted. She watched the old man’s soft lips hesitate over murmurs. He quivered and reached for the handkerchief in his pocket and wiped it across his glistening face. “Uncedo lona,” the man trembled, “ndiyaludinga.²⁴”

u-Nozikhali stood at her gate. Wondering what the old man would say today. Years of drought had banished the colour from their garden, the blushing blossoms that once huddled at the mouth of their gate had been reduced to sticks, and she had long turned their cows into money and their money into walls, extending their house into a structure that would make her own father quake with envy.

Nothing. The old man could say nothing.

¹⁷ “And you, brother?”

¹⁸ “Do you not need someone to help you and your wife with house work? I am sure your house is quite big”

¹⁹ “No”

²⁰ “My wife has died”

²¹ “That is terrible news, my father is also a widow”

²² “Perhaps I could help you with your children?”

²³ “We were never blessed with children”

²⁴ “I do need help”

u-Nozikhali stood calmly as beads of sweat ran down the length of her back beneath her uniform. She opened the gate and walked to the front door, not feeling the ground beneath her feet.

He could say nothing. Nobody could.

She entered into the cool of the house and stepped out of her court shoes, her pantihosed feet warming the white ceramic tiles as she floated towards the bedroom.

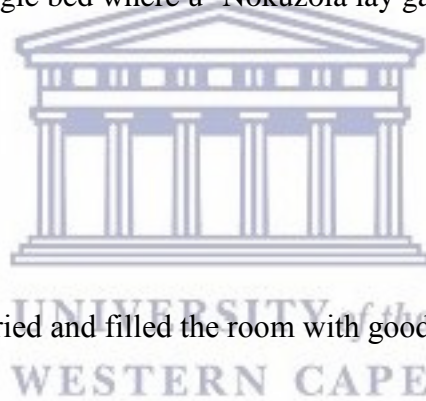
There was nothing to be said. There was nothing to be said. What good was an apology addressed to someone who cannot receive it sent from someone who did the worst that they could to do the best that they could?

She stood at the foot of the single bed where u -Nokuzola lay gaunt and lifeless.

Her child.

Her only child.

“Izibula lam limkile!²⁵” She cried and filled the room with goodbye.



²⁵ “My first is gone.”

"Ma'khulu?"²⁶

u-Nozikhali heard a faint whisper and then felt cold fingertips land one at a time on her forehead. A small weight draped across her torso and pulled her from her dull slumber while childish, excited breath fluttered too close to her face.

"Ma'khulu, vuka"²⁷ she whispered again, gently poking her makhulu's cheeks this time.

"Hmm?!" u-Nozikhali stirred behind blankets of sleep.

"Vuka. u-Mam'am uthi kuya tsha."²⁸ The little weight lifted with u-Nozikhali's sleep.

"Heh?!" Her eyes peeled open, raw as though she had never closed them.

She squinted at the single bed across the bedroom, searching for a silhouette. There was nothing. The silence in the room began to give way to the howling winds outside as she kicked her blankets open in a fleeting huff of sobriety. Awake. And then not. And then awake again but just barely.

"u-Mama wam uthi kuya tsha. Use toilet,"²⁹ u-Loli's voice seemed to come from everywhere out of sight, she had swam through the house with this consistent mischief since she first arrived with her mother. As she sat on the bed, gaining her balance, u-Nozikhali tried to pull the reins on her quiet mutterings, careful not to allow ubuthongo³⁰ to corrupt her tone. She had to be gentle with u-Loli, she was six years old. She was ancient. She was urgent. But she only had six years of practice when it came to listening.

u-Nozikhali patted around searching for matches to light the paraffin lamp next to her bed. She trembled under the weight of weeks of rationed sleep and pulled air into the deep reaches of her lungs.

Would the flame of the lamp withstand the wind she was hearing?

She did not trust the glass surrounding it suddenly.

She narrated mundane details of each of her actions to herself as she pushed onto her feet, pulling herself to action one moment at a time. She was procrastinating. She was nervous. She became frustrated that she was nervous. She inhaled that frustration but had yet to exhale the last. She was tired. And furious that she was tired. She cursed herself for not buying an

²⁶ "Grandmother"

²⁷ "Grandmother, wake up"

²⁸ "Wake up my mother says there's a fire"

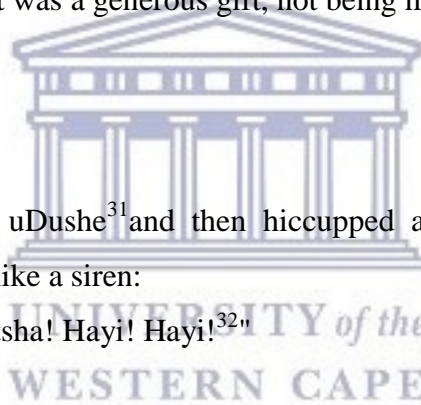
²⁹ "My mother says there is a fire, she is in the toilet"

³⁰ Sleep/exhaustion

extension cord and lighting her yard when she had the chance as she kicked into her slippers and finally left the bedroom in a soft pocket of light.

u-Loli was gone.

But u-Nozikhali could hear u-Loli's little feet quickly lick the tiles on their way down the passage, and through the lounge in the dark. She ran just out of the reach of her makhulu's light until she stumbled through the open front door onto the veranda and was swallowed by a warm gust of night. u-Nozikhali hesitated for a moment, watching her granddaughter on the veranda wrapped in the elements, the wind ironing her night dress across her back and making the pink cotton balloon in front of her. u-Loli giggled and milked the air from her dress only for it to puff up again like a plastic bag in the sky. u-Nozikhali watched her grandchild squeak childishly on the veranda and for a moment envied her peace, that she could play at a time like this. It was a generous gift, not being made to grow up.



The moon was full.

The wind continued to play uDushe³¹ and then hiccupped a silence long enough for u-Nozikhali to hear a cry sound like a siren:

"Kuya tsha! Kuya tsha! Kuya tsha! Hayi! Hayi!"³²

"Hamba wena!"³³ Nozikhali snapped at u-Loli unconsciously, pushing briskly against the wind and towards the toilet. She left u-Loli standing on the veranda hoping the child would forgive her outburst. Her heart knocked at the bones in her chest and her knees were loose and not worthy of her trust. u-Nokuzola, locked inside the toilet, sounded more frail each time her voice would pull through her and cut into the night.

She was scared of something. Death?

u-Nozikhali looked at her through the gap between the door and its frame. u-Nokuzola stood with her arms hung at her sides, her face tilted up towards the darkest corner of the toilet, and her eyes glazed over as if she were watching something watch her.

³¹ Dodgeball

³² "There is a fire! There is a fire! No! No!"

³³ "You get out of here!"

She moaned and whimpered to soothe herself. But then the wind banged the corrugated iron door three times announcing u-Nozikhali's presence.

"Hayi, ungubani?³⁴" She asked too sincerely for it not to be sinister.

The wind dropped and u-Nokuzola turned to look at the door with such sober disdain that she caught her mother off guard. She had never seen that face on her child before. She had never seen any of this on her child. u-Nokuzola's nostrils flared, as her chest heaved and her eyes went from staring the door down to darting delicately across the air in front of her as though she were looking at a face.

"Ndim? Ndim mama?³⁵" She started to shake with confusion and the hard face she had *just* put on began to shatter.

u-Nozikhali looked back at the veranda:

u-Loli was gone.

She looked up at the empty sky that was freckled with light and searched the face of the moon. The moon shone back at her.

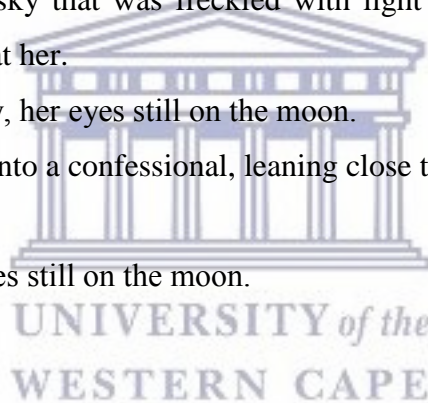
"Nokuzola?" she asked calmly, her eyes still on the moon.

u-Nokuzola turned the toilet into a confessional, leaning close to the door she whispered

"Kuya tsha, Mama."

"Nokuzola, yintoni?³⁶" her eyes still on the moon.

"Ndim mama.³⁷"



The small flame she held in her hand began to pulsate while the wind picked up and u-Nozikhali stood there in the dark as the faint light beat against her face. It had been three months since this routine of madness had begun and she just could not become accustomed to it. It was a bone chilling chaos that soared and dipped and pulled and pushed her with it. A nightly racking on her patience. With bad days made worse by the better days that preceded them.

She at first thought this was a test of her commitment to motherhood: A test of endurance to see how far into the future she would imagine to save u-Nokuzola from her end, and how far

³⁴ "No! Who are you?!"

³⁵ There is a fire, No! Oh no. Is it me? Is it me, mama?

³⁶ Nokuzola, what is it?

³⁷ It is me, mama.

into the past she would reach to apologise for her beginning. But as much as u-Nozikhali feared God, she never did envy the trap of being God: the endless loop between apology and forgiveness. She was a simple woman and as nights piled on top of each other and she thought about the makings of this child, she realised that this was not a test of her commitment to motherhood, this was the return of a curse. She had not really seen u-Nokuzola *alive* since she was fourteen years old and she was not sure what to do with her child's twenty-year old undead remains. What was an apology to a child who was little more than a spirit bucking against the insides of a body so fragile its outsides had blistered? What was an apology to a madwoman that she did not recognise? With darting, desperate eyes, and a back hunched over in secrecy. Locked: under urns full of silence buried so close to her surface that she was vulgar to look at? What was an apology to something so hazardous - so illegible? u-Nozikhali was not literate in this degree of regret and she only knew so many ways to ask what was wrong. Why she cried so. Why she had a scar that fell like a tear down her right cheek? Why her hair was so thin and her bones so weak?

Why she was dying?

Who had killed her?

It was too late to call this child a mistake, or was it too early? Whenever it was, whatever *she* was, it was not fair that her eyes remained bright. u-Nozikhali was sure that it was an uncalled for punishment to be made to look into those bright eyes set in the face of a ghost.

She had made some decisions in her life, big decisions, whose consequences she had watched unfold but this curse was not hers alone, and that she alone was being made to watch it to its grotesque end was unjust.

The door opened.

u-Nokuzola reached out to her mother, who caught her with one hand and held the paraffin lamp above their heads with the other. They walked back to the house under the unstable light and left the night as their witness.

There was once a boy - mostly limbs - sun bleached hair, and peachy skin. He would bruise his flesh and scrape his shins helping his grandfather gather amayeza in the hills. The old man - skin tanned and tightened by the sun - would name plants as they went, and watch the boy run. Nimble. Eager. Reaching between rocks the boy would teeter on small ledges, careful with the bleached roots and the succulent leaves as he dropped the plants into the bag slung across his chest he would heave with pride. With knowledge. An heir. Meticulous in everything that he did, a mimicry of his grandfather's tutelage.

"Nankuya umbethe,³⁸" the old man pointed. "Yiza nawo apha, baleka,³⁹" he sighed. The boy smelled each plant before he pulled it from the earth: a type of goodbye at a plant's death - a type of hello at a medicine's birth. Dirt beneath his finger's nails, healing at their tips. Education in each whisper from his grandfather's lips.

He darted up and down the bumpy faces of the rocky hills and learned and grew faster than the old man could teach. One day he reached the top of a hill, pulled a plant from between two rocks, and then stood with the cool of the wind while it lapped his sweat and cooled his cheeks. The rains had left the hills lush and exploding with colour. He drank the hills with his eyes, one gulp after the other. His eyes danced from thornbush to aloe, from sheep herd to family of cattle, and then suddenly for a moment, the boy startled.

There off in the distance: a lone white horse.

Trotting, and then galloping, and then trotting some more. Inspecting the bushes around it, stopping to tap the ground beneath it as if to ensure that the earth was strong enough to hold its colossal weight. It was fed. Looked after. It was owned. It was certainly accompanied although it was physically alone.

The boy snapped from his daze and made his way down the hill. He did not know much about horses but later thought of it still. While he helped his grandfather grind leaves and pound bark, he told the old man about the white horse. And the old man listened. Still. Eyes closed and hands rested on his knees. "Tata?" the boy whispered, sure that the old man had fallen asleep. But his grandfather was awake. He opened his eyes and ordered that the boy summon his father so that they might speak. The boy returned with his father by his side who regarded the old man with concern, for he was seldom summoned into the sacred holding where the old man and his small apprentice taught, healed, and learned. The old man told the

³⁸ "There is the mbethe plant"

³⁹ "Bring it here, run"

boy to retell his story. The boy told his father that he had seen a white horse. The two men read each other's faces carefully, exchanging slight twitches as the boy said his words.

“u-Tshangisa? u-Bhele? u-Dlamini?” the old man listed.

“u-Japan pha phesheya kwe Mission?⁴⁰” his son replied. Between them, they named all the men with horses in the village. But very few people had horses and none of them were white. The old man told the boy to go and wash buckets near the kraal, they would be working all night and they had to prepare. And while the boy squatted, washing buckets with a knee at each shoulder, he wondered what he had seen, even though he was right there.

It would not be the last time that the boy saw the horse - it would rush him in his dreams and wake him from his sleep. But it would be the last time that he told his grandfather and it would be the first secret that he ever learned to keep. There were more.

Secrets from his sleep.

Secrets older than them both.

Secrets out of his grandfather's reach.

The boy grew and so did his gift of seeing things that boggled his elders, and so he left the old man who could not teach what he did not know. And his boyhood drained from his body, as his manhood led him away to build his own holdings and offer the people a type of healing of his own. The people filed behind the young man and went where he went, very few remained loyal to the old man and his ways. Now a man himself, he wondered often why his grandfather, so wise, still prescribed such soft medicine to people who were in such pain. Things had changed. And people's spirits needed more than negotiations and ancestral pleas. The old man offered guidance and old thoughts on what they knew, but the young man asked that they simply name their enemies.

The young man, Phalo'mkhulu, always whispered never spoken, made nervous even those who stood at his gate and sought his help. Those who made it into the holdings and stooped in reverence in the dark felt his sight rip them open as they writhed in his gaze. They knew for sure that he would give them what they wanted and make it potent, and they knew that tomorrow he would show the same generosity to their enemies. Near the water in the valley. Tucked away. Out of sight. With no neighbours. No spectators. No complaints. No blights. A man by name: Phalo'mkhulu - wholly spirit and fortuitous power - gave healing to those who sought it and generously numbed the cowards.

⁴⁰ “Japan on the other side of the Mission?”

“Ewe ke,⁴¹” a lazy voice sang across the water one morning as Phalo'mkhulu set calabashes to dry in the sun. He stood straight as a pin and saw a girl with a black beret. She wore a man's beige shirt and used her arm to shade her face. Her right eye winked as a bead of sweat rolled down the slope of her brow

“Kufikwa, njani apho?⁴²” she squinted both eyes now.

No prefixes nor suffixes, no ‘Tata⁴³’, nor ‘Mhlekezi⁴⁴’ They could not have been very many years apart but he was certainly her spiritual elder. u-Phalo'mkhulu read her from across the water for only a moment and then turned into his holdings leaving the apparition behind. He arrived inside, washed his hands in the dark - in a basin on the floor - and then washed his shaven head. When he finished he took the water behind the holding and he swung the dish across the grass. The water scattered and he turned the basin on its mouth at the feet of umbhelebhele⁴⁵, looked back across the water, and saw that the girl was gone.

u-Phalo'mkhulu pulled his hand across the top of his head, shaking off the last beads of water from his scalp. He hummed quietly in the sun as he walked across his neatly swept yard, and reached his rondavel where he would begin his morning with amarhewu that he had left to ferment the night before. But when he lifted his eyes, he saw the girl once more. This time at his gate. Sweating profusely. The men's trousers she wore were too tight around her waist and hips but hung well past her feet. She was dewy and out of breath. She had a black handbag big enough to carry a tightly folded set of clothes but not big enough to carry appropriate shoes to accompany what was clearly some sort of a disguise. So she wore sandals that were too playful for where they found themselves standing.

“Uzimele bani? Aku zinyelwa apha,⁴⁶” he said quietly, lifting his hand to stop her from afar.

She stopped and waited to hear more, she had never been to a healer before. She had heard of his work from the gossip of wives from the village and knew the valley that they described as his holdings. So she went, and on the way she changed clothes, because though they needed this man's help, her husband could never know. For his pride's sake.

She listened, awaiting instruction, not sure if she needed some sort of code.

⁴¹ Greetings

⁴² “How does one get there?”

⁴³ “Father”

⁴⁴ “Sir”

⁴⁵ *Albizia adianthifolia*

⁴⁶ “Who are you hiding from? This is not a place for hiding”

But all she heard was the sun on the water, and branches under birds. She watched him stand still yet slightly afloat. His eyes danced across her frame as he read the girl once more. She was not a girl. Not at all. She was a woman full and firm. And she began to etch closer and she began to say words

“Andizimelanga.⁴⁷” One step.

“Ndi ze ku Phalo’ mkhulu.⁴⁸” Another.

“Umyeni ufuna umntana.⁴⁹” A step further.

“Ndacinga ukuza kuwe.⁵⁰” She stopped.

And the sun sunk from the sky and a warm darkness fell gently.

If she thought to look back on that day she would remember it quite clearly. She would remember his ale-coloured skin and the dimple in his chin. She would remember the holding’s warm and all the things that made her heart ache pouring out of her by the swarm. She would remember how he asked why she sought medicine when she was not ill and she responded that her husband’s kindness was only as strong as his will: And he was a weak willed man who was kind when the envy of others abound. And she was a strong willed woman who could not believe the rotten luck she had found. That he wanted things he could not have and he blamed her so sincerely. And imagined phantoms into her body and every time grieved fantasy as though it were reality. It was a ripe type of grief that she could not combat, it was older than her. To combat that type of grief she had to consult a spiritual elder and he was that. She would always remember his clear voice saying that her husband was just tired and he needed some rest. He told her to keep the old man happy. He told her to keep the old man fed. He gave her a medicine to fold into the food of this man who wanted fatherhood more than he wanted the truth.

It would close his eyes and it would open his heart.

But she failed to say her husband’s heart was already open,

She just left and returned.

And left and came back once again.

The fourth and final time u-Phalo' mkhulu saw her, he told her that she no longer needed him.

And not long after came u-Nokuzola, and brought with her peace and made parents of them.

⁴⁷ “I have not hidden”

⁴⁸ “I have come to Phalo’ mkhulu”

⁴⁹ “My husband wants a child”

⁵⁰ “And I thought to come to you”

And not long after came u-Nokuzola.

And not long after came mayhem.



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

Ubuthongo

u-Nozikhali was not sure if it was night or day.

If it was night, she would have to iron her uniform for the Mothers' Union meeting before she slept. If it was day, then it was morning, and she would have thought to iron her uniform the night before. *Was it the night before?*

She looked at the wall where a plastic clock painted to resemble dark wood and gold hung.

Eight.

She turned her heavy head to look out of the window but her eyes were so low she could not see passed the lace curtain. The smell of Pine Gel Cleaner floated on the steam of the piping hot water in a bucket at her feet.

She was awake.

"Yhu!" she sighed as she walked over to the 53cm Telefunken she had spoiled herself with for Christmas and turned it on. The last chords of the opening jingle for Generations rang out. It was night.

u-Nozikhali looked over at the mop that she had left standing alone near the open front door.

Had she finished mopping the floor or had she just begun?

The back door was also open and a dry summer breeze rolled through the lounge and peeled the wet off of the floor on its way.

 She *had* finished mopping.

She blinked away her confusion.

It was the third time that she had closed her eyes for just a moment only to have her mind sheepishly skulk back hours after the rest of her had been performing a routine of wellness. She closed and locked the front door and then walked to the kitchen to close and lock the back. Her feet and hands were swollen and her wedding band was buried in the flesh of that fatigue. She put on the kettle and stood by as it began to hiss, and marveled quietly at how immaculate this kitchen was that she did not remember cleaning. How fresh it smelled.

The light from the kitchen tumbled halfway up the passage and then stopped just before her bedroom door. Her door was open and the room was dark, but she saw her daughter lying there in the shadows on the single bed across from her own, her bony knees tenting under a thin blue sheet. u-Nokuzola had been home for three months and had withered more rapidly each day with no explanation. u-Nozikhali watched her daughter's knees waver under the weight of her own sleep and then snap upright just before they rested. u-Loli's giggle trickle out of the dark

“Makade ayeke u-Loli naye,⁵¹” she muttered to herself, “nguye lo unga phumlisi unina.⁵²”

A chill of exhaustion ebbed through her body and she switched the kettle off in surrender. She shuffled to the lounge and shut the TV off. And then the lounge. And then the kitchen. She reached her bed and lay down on her stomach without taking off her pinafore. While u-Nokuzola starved herself of sleep across the room, u-Nozikhali fell far away fast. Into a place in the dark where ends meet.

She met a man.

He smelled like butter.

He took her clothes and spread red ochre on her skin.

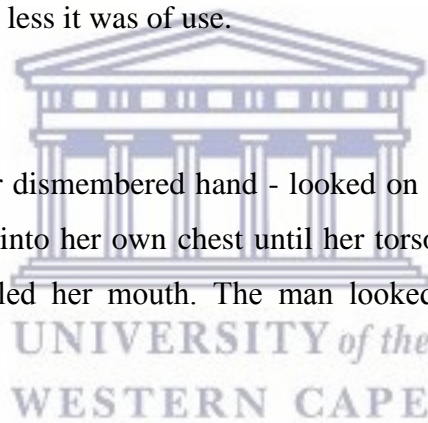
He took her hand and led her through a cluttered field of dead pigs and as they walked, she began to sink into the earth. Her legs became numb the more she tried to move the less it was of use.

Her mouth sealed shut.

Her arms fell off

and the man - left holding her dismembered hand - looked on as she held her eyes wide but felt them shut. She screamed into her own chest until her torso began to tremble. Her chest turned to sand. The sand filled her mouth. The man looked at her and said: “uyakhala umntana.⁵³”

“Omphi?!⁵⁴”



Makhulu?!

Her eyes flew open and she found herself staring at a small back lying next to her. She heard something tapping against the tapeti mat across the room in the corner and quickly pushed herself off of her stomach to investigate. u-Nokuzola stood in the shadows near the door with urine running down her legs and puddling on the floor beneath her. She jumped from her bed and lifted u-Nokuzola’s night dress quickly, but it was already wet. She paused for a moment and then started to pull the dress over u-Nokuzola’s head and let her finish. She pulled up the

⁵¹ “Loli needs to stop”

⁵² “She is the reason her mother cannot rest”

⁵³ “The child is crying”

⁵⁴ “Which one?!”

bucket that she kept in their room and sat u-Nokuzola on it. Hunched over, the bones on her back writhed as they protruded. U-Nokuzola shivered on the bucket while her mother fetched the mop and bucket from the lounge and wiped the floor. She was trembling, she looked utterly confused. But her tears would not fall. She lay her head on her knees and looked like a child. She was overwhelmed. There was finally nothing left to do.

u-Nozikhali began to mutter in frustration as she wrung the mop out. She pushed the mop around, spitting something between a curse and prayer, tears tumbling down the bridge of her nose. She could not believe her misfortune. She dunked the mop into the bucket, wrung it once more and then pushed it back and forth across the floor in front of u-Nokuzola, swishing through urine when she least expected it. She could not tell if the Pine Gel was making things worse or better but she was too exhausted to do anything more than what she was doing. She had not even bothered to put the lights on. She just shoved the mop around in the dark, her chest bubbling with tears while u-Nokuzola watched from the bucket. u-Nozikhali was sure she had cleaned the floor enough for them to sleep and what she did not mop up in the dark she would wipe before she went to the Mothers' Union meeting in the morning.

As she wrung the mop a final time and bit down her tears, she heard u -Nokuzola heave and send bile shooting across the already wet floor - once and then a second time. u-Nozikhali stopped and closed her eyes for a moment, the smell of vomit was instantly unforgiving.

A cock kraaied outside their window.

Makhulu? u-Loli's voice whispered.

u-Nokuzola spat the bitterness from her tongue as she swayed on the bucket.

"Mama?" she moaned, "ndi theni mna? Ndi theni mna ndodwa mama?⁵⁵" She sobbed and then heaved and then sobbed again, "kuya tsha mama," she heaved but nothing came.

"Heyi" u-Nozikhali sighed deeply, her eyes closed and her tears falling at their will. "Gqiba, Nokuzola.⁵⁶" she whispered, her insides wet with sorrow. "Yide ugqibe, ayikho lento yakho.⁵⁷" u-Nozikhali whispered, "Ayikho lento yakho." She left the mop standing in the bucket and shuffled through the dark to the kitchen and put the kettle on.

"Ayikho. Ayikho lento," she cried slowly stammering from fatigue to fire. She stood in the kitchen and pulled her pinafore up over her face and began to wail. Long, angry cries poured into the cloth cupped in her hands over her face as she shook her head in disbelief. One

⁵⁵ "Mama, what is wrong with me? What is wrong with me particularly?"

⁵⁶ "Finish, Nokuzola"

⁵⁷ "Finish this, there is no such thing as this thing of yours"

scream came after the other, each leaving her weaker than the last. She heard u-Nokuzola get up and fall in the bedroom. She heard the bucket of Pine Gel and piss topple over and swish across the bedroom and the wooden handle of the mop tap the floor as it landed. She heard u-Loli cry out for her. u-Nokuzola grunted and then slipped and struggled as she rose.

“Mama!”

u-Nozikhali screamed louder into her pinafore until there was no pain left but her own. She stomped her feet and shook with rage. Again and again and when she thought she might collapse, once more. She buckled onto one knee and then folded onto both. She cried in a melodic hum. A kind of chant. She did not know for how long.

Her chant subsided into a rhythmic pant which slowed into breathing. A cock kraaied again. She sat on her knees in the kitchen her pinafore still over her face, her breath draining out of her at its own will.

When she lifted her face from her hands the kitchen was a little bit lighter. The sun was coming. Not just then, but soon. She stood up slowly but her legs were heavy from being sat on so she stood for a moment. Her eyes were swollen, she could feel them. She dug the heels of her hands into her sockets and then straightened her back before walking down the passage into the bedroom. A miasma of urine, vomit and Pine Gel still hung in the room, but u-Nozikhali walked through it to open a window. u-Nokuzola lay on her side on the floor, soiled in every way imaginable. Her eyes open. Her teeth clenched. And her struggle over.

u-Nozikhali swooped down to pick up the mop and the bucket and as she stood up straight in the growing light of the morning, she saw her ironed church uniform on a hanger, swinging on the handle of her wardrobe.

It was mourning time.

And there is beauty in the mourning.

INTOMBI:

Nokuzola



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

Umthandazo

Andiyi thembi imilingo mna.

Hayi imilingo ethungelwe ebhatyini ka mama ebomvu, ya cinezela ulwimi lwakhe ola lolwa lilitye loku qiniseka eli hleli kuye esifubeni.

Hayi imilingo ka Tata wam xa egoba ixesha ngo moya wokuzi sizela athathe ubomi obude abenze uphinye, athate uphinye amenze iminyaka elilikhulu.

Hayi umlingo woku sweleka ngomzuzu woku zala, woku krazulwa ube sisininzi, isininzi siphinde sibe yinto eyodwa xa leyo ibize emva iginya le ibize ngaphambili.

Hayi umlingo woku zalwa kukufa nesithembiso sobu dlozi nokubaluleka nobukhosi.

Hayi ukusindiswa.

Hayi umlingo woku lahleka ujongiwe.

Hayi umlingo woku bhaqwa ngoku biwa. Hayi

Ndi thembe isiqu endasi qhela ngokusimamela, nentliziyo endayi pholisa ngokuyi thunuka nga meva, ndiwa hlohla kwii koyi zom'phefumlo wam ezinga hofoka xa zinoku shiywa zingenanto.

Ndi thembe amehlo am nokutya akutyayo. Izandla zam ezikwazi uku ngomba inyama ithambe zi phinde ziyi phathe kancinci iqine.

Into endiyithembileyo ngu ngoku.

Kodwa ngoku ndi neminyaka emishumi elinesi thoba, ndi ngumhlali kule lokishi inga ndaziyo noba ndingu bani igama lam. Ndi nemibhalo yemilwo endingenoku tyebisela ngayo, ndi jinga unyana womntu ongathethiyo ondi vuthulula ilokwe ekhangela umangaliso.

Ngoku ndi ngumtshana othile osuke ezilalini ezoku khangela ubomi edolophini wa suka wabaqa ezi yobisayo nezi nxilisayo nezi jongisa esiphelweni.

Ngoku ndi muncwana.

Ngoku andi dimu.

Ngoku andi ngomntu. Andiyi nto. Ndiya lalwa, ndiya xokwa, ndiya bethwa, ndiya xuthwa, ndiya ncanca, ndiya tsicwa, ndiya shiywa ba ndi jongane nokufa. Kodwa kuyo yonke lonto, ndi ngakhe ndi linge ndife. Ndi ngakhe ndi linge ndinenze ababulali. Ndi phile egameni loku sindisa izazela zenu.

I do not trust magic.

Not the magic woven into the threads of my mother's red blazer and pressed into the blades of my mother's praying tongue sharpened by that rock in my mother's proud chest.

Not the time bending magic of my father's self-pity that turned a lifetime of laughter into flashes behind my nervous lids and a moment of shame into a century of silence.

Not the magic of death in birth and one split in two and two becoming one when one swallows the other.

Not the magic of birth in death and the promise of ancestral maturation.

Not salvation.

Nor the magic of being lost in plain sight.

Nor the magic of being found at first glance. No.

I trust only in the body that I have learned by ear and mended by heart, shoving thorn and thistle into the cavities that threaten to collapse if they remain empty. I trust my eyes, and the food that they eat. My hands that make flesh tender with a blow or taut with a touch.

I trust in now.

And now, I am a nineteen year old resident of a place that does not know my name, with scars from fights that I cannot explain, and somebody else's silent son clinging to my hem and searching its folds for a miracle.

Now I am someone's cousin - or something - who came from the villages to find a better life in the city and instead found sedation and intoxication and an impending and inevitable end.

Now I am dimwitted and naive.

Now I am not myself.

Now I am not anybody. Or anything. I am laid on, lied on, beat on, taken from, sucked on, spat on and left to stare into the face of death but told that I am not allowed to die because I dared not make of you killers. I have to survive to keep your conscience alive.

u-Lahmsi only saw what she needed when she looked at u-Zola. She saw a child when it suited her and an adult when it was convenient. She treated her like a sibling - and they *were* siblings: bastard daughters left alone unfairly by an absent and erratic time. u-Zola would always be a monument to u-Lahmsi's unsettling comfort with dubious conditions, she was proof that u-Lahmsi was a good person, but a difficult person. She was a person who could pull another person from the asphyxiating authority of the unknown and send them spinning into a more visceral type of living. A type of living where closed mouths went hungry. For better or for worse.

She told people eJoza that u-Zola was her poor cousin from the rural areas who had come to help her with u-My-Zuzu, her son, who was three years old when u-Zola came home with them. She told people that u-Zola was unolali⁵⁸: A little bit slow, had never seen street lights, and had never cooked on a two burner stove top before. She said she was wholesome and pure and would be an important person one day. But u-Lahmsi always spoke just enough truth to avoid a lie: She dipped her tongue in just enough fact to paint a vivid fiction with just enough detail to inspire faith and u-Zola's presence in u-Lahmsi's house always pointed back to the things that they could not say. Things that were somewhere between being forgotten and never having happened.

But u-Zola was really a testament to a time when u-Lahmsi had run out of decisions to make. When she was three years into u-My-Zuzu's unrelenting sensitivity and moments away from her own submission.

He cried.

u-My-Zuzu cried.

For three full years he cried.

He cried more than he slept, or ate, or played.

He cried her into the echoes of loneliness and into the reaches of evil, from the day he was born. He just would not take to childhood.

He did not look at things with wonder. He seemed to look at everything with disappointment, as if he remembered them from a time when they were better. And so he pouted and cried and complained at every turn. She could not take it.

⁵⁸ "A rural girl"

She often wished she could take him back to the awestruck midwives at his birth who told her that he would be a gifted boy because he was born with a veil over his face. When he would fall out into one of his tantrums to the point of wetting his corduroys, u-Lahmsi would laugh at the thought of those superstitious women and wonder what they would make of their magic baby now.

On the day that she found u-Zola on the side of the N2 near Peddie, u-Lahmsi was twenty-four and u-Zola was fifteen. u-Lahmsi was returning from a trip to her mother's village where she had tried to leave u-My-Zuzu but her mother had refused. Her mother said the boy was too weak to be abandoned like that and that it was u-Lahmsi's fault because she had confused his temperament. She beat him too often for it to be discipline and breastfed him too long for it to be nurturing. She put him in nappies and then humiliated him for still wearing them. She spoiled him and then mocked him for being rotten. u-Lahmsi was an unpredictable woman who had made a nervous child. Her mother said she was too old to mind anything so sensitive. She told u-Lahmsi to take whatever punishment u-My-Zuzu grew up to become because an elephant could never complain about the weight of its own trunk.

And so u-Lahmsi stood on the N2 just outside her mother's village, hitchhiking back to Grahamstown while u-My-Zuzu hung limply from her clasp - giving up again. She cursed herself for even coming to a woman that she had not seen in so many years: A woman who could abandon her teenage daughter for a marriage was not someone to be counted on anyway.

She stood in the stinging sun with kilometers of silence stretching on all sides of her, while an endless sky swallowed u-My-Zuzu's sobs. She looked across the tar and saw a girl standing in the grass, watching them. A dark brown girl with a brown cardigan over a beige dress that had a thousand royal blue and burgundy flowers in different phases of bloom printed on it. u-Lahmsi ignored the girl at first, but hours into hitchhiking and failing, she called the girl over and asked her to watch u-My-Zuzu while she went down the embankment to pee.

The girl crossed the road.

They talked.

u-Lahmsi regarded her closely enough to notice that some of the flowers on her dress were made of blood. The girl told u-Lahmsi that she was an orphan whose family had died in a fire. u-Lahmsi told the girl that she was without parents too. The girl stayed and played with u-My-Zuzu until the empty blue sky began to cloud. u-Lahmsi pointed at a damp spot on her chest and asked if she had a baby. The girl said she had nothing anymore, not even a birth

certificate. She said the fire took everything, even the plans she had for herself. A car finally stopped and u-Lahmsi gave the girl a coat to throw over her stained dress and ashy limbs. She told her to come with her, that she had enough money to pay for them all. The coat was hot and the girl sweltered under it all the way to their destination, but she was glad that she had it to hide under on the way. u-Lahmsi asked the girl her name and when she heard it, she frowned and said it was a village name.

“Ngcono u-Zola,⁵⁹” she smiled, “ubomi obutsha bufuna igama elitsha.⁶⁰”

u-Lahmsi shared everything that she knew about being alive with u-Zola. She showed her how to find her feet. She taught u-Zola how to do hair and while they braided people’s hair together in the lounge, she told stories so fast that u-Zola struggled to keep up with them. She would get so intoxicated with u-Lahmsi’s stories that she would burn with an urgency to speed up her own. She wanted to get a job and finish school and start a life. u-Lahmsi would get excited with her and ask no questions. Not why some of her flowers were made of blood or how old the rightful beneficiary of her swollen breasts was when they perished in the fire. Nor how long she was in that grass at the mercy of the elements. u-Lahmsi simply trusted what she saw in her eyes: They were still bright, they were vacant at times, but they were bright.

u-Lahmsi wanted to be a social worker. She fantasized out loud about what she would be wearing when she pulled up in a state issued vehicle to save houses full of abused children “Khwelani emotweni nina, you are free,⁶¹” she would practise saying while she jiggled invisible car keys on her finger. She loved nice things. She told u-Zola how her and u-Phindi, who lived next door, used to make money off of ridiculous men who would never admit that they were paying for attention. But then u-Phindi married her boyfriend who worked at Shoprite and he turned her into an old lady.

She showed u-Zola all of the beautiful clothes in her suitcases that she said drove people on Joza Street crazy and she gave her the ones that were too small. They had barely been worn and they were good quality, from Truworths. But she fell pregnant right after she got them and had not been able to wear them since u-My-Zuzu put extensions on her petite frame. u-Lahmsi laughed as she remembered the story of u-My-Zuzu and the Truworths clothes:

⁵⁹ “Zola is better.

⁶⁰ “A new life requires a new name”

⁶¹ “Get in the car, y’all, you are free”

She and u-Phindi were hanging around the Noluthando Hall social grant paypoint on pension day when an old drunkard woman came to them crying. She said her entire grant had been taken by a loan shark that she owed money to. The woman was inconsolable and asked them if they had five rands to give her for bread. u-Lahmsi was sure the woman wanted money for iMba-mba but had a plan, she asked the woman if the loan shark had taken her ID and the woman said no. Lahmsi told u-Phindi and the woman that she could get her at least one hundred rand so that she could get some food for the week but they would have to go to town first. They walked for an hour with the old woman to Truworths where u-Lahmsi announced that her grandmother was there to open a clothing account. They filled in some paperwork and the old woman was given three thousand-five hundred rands of store credit immediately. u-Lahmsi told u-Phindi to pick clothes to the value of one thousand five hundred rand for herself while she did the same and then picked a petticoat, vest, and a dress for the old woman. She also bought a single pair of size nine men's sneakers. On their way to the till the old woman asked if she would be required to pay for any of the clothes. u-Lahmsi told her that the store credit was a gift from the old government, as an apology for the apartheid thing. The woman said that in that case she wanted another dress.

When they went to the taxi rank afterwards, u-Lahmsi sold the sneakers to one of her flings and then gave the woman one hundred rand and put her into a taxi to her side of Joza. Her and u-Phindi jumped into a taxi to Joza Street, went home to change into their new clothes and used the rest of the sneaker money to have a drunk and irresponsible night that ended in u-Lahmsi falling pregnant. u-Lahmsi laughed throughout her retelling of the story and wondered briefly whether the old woman ever finished repaying her debt to the loan shark, but then tossed the thought aside as she tossed a pair of jeans at u-Zola. It did not really matter. None of it really mattered.

u-Lahmsi moved so much faster than anything u-Zola had ever seen. She was funny and cunning and always seemed to know where the exits were. She was quick with her decisions and did not look back. She smelled sweet and dressed well. She ironed everything and did not like for things to be out of place. And she drank. She drank and she told stories. She was sweet but she was bitter. She was as strict as she was childish and she snapped her fingers and clapped her hands when her patience ran thin. And when she ran out of patience, she stung. But they each had something that the other needed: u-Lahmsi had a desperate child while u-Zola had a playful patience and a chest that a ghost child had left swollen and aching. u-Zola had a spiritual tremor while u-Lahmsi had a bed, and time, and endless blueprints for

survival. They sunk into each other instantly. They leaned on one another and wove dreams as they drifted to sleep in a queen sized bed on either side of u-My-Zuzu, where u-Lahmsi weaned him off of her and onto u-Zola as if she were sure that u-Zola was there for good. Whether or not that was true did not really seem to matter. What did matter was that u-Lahmsi could finally move and u-Zola would come to learn just how quickly u-Lahmsi moved: in big swift cycles of calm and chaos that swept her further and further away until she was gone.

Months into u-Zola living there u-Lahmsi started seeing a man which, u-Zola came to find out, made a difference. u-Lahmsi would leave at night and come back in the morning. On other mornings she would stay away, forgetting her clients who had hair appointments, so u-Zola started doing hair on her own. u-Lahmsi came and went as she pleased, only mildly embarrassed when she had been away for more than two days. One morning she came back to a Zola who had had time to come down from her intoxicating energy and think about her own life. u-Zola announced that she wanted to go back to school and u-Lahmsi jumped up and pulled out her old school uniform for u-Zola to try on. She said that all they would have to do is register at her old school. But they had no papers for u-Zola. No history. No before. So they returned from the school disappointed. They sat in the sun and basked in promises of going to Home Affairs early on Monday morning to sort all of her papers out but even as they sat in the warmth of those promises, it was clear that they were empty. Nobody was going to Home Affairs: There was nothing to sort out. But they sucked on the artificial sweetness of the lie for a moment before u-Lahmsi said she was going to fetch something from a friend and did not come back for another week. u-Phindi, next door, kept her eye on the house because she knew how reckless u-Lahmsi was and she was sure that the u-Zola did not understand that she was on her own, that she had been on her own since she arrived. u-Lahmsi moved forward, not backwards.

By the time u-Zola was nineteen years old, u-Lahmsi had gone through a thousand cycles of disappearing and then reappearing and then disappearing again. And each time she returned she arrived crumpled in the residue of whatever place she had emerged from. She was sometimes crass and belligerent. At other times timid and embarrassed. Whoever she came back as, it was a relief to see her. Even when she would drink and beat on u-My-Zuzu who did not have to do much to provoke his mother, they were still relieved to see her because nobody knew how to make something out of nothing like she did and there would be nothing

often when she was away. u-Zola thought about leaving but could not leave another place without a plan, and each time a plan started taking form, u-Lahmsi would return, endorse the plan, but then compel u-Zola with amendments that would take years to implement.

Meanwhile everyone grew so accustomed to the sound of u-My-Zuzu's crying and learned to ignore that boy's voice so efficiently that nobody really noticed that he was not speaking. It was easy to ignore u-Lahmsi too, her constant hustling and running from bizarre plan to high risk relationship had drained every neighbour of their patience. Her loud house parties where random men braaied in the yard while her Technics six CD changing Hi-Fi thumped against the windows to make them shake and the inevitable drunken shouting that followed were all just reasons for her neighbours to regard u-Lahmsi's house as a landfill. And they were ready and willing to ignore a landfill as well as the trash that occupied it as long as the filth from their own yards could run through it discreetly. They were ready and willing to ignore u-Zola when she was sixteen and growing and learning and turning into something fast. They were ready and willing to ignore that she was growing a tolerance for alcohol and chaos and responsibility. And they were ready to ignore that she was still a child unconsciously raising another child. They just knew for sure that she liked to kiss boys and they did not care that it was only on condition that they kept their hands in their pockets.

But she was nineteen now and she was not a village girl anymore. u-Lahmsi had been gone for too long this time. So when u-My-Zuzu went to school, u-Zola followed up on some information that she had gotten from u-Phindi who had seen u-Lahmsi when the taxi she was in took an unusual route through extension four. She said that as the taxi slowed over a street hump, she saw u-Lahmsi taking down panties from a washing line in some yard near the graveyard. She said she was wearing slippers, leggings and a vest as though she lived there. u-Phindi described the house and u-Zola decided she was going to go there.

And when she arrived at the neat little face bricked house with a small lawn and a bricked path to the front door, u-Zola walked along the path and knocked on the door.

"Jikela,⁶²" she heard u-Lahmsi's voice sing from the inside.

"Tyini," u-Zola gasped to herself in disbelief.

It *was* her. u-Lahmsi was there, just ten minutes away, and had not been home in months. u-Zola walked around the side of the house to a kitchen door in the back where she found u-

⁶² "Go around!"

Lahmsi in a gown and headscarf. u-Lahmsi furrowed her brow and pulled u-Zola into the house.

“Yintoni?!⁶³” she shouted closing the door behind her.

“Tyini siya lamba Lahmsi,⁶⁴” u-Zola said shocked.

“And so?!” u-Lahmsi threw her hands up, flabbergasted. “Why unga braidi iinwele? Ndiku fundise yonke into mos, ‘suppose ba everything uyayi cwaba. Do you mean okokoko yonke into izaku soloko ujonge kum?’⁶⁵” She pulled a chair from the table for u-Zola to sit on.

“Come on, Zola, yide uphaphame no’kwakho kaloku ngoku. Ude ube kanti uqhela nini kulo mhlaba? Zithini ezakho iiactions ngobomi bakho?⁶⁶”

She turned around and pulled a pot from the oven and then reached on top of the fridge and pulled down a large tupperware container.

“Ndizaku ni phakela apha lombeko ndiku nike imali. But ungaphinde uze apha, Zola uyandiva? Ngumzi womntu lona.⁶⁷”

She put the tupperware and pot full of stew on the table in front of u-Zola, “Gqibezela apha,⁶⁸” then she walked out of the kitchen.

u-Zola poured the stew into the dish and then put the pot into the sink. The house was quiet. The kitchen cupboards were built into the walls and the floors were tiled. The wood in the kitchen looked red while the stove and the kettle and the microwave were black. u-Zola pulled her neck to see what was beyond the arch that led out of the kitchen. There were big leather sofas that looked like pillows and the skin of a goat on the ground with a low glass table on it in a lounge across the passage. u-Lahmsi came rushing in and gave u-Zola fifty rand. She went to one of the drawers and pulled out a plastic bag for her to put the stew in and then rushed her out of the kitchen.

“Hamba, ungabe uphinde uze apha,⁶⁹” she whispered as she shoed her away, looking more mischievous than annoyed.

u-Zola walked back to their neighbourhood laughing to herself in disbelief. She wondered aloud what u-Lahmsi must have told whoever the owner of that house was. u-Phindi had said

⁶³ “What is it?!”

⁶⁴ “I mean, we are starvin, Lhamsi”

⁶⁵ “Why not braid someone’s hair? I taught you everything that I know, you should be an expert. Do you mean that you are still looking to me when you need something?”

⁶⁶ “Come on, Zola, it is also time for you do wake up. When will you get used to this world? What actions do you plan to take regarding your own life?”

⁶⁷ “I’m going to give you these leftovers, and then I am going to give you some money. But you can never come back here, okay? This is someone’s home.”

⁶⁸ “Finish this”

⁶⁹ “Go, don’t ever come back here”

she knew the man and that he was married and his wife lived and worked in East London three hours away. u-Phindi said that he was bad news because he was a dirty old man. But u-Zola was sure it was another scam and did not worry too much after having seen u-Lahmsi in character. She was not sure why u-Lahmsi looked so comfortable and why she was not coming back at all, but she was sure that she would return eventually.

She was glad to get a stew and fifty rand in the meantime, she could not remember the last time she had eaten red meat.

She was nineteen now. And u-Lahmsi was right: It was time to take a hold of her life. She arrived home and found a woman in denim dungaree shorts knocking on the door with a plastic bag in her hand.

“Soso?” u-Zola said with a big smile.

“Yeyi wena kuthiwa ujola no-Zorro, yinyani leyo?!⁷⁰” u-Soso stage whispered urgently across the yard as u-Zola approached, she lifted the bag she was holding and revealed a big box of wine, “khawu balise!⁷¹”



⁷⁰ “Hey you! I hear that you are seeing Zorro, is that true?”

⁷¹ “Tell the story”

Inimba

u-Nokuzola's father loved her like a son. She was her parents' only child, but he loved her as if she were a boy born last after five daughters. A love of relief. A preoccupying kind of love that compelled him every day to sneak two pink viennas from Whitley's Butchery - where he worked - because they were her favourites. A remarkable and public love, recognisable to onlookers by the matching white gumboots that they would wear when they left at sunrise to look for that one heifer that always wandered too far. It was a love too big for her small frame, but one she wore playfully and proudly because it was hers to grow into. Even though it was heavy on some days - even though it hung past her feet and dragged all sorts of debris that she would have to shake off without him noticing on other days. She wore that love - that heavy love - proudly.

Her father told her the same story. A story of how she rejected her mother's breast to be fed cow's milk and inembe by him. He told her that they went from elder to clinic to umthwakazi⁷² near King William's Town, trying to find what the cause might be, but none could be found. He concluded that she had *chosen* him. She could not hear sleep's siren unless she lay on his chest. She could not rest. And it seemed that she continued to make this choice. She called him Tat'am⁷³ as if it were his name. 'Tata' was not enough. 'Tat'am' -- 'My father' nailing herself to him each time she said it. He belonged to her as much as she belonged to him.

The story he did not tell her was the one in which she arriving on a wave of death. The story of her growing quietly in a womb that he had called an open grave. Of her unfurling in the pit of her mother's silence put there by a collaboration of chance, duty and frustration long after he had given up. No, he did not tell the story about how he had given up. How he had surrendered to the idea of either being a forgotten man or an old rumour: A low stakes scandal about a foolish old man who had buried his decades old longing for children with his first wife and then met u-Nokuzola's mother who exhumed that longing only to twirl it between her soft fingers so recklessly.

u-Nokuzola would never know that she was born into a season when her father's inebriation with her mother had begun to subside. That he hated her mother on some nights for making

⁷² Traditional healer especially known to help children

⁷³ Translation: "My Father"

him so anxious in his old age and bringing mourning back into his life: Mourning children that were there and then were not and when there was nothing - not even a figment of his desperation - mourning his manhood. She would never be told how her father openly mourned his manhood.

She only knew what came after her but nobody would tell her what happened before. She did not know how things earned their names. Why her house was called eSlaghuis⁷⁴. It was not because her father worked at a butchery. No, it was because before she was born - just after they were married - u-Tat'am bought a three plate Welcome Dover stove for her mother and two goats for himself with his bonus. The goats flourished and quickly had one set of twins and then another. Before he knew it the yard was filled with bleats of contentment and the kraal became more festive making the house seem more quiet.

And then the goats' feet began to rot.

And despite u-Tat'am's best efforts, their legs collapsed under their bodies as they each sighed and huffed themselves towards unremarkable deaths - he was always just too late to save them. So he would have to give away pounds of goat's meat to whoever was worse off - there was always someone worse off. And the worse off men, who tumbled from his yard with meat slung over their shoulders, named the house e-Slaghuis, shaking their heads at how much worse off *he* was. Because though they took his diseased meat they were sure that they were better off. For knowing that their children stood to work their land and speak their names alongside those of their ancestors' when they knelt at the kraal. For being sure that their blood would carry them on their tongues so far into time that they would transcend into gods. So u-Tat'am was worse off to them, because he was worth little more than the flesh that hung on their shoulders. Flesh that belonged exclusively to this wretched earth.

She would never know about the curse. That one grim day - after months of some goats being found bursting with maggots in the hills and others not waking from their sleep - her father stood over the last goat as it panted itself to death. u-Cirha, one of the older villagers, walked by and saw his despair.

⁷⁴ Slaughterhouse.

“Awu! Tshangisa!” u-Cirha sighed as he looked on with concern. “Ngumhlaba, Tshangisa. Umhlaba wakho uphikisana nempahla. Zithambile iibhokwe, kaloku, zinochuku,⁷⁵” he sang with empathy.

But u-Cirha’s words could not slow the swell of her father’s awareness to being the head of a hexed household. To having made a mistake. To having married a witch. Who could tell her of how his chest filled with bile and his heart toughened. That the conditions for how he would love changed then. That he was sure that nothing would grow there. And so he mourned:

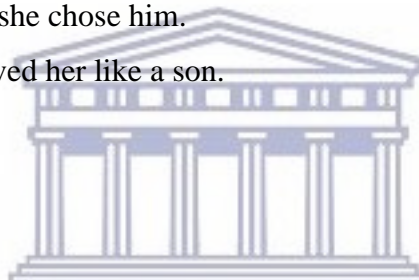
Goats.

Fatherhood.

Death.

Certain that his neighbour was right, that the things that he wanted were at odds with the things he had. He never told that part of the story. He never told u-Nokuzola that he did not notice that she was there until she chose him.

But once she chose him, he loved her like a son.



Until he did not.

And two months before her fifteenth birthday, as she knelt in the bristly grass growing in tufts out of rocky land, she wished with all of the emptiness inside of her that he had never loved her at all. While cocks kraaied in the distance and she could only see the silhouettes of one or two houses against the matte of the morning sky - before the sun doused the village with gloss. She surrendered to her own curse. What else was there to do? Her limbs were numb and her head was buzzing. She could not grab onto a single thought. There was naught left to do but let go.

She thought of her mother.

She remembered how she spent her younger days outside getting nicks and bruises, laughing loudly and carelessly. Running home to shove igwinya in her mouth and chug Eleven-in-One-Orange-Concentrate before rushing back out to play in the field with the children from the village. She remembered how she would put her hand out every time she ran past her mother, pulling her attention as playfully as she could. But she could not have known how

⁷⁵ “It’s your land, Tshangisa. Your land is at odds with your livestock. Goats are sensitive, they are petty”

closely her mother watched her searching for reflections of herself in u-Nokuzola's childish ambiguity. u-Nokuzola was so sensitive. Made of air: Vastly available and easy to have, yet so precious. Even when she tumbled down grassy embankments with her friends and slapped her thighs in protest when they would disagree on the rules of whatever game they had made up - always ready to throw her hands if needs be - she was so clearly delicate to anyone who bothered to look at her. Perhaps that is where her and her mother shared a likeness: in the volatile membrane that coated their ever ballooning sensitivity. In their soft movements and sharp tongues. In their utter lack of patience. Wherever they *were* similar it was not quite legible to her mother who looked at u-Nokuzola and only saw something that was yet to be, expecting that the androgyny of childhood would eventually peel back and reveal a girl who needed her mother. A girl who would need her tutelage. *Her* daughter. The daughter she had made from nothing in a hailstorm of grief and spite - as she so often said. u-Nokuzola's mother was waiting for her daughter to come to her. In the meantime she was happy to watch what she *could* see: u-Nokuzola's complexion turning sweet and velvety like the coffee of a wealthy man and the dimple in her chin deepening. Her mother called her beautiful, often. But the compliment always sounded as if it had come at the end of a lament that only her mother could hear

“Umhle ke kodwa,⁷⁶” her mother would say as if it were gossip, gently pulling u-Nokuzola by the ear or fixing strands of her thick hair.

They did not speak much.

And so u-Nokuzola could not have known how her mother worried that she was spoiling in the humidity of her father's attention and that she might bruise or break should the climate change. How she wondered if u-Nokuzola could tell that her father was fickle. That he was a man who felt the eyes of others. That he was a man of menacing faith to a God he would not name. That he was a man. But whatever u-Nokuzola's mother wondered to herself, she never asked her daughter. They did not speak much. It was only on her knees in the veld two months before her fifteenth birthday that u-Nokuzola came to understand how little her parents spoke to her. How impossible it was to speak to them.

⁷⁶ “She is beautiful, though.”

She did not know how things got their names. Why she was u-Nokuzola. It was not because she did not cry as an infant. No, it was because her mother remembered that last goat. The one that did not die quietly. How it twisted its neck and buried its head in the loose soil, its eyes wide and confused. Softening into a frightened pant only to snap stiff and clench, choking the air from its throat and squeezing a cry from its gut. She remembered watching her husband look down at the last of his stock in defeat. For hours. Not assisting. Not putting it out of its misery. Just standing and watching. Her mother remembered how her father changed after that. How he would sometimes take the food that she had prepared for him and go and throw it in the empty kraal and then go to sleep hungry. How he would refuse to touch or be touched on some nights, but then descend on her with vengeance on others. Her mother remembered how the opinions of the people in their village rattled so loudly in u-Tat'am's head that she could hear them when he lay next to her. She did not want that noise there. And so she went to the valley over and over looking for a panacea. A peace keeper. A quiet to absorb all of the noise. u-Nokuzola.

And she found her.

While her father remained bereft, her mother's body began to stretch and swell in ways that she did not know it could, she suddenly became afraid: of God. A God she had never taken much notice of before but whose presence she was reminded of each time u-Nokuzola stirred inside her. As u-Nokuzola grew, her mother took to the Methodist Church softly swinging her way to each service to listen to her neighbours sing sweetly in worship and then huddle around whispers of gossip after. u-Nokuzola's mother would ignore the gossip. She was not there for their snide remarks. She was there to speak to God before the thing that she made in pursuit of peace ripened.

And when u-Nokuzola arrived and her father woke from his grief, her mother stood back and waited.

u-Nokuzola clung to her father and lived up to her purpose.

Until

One hot day - soon after her fourteenth birthday for which her father bought a chicken and slaughtered it to celebrate - u-Nokuzola stood in the kitchen alone, washing dishes, still in her school uniform. Her navy skirt was undone and barely hung off of her hip while her wrinkled,

white shirt tumbled from the open zip. Her feet were swollen and pink from being bound in woolen socks and those leather shoes whose buckles rang like shakers when she moved. She swirled a dishcloth in the steaming hot water and a teaspoon scraped the bottom of the enamel dish as it spun and she quietly played a game of making music of its dissonance.

Around.

And around.

And around.

She had only managed to wash her parents' teacups from the morning before her hands turned a bright red from the heat, so she was swirling the dishcloth in an attempt to cool the water and pass the time, swaying with an absent mind at the unintentional music.

Around.

And around.

And around.

Floating just above herself

– Soft and warm.

And around.

“Yintoni le?⁷⁷”

Her mother snapped her from her daze as her cold hand slapped u-Nokuzola's arm away exposing her slightly bloated stomach. u-Nokuzola staggered at the sight of her mother's face squinted towards her hips, her horror accented by the red, white and black of the church uniform she had recently earned. She poked her fingers around the top lip of u-Nokuzola's school skirt, certain that she had seen something beyond the carelessness of her shirt. u-Nokuzola turned her hips away from the volume of her mother's alarm, which was just so colossal. She joked quickly about having eaten too many ama-magwinya at break time during school and then turned to dunk a jug into the bucket of water that sat on the kitchen sideboard. She poured all the cold water into the enamel dish. The kitchen was still opaque with suspicion. The water was too cool now, she thought to herself as her hands trembled in the dish while her stomach twisted quietly from hunger.

u-Nokuzola remembered well the change that followed.

⁷⁷ Translation: “What is this?”

How her body would tighten with panic when people at school complimented her on gaining weight. Each time they did she would try to find a quiet place to search her body for clarity: She only had the afternoons when her mother was at her church meetings to get a proper look. But she was not sure what she was looking for. Her nipples were darker, was that cause for concern? Her breasts were perked up and shiny. There was a dark line that ran from her naval into her panties, did it mean anything? She would stand in the mirror, staring at her body, wondering if her mother's alarm was fair. She did not know who to ask. So she sucked her teeth and dismissed the whole thing. She inspected her panties day after day for any trace of blood, relieved that the nuisance had not arrived but apprehensive at what it may mean. She bathed only when the house was empty or her parents were asleep. She slept with her knees pressed against her chest in the bed across from theirs. She hid.

Her mother watched her closely. She watched her turn from her daughter into her peer. She knew u-Nokuzola. She knew her child! She knew her shape and shade and so she knew the moment when she had begun to curdle.

When it was no longer possible to ignore what u-Nokuzola was becoming, it was not quite disappointment that followed but rather grief that returned as u-Nokuzola came to know her parents as people. She was not accustomed to silence - she did not know that her parents had a history with it - but she learned them there in their silence and she rejected their silence and she rejected them. She could not get used to who they became when they did not have their way. How little interest they took in sadness that was not their own. How they turned to anger for help. How stingy they were with their mercy. What liars they were. How they lied. They lied!

When her mother first told her father he spat and then stood with arms akimbo. He was bewildered, steaming with anger:

Who had desecrated his legacy?

u-Nokuzola bit her lips, picked her fingers and named an older boy from her school that she used to play with when they were both younger. She then named the three other boys - his cousins - that he had invited. Her father told her to go to the kitchen while he spoke with her mother and they closed themselves in the bedroom before she could say anymore. They did

not ask what happened. She would never get to say that she did *not* want to play with that boy anymore. She would never get to say that she did not want to play.

u-Tat'am held his daughter's honour high above his head the day that he went to claim damages but then he left it there in the Dambase homestead without turning back. He had asked u-Tat'uCirha to accompany him as he could not go alone. u-Cirha (a quiet man, an odd man, also a father who only knew daughters) obliged.

They arrived kwaDabase, just after six pm on a Friday. The homestead was vast and five men awaited them under an old gum tree. The two men approached the host of Databases who sat on low, individual stools in the changing light of the early summer evening and the eldest of the five men gestured for u-Tat'am and u-Cirha to sit side by side on the single small bench that stood before them.

All protocols were observed.

The five men introduced themselves slowly and fully, each taking a moment during their introduction to glance over at four young men who were plunge-dipping their cattle in a cement tank just off in the distance. A herd of maybe thirty cattle shook the earth with their stomping and low groans of hesitation and each one of the Dabase's took their turn to glance over at this scene of wealth and health. u-Tat'am could not help but to follow their gaze - to the tall broad boys and to the hefty cattle.

The five brothers had finally finished their introductions and asked the two visitors for theirs. u-Tat'am began with his name, surname, clan name and origins. He then mentioned where he lived and was interrupted by a young and slightly amused Dabase.

“Nгаа-ph'eSlaghuis?!⁷⁸”

u-Tat'am's eyes lowered as young Dabase went on to ask what brought them to this side of the village, but before he could answer, the eldest Dabase interrupted, very apologetically. He gently clapped his hands and shook them, pleading with his guests to be patient. They had missed a step in their family's protocol, it seemed, and could not continue the conversation until this was rectified. He shouted for his wife to bring a basin of water, a bar of soap and a small towel. They waited in silence as this man's wife, who could not have been that much older than u-Nokuzola's mother, came to them with the soap and water. Her husband gestured to the guests and she held the basin before u-Tat'am no-Cirha allowing them to wash their hands first. The Dabase wife knelt in front of each man, holding the basin as

⁷⁸ Translation: “Way over at the slaughterhouse?”

each washed their hands, and then offering them a towel to wipe them after. The last to wash his hands was her husband. As she stood to leave, her husband signaled for her to let the basin sit there at his feet and only take the soap and the towel.

He cleared his throat, apologised once more, and then gestured for u-Tat'am to continue.

And continue he did, but this time with a slight heat in his chest.

He was not there to watch this parade. He was there because he was a father.

He was a man with cattle too.

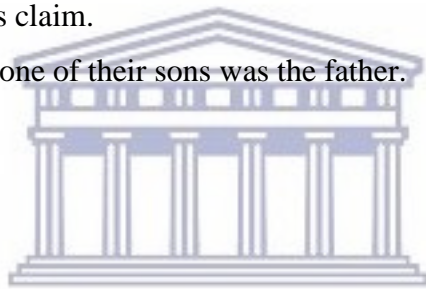
He was a man with a wife and a house.

He was a father.

He was a man.

He rattled on, the inside of his chest shaking, making seem as though he was stuttering when he was not. He tried to resolve the knots in his stomach by fiddling with the woolen hat he had ironed across his right knee. u-Cirha - eyes closed and facing his feet - listened to his neighbour reach the crux of his claim.

u-Nokuzola was pregnant and one of their sons was the father.



Which one?!

All of them.

All four of them were there!

All four of them were there.

A hush fell over the circle of men with only the occasional whistle from the boys diving across the sky like sparrows. The eldest Dabase broke the silence gently. He smiled as he spoke.

He understood the old man's rage. Girls are difficult, beautiful ones even more so. But Dabase insisted that u-Tat'am be reasonable. He was asking them to do the impossible. He pointed at the basin full of soapy water which had changed colour from all the dirt of their hands. He asked each of his brothers individually whether it would be fair of him to request that they scoop only their filth from the water. Each one of them agreed that it was impossible. Dabase cleared his throat and leaned over to push the basin slightly closer to uTat'am, and then sat up straight and watched the old man closely.

u-Tat'am hesitated.

u-Dabase smiled a smile so sincere it lifted the lids off of u-Cirha's eyes. The dirty water lapped the walls of the basin now at u-Tat'am's feet, awaiting his response.

A moment passed before uDabase relieved u-Tat'am with a quiet scolding. He straightened the clean lines of his burgundy shirt while he warned u-Tat'am against allowing his wife to

turn him into a boy and send him on fool's errands. He reminded the old man that it was not wise to take the word of a beautiful woman, but that it was less wise to take the word of her daughter. How could he have been so sure which homestead to visit this accusation upon? Over the word of a child? A child who had run around, hungry for the attention of boys from when she was young enough to look like a boy herself? u-Database went quiet for a moment looking out at the cattle as they were being filed into their enormous kraal.

The meeting was over.

u-Database offered the men a lift in his sky-blue Hilux. They declined. The gathering of men shook each other's hands sternly and the eldest Database escorted them to the gate, wished the men well on their search and turned calmly back to his life.

u-Tat'am would never again forget that he had a daughter and not a son.

And so began the first phase of u-Nokuzola's disappearance. Her father told her to sleep in the lounge, he could not stand to look at her. Her mother only directed her attention at her swollen belly on the rare occasions that she spoke to her. She stopped going to school because everybody knew what had happened kwa-Database and her world suddenly became small.

u-Nokuzola would watch her belly as it shape-shifted around her tumbling baby wondering what would become of her. No one would speak to her. Nobody had questions. Neither of her parents would melt. Her mother had left her fumbling in the arid plains of her father's disappointment and cringed at her as if they were siblings. As if there were nothing she could do to ease the suffocating solitude. u-Nokuzola knew nothing: She was just big and pregnant and floating in silence, getting angrier and emptier each day. Her body felt so tender and she did not know how to ask if she would be okay.

One afternoon, when her mother returned from the Mothers' Union, she came home to find u-Nokuzola lying in the kitchen with a baby girl on her breast and the placenta on the torn tapeti near her feet.

She named that baby girl Lolwethu Oluthando⁷⁹ and u-Nokuzola's mother would hear her whisper the name 'Loli' into the folds of the baby girl's neck in the privacy of night.

⁷⁹ This is our love.

After three weeks of constant scolding and being told that a new mother does not sleep:

Two months before her fifteenth birthday,

u-Nokuzola wrapped her baby in a soft cotton sheet,

Tumbled with u-Loli across the wide quiet that pointed towards the valley,

And she left her.

In the bristly grass growing in tufts out of rocky land,

While she wished with all of the emptiness inside of her that her father had never loved her at all.

While cocks kraaied in the distance and she could only see the silhouettes of one or two houses against the matte of the morning sky - before the sun doused the village with gloss.

u-Nokuzola surrendered to an old curse.

What else was there to do?

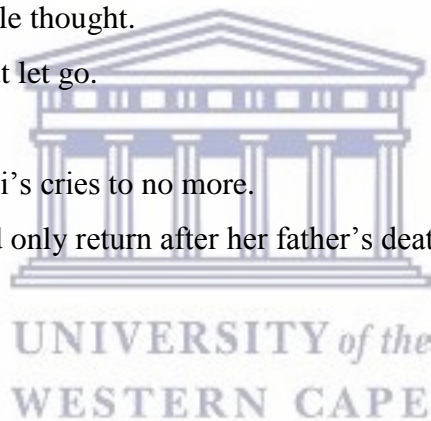
Her limbs were numb and her head was buzzing.

She could not grab onto a single thought.

There was naught left to do but let go.

The morning swallowed u-Loli's cries to no more.

u-Nokuzola left her and would only return after her father's death so as to attend her own.



iYeza

i.

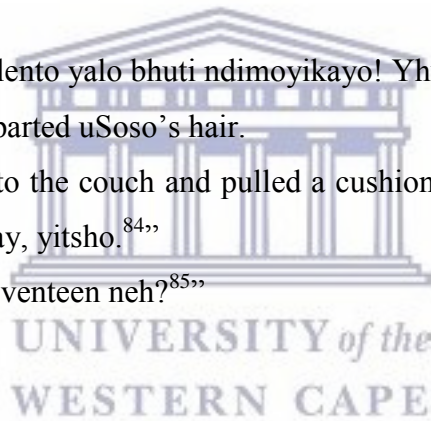
“Unga phinde uze apha’?!⁸⁰” u-Soso guffawed and came just short of shooting Rosé out of her nose. “Yhu, hayi suka usile u-Lahmsi!⁸¹” she said as she wiped dribble from her chin. Soso sat with her thick, yellow legs spread in a wide V and a box of wine, a packet of cigarettes, a few silver coins and a blue plastic tumbler between them. She leaned back against the bottom of the sofa where u-Zola was sitting with her legs on either side of u-Soso’s shoulders, gliding through her bone straight hair with a fine comb. u-Zola had almost asked why u-Soso wanted her hair plaited while it was still straight and manageable, but then she remembered that u-Soso had her own money now. Real money. She did not have to ask u-Zola to plait her hair as a way to conceal her frustration anymore, it was a style to her now. She did it because she liked the way that it looked, not because it was cheaper or lasted longer. She had so much of her own money that she could wear two styles at once, freshly relaxed hair *in* cornrows.

“Khawu balise ke, iqale njani lento yalo bhuti ndimoyikayo! Yhu Zola!⁸²” Soso shuddered.

“Well-” u-Zola started as she parted uSoso’s hair.

“Kha’me.⁸³” Soso reached onto the couch and pulled a cushion under her and then wriggled into it to get comfortable, “okay, yitsho.⁸⁴”

“Kwenye igame, nda ndi na seventeen neh?⁸⁵”



⁸⁰ “Don’t ever come back here?!”

⁸¹ “No, Lahmsi is rude”

⁸² “So tell me how this thing started with this scary man! Wow Zola!”

⁸³ “wait”

⁸⁴ “okay , go”

⁸⁵ “One time, when I was seventeen”

“u-Zola o-fit, o-nice! u-Zola o-nxiba amacici e-ice!”⁸⁶ u-Zorro chimed when he spotted her on Joza street. She swayed - slight and lazy - along the warm tar road, shoulders-deep in the dry, hot of the day as the cool dark of night began to fall. u-Zorro dipped into the miasma of Sunlight, Swanky-Look Musk roll-on, and Clere Cocoa-Butter body lotion that she was suspended in, swam behind her and then emerged - up straight - beside her.

“Awu semdala, Ta-Zorro,”⁸⁷ u-Zola drawled in her deep and lazy voice. Sweet and dismissive in a single beat. Njee kamnandi⁸⁸! She swung a half loaf of brown bread in its plastic bag with one hand and held a bright red bhompi⁸⁹ to her mouth with the other.

“Ubani mna?”⁹⁰ u-Zorro exaggerated his shock at her accusation. “Ndimncinci mna,”⁹¹ he smiled with pretend innocence.

He always walked with his hands behind his back -- he did a lot of small things that made her look. But she walked: her face pointed forward and her eyes -- her naive and disobedient eyes stealing frames of the man walking beside her.

The first frame was of his Dickie’s trousers: Hunter’s green and pressed to paper-like perfection with soft creases at the knee. It was all so crisp that she had to steal another frame: Two thin scars indented on his left cheek.

The scars that he was named for.

She lingered.

He caught her.

She snapped her eyes back in their place, sucked on her bhompi, and swallowed her embarrassment.

He walked up straight again.

Then leaned gently sideways - bumping her shoulder with his - asking her questions he knew the answers to:

Whether she did anyone’s hair today: *No*.

If u-Lahmis’s son still did not speak: *He did not*.

Why u-Lahmsi left her alone in that house with her son: *Because she can*.

⁸⁶ “Zola the fit. Zola the nice. Zola with earrings that look like ice”

⁸⁷ “You are so old, Ta-Zorro”

⁸⁸ Deliciously.

⁸⁹ Flavoured Ice-rock

⁹⁰ “Who me?”

⁹¹ “I’m young”

He asked her questions that anyone on Joza Street could have answered and u-Zola answered as the street would but never revealed anymore than the street could.

So they approached that corner that was not really a corner. Something she had always found strange about ilokishi was how their small, dirt streets jumped off of the wide main tar roads as if they were desperate measures. Old desperate measures at that. So old that each of the three roomed houses on them had seen generations pass through them. Some had been extended and had extra rooms added to them like u-Zorro's home, while others remained a kitchen, a lounge, and a bedroom with a toilet outside. Anyway, this moment, she remembered, occurred on the corner of *this* desperate-measure where u-Lahmsi's un-extended three rooms stood nestled between So-So's home (who had moved to Port Elizabeth and missed all of this) and Phindi's home. Behind Phindi's was u-Zorro's home with his parents in the main house and his own room extending into the backyard. u-Zorro would cross through Phindi's as a shortcut to the bar that was a desperate measure away and on days when he was too drunk to prolong his night but not drunk enough to want to pick a fight with u-Phindi's husband, he would pass through u-Lahmsi's yard which required more ingenuity, but was still faster than walking all the way along Joza street.

u-Zola turned off with that corner that is not a corner. She felt his hand - moist and warm - reach for her as if she were further away than she was.

He touched her with only his tips.

She looked back and saw him slow down.

He lingered.

She caught him.

He hunched over, ever so slightly undulating as if he were begging for something.

She pointed herself at him.

He glitched for a moment.

He did not expect her full attention. He expected that she would recoil.

She was growing up.

He said her complexion reminded him of a Cadbury Chocolate Éclair.

"u-Soet," he sang, narrowing his eyes while the metaphor carried him away.

He wet his lips and then smiled just enough to invite the amber torrents pouring from grids of light above them to wink at the gold star in his incisor. Yi lokishi wethu⁹², everything after dark seems stained in orange. The distant eyes of the floodlights conspired with the soft sighs of light that poured from open front doors that revealed families who were trying to stay cool as they sat in front of the evening news that bellowed too loudly.

A grootman⁹³ walked passed them and greeted them low. u-Zorro threw pleasantries respectfully after him, careful not to scare him but dropping his tone for authority.

People scared easily when u-Zorro addressed them. All people. No matter their age.

u-Zola looked up towards u-Lahmsi's house and saw u-Phindi next door cooling a big bowl of umphokoqo⁹⁴ on the veranda while three children and two dogs spun around her. One of those children was u-My-Zuzu and the other two were u-Phindi's own sons u-Phalo no-Themba. She waved. She seemed in good spirits. Her hair was tied up, she was wearing a kaftan that the dogs kept pulling at as they spun. She was smiling. That was when u-Phindi had been struggling with her health and her husband but she seemed in good spirits on that day.

u-My-Zuzu was there. If he stayed there the night, the bread u-Zola had just bought would last an extra day. u-Phindi waved again as if she had heard her thinking.

“Myeke!⁹⁵” Phindi shouted, continuing to toss the crumbs of maize meal in the big bowl, “at least ku-Friday, wethu, andiyi ndawo ngomso!⁹⁶”

A big thumbs up and a sigh of relief. The bread would last. And if u-Phindi's heart was up to it and u-My-Zuzu stayed the whole weekend, the bread would last even longer. u-Phindi could take the boys to church because although u-Lahmsi's son did not talk, he sure did sing. She felt another wave of relief: At time alone. At a weekend to do *her* things. At 'no My-Zuzu'.

He was a desperate child.

He was such a desperate child.

u-Phindi gathered the swarm of children and dogs and walked back into the house. u-Zola swore that if she ever won the lottery she would buy u-Phindi a car and she would take her

⁹² It's just a township, you know.

⁹³ “bigman”

⁹⁴ Crumbly Millie Meal typically eaten with cold soured milk, “amasi”

⁹⁵ “Leave him”

⁹⁶ “At least it's Friday, i am not going anywhere tomorrow!”

son, u-Phalo, to a white school in town and spare no expense on his education. He was aware beyond his years. So absorbent. Not like u-Lahmsi's son who would be a waste, she was sure, because his mother had made his brain hard with beatings and his heart soft with scoldings. It was just too late for him. But u-Phindi loved her children so gently that their eyes twinkled and their minds were vibrant. They were known for their personalities. They were not named for their scars.

u-Zorro folded back into character in front of her after he was sure that the grootman - who knew his father, u-Mineer - had passed. He straightened his plain white t-shirt and stood with his Jack Purcell's shoulder width apart. He cocked his head to the side and raised his brows as if he were asking an enormous question.

She did not know what the question was.

And then she did.

And then she did not again.

She was not sure whether to treat him like the boys that always chased after her and u-Soso, or a man his age. She did not want to disrespect him by assuming the former, but she was just not sure enough about what the latter implied.

Her eyes wiped up and down Joza Street, snapping stills each time they passed over him.

It was the only way she knew how to look at him: with everything else in passing frames.

A million snaps to be jigsawed later in what privacy she could find. In the dark, where nobody would see.

He did have a thing about him.

Perhaps that thing was that she could not assemble him into anything sure.

She was not sure if he was kind, or mean.

She was not sure if he was hunter or prey.

She could not tell if he was unfathomably strong or weak to the point of numbness.

She had never been sure. She remembered her first day living with u-Lahmsi no-My-Zuzu. She was fifteen. He was the first person she met outside of the house. She had gone to the toilet outside which was different from the toilets in her village and though she knew nothing about ilokishi, after peeing in the shallow bucket that was already two thirds full of human soup, she began to suspect that ilokishi was a place that could take everyday things and make them insulting. As she came out of the toilet she heard a quick high-pitched whistle behind her. At the back fence, with his arm slumped on the sagging wire and two silver coins clasped between his fingers, u-Zorro signaled for her to take the money and buy him two loose

Rothman's Reds at uSoso's house. He barely looked at her but the routine that developed from being sent for cigarettes would be how she came to befriend u-Soso, and how she would become accustomed to him:

On hot days - bare-chested after touching up his cheeskop with a Wahl Hair Clipper in front of a broken mirror on his stoep. Cotton boxers peeking over his loose fit khaki Dickies trousers or slim fit black Levi's Jeans. Lingering at the fence with TKZee booming from his open backroom, everything neat beyond the door.

And then on grey days - just a tall skinny figure in shades of blue and black and a woolen beanie folded just above his brow. Skulking in and out of his room, muffling sweet baladas behind his door each time he closed it. And then later escorting whichever girl he had drowned in RnB all day out of the yard - one hand always dug deep in his pocket and the other ushering her with a slight rush - his shoulders high. He had been in her peripheries since the day she arrived. She had become accustomed to him.

But she did not know him.

And she was never sure whether she should be afraid of him.

She saw him see her one day while she was reading magazines at u-Soso's house while u-Soso did her homework. u-Soso did not see, she had gone to her mother's room to fetch the cigarettes u-Zorro had just paid for.

u-Zorro stood in the kitchen while u-Zola tried not to tremble over her magazine. She continued to read.

"Unee tshomi ngoku?"⁹⁷ he teased whilst seeming genuinely interested in the answer.

"Ewe, bhuti," she faked a laugh.

A moment passed. His cigarettes came. And he left but not before she caught a slight twitch in his brow as he regarded her once more.

He never looked at her the same after that. He still sent her for cigarettes, but every now and again he would warn that it was the last time. That she was getting too old to be sent around.

"Inoba uthi ku u-Soso 'undi qhela kakubi u-Masixole,'"⁹⁸ he once laughed making up a version of her that she did not recognise. *u-Masixole*, she did not know that was his name. She did not know that even an imaginary version of her could just say his name without saying *bhuti* first. But after he said that to her, her mouth would sometimes fill with his

⁹⁷ "You have friends now?"

⁹⁸ "I am sure you tell Soso that I am disrespecting you"

government name when she saw him. Like his name was profanity. Like *he* was profane. But she opted to call him Ta'Zorro and he would always respond by singing "Zozooo" as if he were encouraging a toddler learning to walk.

She had seen so much of him.

So many random pieces of him and she was still not sure that she had enough pieces to say that she even knew his face.

But she was sure she knew his skin: a solid dark wood when the sun rushed it during the day, but now a soft and warm chiffon as it took to the night.

And he took to night - on that corner that was not a corner - while she ran out of places to rest her eyes even though Joza Street was buzzing with people marching towards the weekend.

"Ndi zaku phinda ndiku bone nini kengoku?"⁹⁹ he said, so softly she almost did not hear him. "Umna?"¹⁰⁰ she asked too loudly "Uyandi bona nangoku mos, Ta'Zorro."¹⁰¹ She smacked the pink of the raspberry Sweeto from her lips and swayed playfully to the faint thumping of a passing car's music. She was not fifteen anymore. She was seventeen now. She had learned how to stand on corners with boys. But men? She did not know anything about men. But from what she could tell, they moved too fast. His eyes darted down the length of her body and then up again.

He was not afraid to look.

He drew her in at his leisure before landing his attention on her face. His eyebrows knitted with a sudden seriousness even though his eyes still smiled. She searched the ground between them for a place to quiet her mind and he leaned into her gaze and grabbed her eyes with his.

"Uyayazi lento ndi thetha ngayo, suzenza umntana."¹⁰²

A veil of silence fell over them so suddenly that it made her ears ring high and loud.

Like something had been detonated.

They were invisible to passersby.

His eyes seemed too soft to be pushing into hers like they were.

But he pushed while palpitations banged around in her insides.

"Bhut'Zorro?" she procrastinated while she tried to regain her balance.

He smiled.

⁹⁹ "When will I get to see you?"

¹⁰⁰ "Me?"

¹⁰¹ "But you are looking at me right now, bhut'Zorro"

¹⁰² "You know what I am talking about, don't pretend to be a baby"

The veil lifted.

“u-Zol’omhle,¹⁰³” he said quietly and then took her hand and tickled her palm. “u-Zola onomkhitha!¹⁰⁴” he sang in praise once more before kissing the back of her hand and swinging back onto Joza Street, “Sawu bonana Zozo!¹⁰⁵”

She felt like a child.



¹⁰³ “Beautiful Zola”

¹⁰⁴ “Zola a dark beauty”

¹⁰⁵ “We will see each other, Zozo”

ii.

“And then?” u-Soso sipped her wine and leaned on u-Zola’s thigh and listened disapprovingly. “Nazoku dyola nini kengoku?”¹⁰⁶,”

u-Zola used the long tail of the comb to part u-Soso’s hair and then stuck the comb in her own dry thicket. She reached next to her and sipped from the glass uSoso had poured her.

“Kaloku tshomi, wamane ebuza ‘ba uzaku ndibona nini, uzaku ndi bona nini? Ndathi ndiyoyika. Wa buza ‘ba ndoyika ntoni? Ndathula. Wathi mandi jikele ndize kuye eflatini ngobunye ubusuku. Ndathi u-My-Zuzu ulele endlini andikwazi uku hamba. Wathi ba’na ma ndi shiye izibane zi laytiwe asoze kwenzeke niks, ayizo’tsala.”¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸” She weaved her fingers between u-Soso’s hair leaving neat braids in her wake

“Nda qond’a ndiyoyika kengoku nam anditshintshela, mos ngumntu owenqenekayo yena.”¹⁰⁹,” She turned her lips into an exaggerated frown and then smacked them quietly.

“So ke nam, ndajikela”¹¹⁰.”

“Wathini yena?!”¹¹¹”

“Wathi ndimnandi”¹¹²”



¹⁰⁶ “At what point did you start seeing each other?”

¹⁰⁷ “Well he kept asking when will he see me when will he see me”

¹⁰⁸ “The thing is, my friend, he kept asking ‘when am i going to see you, when am i going to see you?’ And I said I am afraid. So he asked what I was afraid of and I kept quiet. So he said I must come around and see him in his room this other night. And I said I cannot because u-MyZuzu was sleeping in the house, so I could not leave. He said I should leave the lights on and come, because it’s safe and I won’t be gone for long.

¹⁰⁹ “So I decided I didn’t want him to change and not be nice anymore, and he is not an easy person”

¹¹⁰ “So I went around to see him”

¹¹¹ “And what did he say?”

¹¹² “He called me delicious”

This thing started small but then:

He would dig his face so deeply into the groove between her neck and her left shoulder that he would collapse there, inebriated. Gasping, with traces of her bubbling in his lungs. Confessing and confessing and confessing again.

It was a simple thing.

It was supposed to be a simple secret. Something that he asked her to keep:

She was a quiet dark thing that he could leave the door open for on the nights that the mother of his child was acting brand new. Or the nights when all the women at the Cool Spot were old or ugly. Those nights when i-Zamalek and Bertrams made him restless and lewd.

Something easy, that he could reach for in the dead of the night and then send on its way.

Something he thought was slow but turned out to be swift and arresting.

Something that clung. Something he craved. Something other than what he had planned.

Something maddening. Love, he said. Maddening love, he said.

He asked her to help him carry it. Tame it. He was not used to it. *She* had brought it. *She* had to help him manage it.

She was not sure if this responsibility was romance. He was moving so much faster than she could. He kept showing her things at night that would make her insides fold over when she thought of them during the day. Nobody knew. She was still seventeen and he was twenty eight and scared. He confessed that he was scared. He said they were stealing something together. Each other - they were stealing each other. Heists, few and far between: Occurring only now, when he would build up the courage, and again when he would succumb to his cowardice. She could not tell when which was happening. She had never been sure.

This thing started small but then:

He wanted with an intensity that petrified her.

He still sent her for cigarettes, but now that they were stealing something together - each other - now that they were stealing each other, he would sometimes include a closing request:

“Uze kum ke pha late, ndiza’ushiya ku vuliwe eflatini.”¹¹³

And she would show up.

After she closed the curtains and turned on the lights. After she cooked dinner or got some next door. After she washed u-My-Zuzu and they watched Generations. After u-My-Zuzu fell

¹¹³ “Come to me later, I will leave my door open.”

asleep. After she cleaned the house and washed the dishes. After she paced and panicked and wished she was not scared.

She would show up.

And the lights at u-Phindi's would go off and u-Soso's house would go damp with darkness. And u-Zorro's home closed each one of its eyes until that sliver of light that beamed from his open backroom door was all that saw her.

She would show up.

At the foot of the yard where all the fences met.

She would show up and climb over. And he would be waiting for her on the other side.

And she would want the lights off, but he wanted to see her.

And she would want to leave after, but he would want more.

But she was not sure.

She was not sure.

This thing started small but then:

u-Phindi took her to the clinic for a Depo-Provera injection. She did not say that she knew anything. She did not say she had seen anything. She only said at the end of that long day, moments before they parted ways, "Ayingo mntu ke lowa, pass op!"¹¹⁴

When u-Zola thought of what u-Phindi may have seen for her to think to intervene, she shuddered with shame. What had started small had grown into a rabid thing. And so u-Phindi could have seen anything. She could have seen that first visit from the mother of his child, when she slapped u-Zola in u-Lahmsi's yard. Or heard Zorro's frustrated begging later when u-Zola refused to climb over the fence because she was too afraid of too many things.

Phindi could have seen him lunge for her as she stumbled back and ran into the house. Or maybe she only saw him jump the fence and run to the door and knock three times.

Should would not have heard u-Zola cry from behind the door, "Ndiyoyika mna, bhut'Zorro torho!"¹¹⁵

She could not have heard him ask, "Awusandi thandi ngoku Zozo, utsho?"¹¹⁶

She could only have seen her let him in.

This thing started small but then:

¹¹⁴ "That man is not a person, be careful"

¹¹⁵ "I'm scared, please"

¹¹⁶ "You don't love me anymore now ZoZo, is that what you are saying"

Her skin started getting tougher. And she stopped being afraid of narrowed eyes and snarling mouths. u-Lahmsi left her alone with u-My-Zuzu for weeks and sometimes months at a time. And whatever u-Zorro was afraid of before, he was not afraid of anymore. He knocked once and walked in, now. He jumped the fence without a second thought. He was not afraid and so *she* could not be afraid. And though the rumours were rife about who had bewitched who, she was no longer afraid of narrowed eyes and snarling mouths and if he was allowed to have her at his whim, then she was allowed to have him at hers. What had started small had grown into a cataclysmal thing and she would not allow him to settle into any groove other than the one he had carved into her and he would not allow any of ezintwana¹¹⁷ to even look in her eyes and see what he said he had seen:

That she had sins. Sins that he confessed had pulled him into the bottomlessness of her when he had planned to only lap at her mouth for a taste. He said she turned him into a glutton and he had returned the favour. Love. He said it was love. She was sure he was right. What else could chafe against her sanity so? What else could make her feel so sick and tired? Why else would she want to grab onto him and scream into his chest until they both shattered into a million pieces and ceased to exist? She believed every word he said into her neck at night.

Every confession that confused her insides and made the pieces of him seem smaller and harder to assemble.

She believed them.

Every time.

She believed the story he told her about when he was a child:

A child child.

A child old enough to hold a pen but not old enough to write a thought.

He would wake before his parents and dive under the satin curtains in the living room to peer carefully out of the window that faced the street. Cars would run smoothly on Joza's grid of wide tar roads running parallel to each other [Ncame, Nceme, Cinto, Joza and Goba] and then climb onto those narrow dirt desperate measures that ran tightly between the houses and rattle and cough in protest.

¹¹⁷ These boys

A well tuned ear could predict the arrival of just about anybody by the sound of their vehicle's upset.

And his ears were tuned.

He knew what it sounded like when his ama-Bhaca were on their way. He could hear them moving in the navy of the morning four - maybe five streets away. He would stand at that window every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday that he was able to wake up early enough, careful to remain completely undetectable, listening as he heard the giant truck clank and hiss its way through the streets. His mission was simply to stand in the window and look at anyone of their faces for long enough to see if they had scars like his. He would stand in the same spot before their arrival, as still as his small bones could keep him, so that should they notice something in the window (and that something was him) they would assume he was just an ornament or a statue. He knew that ama-Bhaca did not like to be seen: his friends had told him so.

He said he would stand motionless, his mind wandering in and out of time, his thoughts sojourning from one little feud to another little point to prove: Like with his friend u-Dibo who thought that he was shaming him by telling all their friends that u-Zorro is a Bhaca, like those men that collect the buckets from the toilet. When he asked him how he knew, u-Dibo smirked "Uqatshulwe,¹¹⁸" pointing at the scars on u-Zorro's face.

Two on his right cheek two on his left.

Three on his forehead and three on his chin.

He admitted that all he knew about his scars was what his mother had told him: That right after they were married (when his mother was still in form four), his father sent her away to live with his family in Mount Frere while he remained in Grahamstown to continue teaching. u-Zorro was born in Mount Frere and then scarred just before he returned with his mother to Grahamstown as a child. His scars faded in adulthood but were bright when he was a child, and so they named him Zorro.

The truck hissed two - maybe three streets away.

And he stood motionless. Thinking about the time his mother woke to find him at the window and told his father who beat his skin to ash.

The truck was close.

The truck arrived.

¹¹⁸ Translation: Reference to the scarification ritual of amaBhaca who slice the skin on the face as a means of spiritually protecting the family and individual.

His body stood motionless. His mind, still.

Packed high with buckets, He said he could not see the truck as anything more than a detailed shadow carrying nameless gods. He said it lost sound as it rolled slowly in front of the house. He said they spoke in whistles that darted over and under the truck, between houses, across the street.

One of them approached the house as slowly and gracefully in u-Zorro's mind as he did quickly and efficiently in reality.

He said the man was hefty. The arms of his overalls looked as though they had been ripped off, and when he dropped off of the truck in front of the house, u-Zorro expected a thud but he said they moved like amaphantsula on their feet. Light. Precise. The man's brown and white striped balaclava was pulled down and tucked beneath the collar of his hunter's green overalls.

He disappeared passed the window into the back yard with an empty bucket in his hand and u-Zorro closed his eyes.

He said he closed his eyes and felt himself drown in the smell. The smell of everything. The smell of privacy in open air. The smell of secrets. The smell of umva ndedwa¹¹⁹. The smell of izothe¹²⁰. Things purged and thrown away. He said his eyes were startled open by the sound of the man's return. He watched him walk away with their full bucket dangling from his fingertips, something prehistoric in his stride. His arms emerged thick and veiny from his rubber gloves, and a thin black belt was tied tightly at the top of each of his biceps. There was a small black cube bound in each of these belts and u-Zorro wondered if this is where he kept the world's secrets. Would he keep these secrets and then use them to line the walls of his kingdom? Their kingdom. After all, he was a Bhaca too. He was a Bhaca too and so he was sure that only he would have been able to see a light beam behind all of their scars. u-Zorro swam so deep in wonder, he had not noticed his own fingers running along the length of the scars on his cheeks and moving the lace under-curtain with their actions. It was only when the man who was leaving their yard with buckets hanging from each arm swung onto the back of the truck and then squinted his eyes at the window that u-Zorro froze and realised he may have been seen.

A short high whistle brought the truck to a halt just as it began to roll away. The man narrowed his eyes and leaned forward to get a better look and the host of men some perched,

¹¹⁹ Translation: "That which one feels alone"

¹²⁰ Translation: "A curse that makes one unloveable"

some hanging off of the truck turned to look and lean with him. A light moved beneath each of their scars, sliding beneath the surface of one face after the other. u-Zorro was scared. He said he closed his eyes and behind his lids the silence kaleidoscoped into one million possibilities.

He said when he opened his eyes to see which of the one million was playing out.

The truck was gone.

He said that those were his people, and that his people were magic.

He said he would use whatever magic he needed to use to keep her right there under him.



iii.

“Yhu ndiya moyika sana lo bhuti mna. Ever since ndimncinci, ndiya moyika,” u-Soso slurred as she poured herself more wine from the box “so ukuthakathile ke ngoku, utsho?¹²¹”

“Andimazi noba unyanisile okanye akanyanisanga na, kodwa ona amayeza uyawa thanda shem,¹²²” Zola sighed, tilting her empty glass toward u-Soso for refilling.

“And then wena, wenza ntoni ngalonto? Do you mean uhleli njeee?¹²³”

“Andi hlelanga nje, tshomi,¹²⁴” she smiled slyly.

“Usebenzisa ntoni? Ivamna?!¹²⁵” Soso giggled as she leaned back into u-zola’s thighs.

“Soze.¹²⁶”

Soso laughed, “Intoni ke?¹²⁷”

“Enye into wethu, ehlisa landawo yoyikayo apha kum,¹²⁸” u-Zola smiled and sipped her wine.

“Uyekile ukumoyika kengoku?¹²⁹” Soso leaned away skeptically.

“Ndi yeke total. Undi beta ndinye ndimbethe anye okwam! Sikulonto ngoku, the whole year,¹³⁰”

Soso screamed with laughter, slipping from between u-Zola’s fingers and flopping around on the lounge floor.

“Uthini tshomi?! Uthi yi WWE?¹³¹”

“Smackdown, Nono. Andi yenziwa lonto ngoku mna. Ndi betha kwa loo mankazana ngoku.¹³²”

Soso stopped mid-laughter to look at her friend, “Khawume, do you mean aniyekanga utyana?¹³³”

¹²¹ “Wow, I am scared of this man! Ever since I was a child I have been scared of this man. So what is he saying, he bewitched you?”

¹²² “I don’t know if he has bewitched me or not, but I do know that he loves traditional medicine”

¹²³ “And what are you going to do about that? Are you just going to relax?”

¹²⁴ “I’m not relaxing, my friend”

¹²⁵ “What are you using, a love potion?”

¹²⁶ “never”

¹²⁷ “What then?”

¹²⁸ “This other thing that stops me from being afraid”

¹²⁹ “So you aren’t afraid anymore?”

¹³⁰ “Not at all. He beats me to shit and I beat him right back. That is where we have been the whole year”

¹³¹ “Oh my friend, you are in WWE?”

¹³² “Smackdown, my friend. I even beat these women he keeps running around with”

¹³³ “Wait, so do you mean that you and this guy are still actually seeing each other?”

u- Zola stared at her friend for a moment and then admittedly sheepishly, “Lomntu ufana ingathi undi qale ndina 15 years ukundi thakatha, Soso. Ndi leqa i-twenty ngoku. Andi sa kwazi ukuzi nceda. Ndi ba namaxesha ndizi funele okanye ndi zive uku ba ndiyamthanda lomntu mna, Soso.¹³⁴” She felt her chest get warm. “Ndi qonde ndi neentloni. Ndiyazi caphukela. Ndimthanda njani umntu owenza izinto ezinje kum? Ndimfuna njani? Ndimthemba njani. Andikwazi noku dibana nabanye abantu. Undivalele nge yeza wandi faka izothe ba ndi nga funwa.¹³⁵” She gently pulled her friend back into her lap and started parting the final few rows of hair. “So mna, I decided ukulwa nga lomzimba ndi naye, ngoba inqondo andi senayo ngoku. Ne ntliziyo yam ke, yi le yona yaaphambana.¹³⁶”



¹³⁴ “This person may as well have started bewitching me when I was fifteen, Soso. I am chasing twenty now. I can’t even help myself. Sometimes I am the one who wants it. Sometimes I can feel myself love him, Soso”

¹³⁵ “And I feel ashamed. And then I hate myself, because I don’t know how I can love someone who does these things to me? How can I want him? How can I trust him? I can’t even be with other guys, he has blocked me with his witchcraft. I’m not loveable. Nobody wants me.

¹³⁶ “So now I decided to fight with my body, because I lost my mind and my heart has gone crazy”

The day was done and the girls were getting drunk.

u-Soso was back. She was not back for long, but she was back long enough to remind u-Zola to think of herself. Soso had been away for two years, first at a nursing college and then to work at a hospital in Port Elizabeth. When she left, it broke u-Zola's heart so unexpectedly, that she did not know what to do with her hurt. She had not bothered to make friends or get to know anyone else really. Sure, there were girls that they would meet on the rare occasion that they would go to the Cool Spot, but it was not quite the same as being friends. And anyway, u-Soso's mother did not believe in friends. She warned of friends the way that other parents warned of drugs, she only trusted u-Zola because of u-Lahmsi's tales of how she had never seen street lights before she came to Joza. Being a village girl herself, u-Soso's mother found that to be comforting.

Her and u-Zola drank wine and gossiped now but before u-Soso moved away, they would just wander around ilokishi talking to boys and getting into mild trouble. They were so close before u-Soso left that her departure left u-Zola bereft. She was suddenly spending hours alone, with nobody to talk to and nobody to touch.

When they first met, u-Soso was excited to see u-Zola as if she had been expecting her for all of her days. She gave her a hug and said '*welcome to the neighbourhood*' and then wrote her a letter asking to be her 'Mother'. When u-Zorro had first sent u-Zola to buy cigarettes at u-Soso's house, u-Soso was seventeen and doing matric at a school in the coloured area and u-Zola was fifteen and out of school. But it would only be after u-Soso matriculated that u-Zola would come to love her. Before u-Zorro began his chaos but after u-Lahmsi had started hers, there was a blissful time when u-Soso taught u-Zola how to touch:

u-Soso had finished matric but had not qualified for university and was spending her days and nights elokshini with u-Zola. They would walk all the way to extension five to buy amagwinya kwa Miya just so that they could take scenic strolls back as they hallucinated about being rich and famous. They would have fake Oprah interviews with each other and talk about a new invention or a new book. u-Soso would help u-Zola do people's hair and then they would buy Redd's and get drunk, while making chicken giblets and pap for supper during the cooking segment of their day long Oprah interviews.

u-Soso never told her when she had food on her face, she would just reach over and rub it off. u-Soso would neaten u-Zola's eyebrows with her thumbs, dip her fingers into her jean pockets to pull out change, kiss her on the lips anytime they had not seen each other in a while, hold her hand when they were just standing around and talking. When they were

gossiping in public, she would pull her close and hold her face as she whispered in her ear. She would baby-talk u-Zola and pull her cheeks when they were chatting. Or lie on top of her when they watched TV. She would sink her fingers into u-Zola's hair and massage her scalp until she was overcome by sleep. When they walked to the shops in the evenings, she would pull u-Zola's arms around her like a shawl, and they would walk with their hands locked swaying from side to side. On rainy days when u-My-Zuzu was at school or at u-Phalo's house, they would lock themselves in u-Lahmsi's house and listen to R n' B loudly. They would slow dance and caress in the lounge. They would drink and dedicate songs to each other and then sing them. u-Soso taught u-Zola how to touch. How to caress. How to float away and play.

They laughed and said things to each other that they could never say to anyone else. u-Soso was the one who told her that she should only close her eyes if she was kissing Mr Right. She is the one who taught u-Zola how to kiss *properly*. Boys always wanted to kiss u-Zola, there was always someone trying. Sometimes she would want to kiss them too but she did not really know what to do. So she would ask u-Soso to stay with her and standby with her back turned, and then intervene if she heard any signs of distress. But one day u-Soso peaked and saw what u-Zola was calling kissing. She was pinching up her entire face while these wildlings licked her. u-Soso said it was time to go and as they made their way back to Joza Street, she asked u-Zola if she liked it when boys kissed her like that? u-Zola was shy, even when u-Soso did everything she could to pull her from her shell. When they got back to u-Lahmsi's house u-Soso walked up to u-Zola in the lounge, she pushed her face into u-Zola's and rubbed it around and told her that that just was not kissing. And then she played music on the Hi-Fi and gathered u-Zola in her arms. They swayed gently from left to right afterwards and u-Soso said, "Umntu funeke aku bambe ingathi ubambe imali enintsi.¹³⁷" She giggled. And then she melted her face into u-Zola's and then squeezed her until she whimpered.

"Aku phuze ingathi ungu Gina and yena ungu Martin," she pecked her on the lips before smacking her lips own in congratulations. u-Zola remembered that day as the day she discovered how soft she was. That she could be turned to liquid by someone's hands. That she could melt into nothing and then be reformed.

¹³⁷ "People need to hold you like they are holding an armful of money"

U-Soso had given u-Zola genuine joy when she still lived close and gave her joy once more with her visit. But she had grown tired of talking about u-Zorro, he had made her hard, and she wanted to be soft for now.

“Wena, umosha wenza ntoni kwela Bhayi?¹³⁸” u-Zola asked.

u-Soso responded by raising her plastic tumbler full of wine.

She never did like boys. They like her. They liked her thick legs and her deep dimples and the small part between her two front teeth. But she was loud and uninterested, she just liked to talk about them but she did want to spend time with them.

She was her best friend, and she was funny, but she was also a gauge. A stick u-Zola would measure herself against. To see if she was growing at all. When u-Soso left two years before, u-Zola promised her that she would return to find her a different person. A person with a job. A person who went to computer classes at the Nduna Library. Someone who woke up in the morning, slept at night and worked during the day. But she was not that person. She had done none of those things. She had even failed to be an accurate imitation of u-Lahmsi. She did not know how to scam old women and the government. She could barely figure out how to charge people more money to do their hair. And had hours like a night nurse. Fighting and drinking with u-Zorro. Snapping on him and the women that he sneaked around with. u-Zola was slapped once by the mother of his child and swore that she would never let such a thing happen again. u-Zorro had beat her once without any retort from her, and she swore that that would not happen again either. So she had spent all of her time and energy getting hard, and mad and mean and drunk. Her face had changed. Her eyes had deepened. She had lost weight, and she was nowhere near the person that she said she would be when u-Soso returned. u-Zola liked the time she was spending with u-Soso and it felt good to touch her again, but it reminded her that she had not thought about herself in years and when u-Soso left, she would probably not think about herself for years to come.

u-My-Zuzu and u-Phalo tumbled into the kitchen and u-Zola heard u-Phalo drag a chair to the electricity box and begin to punch in the electricity token numbers she had sent them for earlier. They were both seven years old now: Tall and ashy, with giant serrated teeth and knock knees. u-Soso called them both into the room once u-Phalo was finished and subjected them to what they were always subjected to when grownups drank. They had just gotten

¹³⁸ “And what are you getting up to in Port Elizabeth”

haircuts and she said that they looked as neat as a couple of Seventh Day Adventists. She asked what grades they were in and who their teachers were, u-Phalo answered for himself and for u-My-Zuzu, who swung his arms and chuckled shyly. She reminded them that she was almost two years older than u-Zola so they ought to call her 'Sisi', she told them to take the coins from the floor in front of her and buy themselves a car, and u-Zola reminded u-My-Zuzu not to come home too late. The boys ran off to spend their money.

Tuesday was close to over and u-Zola and u-Soso were officially drunk. u-My-Zuzu had come home a little more distinguished and barely protested when u-Zola insisted that he wash his hands and feet under the tap outside before he ate his dinner and went to bed. He moved independently in the kitchen and then to the bedroom where he eventually fell asleep in a small vest and bright blue underpants while u-Zola and u-Soso sat in the lounge, drunk and loud.

“Hayini! Uthetha ’kuba siyayi gqiba le wine?!¹³⁹” u-Soso scolded herself as she shook the box and listened for how much wine was left. She opened the plastic tap a final time and then leaned back into u-Zola who had long finished her cornrows and was now just dragging her fingers across her neat work and playing with the tips of u-Soso’s braids while they talked. They talked less frequently and more quietly while u-Zola stroked her cornrows and u-Soso leaned sleepily on u-Zola’s thigh.

They fantasised about u-Zola leaving u-Lahmsi and u-My-Zuzu and u-Zorro and just going to join u-Soso in Port Elizabeth. About her going back to school. Doing those short courses she used to think about so much and getting a nice job or owning her own salon.

They went quiet again.

u-Soso hugged u-Zola’s calf with her arm, “Sithenge imoto, Zola,¹⁴⁰” she sang as she sipped her wine and began to sway from left to right.

“Andi kwazi noku qhuba phofu,¹⁴¹” u-Zola smirked reaching for the tumbler in u-Soso’s hand and taking a sip.

“Sawu funda wethu,¹⁴²” u-Soso retorted without missing a beat.

They went quiet again.

u-Zola stroked u-Soso’s hair while u-Soso held her leg quietly.

¹³⁹ “Oh no! Do you mean to tell me we are about to finish this wine?”

¹⁴⁰ “And we could buy a car, Zola”

¹⁴¹ “I don’t even know how to drive”

¹⁴² “We will learn”

They were drunk and drowsy.

It was late and the street was dark.

“Andi lambe,¹⁴³” u-Zola laughed.

“Ha-ah! Zola sana ndiya hamba mna, ndi shushu ngoku¹⁴⁴.” Soso rolled onto her knees looking like a toddler in her denim dungaree shorts and pumps. u-Zola went to the kitchen and put oil on the stove so she could fry some eggs that she had bought with u-Lahmsi’s money. She was too drunk to go to bed on an empty stomach but too lazy to make anything substantial.

“Awu lambanga wena?¹⁴⁵” u-Zola asked u-Soso as she prepared to leave.

“Ewe, but ndiza’u funa u’lala ukutya kwam.¹⁴⁶” She yawned.

“Lala apha.¹⁴⁷” u-Zola smiled.

They went quiet.

“Okay, yima ndiyo thatha izitshixo ndi tshixe pha endlini. Umama ulele pha.¹⁴⁸” u-Soso smiled back.

They stepped out onto the stoep, the whole block was dark. Everyone was sleeping. All the lights were out, with the exception of one.

u-Zola stood still as if all her senses were stripped bare at the same time.

“And then?” u-Soso staggered.

“Shhh!” u-Zola turned the kitchen light off and stood on the stoep again. She stared across the backyard at u-Zorro’s window. u-Soso watched her in awe amazed at how ready u-Zola’s rage already was. A moment passed and u-Zola saw a figure move in the window and a second one move toward the first.

She did not hesitate

“Kha’me, ndiya buya.¹⁴⁹” She pushed passed u-Soso and climbed the fence without missing a beat. She knocked twice on u-Zorro’s door and was met with the silence of the night behind her and the soft muffled R n B warming the door in front of her.

She waited.

¹⁴³ “I am so hungry”

¹⁴⁴ “No! Zola, babe I’m leaving, I’m drunk now”

¹⁴⁵ “Aren’t you hungry?”

¹⁴⁶ “Yes but if I eat I will immediately want to sleep”

¹⁴⁷ “So sleep here”

¹⁴⁸ “Okay, but let me go and fetch my keys and lock the house, my mother is sleeping”

¹⁴⁹ “Wait, I’ll be back”

She looked up at u-Soso who was still standing at u-Lahmsi's stoep. u-Soso waved that she was leaving and turned to close the door and pulled the bolt, sure that she would hear about the details of the confrontation in the morning. u-Zola watched u-Soso leave and then turned her attention back to what was in front of her.

u-Zorro's door.

She knocked again.

Harder this time. There was a slight wind that was picking up. Or perhaps it was just her.

“Vula apha Ta’Zorro, unga ndi gezisi,¹⁵⁰” she said low and deep.

The door creaked open and he stood before her with an intense narrow in his eyes. She shoved passed him and found a girl, about her age, sitting nervously on the edge of the bed. The girl's eyes were wide and already dancing with tears. She looked freshly bathed, her hair was slicked back into a bun and she smelled of fruit. Her skin was not tired. She did not look like she had ever taken a hand to the face. She could only imagine what the girl was seeing looking up at her. The scar-tissue-filled tear on her right cheek from a fight she had with u-Zorro that ended in his belt buckle catching her face was possibly her most frustrating feature. There were people who, when asked who braided their hair, would describe her starting with that scar. It radicalised her, it is what turned her into a fighter.

And now her reputation for having an athletic temper preceded her so vividly that she simply stared at the girl in u-Zorro's room for a moment before asking quietly:

“Ndiku thini?¹⁵¹”

The girl, too shocked to say anything, shook her head as quickly as she could and when u-Zola pointed to the door the girl ran out leaving the door open behind her. u-Zola walked to the door, closed and locked it and then opened the window to throw the keys out into u-Zorro's back yard.

“Wenza ntoni ngoku, Zozo?¹⁵²” u-Zorro sang out of habit, seeming as exhausted as she was.

The sound of BoyzIIMen was infuriating her.

The fact that she could still smell that girl was making her feel sick. She felt sick.

She had for the first time told the whole story of her and u-Zorro and it did not taste nice in her mouth. It was bitter. Her whole story was bitter. He had made a fool of her. They all had.

¹⁵⁰ “Open the door, zorro, don't make me have to be disrespectful.”

¹⁵¹ “What shall I do to you?”

¹⁵² “What are you doing now, Zozo?”

She was anonymous to him. She had no likes or dislikes. There were not things that he thought could hurt her, and if there were, he did them over and over again until she was calloused and numb. But she wanted to be soft without ukuqhelwa¹⁵³. She wanted to remember herself. She had forgotten things about herself: That she was smart and funny. That she liked to be kissed and held. That she deserved nice, simple things like being gathered in the arms of a lover like she was money. She wanted to make plans but she had not been able to think for at least two years. She had been confused and scared and paralysed by every single type of magic that she did not trust in.

How was she different from the undead?

“Ndi bulale,¹⁵⁴” she said, calmly stepping out of her flip-flops.

“Hayi man, Zozo, yintoni ngoku?¹⁵⁵”

“Ndi bulale, Masixole. Andithi ufuna ndi gule?¹⁵⁶” She heard thunder raging in her head and something began to boil in the pit of her stomach. She threw an unexpected punch that landed square in his mouth.

“Ufuna ndi gule ndi fe?¹⁵⁷”

He staggered but did not fight. He braced. She punched him again.

“Ufuna ndi gule nge nqondo.¹⁵⁸” And again, “Nange ntliziyo.¹⁵⁹” And again, “Nango mphefumlo.¹⁶⁰”

She stood trembling so deeply that she was sure that the earth was shaking. She drew air slowly and deeply into her lungs and then started to crumble around it. He lunged at her, threw his hand over her mouth, and tackled her to the ground while she screamed into his palm.

“Pheza¹⁶¹” He gritted the word between his teeth, his mouth now bloody.

¹⁵³ Being misunderstood/made transparent and misread

¹⁵⁴ “Kill me”

¹⁵⁵ “No man, zozo what is this now?”

¹⁵⁶ “You want me to be sick, right?”

¹⁵⁷ “You want me to get sick and die?”

¹⁵⁸ “You want me to be sick in my head”

¹⁵⁹ “And in my heart”

¹⁶⁰ “And in my spirit”

¹⁶¹ “That is enough”

“Andifuni! Andifuni!”¹⁶² She screamed muffled sobs into his palm, too drunk to fight from under him and too bereft to sober up.

He tightened his grip around her mouth and she screamed louder, so he reached for the remote that was lying on his bed and turned the music up. She wriggled under him, and launched into a full body tantrum: Tears pouring from her eyes and veins bulging from her neck.

“Kutheni undenze lento nje?”¹⁶³ she sobbed under the blanket of romantic music and the grip of his suffocating hand.

“Uxolo, Zozo kaloku,”¹⁶⁴ he whispered as he continued to hold her down. “Undi xolele. Ndi ku moshile. Ndiku moshe nyani.”¹⁶⁵ He held her in a grip so tight she was sure he would pierce her skin. “But masiyeke ngoku. Wena yeka mna, nam ndizaku yeka,”¹⁶⁶ he said matter of factly.

‘The colour of love’ pouring from the speakers began to fade as it rolled towards its end and her crying subsided into a hum. u-Zorro let go of her mouth and wiped tears from her cheeks as he gazed at her with an unwelcome sincerity. She lay limp under him and tried to catch her breath, but then heard something outside. She told him to turn down the volume on his sound system and he did. “*Kuya tsha!*”

She heard someone faintly shouting out in the night. She sprang from the ground as if u-Zorro’s weight were nothing and rushed to the window to look over to see u-Lahmsi’s house and saw the kitchen engulfed in flames and crowds of people beginning to gather but unable to get close enough with their buckets of water because the fire was too hot.

u-Zola’s mind vacated her body with such velocity that she fell back and landed on u-Zorro’s bed. u-Zorro looked out the window and then stood with his hands on his head for a second before he reached for the door and remembered that it was locked. He kicked the door until it swung open and rushed out and stood at his fence while trying to hear what people were saying. Whether there was anyone inside the house.

u-Phindi screamed from her yard.

“Khawu tsale iHosepipe Masixole, uya tsha umntana ka Lhamsi!”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² “I don’t want to!”

¹⁶³ “Why have you done this to me?”

¹⁶⁴ “I’m sorry, zozo”

¹⁶⁵ “I hope you forgive me. I ruined you. I ruined you for real”

¹⁶⁶ “But let’s leave it alone now. I will leave you alone, and you leave me alone”

¹⁶⁷ “Feed your hosepipe through the fence, Masixole, u-Lahmsi’s child is burning”

He ran passed his room to the shed where his father's gardening tools were. Something exploded and blew out the windows of the u-Lahmsi's kitchen with such force that u-Zorro squatted low in case anything shot through the sky and caught him by association. He got up again and then ran back to the fence with the hosepipe, on his way he looked inside his room.

u-Zola was gone.

Something else exploded and screams of "*Kuya tsha*" rang through the night.

u-Zola ran barefoot up Joza street. Her heart had stopped beating. But she dared not die. She had to survive, at the very least, for some sort of salvation.



Ubuthongo

Everything in the house was asked for. Everything there was a little bit broken:

The kettle u-Phindi gave her did not switch off automatically, she would have to chase after the boiling water. The grey, plastic basin that she bathed in only had one handle, so she had to angle its jagged edge into the flesh of her hip to keep it from falling as she carried it to the bedroom which no longer had a door. The red plastic jug that she drank water from was cracked, so she could only fill it halfway. The government had replaced their buckets with toilets that flushed fine, but she had to stand by it outside and lift the handle so that the water did not run forever, so she preferred to turn the toilet water off. But strangers would come at night and relieve themselves as they pleased because the toilet door did not lock and she found herself assigned with a morning duty of flushing someone else's mess before she even sat down to make her own. There was no TV to receive the instructions she gave the remote when she was too drunk to remember that the TV had perished. When the fridge exploded in the fire, it put a dent in the wall that made the kitchen door loose and rickety. The walls were black and burned. The house was empty. Her eyes were swollen and she would not heal. Not even a little bit.

Everything. Broken. Everything.

Nobody really came to umsebenzi¹⁶⁸ that she had organised. After the funeral she struggled at every turn. Her mother had assumed that she must have been on drugs to find a girl in the streets and leave her alone with her child, and so she took u-My-Zuzu and buried him in her village where she said he would be safe from any further indignities. u-Lahmsi stayed after the funeral for a month and then left the village after her son's cleansing ritual. She could feel her presence straining her mother's married life.

When she returned to her house she could feel him in the walls and for weeks it drove her mad with grief. But everyone had sort of moved on, Joza never sleeps. Things move forward never backwards. After weeks of drunken grief, she attempted to be an adult and hustled and borrowed and tried to reassemble her home. But it was hard because she needed everything and who had that to give? She could not move. People did not want to come to that barren,

¹⁶⁸ Ceremony.

haunted house to do their hair. And none of those men she used to scam wanted to look down into eyes that were shimmering with bereavement. She felt cursed.

She realised that she may need to turn to the ancestors to lift some of her grief. She scrambled money together to buy enough ingredients for one pot of traditional beer and three bottles of gin. She hand wrote invitations to a cleansing ritual in an exercise book, tore them into individual squares, but then could not stand the thought of going to each of her neighbours to deliver them because she could not speak of her son without losing her breath to despair.

She quickly walked over to the bar for some courage, they had a wine so cheap that it looked like oil and tasted like petrol, but for ten rand she could get enough of it to run this difficult errand and then come home and sedate herself with the rest.

But the wine was too strong and the sun so hot that by the afternoon she was sleeping on a school chair in her yard, fermenting in the heat with the invitations in her lap. She woke to the sound of children returning from school and stumbled into her house, but not before spotting u-Phalo and shoving the invitations into his hand for distribution.

On the day of the ceremony nobody came. She walked around her yard, in an uncharacteristically discreet ensemble of a head scarf, long skirt, and long sleeved t-shirt.

But nobody came all day.

When she had made a pot of traditional beer during the week and left it out to ferment and none of her neighbours came to investigate, she had assumed it was because they were working, u-Phindi had a job now, after all. But now that the day had arrived and was just a few short hours away from becoming evening, she considered that u-Phalo may not have handed out those invitations. She had not stayed sober enough to follow up. Nor had she left enough time between the distribution of the invitations and the ceremony itself.

She sat and drank her traditional beer and decided that she would cleanse by herself. One way or another, something had to happen. She could not let this fire burn down her entire life.

She sat in her empty living room singing alone and drinking her beer from the cracked jug and people started to arrive. They were mostly drunks from the neighbourhood: acquaintances, but not really her neighbours. One of them had seen u-Phalo outside and sent him for cigarettes and u-Lahmsi saw him as she was leaving the toilet and he was running out of her yard.

“Hey!” she shouted after him, “kutheni unga hambisanga ii-leta zam wena?!¹⁶⁹” She slurred as she shuffled towards the tap to wash her hands.

¹⁶⁹ “Why didn’t you deliver my letters?”

“Ndizi hambisile!¹⁷⁰” he protested.

“Phi?!¹⁷¹” she put her hands on her hips and staggered.

u-Phalo pointed across the road, and then next door, and then at u-Soso’s house, and then at his own house. He kept pointing and pointing until u-Lahmsi just shook her head and shoed him away

“Okay okay,” she mumbled and walked back into her house.

The day was gone. The raspy drunken harmonies were comforting at first, but her guests were squabbling over cigarettes and ranting over how unfairly they had been treated by something or other more than they were singing. Those who were singing sounded like they were crying and they were making her more emotional than she already was. u-Lahmsi sat flat on the floor in the corner, with her legs spread in front of her and her dignified outfit cocked and slanted and sliding off of her body.

“Hambani ngoku,¹⁷²” she said without looking up.

A lump sat heavily in her throat. She looked around and realised that these people were here for a party. She was known for her parties. Most of them were young and passing through. They just wanted to get a buzz going before they hit the bar or tavern. Her son was dead and people were drinking her tears to get buzzed for their social lives.

She stood up from her corner and started kicking people out. And her guests did not resist at all.

“Animazi noku mazi umntana wam, voetsek!¹⁷³” she spat, getting more belligerent as her guests gathered themselves and stumbled out of the house and into her yard. A few of the younger drunkards lingered in the yard as they tried to decide amongst themselves where they night would take them next. She stood on her stoep and cursed them from her yard. Parasites! Bloodsucking, soulless parasites who would eat the remains of anything they come across.

One of the parasites, hissed back at her with as much belligerence.

“Rha le bitch!¹⁷⁴” he spat, disgusted that she would curse them after they helped her drink her nonsensical beer. “Ucing’ ‘ba unga sebenza kwi yhadi engena buhlanti, unayo ingqondo? Unobu lokishi too much, awuyazi na lento uyenzayo, rubbish!¹⁷⁵”

¹⁷⁰ “I did”

¹⁷¹ “Where?”

¹⁷² “Leave now”

¹⁷³ “You don’t even know my child, piss off”

¹⁷⁴ “This bitch”

They left laughing and smoking.

She spat after them.

Parasites.

She stood seething with rage. Words sputtering out of her like lava. She stared at u-Phindi's house next door. The lights were all on. She looked over at u-Zorro's house, out back, all their lights were on too. It was early in the evening. These people were awake. She spat and cursed and screamed. Parasites! Blood sucking, soulless, parasites who would not do anything for her but judged her harshly for doing for herself.

u-Phindi's yard went dark but the lights stayed on.

“Voetsek!¹⁷⁶” u-Lahmsi shouted in response. She shouted one curse after the other into the night.

u-Zorro's lights went off and the yard went dark.

Cannibals! The worst kind! The kind that pretend they do not eat human flesh while they drink the gravy.

u-Lahmsi kept cursing and cursing until she was frothing at the mouth. She kept standing at her door while all the lights around her went dark until she was just suspended in an oval of light against the dark of night, spitting and cursing while music thumped in the distance at the bar, and the rest of Joza kept moving.

Broken. Everything. Broken

How they got that way was never simple.

Whether they had gradually cracked or torn or dulled or calloused over time, or if in fact something had snapped each of them into dysfunction forever changing the way that they worked, it was hard to tell. Either way, when they worked, they worked. They were broken. And they were named for their brokenness. And they worked.

But there were live wires left by the fire that she could not afford to attend to. And there were days when they felt more dangerous than others. She would have loved to leave that charred house but her son was trapped in the walls and she could not leave him there again. And nobody wanted to come to a house so alive with despair. So u-Lahmsi returned to her habits of appearing and disappearing in wide cycles of rapid succession, but now she had to do it without really leaving at all. Without moving. She could not move. Not for a while.

¹⁷⁵ “You think you can have a ritual in a yard with no kraal? Do you have a brain? You have too much of the township in you, rubbish!”

¹⁷⁶ “Piss off”

And then one day, while morning was still clearing night's mist, u-Phalo shouted from the kitchen door while u-Lahmsi bathed in the bedroom.

Her one foot was in a basin of the cooling water, while the other was folded over her knee as she rubbed the dead skin from it using a smooth stone she found the last and only time she went to the sea. She sat on a crate in front of a mirror that she had leaned on a school chair in the empty bedroom where a blanket spread was spread on the floor where she slept.

“Yintoni, ekuseni apha?”¹⁷⁷ She shouted impatiently over her shoulder, naked and hunched over.

She heard him heave words out of his body as he pressed his little voice harder, his school shoes lightly kicking the bottom of the door as he stood as closely as he could. She called him into her room and he stood at the door shyly. u-Phalo's orange face was shining with Vaseline, his school tie, burgundy school jersey and little blazer all seemed to serious for his frame, and his hair was combed into a perfect copper cloud.

“Uthini?”¹⁷⁸ she said, the lazy grains of a hangover making her almost inaudible.

He put money on the chair where the mirror leaned. Two rand.

“Uthunywe ngu mama wakho? Ufuna ntoni?”¹⁷⁹ She growled impatiently as the sight of u-Phalo in school uniform began to make her feel sick. His mother had surely sent him. She needed pain pills, the strong yellow ones that she always needed. u-Phalo's mother was sick, but u-Lahmsi did not know how to help her because everyone was sick.

“Hayi andi thunywanga, Mama ka My-Zuzu.”¹⁸⁰ He smiled a big smile and swung his limbs shyly and his eyes shimmered with tears.

“Yintoni ke?”¹⁸¹ she rushed him. She did not want to see his little school shoes and oversized pants and his ironed shirt and enormous tie anymore. She wanted him out.

He rested his eyes on the ground in front of him and slowed his swinging.

“Bendi cela uthengele itshomi yam iiflower. eTVini xa umntu eswelekile and then umkhumbule, umthengela iiflower.” He stood still, his eyes still on the ground in front of him. Tears chased each other down his face. “Ndi khumbula itshomi yam, namhlanje,” Phalo rubbed the tears from his eyes, “kodwa ke iiflower andi khe ndizi bone zithengiswa apha

¹⁷⁷ “What is it, so early in the morning?”

¹⁷⁸ “What are you saying?”

¹⁷⁹ “Did your mother send you? What does she want?”

¹⁸⁰ “No, nobody sent me, My-zuzu's mom.”

¹⁸¹ “Then what is it?”

evenkileni and u-Tat'uMineer soze avume ndi khe ezi zakhe.¹⁸² He sniffled and then shrugged, “ndi khumbula itshomi yam qha.¹⁸³” He threw his arms over his face and sobbed at the bedroom door. u-Lahmsi stretched her hand out and pulled the boy into her naked arms. She rocked with him while he cried and cried. His sobbing subsided. She looked at his face and wiped his cheeks. She smiled through her own tears and exaggerated a surprised face at him

“Ngelo xesha wawu gezela umntana wam ngoku thanda ukukhala,¹⁸⁴” she chuckled.

“Waye thanda ukukhala, u-My-Zuzu,¹⁸⁵” u-Phalo sniffled his voice sounding low and relieved.

“Uya khala, mos, nawe ngoku,¹⁸⁶” she teased.

“Hayi, not ela hlobo lika My-Zuzu kodwa,¹⁸⁷” he smiled shyly.

u-Lahmsi laughed and embraced him once before fixing his face and his uniform like she used to do to her son.

“Ndiyabulela Tata, uyeva? Ungaze utshintshe, Phalo. Thatha i-two rand yakho wena, uzithengele into emnandi eskolweni ekucingisa u-My-Zuzu. Umna ndizaku zikha eza flower zika mineer andimoyiki, akandi khuphi,¹⁸⁸” she told him as if it were a secret. “Ndiyabulela. Hamba ke iya eskolweni.¹⁸⁹” She looked at him once more. “Uzaku thenga ntoni?¹⁹⁰” she asked.

“I'stok'sweet,¹⁹¹” he smiled.

“Wayesi thanda i'stok'sweet.¹⁹²”

Phalo left.

u-Lahmsi lay on the floor and cried for what she suspected would be the last time and primed to move forwards. Never backwards.

¹⁸² “I miss my friend today. But I don't ever see flowers being sold at the shop and Mineer would never let me pick his”

¹⁸³ “I just miss my friend”

¹⁸⁴ “Meanwhile, you used to make fun of my boy for crying too much”

¹⁸⁵ “He did cry too much”

¹⁸⁶ “You are also crying now”

¹⁸⁷ “Not like u-My-zuzu, though”

¹⁸⁸ “I am grateful. Don't ever change, Phalo. Take your ten rand and buy yourself something nice at school that reminds you of u-My-zuzu, I will pick flower at uMineer's house. I am not scared of him”

¹⁸⁹ “I am grateful, now go to school”

¹⁹⁰ “What will you buy?”

¹⁹¹ “A lollipop”

¹⁹² “He really liked lollipops”



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

IMVEKU

u-Loli:



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

Umthandazo

Kumnandi ekuseni. Kanye xa ilanga lingeka phumi imini ingeka qini.

Musani uku lila.

Kwela lixa loku phaphama kwemiphefumlo ibi phumle.

Musani uku khala.

Singamathole eenkomo ezazi hlohlwe ngee nkwenkwezi zagcwala, nathi ke safuza.

Amathole ezi gwili awathi oku khonya ku vele kukhanye.

Sithi abo!

Ziphi iinkomo?

Zibaleka phezu kwa mafu, zibaleka kungabiko zithonga.

Ziphi iinkomo?

Sithi aba.

Musani ukulila.

Akukho mzimba ungena sono, akukho sono esingenanyama, alukho usana olungena nina, kodwa musani ukulila ngokuba sidibene ngo nga dibani apha kobubu khosi. Iinyama zethu esasizi bolekele nezono eza gcwala kuzo, zizilingo zalandawo inameva ingemva inezigebenga. Kodwa akukho pha, apha. Kukwam apha.

Kukwakho nawe.

Shiya ezo zingqi ezi bhexeshwa sisiqhelo, bukhulu ubukhosi, umkhulu nawe.

Ungakhali.

Kukwakho apha.

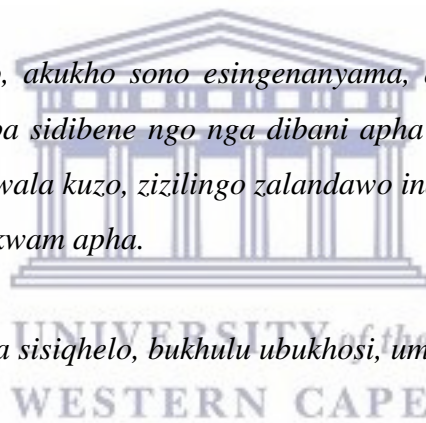
Kukwam nami.

Zembhatise ngezidanga zangonaphakade, nguwe incutshe. Nguwe ingcali.

Ibizakuba ngubani xa ingenokuba nguwe?

Musani ukulila.

Kumnandi ekuseni.



There is beauty in the morning. Especially before the sun rises and the day finds its feet.

Stop weeping.

At that time of the awakening of spirits that have been resting.

Do not cry.

We are the calves of cattle who were stuffed full of constellations and we took after them.

Calves of the wealthy who, even when we cry, beam light from our open mouths.

This is us.

Where are the cattle?

Running above the clouds, galloping with no sound.

Where are the cattle?

Here we are.

Do not cry.

There is no body without sin, there is no sin that does not become flesh, there is no infant without a mother, but do not cry because we are a sovereignty gathered by our fragments.

And the flesh that we borrowed and the sins that filled it are things of a place that has thorns and robbers. But this is not there. This is mind. This is yours.

Leave that rhythm you walk with of familiarity, sovereignty is colossal, you are colossal.

Do not cry.

This is yours.

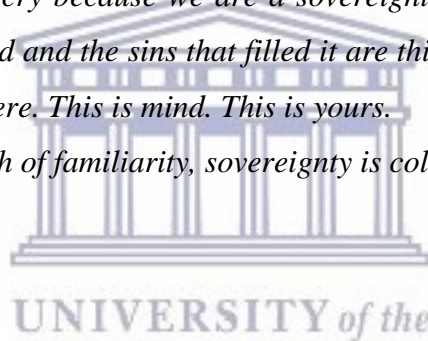
This is mine.

Throw gowns over your shoulders, you are the genius. You are the expert.

If not you, then who?

Do not weep.

There is beauty in the morning.



Inimba

uMy-Zuzu was born with a veil over his face.

Cry, cry, cry.

Oh he cried. He cried something selfish.

He cried as the nurses first folded him into government sheets (sheets like wet paper that had dried in the sun).

He cried in the taxi home, under a thin yellow fleece with brown bears and rainbows and ice-cream cones on it.

He cried while his mother ate standing up and thought of sleep.

While she hand-washed his nappies and hung them in the kitchen as winter rains tightened outside in vertical sheets.

He cried distance between his mother and her friends who thought he may be sick.

He cried his father away who said that he cried as though he thought that they were rich.

Cry and cry and cry.

One night as the damp of the nappies darkened the kitchen and chilled the house,

In the bedroom on their double bed,

Pressed against her chest under the blankets,

He gargled, choked, spattered, and panicked behind a dam of breastmilk that his mother had shot into his mouth in exchange for one moment of quiet.

He was sure that this had happened. He was sure because he remembered.

His brand new eyes bulged from shock, and his brand new skin, his brand new arms and legs, his delicate new fingers and toes, and his fresh mind made from scratch, all assembled at his possible death. A storm cloud of silence rose from their bed and unfurled through the house.

He saw her.

He was not sure how he saw her, or *how* he remembered.

But he saw her watch him suffocate.

He caught his breath and then, cry cry cried. A different cry this time, one that curdled his heart and buried the memory in his marrow. From that night onwards he would never shake the sense that things were not as they were meant to be, she let him meet his mortality. He did not hate her, he was not angry, he was just sure that it was never meant to be.

As he grew, uMy-Zuzu continued to cry. He cried. It was his nature. It was his language.

But when he was finally old enough to be given something to cry about, his mother gave him plenty. She did not want to hear that sound anymore. She did not want to hear that siren. And he did not want to cry, but sometimes tears just fell. His mother hated tears, they made her so angry because she did not understand what he wanted her to do. She would wonder aloud who he took after, who was so soft in his father's family because it could not have been from her's.

She was scared:

That he was too soft and would never survive. He was afraid too. But his chest would fill up sometimes, and his eyes would go dark, thoughts would cloud over and tears were all that helped. It was sadness, it was not complaint, he just overflowed sometimes.

And every feeling he felt, felt like the last thing he would ever feel.

It was not always simple. It was not always pain.

His mother was tired. He was tired for her.

And sometimes he was scared that she might let him die again.

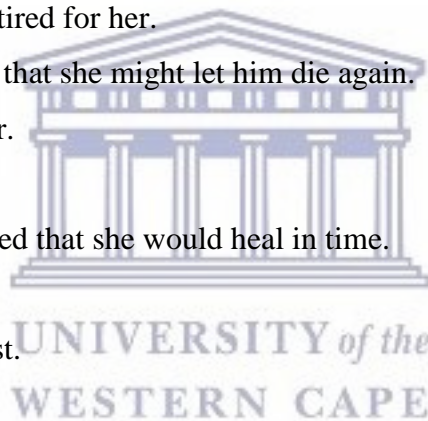
If she did he would forgive her.

If she did he would be fine.

If she let him die again he hoped that she would heal in time.

He had many good days.

His last may have been the best.



He was playing at u-Phalo house when u-Phalo's mother ordered them to go to u-Ta'Zorro's to have their hair cut. They decided that they would walk all the way around onto Joza Street instead of jumping over the fence because they were afraid of u-Ta's father, u-Mineer, who was known for his belt that had no favourites.

Before they left, they stopped at his house, next door, so that he could put on some flip-flops while u-Phalo stood waiting for him outside. His sister was at home with her friend drinking and doing hair when he ran passed them into the bedroom. She shouted that there were lollipops on the dressing table for him and u-Phalo. He grabbed the treats, walked back out, and presented the sweets to his friend.

They started walking.

“Ndiyam'thanda uSista wakho, mfethu, ndizaku mtshata xa ndimdala!¹⁹³” u-Phalo squeezed the fabric of his t-shirt near his chest as though he were pulling his heart out of his body.

He rolled his eyes

“Awundi *believe-i?!¹⁹⁴*” u-Phalo squealed with sincerity.

As they turned onto Joza Street he did not bother to walk on the tar road because they were just going around the block, but u-Phalo insisted that beautiful people do not walk on gravel so he ran onto Joza Street and paraded and performed there.

It was a Tuesday and still quite early in the afternoon. The streets were busy with tired school children whose backpacks looked like they were filled with cement. He was quietly thankful that his backpack stayed mostly empty, but then remembered that it sat at home with English homework which would have to be done before he went to sleep.

He watched u-Phalo, who was jumping around and pretending to marry his sister.

“Oh baby, I love you!” u-Phalo swooned at his imaginary husband as his own imaginary bride “You may kiss the bride!” he shouted in an unexpected cheer, and then started ululating - something he did often even though he had been told often that boys do not do that. u-Phalo wrapped his arms around himself and kissed the air before him so passionately that when he broke from his own embrace he staggered dramatically. Vul'indlela by Brenda Fassie was the wedding song that u-Phalo chose for his reception, and as they turned onto u-Ta's road u-

¹⁹³ “I love your sister and I am going to marry her when I'm older”

¹⁹⁴ “You don't believe me?”

Phalo sang and danced around with so much excitement that he had to stop and watch. u-Phalo bopped and shook his head and spread his arms like a bird as he sang, straining so hard on the high notes that veins were popping out of his neck. While he watched u-Phalo he could not help but to laugh at how invested his friend was in the success of his pretend wedding. It was an intoxicating dedication. He had resisted for as long as he could but the festivities were contagious and the chorus was coming up. He surrendered and ran to dance with u-Phalo on the road:

Vul'indlela we Mam'gobozi!

They started doing a wedding march and clapped their hands rhythmically.

Vul'indlela, yekel'umona!

He saw a woman who was hanging her clothes in a yard nearby, smile and sway as she watched them dance.

Vul'indlela we Mam'gobozi!

“Yhu, yi ngoma yam ke leyo.¹⁹⁵” She grinned.

Vul'indlela, yekel'umona!

“Yeyi!”

He heard a big voice shout and they both looked up the road.

u-Ta was standing in front of his house with his arms high above his head, tapping the face of his watch impatiently.

“Sanuku ndi qhela kakubi nina!¹⁹⁶”

He looked at u-Phalo who already had his mouth open in comical fear, they snapped out of their faux wedding festivity and raced to u-Ta's house.

¹⁹⁵ “That's my song”

¹⁹⁶ “Don't get too familiar with me, you two!”

u-Ta's house sat on a high and exposed foundation that was small, red-bricks on its sides and then cemented and painted red, and polished weekly on top. The foundation jutted out and wrapped around the front and side of the house as a veranda and up at the front, it had its own little roof that kept the sun at bay and provided a quaint little shelter that overlooked the garden which was lush and looked after. The soil in the garden was tilled and rich, the flowers were in bloom, and the bricked footpath swept. That footpath started at the small gate, crossed through the proud garden and then ended at four stairs. Guests could climb those stairs and enter into that shaded part of the veranda and rest in a swing chair looking out into the street. That part of the veranda was clearly not for the likes of him and u-Phalo. He looked at his feet which were dusty from racing down the road and felt sweat trickle from his hairline down his face. He poked his head down the front of his t-shirt and confirmed that he was indeed too smelly to even think of sitting on that swing.

They walked up the footpath through the garden, but then turned off onto the side of the house where the veranda went on without shade. The yard was still neat and swept, but there were no flowers, just the hard to love and hard to forget brownness that Joza was built on. The long unshaded veranda was a deep red against the unending beige wall that was interrupted first by a kitchen door, and then by an aluminium framed window, and then further towards the end of the yard, by u-Ta's back room door. u-Ta's room was so close to his and u-Phalo's homes that it was only fair to consider u-Ta more of a neighbour to them and his parents more of a neighbour to whomever their swing chair was pointed at.

Between the kitchen and his window, u-Ta had put a chair out and had run an extension cord from his bedroom window to the chair where the hair clippers were plugged. The side of the house had four stairs too, and that is where they found u-Ta sitting and waiting for them.

u-Phalo went first:

He watched u-Phalo sit and swing his peach coloured legs energetically in the school chair that u-Ta's Zorro had set out, still buzzing from his pretend wedding reception. While u-Ta and u-Phalo settled in, he climbed the stairs and sat on the edge of the elevated veranda with his feet dangling over the side, looking up every now and again but not too much because it was too bright. u-Ta had his back to the sun, so when he looked up at him moving against the soft blue of the sky, the rays of the sun looked as though they were coming from his head and his face was little more than a detailed shadow.

u-Ta waved a black barber's bib over u-Phalo and it floated down onto him as if an elaborate magic trick was about to begin. The sun twinkled in the thicket of u-Phalo's copper, brown,

gold, and bronze hair while the string to the bib was gently tightened around his neck. The sun danced behind u-Ta's head as he swayed from side to side to the gospel music coming from his open door and his shadow stretched just far enough to fall over both him and u-Phalo in the chair. He was happy to have the shade on his face after having had to squint under the sun's sharp rays on the walk over.

u-Ta took a spray bottle of methylated spirits and spritzed his clippers before making the machine buzz for a second and then switching it off again.

"My-Zuzu," u-Ta said as he wiped the fine teeth of the clippers against his dirty black jeans and looked around on the floor next to him "khawu ze nala brush, mfethu, nantsi ipha kum eroomini."¹⁹⁷ He jumped up onto his feet and while he tried to put one of his flip-flops back on u-Ta cocked his head to the side and played with u-Phalo's hair which straightened when he pulled it between his fingers and then sprung back into coils when he let it go.

Once his flip-flops were on, he smacked along the shiny, red veranda towards u-Ta's bedroom, the ever inviting harmonies of Amadodana Ase Wesile scattering out of the open door as he approached. When he finally entered, he was swallowed by music and while his eyes adjusted to the dark room and his skin puckered in the abrupt cool, Amadodana sang *Phezulu Enkosini*.

It was the neatest place he had ever seen. They did not get their hair cut often by u-Ta, but when they did there was never any reason to go into his room. This was his first time and he was awestruck. It was meticulous. There was not a speck of dust on any of the shiny surfaces. The air smelled sweet and something else - spicy maybe - he could not put his finger on it. Under the window there was a dark wooden dressing table with three mirrors for eyes. He walked over to the mirror and was able to see every blemish and dry spot on his face. He wet his finger and rubbed a smudge from his face that he was sure he would not have been able to see in another mirror. The dressing table was full of glass bottles. Some were square and blue, others were rectangles with soft edges, one was shaped like a fist. He picked up one of the bottles that was clear but looked cloudy and then put it back down immediately when it caught him off guard with its soft, matte texture. He turned around once and then again in the wide open harmonies that were pouring from the speaker, uncertain about why it felt so good to be in that room but sure that it felt very good. Something about the row of colourful sneakers that lined the walls with their noses pointed into the middle of the room, and the TV

¹⁹⁷ "Please bring me the brush, dude, it's in my room"

in the corner that sat on top of a stand full of CDs and DVDs. Something about the duvet on the bed that looked as though it were once pumped full of air but then was left to slowly deflate, or the off-white ceramic tiles. He suddenly understood why his sister slept there sometimes. He wanted to sleep there too.

“Ise caleni kwe radio!¹⁹⁸” u-Ta’s voice interrupted his tour. He saw a shoe-brush near the Hi-Fi, grabbed it and then made his way outside. As he drew closer to them he heard u-Phalo’s chatter.

“Sho mfethu¹⁹⁹” u-Ta winked as he took the brush and started cleaning the clipper with it. He nudged u-Phalo to continue with his story and then sunk his fingers into u-Phalo’s hair and tilted his head gently until his chin touched his chest.

u-Phalo was lying, as always.

The clipper buzzed.

u-Phalo talked into his own chest about, two girls who were fighting over him.

The clipper slid and pushed bundles of his hair off of his head leaving his ashy, pale scalp in its wake.

u-Ta’Zorro asked what they looked like.

u-Phalo said they were brown.

u-Ta asked how old they were.

u-Phalo said they were older.

u-Ta asked how old.

u-Phalo said they were in grade 3, maybe.

u-Ta grunted skeptically and said that there was no such thing.

u-Phalo tried to convince him and went on and on about his girlfriends until u-Ta asked him to name one of them.

He hesitated and then said:

“Ngu Monica”

u-Ta’Zorro stepped back and bellowed with a laugh so big that he had to arch his back to let it out of his body. And the clipper sang through the air and laughed with him. u-Phalo lifted his face and furrowed his brow in bemusement and turned to look back at u-Ta. He watched his friend quietly congratulate himself for making a grown man laugh while u-Ta wiped a

¹⁹⁸ “It’s next to the radio!”

¹⁹⁹ “Sure dude”

tear from the corner of his eye with the back of his wrist and then stepped back into position, gently repositioning u-Phalo's head. u-Ta shook his head in amusement and then turned his attention to him

“And wena? Ngubani eyakho i-tsherri, ngu Brandy?”²⁰⁰ u-Ta smiled.

He shook his head with such shock that his eyes blinked.

u-Ta chuckled “Awunayo wena i-tsherri?”²⁰¹

He shook his head again.

“Awuyi funi?”²⁰²

He shook his head with a smile this time.

“Uyayi funa?”²⁰³

He shook his head harder with an exaggerated frown.

“Hmmm” u-Ta laughed as he tilted u-Phalo's head to the side and held down his ear so that he could sneak the clippers behind it. Standing with his legs far apart, his hips pushed forward, and his face dropped down to his chest, u-Ta narrowed his eyes at u-Phalo's head and then glanced over at him from below his heavy brows

“Awuka thethi nangoku mfethu?”²⁰⁴

He shook his head again.

“Ukohlakele kwedini”²⁰⁵ u-Ta scoffed, straightening to walk around u-Phalo, lift u-Phalo's chin and look down at his face for a moment before shaking his head then whistling

“Yhu, uzabamhle ntwana yam! Ziza ku phambana worse ezi way, su'ngxama!”²⁰⁶

u-Ta'Zorro finished cutting u-Phalo's hair and then cut his while u-Phalo lay on his side on the veranda as if they were on the beach. His sister shouted at the fence and gave u-Phalo money to buy electricity when they were finished with their hair. But when they finished, u-Ta gave them money and sent them to go and buy u-Smile²⁰⁷ on Goba Street. They also had to get bread, cigarettes, and Lemon Twist on the way back. They had planned to leave right afterwards, but u-Ta told them they were being rude and they should join him on the front veranda because he could not eat all that bread and meat by himself. The three of them sat on

²⁰⁰ “And you, who is your girlfriend? Brandy?”

²⁰¹ “You don't have one?”

²⁰² “You don't want one?”

²⁰³ “You do want one?”

²⁰⁴ “You still not talking, dude?”

²⁰⁵ “You are diabolical, boy”

²⁰⁶ “You are going to be beautiful, my friend, these girls are going to go crazy, don't rush”

²⁰⁷ Cooked sheep's head.

the special veranda and he could not believe that he was the only one who wanted to sit on the swinging chair. By the time u-Smilely was finished, he was so full that he had to lie down to stop from exploding. He hung one leg off of the side of the swinging two seater and kept the chair rocking, while he held his second glass full of Lemon Twist over his chest with his eyes closed and his heart open. The sun was lower than before and reached beneath the shelter to tickle across his body as he floated between bliss and disbelief. It was no wonder they hardly ever saw u-Ta's parents. They probably spent all of their time swinging and eating sheep faces in the sun. u-Ta was sitting flat on the floor near his head - he said that the chair made him nauseous when he sat on it - and uPhalo was standing on the stairs talking and laughing so much that he was red in the face.

It was glorious.

It was glorious to have best friends.

u-Phalo was still eating because he had been talking so much in between, and he was talking still: telling them a story about his uncle - a policeman - who had to pretend to be his partner - another policeman - because they had a witness in their protection
“Hayi suka, ngu Bad Boys lo umbalisayo wena!²⁰⁸” u-Ta laughed “Yere iya xoka lentwana! Uhlala nalomntu uxoka leweyi?!²⁰⁹” u-Ta nudged him so hard he almost spilt his drink. He rolled slightly onto his side for safety and watched as u-Phalo narrowed his eyes and insisted through a mouth full of bread and meat
“Nyani-nyani, grootmans²¹⁰” he sang and swayed.

u-Ta lit a cigarette and leaned back against the wall, his one leg spread straight in front of him while the other was bent at the knee. He took a pull of his cigarette and then hung his arm on his pointed knee. A car pulled up. A big car, in front of the gate. It was a long white car with tinted windows. A BMW. He sat up in awe. u-Ta jumped up and skulked to the car, taking another pull from his cigarette on the way and leaving a cloud of tobacco suspended in the garden in his wake. u-Phalo was still talking. Still chewing. Still lying while he watched u-Ta lean over the passengers side of the car, laughing and joking with whoever the driver was. u-Ta came back into the garden while the tinted window slid up behind him and then walked over to hand him the cigarette.

²⁰⁸ “No! That is Bad Boys that you are talking about”

²⁰⁹ “My God this boy can lie! You hang out with someone who lies like this?”

²¹⁰ “For real, for real guys”

“Bamba so, mfethu²¹¹”

He held the cigarette while u-Ta enlisted u-Phalo’s help to clear up the glasses, tray, knives, and plates. They disappeared around the side of the house and left him sitting alone on the veranda. He looked at the cigarette in his hands and wondered what u-Mineer would do if he found him sitting on his fancy veranda with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of Lemon Twist in the other. The glass! He looked around the corner and hoped that u-Phalo would appear so that he could give him the glass to put inside. He stood up and started down the stairs but then realised that u-Ta probably did not want him to come around into the house with a cigarette, while he hesitated u-Phalo came bouncing around the corner too excited to receive any information. And before he could say anything u-Ta came past him, grabbed the cigarette and nodded for him to follow. They walked ahead of him u-Ta no-Phalo, but he hesitated, the glass still in his hand. u-Ta opened the back door of the BMW and u-Phalo dove in. He lifted the glass sheepishly

“Yiza nayo!²¹²” Ta nodded.

They drove up Joza Street and turned down onto M Street. The car was so cool that he thought he might be catching a cold. Music played low as u-Ta chatted with the driver whose face he had only seen the side of since they got into the car. He looked over at u-Phalo who was sitting in the seat behind the driver and had his face so close to the window that it was getting cloudy. The car smelled like apples and something else - dry leaves or grass - and the seats felt like skin. They turned up onto J Street and stopped in front of a small, old house. u-Ta jumped out and he and u-Phalo were left with the driver. The man stretched and locked his hands behind his headrest. The man had hair on his hands, even on his knuckles. He had never seen anyone with hair on their knuckles before. He had a gold watch on his wrist too, and a gold ring on his pinky. When the man dropped his hands, he turned to look at them with an amused smile, but his eyes could only reach one of them, u-Phalo was too far behind him.

He asked the stuff that adults always asked. What grade they were in, what their teacher’s name was, if they passed. u-Phalo answered but the man kept his eyes curiously on him as if he were the one speaking. And he accepted each answer u-Phalo gave as though it were something deep and meaningful. He nodded slowly and approvingly and then turned back around to start the car as u-Ta climbed back into the passenger's seat. u-Ta asked if they were

²¹¹ “Hold this for me”

²¹² “Bring it”

all getting along and his friend told him they were, but told him that they were quiet. u-Ta exclaimed and pointed at u-Phalo to confirm if he was the one that the driver was talking about, but the driver corrected him. u-Ta reached back and slapped his legs playfully whilst telling his friend that *this* was the most dangerous boy in Joza. He could not believe that u-Ta was talking about him as if he were the strongest boy in the world. He looked beside him to see if u-Phalo was hearing any of this but u-Phalo had fallen asleep. u-Ta turned to give him a quick wink and he smiled broadly in response.

They drove off again.

This time up passed Fingo towards open green fields that he had never seen before. They pulled over on a gravel road and then asked him if he wanted to come or stay in the car with u-Phalo, who was still sleeping. He said he would stay with his friend. u-Ta's friend told him to climb into the driver's seat so that he could listen to music and as soon as they got out of the car he did just that. He watched them walking towards a house that looked like it could have been an old church before. It stood at the back end of a huge yard that had one big tree up front and plenty of soft grass surrounding it.

u-Ta and his friend swayed more than they walked, really. It was as though they could hear a song that nobody else could. Side to side they swayed and nodded their heads. Laughing and slapping at each other's arms as they talked. He wondered if this would be him and u-Phalo one day: Slow riding in a BMW, drinking Lemon Twist with pinky rings and watches on. He wondered if they would be patient and kind enough to be friends with little boys and cut their hair and listen to their lies. He quietly hoped so. And although he thought that u-Ta was the greatest man that ever lived, he loved that BMW and the soft leather seats, so he hoped that he would grow up and be u-Ta's friend and he hoped that u-Phalo would grow up and be u-Ta.

He sat behind the soft steering wheel and ran his hands over it again and again. He turned the music up and pretended he was driving somewhere far. He did things that he had seen drivers do, like tap the wheel with his fingers and roll his head around stretching and yawning. He sat on his haunches so that he could hunch over the wheel, and then he sat back again, locked his arms and pretended to speed so fast that his adrenalin spilled into reality and he had to stop.

He was not sure when he fell asleep and how he got to the back seat again. He just felt u-Ta shaking his knee from the front seat and when he looked around, they were parked between his house and u-Phalo's house. He looked over at u-Phalo who was already stretching and getting ready to climb out of the car. u-Ta and his friend offered them their fists and they each bumped them with theirs. As the car pulled off and left them on the street, u-Phalo remembered that he had been told to buy electricity. They rushed into the house where his sister was still drinking with her friend. The sun was setting. u-Phalo grabbed a chair, pulled it to the electricity box and punched random numbers as if he were putting in an electricity token. u-Phalo climbed down and whispered in his ear that they would just buy it tomorrow and that there was still enough electricity to last the night. They were tired. Exhausted. from a full day of being grootmans. His sister's friend called them to aks them the stuff that adults ask and then he walked u-Phalo to the gate. They bumped fists and he went back inside, just as he was about to throw himself on the bed, his sister said he had to wash his feet because she had changed the sheets that morning.

He obliged.

He was drowsy. He stood at the tap outside and let the cold water run over his feet. The sun was gone now. The day had given him everything that he could have thought to ask for. A new haircut, a new best friend, a ride in a BMW, a fizzy drink, meat, bread and time alone in a room he did not know could exist.

He went back inside and wiped his feet with his washing rag before taking off his shorts. He heard a knock as his shorts hit the floor and searched the pockets to investigate. His lolipop! He had forgotten all about it. He slipped it under his pillow and then changed into a cotton vest from when he was small. He walked over to the light. Flipped the switch and darkened the room, crawled across the bed and did not even bother to get under the blankets.

Sleep pulled at him as he remembered his homework.

It would have to wait until the morning.

Ubuthongo

Kwathi kaloku ngantsomi²¹³, there were clouds too lazy to bring a storm. Sagging, low and grey, they writhed over thorn bushes. There was a grey-blue horizon of hills, whispered to and waved at by long, khaki-coloured, dry grass. There was a mischievous wind. Flipping and rolling and tumbling down grassy embankments.

Away.

Away.

Down past the new graveyard where uTat'am lay resting finally.

Away.

Across that sudden patch of arid, rocky, nothingness where the sun had petrified the air suddenly and specifically. Where unidentifiable animals let out high-pitched complaints which seemed to intensify the heat only for all of that to cower at the cool invitation gently calling from the valley, and the moody promise quietly brewing in the sky.

A drop of water slipped from a cloud's grasp and landed away.

But heaven had played this game before, this game of empty promise.

Taunting this waiting and wanting.

The wind tumbled playfully past the graveyard and then scattered into the cool of the valley, where the earth stopped suddenly and dipped down into a crater. The rocky walls of the crater were decorated in tufts of grass and stubborn flowers. A family of aloes at the top of the drop, with a grey and moving sky at their backs, smiled down at the laughter of the narrow stream as it rolled by. The stream ran through this holy house and then out into the horizon where it deepened and widened. But here it was a baby. Here it played and giggled and tumbled and laughed. Here it was a child, long and thin. It never returned. It never looked back. But it never left. Here it was home.

The floor was carpeted with lush green grass on some patches while it remaining cobbled with stones in others. A well furnished home, decorated and warmed by its occupants. Less of a valley and more of a giant footprint left mistakenly by the designer who had surely walked

²¹³ Translation: "Once upon a time"

the earth without realising it had not dried yet. And now things grew here. An enriching coincidence.

Perhaps.

Or perhaps a meticulous plan, personalised and pointed to whoever has the courage to say they are at its mercy.

Things grew.

There was a path, lush and rocky and cool, and then a cave that sat in the wall like a nest. In its mouth sat an omen, legs crossed, watching the sky turn. She wore a white cotton dress and no shoes. Her hair was soft and tangled and black like wool. Her eyes were bright and wide. Her big forehead was wrinkled with anticipation and she had a resting pout.

When the clouds gather like this, people retreat into their houses as if to give the heavens some privacy, but she was not people. She stared into the sky waiting for a call.

Another drop slipped from the sky and she shot to her feet. The sun reached passed the clouds to warn her that it was still there, the aloes trembled briefly in disapproval, and the stream cringed quietly hoping that the reprimand did not come its way.

She looked around the cave with her brow furrowed and she pouted with more intention. She folded her arms and turned into the cave to sulk. The stream laughed and went on its way, every now and again splashing loudly to make sure she was okay.

There was nothing more to do but to crawl into her nest, home had spoken.

She stepped deeper into the cave and lay on her back staring into the darkness above her.

Her rocky roof echoed the sound of her sibling splashing outside. She wondered if the cows would come as she crossed her legs and folded her arms. No sooner had she wondered than she fell into the dark.

She startled at first, she always did, but then she floated for a moment and found her balance. She wriggled her body and felt herself stabilise. She locked her hands behind her head and crossed her legs at the ankles. She floated in the dark.

A star appeared on her white cotton dress making her sit up at attention. Something twinkled in the face of the dark in front of her.

Another star tinkled near her frayed hem. And then its twin in the dark, further from her this time.

Two stars, one close one far.

The stars disappeared. Perhaps a false alarm. She sighed disappointed.

They returned, but this time each with a partner a little ways beside it. Two more stars tinkled on her dress. Something moaned low and warm. The stars were moving ever so slightly, shimmering, and the one farthest from her pivoted, pulling the star at its side above it.

It pivoted back dropping the other star to its side again but then pivoted again, and again, faster and faster. Each time it pivoted more stars appeared until the darkness became littered with a constellation and her dress twinkled in applause. Her eyes were wide and her mouth open in a silent cheer.

The two stars stopped pivoting for a moment and floated quietly in the twinkling cluster.

She sat floating in the dark, her legs crossed, her back straight, and her hands over her open mouth while her eyes danced in the light, waiting for the show to go on.

The stars pivoted again only this time it was all of them. The sound of flapping ears filled the cave as she clapped her hands every now and again throwing them high above her hair in celebration.

The sound of flapping ears grew louder and louder until a face appeared around the first two stars. The long and wide face with a thousand freckles between its starry eyes stopped shaking once it had fully arrived. One by one each of them stopped when it had fully arrived until finally the cave was full of cows with eyes that twinkled with the light from her dress. As the horns on the first cow grew the sound of flapping ears had been replaced by groans and moans and huffs as the handsome cattle filled in. She swam between them, putting her forehead between each of their eyes. Smiling and giggling as they grunted and nuzzled and tickled her with their breath.

She reached the cow that appeared to her first. The other cattle folded their legs beneath them and lowered their heads as they floated. She put a hand on either side of the cow's face and then touched her forehead between its eyes:

She saw her mother.

Standing on the other side of a raging river.

A mature river, not like the baby at home.

Her mother had a little boy at her side.

He was tall but he was little, wearing a small white vet and blue underpants.

The waters raged and her mother waved for her to come closer.

She pulled away from the cow and looked at the host of cattle kneeled around her.

She looked back at her cow and touched it with her forehead again.

Her mother waved for her to come closer.

She climbed into the constellation between the cows eyes and tumbled onto a million loose stones sprawled all along this river bank. All the stones were round and soft and different sizes and shades of grey. She looked down at her own feet as they balanced and gripped the rocks as she went, and the water raged louder as she edged closer. She stopped when water began to appear in front of her. She looked up and across the river where her mother still stood with the boy.

Her mother waved her over once more but as she neared the water to get close to her mother, she heard cows moan, low and warm.

She shook her head.

She looked closely at the boy who had dry tear stains on his face.

She looked again at her mother but could not make out the details on her face.

Moans, low and warm.

Her mother spoke but the river was roaring so she could not hear what she was saying.

She pointed to the river and then to her ears. Her mother edged closer to the water, careful not to slip.

She let go of the boy's hand and cupped her hands around her mouth, shouting across the water, leaning as close as she could to the water to help her voice carry over. She grew more and more frustrated as she realised that she could not be heard. The little boy started crying.

She watched her mother throw her hands up in defeat.

She heard a moan grow from low and warm to loud and distressed.

She had to go back.

She tried to wave them over, but her mother and the boy could not get near the water.

Her mother was pacing and at the bank, frustrated and panicking.

The cows called again.

She had to go back.

She began to walk back to the constellation she had climbed from, looking back with each step to see if her mother and the boy had conceived of a way to come with her.

As she climbed over the lip of the constellation to return to the cave, she regarded them both once more.

The boy, clinging to his mother's hem, ran after her as she paced and stumbled trying to figure out how to cross the water.

She climbed into the cave, stood with her face still against the cow's and could not bring herself to open her eyes and look away from her mother and the boy. But she had to. As she did,

her mother grabbed the boy and threw him into the river.

Darkness fell.

The cows were gone.

The rain was pouring.

She sprang to her feet and ran to the mouth of the cave to look out into her home.

Standing in the stream, rubbing the rain from his eyes with futility, panting bewildered and wet, was the boy.

The rain stopped.



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

“Over-seen: Opacity, ugliness and the right to fantasy.”

An artistic reflection.

Introduction:

Bab'aba - Ugly Short Stories is a collection of vignettes whose function is to colour and collage three portraits of Black women characters; namely, a rural woman (Nozikhali), a township teenager (Zola), and a child/baby (Loli). Each of these stories serves as details in each other's portraits whilst remaining stories on their own. In his writings on opacity, Edouard Glissant points to the implicit oppression found in the demand for the oppressed to account and remain transparent as the presupposition of the supremacy of the gaze over the subject. For indeed to “give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures” (Glissant 1997, 190)²¹⁴ is to concede to a type of abstract equality and right to mystery that the Black and the feminine have been deprived of in storytelling. My intention with this collection was to restore some of that abstract equality and right to mystery by functioning within a lexicon of opacity. I must clarify, before going forward, that I am choosing opacity over transparency as a writing methodology on both technical and ideological levels, and though I will attempt to be as forthcoming as possible about the writing process, this essay will serve as more of an ideological lament on my epistemic position when constructing these stories as opposed to a reader's guide to the collection. I think it may also be of importance to disclaim that this project was not addressed to the academy, it just happened to have emerged while I was in the academy. And while my reading towards this degree ranged from Bell Hooks to V. Y. Mudimbe to Bessie Head to K. Sello Duiker, Edouard Glissant, Lewis Gordon, James Baldwin, Lewis Nkosi, Terrance Nance, Arthur Jafa, Fred Moten, Kendrick Lamar Duckworth and many more literary, political, and philosophical texts across mediums, I cannot say how these texts enter the creative writing itself because the writing was not an academic exercise for me. It has been a personal and artistic reflection and meditation. Which is to say, narcissistic as it may read, I have been the primary reading for this creative project. In the scholarship of decoloniality this

²¹⁴ Glissant's argument for opacity posits that the oppressed have the right to be opaque and not have to account for every action and inaction in their lives.

is my argument for the legitimacy of vernacular/customised definitions for problems that preoccupy communities/individuals rather than having to always pin ourselves to already existing theory in order to be legible. In the scholarship of opacity, this is a contribution to the argument against the necessity for legibility/transparency in exchange for dignity.

Ideological framework:

This writing project began with a type of meditation on the connections between ugliness and violence particularly in communities that I was raised in. Ugliness and beauty are such collaged concepts, ranging from the tangible to the intangible, across senses with a shapeshifting adaptability to time. However where beauty denotes purity, clarity, symmetry, and transparency, ugliness denotes impurity, obscurity, asymmetry, and opacity. I chose ugliness as my focus because I was quite confident that it would allow for a richer exploration into notions of marginality and an emancipatory praxis that cannot afford to have in its makeup the potential to seek to eliminate. And though such a liberatory ambition is hard to fantasize about against the backdrop of popular chauvinism in the contemporary landscape of - particularly - South Africa, and the visceral effects thereof and the swift justice needed to attend thereto, I do think that there is merit in hallucinating some sort of doctrine of humanity that ends in dignity for all.

These stories do not occur in a vacuum. The ontological reality that this meditation happens within is a network of post apartheid South African hush-politics of rainbow nation ideology, petty politics of particularity embedded in apartheid doctrines of separation, suppression and small difference, and their pompous colonial preceding philosophies of white supremacy, all kept vivacious by religious and patriarchal capillaries that are delicate enough to be carried quietly in the hearts of deity fearing citizens (whether that deity be a God, science or themselves is rarely of any consequence).

Admittedly, the project began with me positioned in a very naive and pedestrian understanding of ugliness and led to my becoming quite frustrated at not being able to identify why my language felt so limited as I wrote. But I came to understand that my own tendency to think of ugliness as an accusation pointed at an already existing precarious trait within the subject being accused – as opposed to a random cluster of manufactured traits that are superimposed onto whomever is unlucky enough to be up for elimination – had made me a violence unto myself, which made me a violence unto the characters I sought to write.

Because essentially, what I was always and already conceding was that there was such a thing as an indisputable undesirable, that there was such a thing as plain old ugly. By nominating to write a meditation on ugliness and violence and quietly conceding to the possibility of the ‘objectively ugly’ I was flattening my palate and potentially assisting to stall a movement away from the two dimensional storytelling ideologies that have seen so many of us rubbed from the tapestry of our history because we were just plain old ugly.

However, pessimism would not allow me to rely on beauty instead. Popular discourse around beauty and its association to purity and exclusivity has left me somewhat cynical and so I still find myself more convinced of the empathetic potential of ugliness because its associations are opaque rather than pure. I find the case for ugliness more compelling because of what it requires one to do, which in my case, meant to confess to an ideological alignment to supremacy that I had taken for granted: An iteration of supremacy that left me assuming, no matter how abstractly, that there was such a thing as people who deserved to be thrown away, while insisting that *I* could never deserve to be thrown away. It is a trap of supremacy that keeps one open to the inevitability of atrocity by presenting domination as a necessity for safety and calm. It is a trap that I am not interested in being caught in.

This project has given me a new place to imagine liberation from and a new place to imagine liberation for. A more complicated place that does not already know the answers because it does not assume to know the problem. In light of my shift in position I attempted to make narrative vignettes of characters who are under constant threat of being thrown away. I have done my best to *not* make a case for or against them in the hopes that simply seeing them alive, on a good day or a bad day, will be enough to remind us all that people *cannot* be thrown away.

Narrative Structure: Form

In writing this narrative collection it was important that I set technical objectives that could help me to discern whether I was still writing what I had meant to write whilst ensuring that I was writing as freely as possible. Technically speaking, I hope to have created a narrative collage using pictures I have found in memories, shared stories, urban legends, photo albums, teenage mis-educations and ever elusive facts alike. The notion of vignettes is appealing because of the suspended potential of the moments presented in candid pictures and the manner in which the concealing of the before and after invite the viewer to imagine with the *characters* as opposed to being disciplined by a plot. A picture is a depiction, but a good

picture is an introduction; to a character, to a world, to a way of life. My aim was to emulate the visual storytelling methodologies of photographic portraiture and candid photography and use those intuitions to paint vivid images – *where* on a plotline I have chosen to point the frame is based on which characters I wanted to introduce. But rather than having these vignettes scattered across multiple unrelated characters, I opted for a type of photo album approach where characters can resurface in varying iterations of themselves depending on the positioning of other characters in the scene. The Nokuzola/Zola paradigm is an example of how a change in environment can not only make you look at a character differently in their new context but also invite you to look at them more closely in their previous context.

My spacing was an experiment in pacing, which was an important thing to try to manipulate especially in light of the geographical movements and shifts in landscape, as well as the subtle changes in tempo that had to do with the discrepancy of pace in Joza versus the village. The spacing of dialogue and who speaks how often also has to do with the geography and tampering with temperament, I suppose, but by and large, the rhythmic elements of the writing were scored to the sound of the people.

Narrative structure: Themes/storytelling methodology

So who did I take these pictures of? The simple answer is mothers, daughters and babies. The fancy answer is past, present, and future. The ambitious answer is fact, fiction and fantasy. I used a cyclical thematic model by naming the stories after each other, namely: Umthandazo (prayer), Inimba (nurturing), Iyeza (medicine), and Ubuthongo (sleep). All of these themes fall within the field of healing practice and each chapter is intended to be a type of lingering on the textures of each of healing, such as healing under duress, cause without healing, and the performance of healing where it has had to be suspended.

Nurturing, vulgarity, and the impossible history of fact:

The epistemic question of colonial languages and the politics around their use in the thinking about and writing of African stories is a question as old as colonialism itself. The discussions around the subject in the field of literature on the continent are rigorous and ongoing and have been for some decades, with important voices such as Achebe and Wa Thiong'o at the table. Indeed, the subject of epistemic dominance cannot be approached glibly when colonial

epistemes such as Englishness, manifest themselves as doubt and a doubt premised on an assumed authority at that. That is to say, as a Black South African woman who grew up in the Eastern Cape, each time I tell a story and am required to find an English equivalent of that experience to piggy-back my own off of, historically speaking, the threat is that should I fail to find an English equivalent to my experience, it will not be registered as credible and legitimate and will instead be banished from the dominant discourse. This, of course, is in keeping with colonial trends of elimination and the racialising, gendering, and commodifying of the mere possibility to participate in and be represented by that dominant discourse, and even then, believability and legitimacy not being guaranteed. It is a serious subject. Serious enough that language has been loaded with silence for the post-colonial thinker in these busy streets of white supremacy. But silence cannot be an option when there is an ever expanding lexicon of supremacy to unravel. And so I would like to insist on the credibility of the vernacular, the common, and the vulgar as a lexicon of liberation. The question of opacity, to think with Glissant, then becomes an important ideological anchor in this project because opacity as a praxis is more suited to engage the vernacular, the common, and the vulgar without problematizing these concepts before they even get to tell the first story.

So what is a vernacular candor around subjects such as mental health, sexuality, intimacy, womanhood and opacity, for example? What does mental illness look like in our community? How does trauma show itself? These are not new things. Sexuality is not a new concept. How have we been talking about these things? How have our grandparents been talking about them? The lexicon of supremacy frames many candid conversations around these subjects as vulgar and tasteless opting rather towards a gradation of euphemisms that tumble towards silence, and I suppose it is understandable that the machinery which perverted these subjects would preemptively reject those conversations to avoid accountability. But it is important to remember that in the traditional framework of ‘othering’, the ‘*other*’ is always and already vulgar, and so any vernacular candor or ‘language of the other’ purporting to discuss itself in terms of subjects such as mental health, sexuality, womanhood, intimacy, and opacity would be read as doubling down on vulgarity. But since the supremacist premise of ‘*always-and-already*’-ness is fundamentally brutal, and its brutality is not a position with which I want to imagine liberation, I meet the insistence on the impossibility of constructive vernacular candor with the same scepticism that I meet all such dehumanising sentiments.

“isi-Xhosa si krwada” is a common phrase in my language that translates to “isi-Xhosa is vulgar”, but it is also a perfect analogy for the damning consequences that a lexicon of

supremacy can have on a vernacular when said vernacular is assumed not to have any cultural importance or epistemic position. To fully understand the meaning of the phrase and the implications of supremacy perverting this phrase, one does have to read the phrase twice: once, with opacity, away from the assumption of vulgarity as violence and rather as a cultural invitation, that notifies the speaker that they are entering into a linguistic culture that abandons euphemism; and then a second time, but this time with a lens that warns of vulgarity as a threat to safety, suggesting that we opt for a more subtle means of expression. The snag here is the resurfacing of a random cluster of manufactured traits that are superimposed onto whomever is unlucky enough to be up for elimination, because the latter reading of that phrase has nothing to do with the phrase at all: it is simply a reading of its own scepticism of the vernacular and the speakers of it. So when speaking of things that are associated with the abstract within the popular discourse, the vernacular is rejected wholesale as a credible and helpful epistemic framework based on who is speaking it, and the experiences of those who speak it are rejected as important contributions that could aid toward a better understanding of urgent social ills that we are failing to remedy.

I have tried to take candid pictures of all the nuanced surfacing of the things that dominant discourses said that we could not feel. Agony and disappointment, anxiety and melancholy, mischief and romance, all of these things in the quickest flashes in the smallest moments in a bigger frame. In the collection I have attempted to present an argument for opacity by allowing the characters to live, love, heal as vulgarly as they each see fit.

Daughters of now and questions of fiction:

The unspoken is a recurring tableau in the project. The characters suffer at each turn in their narratives as a consequence of not having the liberty to ask nor honestly answer the question “What happened?”

Erasure does not only present in the form of atrophying empathy around subjects by tucking us out of sight, effectively removing us from the public imagination, but also by repetitive presentations of archetypes that cherry-pick existing commonalities in our communities that are deemed favourable to the dominant narrative surrounding us, thus making us at once familiar and forgettable. This recurrent insistence on our monolithism locks us – both individually and collectively – into a hyper/hypo visible loop that sees us submit ourselves to the anonymity of that monolith but also lowers our tolerance for deviations from it revealing that we have, in many instances, become proxies to our overseers and have thus conceded to

being overseen. Lewis Gordon writes, in his essay *African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason*,²¹⁵ “literary examples of black existential thought can be found in the writings of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, both of whom explored problems of black invisibility as a function of hypervisibility” (Gordon 2006, 16).

u-Lahmsi and u-Zola are my portraits of the hyper/hypo-visible paradigm, folding together abandonment and parasitic kinship with solitude and constant observation. They are watched by neighbours but are not really considered and so I tried for a type of dismembering writing approach that gave a sense of the type of fragmenting that happens when a gaze is permanently set on you and then another and then another. Lights going on and off, cracked open doors, grids of light from above, rumours, these are some of the subtleties that may seem quite regular but “ilokishi was a place that could take everyday things and make them insulting” (Nxadi 2018, 66).

The busyness of being black is business indeed and boy has it been a long bumpy road to the privatisation of humanity. The cost of fantasy is high, but what they do not tell you at the time of purchase is that you will need something called privacy to keep the fantasy working. Privacy, however, is something interfered with, undermined, and denied in our communities. That is the unfortunate result of being over-seen. Of being seen so much with such emphasised contrast that we elicit critique of the manner in which we manage what little privacy we *do* have, critique of what we emerge as from our stolen moments of privacy, critique of the sting of alcohol on our breathe or boastful, impulsive purchases piled in up in our arms, critique of our selfies, critique of our self-medication and sedation, critique of our laughing to avoid crying, critique without irony, gaze without interruption. Without self-awareness.

The idea of being singled out for being a deviation sets the stage for some form of explanation, testimony, account, and essentially, apology. And because the apparatus of surveillance in the township is as dependent on the citizens as it is on itself, what we find is a group of watched people watching each other. But I did not want there to be a tone of apology in u-Lahmsi’s house. I preferred for the house to be an ever open wormhole to self actualisation, presenting again and again the opportunity to enter, erase, and be reborn. u-Lahmsi’s house is a type of inefficient dream making machine that takes just as quickly as it gives, a kind of microcosm for ilokishi and the quiet violence of dreams – a timeless phrase by K. Sello Duiker that still optimises the reality of the Black South African today.

²¹⁵ A chapter that appears in *Not Only the Master’s Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, co written with Jane Anna Gordon.

u-Lahmsi and u-Zola never fill each other in or their histories and traumas and past sins, rather, what we find is two women who take each other as they are. And though this presents itself at first as a type of opacity, it quickly becomes dangerous when granting opacity or ‘minding one’s business’ becomes indistinguishable from ignoring an ongoing cry as represented in this passage:

Meanwhile everyone grew so accustomed to the sound of u-My-Zuzu’s crying and learned to ignore that boy’s voice so efficiently that nobody really noticed that he was not speaking. It was easy to ignore u-Lahmsi too, her constant hustling and running from bizarre plan to high risk relationship had drained every neighbour of their patience. Her loud house parties where random men braaied in the yard while her Technics six CD changing Hi-Fi thumped against the windows to make them shake and the inevitable drunken shouting that followed were all just reasons for her neighbours to regard u-Lahmsi’s house as a landfill. And they were ready and willing to ignore a landfill as well as the trash that occupied it as long as the filth from their own yards could run through it discreetly. (Nxadi 2018, 41-42)

There is a common saying “uku qhela kakubi” whose translation can be found across many South African indigenous languages but is starkly absent in English. The phrase is a request for opacity, but at the same time it cannot be understood so simply. For indeed the speaker who invokes this phrase is not referring to any type of hierarchy, but is rather calling out a difference in philosophy. That is to say “do not assume to know me based on the traits you have assigned me” but also “do not assume to know me based on the traits that I display”. In essence the phrase means to debunk the idea of ‘knowledge’ or ‘mastery’ and seeks to remind both speaker and listener of the performativity of being. But rather than understanding this phrase to be a slogan of anti-knowledge, we should understand it for its actual purpose which is to be pro-knowledge seeking. The call to abandon the concept of certainty is a call to listen. The phrase is one that is difficult to explain because it is such a common epistemic philosophy in the vernacular that it has never really had to be explained outside of the vernacular. I cannot help but read the difficulty to explain this very commonly used and widely held philosophical standpoint as a testament to the disinterest that the dominant discourse has in the vernacular. However, this is the phrase that underpins u-Zola’s Act

because to approach any of these characters with certainty is to erase them, and each one of these characters resists that erasure at every turn.

As stated, I would like to insist on opacity (as opposed to transparency) as my preferred narrative ambition. However, I cannot do that without acknowledging first how indistinguishable silencing and erasure can be from practices of opacity. That is to say, in a system of habitual practices of race, class and gender specific silencing, I cannot take for granted that those may appear dressed as opacity whilst continuing to shrink the lives harmed by those silencing practices. I cannot take this for granted because (contradictory as it may come across) as a general society building model, our communities deserve to know - our children deserve to know - we deserve to know “What happened?” We deserve to ask what happened. We deserve to share what happened and we deserve to do so without our words and our experiences being taken as evidence in an ever pending case for our humanity. We deserve an opacity that comes from empathic intuition. That is to say, a narrative practice that imagines that it cannot begin to imagine the intricacies of the makings of the subject that stands before it, but asks, and listens and shares as a matter of concern towards the survival of that subject whilst understanding - at the very least - that its own survival is there intertwined. We deserve to be believed: “u-Lahmsi only saw what she needed when she looked at u-Zola. She saw a child when it suited her and an adult when it was convenient. She treated her like a sibling - and they *were* siblings, bastard children of an absent and erratic time” (47). Lahmsi and Zola’s relationship is an opportunity for us to imagine how much better things could be if everyone felt a little bit safer, but it is also a reminder of how dire things can get when nobody feels safe.

Infancy, Future and the Right to Fantasy

A single question recurred as I interrogated myself during this writing process. Who am I writing to? Who is this audience? What does she want? Oh. Okay. She? A girl? A young girl. Is she me? What is she doing in the future? Why is young me in the future reading present me grapple with history? Or is she reading me grapple with my contemporary? Either way, it is *her* history. Or is it? Since this is a collection of fictitious events, *is* this her history, is she fantasy? Am I fantasy? Are we fantasy? And if so, is there a violence more profound than to deny us access to ourselves?

I called the girl Lolwethu Oluthando. This is our love. A nebulous thing. A thing born of love and silence and mistakes and violence and stubborn, insolent hope. A contested thing. An expose. A monument. An inconvenience. A final straw. A thing squeezed from its host. A thing made wholly spirit. A vignette of melanated perfection suffocated by expectation and snubbed from existence before she even knows what she is born into. She and all the other children in the collection are spiritual works and I cannot say much more about them since they are of the sky.

Conclusion

This collection has come as a meditation towards an epistemic call to arms, one that asks that we turn to wonder, one that scatters singularity, in defense of opacity. The snag, however, in living in such close quarters with one's overseer, the thing about sharing your privacy – the thing about being among the last to escape – is that there is an intimacy there that will not be denied. A moment of doubt just as the blade touches the soft flesh of the parts of our community whose only function is to concede to being overseen. To being looked at and weighed. To being tangible. Consumable. This most vulnerable moment, this most human moment, potent enough to postpone the corrective measures necessary to match our communities with our ambitions is to be expected. I would like to communicate to whomever encounters these words that this moment is to be expected. And when I have faced that moment of doubt, I have committed to conjuring uLolwethu Oluthando. To conjuring as much fantasy, magic, and mystery as I can maintain with the little privacy I am able to muster, and imagine for a moment that I am qualified. That I am qualified beyond the competence of supremacy to fantasise my own reality.

Bibliography:

Baldwin, James. *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. New York: Random House, 1953. Print.

Cobb, Martha K. "Ortiz, Glissant, and Ellison: Fictional Patterns in Black Literature." *Afro-Hispanic Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1/2, Special Anniversary Issue: A 20-Year Retrospective (Spring-Fall) 2002, pp. 179-184. Print.

Duiker, K. Sello. *Thirteen Cents*. Cape Town: Kwela, 2000. Print.

..... *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. Cape Town: Kwela, 2001. Print.

Ellison, Ralph. *The Invisible Man*. New York: Random House, 1952. Print.

Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997. Print.

Gordon, Lewis R., and Jane Anna Gordon. *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*. Boulder: Paradigm, 2006. Print.

Head, Bessie. *A Question of Power*. London: Heinemann, 1973. Print.

Hutcheson, Francis. "An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue; in Two Treatises: I. Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design; II. Concerning Moral Good and Evil (3rd Ed. Corrected)" (1729). Print.

Mda, Zakes. *Ways of Dying*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 1995. Print.

..... *The Heart of Redness*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002. Print.

Mhlophe, Gcina. *Stories of Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2003. Print.

Morris, Rosalind C., and Gayatri Chakravorty. Spivak. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

Ndebele, Njabulo S. *Fools and Other Stories*. New York: Readers International, 1986. Print.

Nxadi, Julie. *Bab'aba: Ugly Short Stories*. Master's thesis. University of the Western Cape: English Department, 2018. Print.

Sekula, Allan. *The Body and the Archive: The Use and Classification of Portrait Photography by the Police and Social Scientists in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries*. Cambridge, MA: Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, 1986. Print.

Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ Wa. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: J. Currey, 1993. Print.





UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE