

Happiness is Somebody's Name

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Abstract

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Topic: Short story collection

This collection of loosely interlinked short stories is a “book of imaginary beings”. It draws its influence from amaXhosa history, religion and mythology. Written in a fluid blend of isiXhosa and English, the stories make use of innovative forms and an inventive, pared-down language to create new and strange perspectives on our past, present and future. Ranging in length from brief mini-sagas to longer vignettes, the collection touches on such diverse subjects as the lore and superstitions surrounding the mythical being of tokoloshe, sorcery in the black community, and other fantastical elements of amaXhosa folklore.

Literary influences include the Syrian writer Osama Olamar, whose writing about inanimate and everyday objects is both interesting and rare; Amos Tutuola, whose appropriation of Yoruba mythology I have learned much from; the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar who has the facility to articulate the fantastical in a straightforward narrative; and Taban Lo Liyong, the Ugandan writer, whose fabulist work has served as stimulus for many of these stories.

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**A LONG STORY SHORT, or:
HOW I CAME TO BELONG TO A MILITIA OF BABY OCTOPUSES AND OTHER
WARRIORS IN A STRUGGLE TO RESCUE FINETOWN FROM MY OWN
FATHER**

I did not know I could paralyze a man with my saliva until I was in my twenties, not long after Mother disappeared one morning, my dead sister in a sports bag she carried on her head as she would a pail of water from the communal tap. At sundown she came home, to say business had been joyful, how the commuters at the taxi rank asked to lick the bowls after sipping on her wild onion and warthog liver soup. When she went missing again, I did not see her for some years before she returned, stealing in through the window one night when it was moonlit-dark outside, Mother tiptoeing to my bedroom door whenever Father wandered about the kitchen in a foul mood, raiding the cupboard drawers rubbish bin pot plants breadbasket salt-sugar-spice containers for his tobacco, all the while grumbling, *I swallow my food first! and read my Bible after! to taste life twice! now! and in my sleep!*

A GOOD SONG MUST BE SUNG AGAIN

Before the great depression, before Finetown became what it is today, before it was normal for us to sit in our living rooms at night with the TV on mute so we could always hear who was opening the gate before a knock on the door, before our fathers slept with our mothers with revolvers in their hands, before babies too young to crawl around the floor on their own were kept under the kitchen table all day, since no stray bullet would think to comb there first, there was the top end of a street with no name, though everyone who grew up there later remembered eNdlovini before the shacks were clouted into lumps of dirt and the old rain puddles that used to be in between dried up to be known by other nightmares: eNdaweni became brick houses then, became antennas on the roof, Saturday mornings of endless House music, school laundry on the sagging clothesline, “Beware: the dog bites” where post boxes should have been, to each surname a peculiar disgrace, became razor wire- and beer bottles-lined brick fences – bottles broken in half and injected on a bed of wet cement bottle-mouth first, leaving the jaggedly half facing up, a salient hey wena to all the grootmans we knew to promote their menace like door-to-door salesmen.

At the time, I was convinced dogs must get Aids too, since no street stayed respectable with an infected neighbour; whenever one got sick it was hung on the fence and at night I would hear those not yet dead bark anytime a car drove by on the street, feeble woof-woofs that sounded more like complaints at the unfairness of how they were approaching the grave than a threat of violence. Not knowing it was to accelerate their dying, from a contagious case of something serious, as rabies.

I had lived eNdaweni with my parents up to the afternoon Father came to my bedroom while I was rinsing from a vaskom beside the floor mattress and found the door locked. Walking away, I heard him complain to Mother, “Ndiyabona izinto zitshintshile Noparty, liyamsind’ ijwabu lakhe unyana ‘akho.”

On the weekend I was received as ikrwala, Grandmother came and left with me for kwaNtu, but even then, after all that absenteeism, returning to inhale Finetown air with a guilty insight, I was always home eNdaweni as home is always home.

THE UNBLINKING STARE

I had been returning from the spaza shop in Mondale Street, eggs in one hand, and when I got to the BP by the corner I felt a sharp tap on my left shoulder and before I had turned around a voice said *I have a naughty bum with me if you like to play*, and as I looked behind me, of course, now, with something resembling a phind’ uthethe look breaking across my face, melting away whatever thoughts I may have been humouring on the subject of breakfast, I saw this outie, eyes more enthused than mine, scrutinizing me the way you would say a housefly perched on the tip of your nose is eyeballing you, glaring not at my face but down there, where I usually keep my wallet, and I, in turn, was busy fixing my eyes on the doek tied around his head, those bushy sideburns bracketing his cheeks, and of course I was about to speak when the voice came, again, saying *So what do you have to say uthini?*, and before I knew it I found myself eyeing the cut, frills and freshly-ironed cleanliness of his makoti garb, the way the outie’s arms hung beside his hips, a knobkerrie in one hand as though he was a majorette readying himself for a twirl-and-march routine, and I got to thinking how, had he been a portrait cropped from the ankles to above the stomach, I would have never thought to jeer at him by way of a silly request for particulars, me asking, *Stop there mjita, are you intombi or what?*, that it would not have happened like how it actually happened, not the way I was stuck on his swollen chest, speculating on whether there was a bra there and underneath it something balled up so the bra is made to look as if it was cupping the kind of breasts we Finetowners call speed bumps, for slowing your tonguing on your way to a cherry’s downstairs, or else something equally supernatural, and there was still that voice, saying now *Soon as the sun runs to hide behind the clouds ke, don’t lock the door*, and the outie took one step towards me, then another, then another, picking up pace with each, and as soon as he’d taken the first second third he was a gust of wind striding past me as if I wasn’t there, and I found myself turning around, as you would do too, not to gauge the safety of the street-crossing, as was my trend on Finetown’s unreliable pavements, or to see if the pedestrian robot light was still red, which it was, but to look at the outie some more, and the voice in my head was saying *Oh I can use the window uyabo?*, and before I knew it the outie walked right into the onrushing traffic and this phela had to break into a screeching halt the moment just before the bumper said hello to his sheens, or else the hand of Qamatha, our 24/7 hardworking sinyanya in the skies, would have had to stab through the clouds, the outie raising his own matchstick arms to grab Qamatha’s pinkie finger at the fateful instant, the outie climbing onto the calloused palm of Qamatha with

obvious struggle, and I could just imagine him being pulled up beyond the clouds, novice-makoti he was on Qamatha's hand, the outie lifted up and up and up until he disappeared from my normal eyes, (*We must talk*) and there was heckling all over the place, scathing hysterical flabbergasted talk, behind me, before me, sideways, in my head, far from eyesight, talk seeping through the smells of the pavement stalls and the flamboyant music issuing from the grocers run by oomy friend, Quantums, amaphela, Ventures, bakkies hooting uncontrollably now, a clattered, Auto Tune mixtape that can only be found in Mondale and always languishing deep within the tunnels of my eardrums, the outie being called every other dread, but ah, as in any engrossing daydream, he didn't seem fazed in the slightest, the hem of his makoti dress dragging on the ground as he trod bare feet and crossed the road, farther and farther and farther from me, hands still hung to the hips, knobkerrie safe in a grip, doek unruffled, bum jelly-jiggly through the cloth like he was maybe wearing a G-string, and the voice spoke to me, spoke again, again a reminder, a reminder saying *Remember to switch on the heater*, but then it happened that I felt the unmistakable tap on my shoulder and, as before, I turned around to look behind me, (*You should know I am not used to the cold*) but all my eyes picked on was a young girl with bandages wrapped around her knees, both feet caked in mud, her baby sundress the peel of rotting carrots in colour, torn in several places at the chest to reveal a bruised, discoloured cleavage, one shoulder strap down by the elbow and the other tied into a knot that drooped onto her collarbone, so that she appeared like someone who had dressed themselves with terrible purpose, (*I have a story to tell you*) and that is when my understanding flew indulgent, once my eyes feasted on her bandaged knees, her lips that could have been smeared with real blood melting in the midday heat, her dishevelled hairdo that could have been three wigs straining to fart, her chain of broken birds' bones, rung around her gaunt neck as if a medal, and I saw how she was one of those children (*I can't handle the cold yazi*) who never grow beyond a certain age, and you could see the weight of the day's problems in her eyes, the way she was craving to say something to me (like *Voesteka maan or do something, anything, or Move on wethu*) and until now I am not certain if it was her speaking or the voice in my head or I was imagining her speaking these words or was it me putting these words in her mouth, inventing them with my uvula, thinking maybe speaking these words to her, or the voice getting the better of me (*Move on, I say*), and that's when the young woman-girl took a step towards me, sizing me up all the time (*Hamba maan*), and she took another and another and before I had grown to enjoy the look of her she was a deteriorating affair, and of course I turned around to follow her footsteps, traffic at a standstill now, the robots staunch in their no-no redness, and observing the crowds push their way across the street I thought of how whole societies engage in this quotidian trek, like all I wanted to ask was, exactly, what is wrong with this world, each to her own Sinai prison, a means to delay the ethnic cleansing of boredom and hunger, surviving in a tamed wasteland and gagging on the agony of all the molested whose grief is buried somewhere unreachable in the sky, and that is when I realized the heavens were clad in a different temper now, and the way the sun shone through the clouds it was like Qamatha had covered the sky with a blanket riddled with cigarette holes and all the young men of Finetown who died horny and were buried with their erections were poking torchlights through the blanket so that the rays beamed onto the earth like a scene from some disco-ball lights you probably recall catching sight of in a B-movie or a sci-fi thriller, at its most orthodox, people being sucked into spaceships hovering above skyscrapers to the accompaniment of eerie music,

echoes of unending wailing and wailing in the background, overdressed children on the screen, with saliva-covered lollipops in their fists, under-the-arms toys dropped on the tarmac, dumbfounded by the fake Armageddon but not too worried either, the grownups, who should know better, the worst off, screaming too much, pandemonium screams, feeble screams, scum, mouth-filling screams, jubilant screams that can only come from the humiliation of all the school bullies you knew as a child (*Loving me is a dirty job*, the voice interrupted), and that is when I came to and my mind returned to what only my eye could tolerate, all the tooting on the street, not a moment to relax and pretend to delight as only Finetown can, the sun painting the air a pale, milky glow, and in all this turning my head this way here and that way there and that way that and this way this my eyes touched all points of the compass so that in the corner of my eye I glanced at a band of long-tailed red doves with arrows in their beaks, soaring over Mondale to the accompaniment of qaraami music from some spaza behind me, the way smoke would exhale itself out of a burning house and you knew just by the acrid whiff of it before you saw it with your own eyes, the way you can ejaculate without touching a still-dressed girl anywhere, and then another thing happened, a goat mehehed behind me, which is to say I turned around, for what reason its bleat stood out to me now cannot be validated (*I am your best-best friend and yet you do not recognize me, why?*), and I saw how the goat was quite old, how a black rope had been coiled around its white neck, how the rope rose from its neck towards the sky, how the rope rose and rose and rose until I could see that it was tied to a black balloon shaped into a fuck you hand gesture, how the fuck you balloon was hovering in the sky with hardly any swaying, as if it had water instead of air inside, and that's when the voice came over me, came over me and for once I was overwhelmed, I and it on conversant ground, and the voice shook me 'til I could do nothing but get down on my knees, until I could not help myself but vomit all the words I knew to constitute a prayer. It was not a lie that overstayed its welcome.

I crossed the street, then three others before jumping over a fence; I ran across a field of old graves with some lazy-eyed grazing cattle around them, and jumped through one, two, three, and then there was the fourth open dumpsite, before I reached my father's three-room; I unloaded the eggs on the table, set the paraffin stove breathing flame and uncovered a salad bowl of sour, day-old dough, which, once balled by the hand, I dunked into a pot of boiling cooking oil for amagwinya.

Father staggering out of the bedroom in his Orlando Pirates shorts, not bothering to cover his hairy, cut-riddled stomach with the blood-drenched, soiled bedsheet that was his only blanket now.

Father trundling the steel pole that held his two hospital drips by hand as though it was a broom to sweep the floor with.

Father standing by the sink, hesitating in his gait, as if he'd forgotten something important in the bedroom and was considering turning back to fetch it.

Father quieting his breathing.

Father refilling one drip with a cup of milk with grains of salt in it.

Father refilling the other with a whole nip of vodka.

Father coming to join me where I was by the window, taking a seat opposite me.

Father and I having our first meal for the day.

Father keeping his head down throughout our chewing.

Father not talking to me since the previous night with the ambulancemen.

Father coughing and spitting blood onto his scrambled eggs and lifting spoonfuls of this to his lips without bothering to separate the clean from the stained.

In my bedroom. The nap I took was, in its brief joyride of hallucinations, a girl welcoming me with her legs already wide open: my lips smack-caressing the pillow, gossiping in my dreams: lying on my back, inhaling the scent of her panties: that kind of fairylike.

If only you locked the world out of you, you could smell me near just fine! I was in a sweat when I stumbled awake and did not bother to respond to the voice – not to say I didn't try, as though having the ears to hear the voice muted my own, even in my head, since I had no way of speaking out loud myself, anyway.

The voice spoke again, saying, *I am your best-best friend, bow down you fool!* and of course I lay there in my bed, being esona simuncu, thinking *My my, how dodo can I be? I go for eggs and, and before I know it I've ...* the voice saying, *Hey wena, be quick! I'm not waiting forever.*

I heard a knock. Soft, persistent, like I was always forgetting to close on the bathroom tap properly. When I got up to have a look there was no one, even when I opened the window and peeked out, thinking maybe Mother was at it again.

It is only after I have turned around and I am about to fling myself onto the bed that a shadow hovers over me, and I think to look up, but still I see nothing out of the ordinary.

And the voice says, *I am here.* Except it no longer comes from my head.

Steps in surreptitiously through the window. One thin cracked heel separating the lace curtain as if a gentle breeze blowing, scrapes against the plastic tile-floor. Head wrap, flowing nightgown, covering the legs to her feet. Gold tooth in the mouth, glinting in the fragile, late afternoon sun.

We both sit down. On the bed is me. She kneels beside my feet, Muslim prayer style.

We could be under the blankets right now, but tomorrow needs you more with your best eye.

When I make a move to rise, remembering the entreaties on Mondale, the voice's invasive nature, about the heater, closing the window, but I only have to... *No, no, not now*— before she says, *You will be greeting my siblings soon.*

The baby octopuses float in through the window squealing like annoying toys, like some kind of stuffed pineapples that respond to horizontal gravity, gliding like the animals of the deep sea they are. One by one and all of them in, in and in, in and in, until the army of them unfurl their tentacles and drift up to cling on the ceiling.

A moment of silence slows my thoughts down, the whole ball of mdudla in sluggish motion.

She slowly unwinds her head wrap and after she is done her dreadlocks begin to come alive, tentacles of terror awakened.

I watch as her octopus head dislodges from her neck, floats up to the roof, Sista Octopus and her howling siblings.

We are all here, she says, and the baby octopuses squeal some more, possessed one sauntering second to the next, louder and louder with each lungful.

Sista Octopus' head, all its nimble limbs outstretched like wings, floats down to where I am sitting on the bed, to lie on my lap eyes closed, as if forever.

WHAT THE WORLD DOES TO YOU

How was my relationship with Father then?

- A. Mother and Father were effectively divorced, and Father blamed me?
- B. I was the one who gave Father those nasty cuts to his stomach?
- C. Father had ransacked my room and burned all of Grandmother's books and deserved my lunge with the breadknife at him?
- D. The voice in my head had something to do with it?

MOVING VILLAGES

It happened when I went to be circumcised in the hills by the highway before you enter Finetown, and the only reason was Grandmother thought I was in need of a real friend, now that Father was without Mother. Only Inganathisonke was more knowing than that.

I had never met her in person, and I knew better than to refuse Grandmother, at least to her face.

There was only a phone number, Grandmother saying nothing else, beyond, *You are a child to ask me for the sun.*

We talked on the phone for what now seems like all the time, even if today a minute, tomorrow silence, the day after a whole afternoon, three or four days in a row, all day, Inganathisonke bye-byeing me, always, *I prefer to go to sleep knowing you would like to laugh but your voice won't allow you, Sofanguwe.*

REMEMBERING HERE

It was not always as contaminated, the nature of the resentments that sprouted between Father and me as is the fog of confusion that is Finetown:

1980 I am born on a midnight when all the lamps in Father's shack refuse to catch the flame of his lighter and so Father ends up collecting wood out in the yard and sets an iridescent brazier down at the centre of the shack floor, smothering us all to near death.

Mother says, *It cannot be the ugliness,* coughing.

Father has a change of heart, *Maybe this way we lose him with enough love to feed on for the both of us.*

1984 Mother tells me the episode in all my born-days and when I turn four Father justifies them both: *That is all the education you have needed for now.* He shoves a battered volume of the King James Version at me, the cover draped in gift wrap, verses upon verses underlined in black pen and indecipherable doodles on the margins. *I have all the songs you need son, but first learn these saws so you know what I'm raising you for.*

1985 Mother tells me to abandon Khayaletu, the first name she and Father had given me, but recites a replacement to Father and me in a voice meant to communicate despair but reaches my ears as jesting, which is why I clap my hands and open my mouth as if hollering Mother's name at the top of my voice after Mother is done singing, but Father doesn't.

You will order my killing wena, Mother says with a hint of remorse.

Ag sies torho, this one? Father says. *Mice I cannot even trust with a bird's trap.*

1986 An old woman visits us one night and she asks to see the new member in Father's house. Father and Mother point at me with their eyes.

The old woman turns her face towards me.

Says, *You have a mother of age more eagle-eyed than who you know.*

Well Mother, Father says, *our debt is only with the others, remember.*

Grandmother says, *Send him to school first.*

Father says, *I even bought a cow for the boy and I wash him with its pee all the time to do away with the ticks that eat into his ribs.*

Grandmother says, *Fight them both,* pointing at Mother and Father, *if their words clog the blood vessels to your heart* and plants a wet kiss on my forehead.

1987 Mother and Father build a plank shack on the dull end of our street and Father supplies my name. Sofanguwe Teashop can only be traced through a scrapyard where they take only bicycles, potjies and tableware. I go there every day after school, since no one is at home. The special dish is a soup of my fingertips suffocated in shrunken pesika leaves. Father says, *We will cook it only when white people whose ancestors have African blood on their hands order it.*

Mother thinks something about the promotion aided the ruin of Sofanguwe Teashop when it closes three weeks later.

1992 Mother gives birth to my brother Thathanazindoda and on the night of the day my brother is born Father mutters under his breath, *This one can't be the killer Noparty, he is not a girl!* so Grandmother walks all the way from kwaNtu and soon as she arrives she heaves herself out the door, delightedly speechless, Thathanazindoda on her back, not even a word of goodbye.

1993 My sister is born on the longest day of the year, but I keep overlooking her real name and each day when it's lunchtime she howls in pain, but Mother only hums to herself, *It might be we have a visitor coming.* Father pulls me by the collar and drags me to the backyard to chide me under the ngwenye tree, *She loves to suck your nipples and you know how I want your mother's assassin to be treated well, so don't pretend you don't know what to do, son.* When Grandmother visits, Grandmother and Father argue all night and the pots with our supper hiss and steam until the vapour escapes through the hole-riddled zinc sheets of our roof, until the food is damp from the night air and frustration in my eyes, until Mother and I go to sleep with grumbling stomachs, until Mother and I wake up in the morning to find Grandmother and Father still arguing, until Grandmother gets to flee with my sister.

1997 On his born-day, Grandmother visits from the villages and leaves the same day with my brother before he is even named. But for once Mother gets to own a new t-shirt and Father a new overall, but to me Grandmother offers a tall mirror and a heavy trunk of newspaper cuttings to read.

Grandmother says, *You cannot trust your beauty to blind eyes.*

Mother and Father make it customary to stop and stand in front of my mirror before they leave the shack, and in that way I get to burn their looks into my head: the overalls Father rolls down at the waist so that he goes everywhere half-naked, exposing his humpback; Mother never runs out of green nail polish, is missing one of her smallest toes because of some ritual that happened long before I was able to pee on my own.

Mother says, *We are being good examples to you, which is all.*

1999 Some morning in the winter Father disappears and for weeks we do not hear from him. Mother is not too worried and I see no reason how to do anything, but one night Father walks through the door and tells the women he has brought with him to gather Mother and me in the courtyard, and in that way introduces me to the aunts – *These are educated people, son, you must learn whatever you can from them* – and all the women hiccup into their fists, as though it were some respectable way of acknowledging Father's compliment – *I will play some music now, people* – and Father balls up his hands and bangs and bangs on the walls of our shack so that Mother and I fall asleep lying on the grass while watching Father.

The next morning, Mother whispers to me while hand-washing my underwear, *Wonder I, what happened to the churchwomen Father rented.*

2001 After Mother gives birth to Sanelisiwenguwe, Father says, *Maybe this is the one who knows what foul play means?*

Mother says, *We must worship them, all dreams I remember.*

What is that I smell Noparty, your funeral?

I see you want us to live on food of rubbish.

Father says, *Give her here, I'll raise her on my own* and stomps away with my sister curled up in his hairy arms. Father and Sanelisiwenguwe never leave Father and Mother's bedroom, and Mother keeps an eye on them throughout the day, but later, in the doorway, she takes notice of my dejection and says, *Mntasekhaya just call and she will be juicy company, you will see.*

When Grandmother comes to visit later that day, she goes into Father and Mother's bedroom brandishing a flyswatter and soon as she opens the door Father jumps out in his overall and gumboots, his high-pitched cries rinsing my heart of all the hate I had been carrying all day.

Grandmother says to me, *It's a riddle, isn't it, first and only one?*

Why I am a mute, born without the gift of speaking my thoughts when I open my mouth?

Why I am taken to a school where all the teachers pity me and the girls fail to read between my hand gestures?

Why Grandmother never takes me to the villages with her?

Why I never see my siblings again after Grandmother leaves with them?

Be the whole, Sofanguwe, Grandmother says.

2003 Father acquires a donkey cart but no donkey. Pulls the cart after him every time he goes on his rounds in town, collecting discarded plastic bottles to resell. Someday he tells me, *I only brought you with me today because I want you to read that book I gave you without Mother and her readings making you think less of God.* Something in the way he says it makes me understand this business of sabotaging Grandmother won't last.

2004 Mother tells me, *You have another brother coming.*

Father only mounts his rocking chair and cries, *Where does all the breastmilk go in this house?* Fuming, you see.

2005 Mother flees our home on the day the government men finish building our RDP and Father beats me up all night long asking me to tell him why Mother left, and though he knows I cannot talk back at him he is convinced I am united with Grandmother in a conspiracy to break up the family.

There are streaks of tears down my cheeks.

Father says, *Who eats lies in this house and never defecates truth?*

I give no answer.

Father towers over me with excited anger while I lie on the kitchen table chest-down, lifting the belt behind me only to rain down his strokes on my naked back.

2007 On a night when all the Somali, Pakistani, Ethiopian spaza-owners are chased out of Finetown and their shops looted, Grandmother knocks on our door and demands to know why

the babies have stopped, but all Father can say is there is nothing in the bin to cook us a decent dinner, never mind a baby.

Grandmother says, *Prepare to have your heart cut out with broken glass and forced down your throat.*

Father says, *It's the new sickness, Mother. This house is missing a fire place for you.*

Grandmother says, *Then he is ready to come with me!*

Pointing.

Circumcise him soon.

2008 Mother and I hug as if to make up for her long absence. In the morning, she climbs out through the window and tells me of the love I stand to gain the day I join her.

I don't ask her whatever happened to the baby in her stomach or where she is living now or why one ear is missing, as though it had been sliced off with a sharp knife.

2009 Mother is wearing a new green coat when she knocks on my window, but I cannot accept any of the jeans she has brought with her. *They are preparing to kill me*, she says. Behind me in the other room, Father is talking with Grandmother, but the Grandmother doesn't recognize Mother's presence.

2010 I hear Grandmother say *Is he a man yet?* through the walls.

I suppose Father tells her the truth.

Go on, your daydreaming is waiting!

The door bangs loudly on her way out.

2014 Father begins on the talk about esuthwini, real man this, real man that, again, and at last I relent. Grandmother visits on the day I am bhut' krwala and her words are enough, *You will now become your mother and father's enemy. Your brothers and sisters are waiting.*

GARDENING PEOPLE

A. Sista Octopus is not Mother returned.

B. Sista Octopus is not of the same blood but she and Grandmother are related.

C. Grandmother knows about Father's struggle with the ambulancemen when they came to fetch him, how they knocked on the door and Father undid his belt and went out to greet them. How, by the time I came out, they had Father pinned against the wall, had him kissing it, hands handcuffed behind Father's back, one ambulanceman telling Father he had the right to remain silent and anything Father said could be used against him in hospital.

How Father said, *You people know I did the right thing for burning those papers – Mother is turning him away from me.*

The other ambulanceman telling Father to shut up and not make this worse for himself.

You think I'm abusing my boy. Look at all these cuts on my stomach. I know he's one of theirs now.

That's enough!

You people must understand. There are people who will kill me if I don't kill him first.

WHAT YOU DO TO THE WORLD

Inganathisonke preferred texting me back, reminding me, when I pushed for a physical meeting, *I and I alone can recognize how lucky you are to have the gift of listening but not talking, I and I alone can hear your thoughts, I and I alone can find you when you are ready to be. Silence is such a rare thing these days.* Until that afternoon's visit.

HERBAL LOVE

When she finally woke up from my lap, she said, *Once (pensively) I was a little girl and on the road to the spaza shop I met an old woman and she told me who she was and who was me and we got to talking and that is how I came to know you.*

Do I feel neglected, she asked me (annoyed)?

I do (obediently, nodding my head). *Oh yes, I do.*

She said (fondly), *No need for you to try speaking; you should be happy as you are.*

I nodded, addressing her words in my mind (still obediently).

Is that what you're really asking me? (slightly irritated)

I nodded (politely).

Did your grandmother not teach you anything (in a disrespectful tone)?

I waved my hand no.

I see you do not recognize me.

Back and forth I wave my hand (submissively).

Loving me is a dirty job.

I have been listening to your thoughts since I got to you, she said, having dealt with the introductions, *and I still question the look in your eyes.*

I stared at her (quizzical).

I might as well be serving you a tray of fried grass right now (exasperated).

Say it, say what you want to say already, I thought.

You misunderstand me really, sihlobo.

There was her headless body, still kneeling beside us as from when she had dislodged her octopus head.

It began with her right arm, wiggling as if a rattling percussion instrument, until it became a cat, her hand a thick-toed gecko. My eyes were learning to recognize her quivering mutation when the other arm transformed into a slithering black mamba, the hand a classroom of baby terrapins.

Her breasts, underneath the gown, softened until I heard a pair of Pitbull puppies yelp wow-wow.

My stomach is a zoo, so let's not even go there.

One leg became a Colobus monkey, the other a Senegal bushbaby.

The feet could have been my Father's fowls.

After her limbs returned to their solid forms, I watched with equal fright and wonder as her octopus head joined itself to the rest of her body.

I should see you tomorrow.

The curtain parted, revealing the early screams of a Finetown evening, the squealing octopuses following after Inganathisonke.

All I glimpsed was her lone figure unlatching the yard gate: arms thick as her thighs, barefoot, the head wrap, nightgown a size big enough to belong to a woman twice her age.

I closed the window and drew the curtain shut.

I headed to the kitchen, to see what something I could cook for supper. *Father better not be up and digging through the foodbin.*

ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

Finetown doesn't like to be talked about in whispers, so when I applaud in its name it's only because Finetown only talks in screams and no other temper, breeds the screams with the air we breathe so they're in the food we eat and in the water we rinse our mouths with, we smoke them, screams shot as heroin or the shoe glue I sometimes stole from Father's room and sniffed for fun when I was younger, overloading my brain heart liver lungs gallbladder kidneys colons with screams so that I was always high on them, screams that run down our noses like mucus, screams coughed as greetings, as goodbyes, or how it's like phlegm stuck on the bottom of your throat, as we like to say now, when we exchange a Finetown hi, *Ndine sikhohlela ntanga, asinakususwa nayibleach*, screams that fill our stomachs with foul gas and make us want to fart them out again, very aggressively, screams as a far more useful measure of Finetown's tragicomedy, the name, its pleasures, its hatreds, religions, heroine-making and hero-unmaking as reflected in our facial complexions, the delusions Finetown honours itself as in my days as

a clay-moulding-by-the-chicken-coop boy watching Mother rest her arms on the fence and banter with Thembakazi's mother, our neighbour, while taking a break from her laundry, screams that better articulate Uncle Sibonda's one-sided facial paralysis – upper lip determinedly pulled towards one cheek as if he is sneering or attempting to show his teeth and raise his eyebrows at the same time, one eye unable to close if he tries to, hence the eyepatch he wears everyday – screams that most eloquently draw out Finetown's contempt for humility, a certain type of Finetown life that Finetown reserves for its own, so that in the end Finetown can forgive a man sprawled on his back in the middle of the street, a clean bullet hole on his forehead, but not glorify the one with his bowels vomiting out of his belly at the dumpsite, screaming, naturally, as though his guttural cry came out of the wide, open cut in his stomach and not his mouth, that Finetown will always celebrate a school girl who wakes up in the morning and can still walk the streets with her head held high, despite missing the bottom half of her ear because some other sisterie unkindly borrowed her earring during a girls' brawl over a man or one side of her head was singed with boiling water, a revenge attack, that Finetown has no time for men and women who, one moment, drink themselves happy on its spiritual gifts and in another go around its street pavements bashing amasiko and proselytising on behalf of a god who has little to offer its downtrodden, these ingrates that demand this or that would be curable if only Finetown did something with itself other than umjayivo ongapheliyo.

A priest will get drowned in a pothole if he's not too careful around here.

Don't you know Finetown boys bathe in darkness just to forget the scars tattooed all over their bodies with many a midnight knifing and a nurse's needle?

That Finetown's old timers drink Black Label for breakfast just to taunt their tastebuds?

How Finetown girls start hunting for husbands in their fourteens just to arrive at their twenties without children to worry about?

Why any clever magogo in Finetown entrusts her pension card to the spaza owners so on payday all she has to do is pick up the food without having seen the money and being murdered for it while lumbering towards home?

The trainings of Finetown, as Finetown's own reason, when every other hour someone who thought they knew it all comes to realize how and why they know nothing and will never know enough to know anything at all.

When Finetown, the willing Finetown I know, the glad-and-ready-for-a-dare Finetown I was raised in, lifts her arms and growls that everybody shut up and listen now, why Finetown's own will tell you you're alive and safe as Qamatha's wife if you are a mother in your blooming middle ages, for only to them, the ones who shield, look after, keep Finetown from burning to the ground, her starving sons and daughters cadavers hungering after release from the screams that disturb their sleep, to them only is respect given, said more honestly, of course, in those moments when Finetown takes it upon herself to demonstrate her own set of commandments, whether in the streets or in our homes or in the boots of cars in front of the tavern or in the music we make each other listen to or the dreams we have at night and in the day,

- a) that you shall follow no gods who squirm at the sight of fresh blood, gods being no good for us if they do not doctor Finetown's own back from the dead;
- b) that you shall not make idols of those whose head is a stained, leaking pot, nothing to eat there;
- c) that you should not speak the name of your mother in vain, we descendants of the forgotten tribe of the red blanket, our High Mother raped in the year 1562, her head fed to the dogs by two of Somersettan's generals in full view of the royal house, a story Grandmother never lets me forget;
- d) that you should remember, always remember and remember always, to honour the festival of the sky, even when your own father and his father no longer remember what did Sazela the God of Good Weather ever do for them, or you;
- e) that to honour your mother and grandfather is to extend your life, or as we say here, Ukuzalwa kukolulwa xhego;
- f) that the day the bull walks into the kraal on its own consensus and points to its heart, demanding umkhonto, will be the day new explanations will come out of our mouths;
- g) that sleeping with another man's man and another man's woman as nothing personal is the day the Finetown local will have found a language to demonstrate how heathy sexual desire is the most important attribute one can retain into old age, not overlooking how this, too, of course demands talent;
- h) that envy is the root of all evil, that admiration can bring you closer to the garden, which is where we Finetowners believe true life resides, or as we say, Even the grave is a blessing too;
- i) that jealousy is a waste of time, if you want something borrow it, as long as you argue or beg fair first.

This is Finetown.

Where they kill for smiling too much, where we think nothing of a glowing repute, where life expectancy is a bad song in need of a long and uninterrupted spin on the turntable.

This is Finetown.

Where we pop chilies seeds in our mouths before kissing one another if we are in the mood for rough sex.

Where we carry dice in our shirt pockets for good luck – school exams, court case, a bank robbery.

Where we mix brown and white sugar inside the mouth during our domestic confrontations, since we know none of us would cheat the other out of a confession without betraying themselves.

Where we daub honey on our clothing, as a love potion.

Where we tell the children, as young as two, to never go out into the streets without remembering to wear their strip of snake skin, tied around the waist or the wrist or the ankle or the neck. Uxhobe mfana if you know you are a reward, which is what we call a wanted man in the streets here, and everyone is.

Finetown is always hankering after screams.

Finetown doesn't trust I love yous.

Finetown will mock you for being overemotional, for talking too kak.

Finetown doesn't always treat kindness the way people who say something and mean it should be treated.

Finetown keeps no money in a bank account, rejoices over no good weather.

Finetown wants you to dump all the optimism you carry in your backpack, a Brazilian wax of psychosomatic drunkenness and private letdowns, to haggle over truth with your own children, not to question the fashions we adopt, to look past the difference between a high school that makes it and the ones that don't.

Finetown has it in itself to receive newcomers with open arms.

To you, Finetown can only say, *Update your funeral cover right now s'bhanxa! Ucimb' uphi? KUS' EFANITO APHA!*

IN MY STREET THERE IS A BOY NAMED YESTERDAY

It was them who came with their amens, who fastened biblical chains on our grandfathers' necks and set them to work on the farming fields, who got our fathers hooked on money, pulled down our mothers' red blankets and shoved white babies at their breasts, who killed our young when they took to the streets, who manufactured the depression.

Children protesting outside Ndaweni's crèches, hugging each other in what they called a "hug only people you want to hug" protest; talks about a child's right to her or his body and how mothers, or any adult in fact, should never force their children to hug them or anyone if their child does not want to could only happen in Finetown.

The only music to be heard from street-side grocers and the revelation churches, but hardly in people's hearts, since the music on the radio now has aphrodisiacs in it, the screams in the air, the water, the spicy stench of everything rotten, how, to remain sane, it was wiser to sing to each other or go without it at all could only happen in Finetown.

UNUSUAL PUNISHMENTS

My parents gave me four names before they settled on my last.

I never knew the need until Grandmother came for me.

My seniors kwaNtu, they who were for knowing during that time, explained everything. How Father and Mother were wedded, Mother's vow to Grandmother with my brothers and sisters, the doom Mother brought on us all with her disappearance, Grandmother fetching me at last for kwaNtu.

Say your names more carefully from now on, one uncle warned me, otherwise you might get us in trouble.

KWANTU

Anger is bile, she said, giving me a glass of water, and bile angers without a reason.

I drank down the bean.

You were the one and only for a reason.

I looked at her so she could read my eyes as being respectful, as saying Yes Grandmother, read my dreams for me please.

Some of your aunts are mixed with your brothers and sisters here. She waved towards the gathered crowd. But I trust at least you will know which is which when you look.

She left me to wander by myself among the men and women.

It was in the first months that I took to reading and slept and ate and drank and pissed and coughed and burped and washed clothes and draw and wrote and sang and fought and hugged and gossiped and cleaned myself, back to the reading, to repeat it all over again, and again.

It was the uncles who taught me riddles, the English dictionary was mandatory, and the aunts carried a great deal of African history and agriculture with them.

I was put in charge of the library, a stack of books by one wall of the hut they kept all the hides and severed horns of the bulls that had been slaughtered in KwaNtu, all five hundred and twenty-one of them, and I slept in the hut that houses all these things, and uncle Sibonda would visit me at night, cradling ibhekile yakhe, a smoking pipe to his lips, to drink and argue with all the people who'd wronged him that day, speaking to himself until he fell asleep on his khukho.

I began to really know Grandmother then, this black woman in her eighties, white hair twisted in dreadlocks, a complete set of false teeth fastened to the roof of her mouth. Gogo Nombolo, as Sibonda called her. Her three fat piglets trailing after her wherever she went, Grandmother threatening my siblings with them whenever they complemented her on how young-looking she was. Grandmother spending all of her day in the farming fields, limping with her walking stick, never complaining.

She found me browsing among the books once. I had not seen her for a whole week and had not bothered to ask Sibonda.

Teach him how to make a woman want him without him wanting her.

Sibonda moaning, *He 's slow that way, but he 'll be a fighter, don 't stress.*

She had made certain, in choosing the bean I took, that I would recall what she wanted me to remember and none of the other details that would dredge up all the hate and confusion I held against her over the siblings she took away: how she was the last born of the right house in the royal house of the red blankets, the only girl of High Mother Noloyiso, how her mother came to the battlefield because she felt the men-warriors were not up to the fight, and some week later of fighting the generals seized her by her breasts and made her to kneel, throwing every slanderous word in their heads at her, until a new idea came to them that they should take their exhibition to her royal house: how the tribe languished in the wild, sleeping next to wells, their houses, as Grandmother said, the shadows under the trees, eating whatever wild flower that would not kill them, until at last they decided, as Grandmother said, *If the land was not coming to us we would go to the land*: Nzotho walked fastest so he went first: Nyelezi was the oldest so he had first dibs: Maphango the drunkard, staggered through the wild the whole way, abandoning her children and getting lost countless times, took her twenty years to reach it: Gxugxa was the rebel – *Who me? I don 't care for these albinos and their smelly buttocks, and stayed right where she was* – until they came to remove her, the bastards, dug up her bones next to Nciba and threw them where kwazi bani: Wele noBabini did say it was not right to kill the family heifer for the skin that made for a superior blanket in the cold of their abandonment, despite the famine that later killed them.

I have my own reputation to look after, Grandmother said.

Finetown was still Finetown when I came back six years later, the air eternally reeking of kaka: chickens prowling the streets with dogs and donkeys and cats and cattle so that each morning the town streets were turned into a catwalk for this macabre pageant of the wilderness.

MONDEWENJA

In kwaNtu, we began the day by digging out of the ground High Mother's skull and then polishing it with a black mamba's spit 'til the flesh grew back onto the bone, her lips still missing, the nose attached by a piece of her skin to dangle by the chin, one eye socket as clean as a dry cup, fresh reminders of the dog mauling by Somersettan's generals; the brooms by the river would stir into an upright position and dance with rehearsed merriment a hopscotch kind of dance; it was only after this that High Mother's skull was returned to where it belonged; next we gathered ourselves into a single file and marched back into Grandmother's hut, all of this conducted with a diplomatic air, just about crestfallen, just about.

In kwaNtu, they said if and when you find your way into the worlds of others, it is more clever to bring along an enamel bowl and a spoon for all the hate that collects at the bottom of all our

hearts, a flask for the bad manners we cannot help, and a scuffin to pack in all the cries of betrayal every child of kwaNtu carries in the marrow of their spines, to take back with you after you have seen to all your undertakings; if you have any affection, they said, be like a man and hug a tree, to empty it all out.

In kwaNtu, to reinforce your new personality they let you choose between unreasonable humour and an undying faith in the realness of dreams; Grandmother did not take kindly to how the tribe had failed itself in the past.

In kwaNtu, every afternoon we lunched on big cups of soup, our lips glued to the brim, long sips of snake poison that turned our lips the colour of black rain, and no one cared to ask anyone why-when, why-how, why-now; the swepu we flogged the veldt ground with every dawn or dusk, mowing down the wild flowers, was to add taste to the meat of the cows, no salt to speak of here, and so we couldn't help it if we were forced to burn all the dead plants by the river to make a fire and roast tubers.

In kwaNtu, there was a saying about having confidence in hate: do not beg the sun to come out, we said, when you know it will, or it won't; swallow your dreams standing up, we said, or go pray by the riverbank, then the air shall work out who's who.

In kwaNtu, right after the daily work in the farming fields ended, all the new recruits had to go out onto the forest and re-enact it according to the real thing, down to its smallest, horrid, malodourous detail; we did this because we believed every wave of wrongdoing should be enjoyed, for blood is known to be as sweet as amaqunube and the gore of any festivity must be celebrated as heroism damaged, except now for all eternity, the clouds remorseful as a limp nose that complicates your swallowing, the wind locked in a dance of east to west, north to south, and in between the glamour were the smiles that hid their fondness for sucking human nipples.

In kwaNtu, they said you know you are drunk on mischief when your body feels like all the love-making you've ever committed yourself to is merely spilling dancing songs on our chests, sometimes putting the arrowhead to our lips and chocking on the gravel in our soup at the same time as some other aunt started giving birth to another uncle's child behind you—screaming laughter, blood squirting out of our ears, pushes accompanied by the proper expletives, breathe in breathe out ... all the memories that escort pain when it is time to be pleased at another disagreeable morning.

In kwaNtu, they said you must learn to make friends with your own family members or else it cannot be said that you are a frustrated human being too.

In kwaNtu, intsomi and ooqashqash were the only massage afforded one's heart—yes, High Mother's spirit had strange roots, and peace we scarified and drank to.

In kwaNtu, they said to kiss the donkeys on the mouth anytime we wanted to; they loved it when old and new mindsets played the supporting roles to each other's present.

In kwaNtu, they told stories, many stories; amusement, as they said, was the kit of shadows.

SOCIETY OF BUTTERFLIES

Inganathisonke had failed her sixth grade at the Mkabayi kaJama High but was still hopeful by 2020 she will be ready to work at a till, Sibonda a ward councillor in Bayaphi Township, Grandmother with her huts and the farming fields, and I had tried everything from trolley boy, tiding up after the crusade, to tavern barman and rubbish cleaner with the municipality, until I settled on security guard (you just have to sit there, saying nothing, just keeping an eye on the inaction, always Supa Strikas on my lap), but when it came to the other work, we all knew the sauce on our plates.

THOBANINGALE

On the day the dead baby was discovered outside Bafana Store, I pretended to be suffering from flu and Mother did not let me go anywhere I wanted to go, and that's how I could sit still in the kitchen and listen when the five women came to our house, a kind of street committee set up by the neighbours and dedicated to solving the riddle of the baby's sudden appearance: Ali, he of Bafana Store, unlocking his burglar doors for trade as is habitual with him on any lucrative morning, only to find out somebody had heaved an infant onto a Shoprite trolley, drove-walked the trolley from where the nameless baby came from and parked-dumped the trolley outside his door.

The women didn't worry themselves too much about knocking before they entered my home, so accustomed to paying Mother an afternoon visit and interrogating her for whatever gossip she can pass on to them to help with their investigation, that each night Mother would ask-beg Father and I for any news we might have heard so that she could have something to give-suppliate the street committee the next day.

Father resistant in the beginning. The one banging doors around the house and complaint-pleading, "Udenza umamgobhozi uNoparty maan!?" But soon even Father tired of the unyielding women and after that Mother did not need to ask him anything; Father was the one who talked first after suppertime, Father dawdling in his tenor, "Ndikuthanda nje ndizakuthini ukungazilibali intloni?"

The women would picket-walk through the door humming *Senzeni na bethuna aphe khaya?* and give Mother tight, you know well why we're here hugs.

First woman: "Rhonani."

Second: "Unjani na namhlanje?"

Third: "Uphilile na?"

Fourth: "Uphilile na kanye?"

One hinted Mother should eat more, her bones would thank her for it, another going so far as to compliment Mother on the length of her nails.

"Ungalomba ngelang' elinye ingcwaba mos, ungatsho nje, mfazi?"

One woman touched Mother's t-shirt as if Mother were a mannequin in a clothing store, eyeing her with fretful expressions; another stooped low to lift Mother's skirt so she could look-see underneath.

Mother spoke-whispered, "Ewe, ndiphilile kanye."

We don't believe you Noparty, their faces threatened.

"Hluza ubisi mfazi," the fifth woman commanded, "sandule songule ucwambu thina."

Mother had been going around the streets for weeks before their visit, peddling her new of warthog liver soup, if only the neighbours didn't keep looking past the brands embossed across her torso, at how her XXX t-shirts were suddenly too tight around the bellybutton, but all Father had to say so far was, "Ndinento ethi uyandincedisa apha kubutywala bam Noparty. Uzakuthini ke ngoku ukungaxhamli umkhaba?"

"Uphi na umpheki?" (First woman to no one in particular.)

"Ungaphandle kwendlu." (Second, as if to herself.)

"Mbize." (Third, look-staring at Mother.)

"Khawumbize angene endlwini." (Fourth, facing the bedroom.)

Mother said, "Hlalani phantsi siqale." (Eyes cast down.)

"Ewe Nkosikazi!" the fifth woman cried out (hands raised as if experiencing a hallucinatory eureka moment). "Ewe Nkosi!"

The women's visits came as fresh air lingers outside the window after the smell of a burnt meal strangulates the kitchen; they were always a job interview you didn't have to submit your CV

to, their coming an open secret, as if they were standing outside the yard the whole night, waiting for a command from some higher power to proceed at any time during the day.

“Ndinamadoda am angena emfazweni enxibe iidyasi, aphume engenazo.”

None of them answered Mother.

“Ngumbona ongqushwayo.”

I was the only one who laughed from where I was squatting by the ajar door.

The sixth day Mother even prepared her soup for them, and afterwards she would only mention the fact of how one of the street committee women ate a full spoonful, an accomplishment she wanted us to acknowledge.

One Sunday only one of the street committee women entered the house.

Tears were running down the woman’s face and Mother had to use a vadoek to dry her cheeks, spending what must have been an hour talking about raising children and the rigors of breastfeeding.

At one point Mother said the woman’s name, Nomoya, always her beach towel around the lower body and gumboots on her feet, how she was the most talkative.

“Unyan’am mdala oku kwalo wakho, mfazi,” Nomoya said, “qha uyathanda ukunxila, amane endishwabulela xa ndingamphakelanga ngalendlela ikholisa yena. Uthi kutheni amehlo am empompoza inyembezi oko mthombo nje?”

“Uthini na ngonyana wam?” Mother said, annoyed.

“Sihlala sibona yena yedwa apha emzin’ wakho,” Nomoya said. “Khawutsho, bakhona abanye abantwana onabo?”

Mother shook her head.

Nomoya left after that.

Matakane was the daughter of one of the street committee women that visited Mother.

She knocked on the door early one afternoon and when I stared too hard in her direction, Mother said, “Yintoni na mntan’am ungakhe uhambe uyokuhlakula lendlela intsha yetar bayandlalayo apha estratweni, torho?” but I would not budge from where I was standing.

Father walked in at that moment.

Despite the winter air outside, his overall was rolled at the waist as usual, exposing his humpback.

“Kalok’ amadoda akafani,” Father said. “Afana ngeentshebe kuphela.”

“Phofu ukhalazela ntoni wena ta’kaThobani?” Mother said. “Intaka yakha ngoboya benye mos.”

Matakane received the bowl of brown rice from Mother with one hand.

Mother placed a rotting potato on the girl’s free hand.

Matakane stepped away through the doorframe in her bare feet.

One of the street committee women walked in.

She handed the bowl of sugar and potato to Father.

“Wala idliso ma’kaMatakane,” Mother said, concerned. “Kutheni, wasibuyisa esi siphiso?”

“Phofu amagqwirha akazisokolisi ngokubas’ umlilo ukuze atye,” Father said. “Ndim lo utshoyo kakade!”

The next day the women came and said nothing to Mother or us, except to prance around the kitchen and burn their mpepho. Father thought they might be running out of patience this way, but the next day when the shebeen queen Nostrato entered through the door, Father jumped from his table seat and ran to the bedroom. He did not come out until Mother switched on the bulb in the kitchen and called me out to help her with supper.

When the widow Nothole visited, she walked into the bedroom without bothering to greet us and afterwards, inside the bedroom, she called out, “Yiza tata kaThobani, ndim nawe namhlanje.” Father walked in after her, loosening his overall, and closed the door behind him.

On the last day of their visits, Notaka brought all the widows of Finetown with her. They did not ask to speak to Mother nor addressed a word to Father, but instead came for me.

I was headed for the hill by the highway the next day.

Five weeks later, my penis was healed and I found myself in kwaNtu.

SOFANGUWE

My name before I met you was Nopretty, she said.

We were in my bedroom, undressing.

For some reason I expect you to moan even though I know you can't.

I found an easy way to kiss her clit first before returning to her mouth without spilling any of my saliva.

Your Father is making plans about you, and the Notaka wants to marry him.

I coughed.

Her head was on my chest.

She raised her thumb and placed it on my forehead.

The hammers coming to knock on the roof after breakfast, so Mother's mind rouses itself up first thing; the door moves aside to let her pass; the sports bag balanced on her head dreaming in its sleep; the t-shirt Mother wears fondles her chest tightly as she steps out into the day, a precaution against the imminent cold; the Swazi print wrapped around her waist blows hot breath on the insides of her thighs as though it fears the lustful gaze of the wind; it is Mother's head that is not a believer in early mornings and the only reason her armpits are joining in on the protest is because, on days like this, they regret having no hair; the only good pair of warm boots in the house has sped off to spend the weekend attending a funeral, church on Sunday, and one hour tucked inside the wardrobe of Mother's sister, and Father's gumboots refuse to carry her until their pay is raised by a small percentage; in all this dilemma the soles of Mother's heel-cracked feet are in no mind to negotiate since they have never been shy of making it known how they think capitalists are unAfrican, so this too is nothing to sulk for; all the letters that make up the word goodbye in Mother's language pedal-swim out of her mouth to float in the air like bubbles, from behind her the fifteen-year-old boy that is me tosses the hooked end of his tongue as though it was a fishing line until all the letters, ensnared in his distress, are reeling towards his ears; a passing truck waves at Mother with its side mirrors; a neighbour's eyes gossip with each other loudly by the fence, speculating on what destination her madness will be hoeing next; her hands are in a foul mood and won't even wave hello; a Hi-fi inside a neighbour's house laughs at a memory her walk evokes, but the TV next door is engaged in a serious debate with the couch over why no one has thought to raise the issue of all the hearts caged inside human chests and their need of suffrage, and so doesn't see her; at the street corner, the pavement has an opinion to offer about the coming local government elections. Lightning and thunder sound in the sky and the blisters on Mother's skull think Qamatha must stop smoking tobacco, otherwise his lungs are finished; most of the trees in the courtyards seem to be telling their leaves they are old enough to start their own families, the way Xhosa mothers will nudge their oldest boys towards the bush when something that is not a beard yet has sprouted below their mouths; the wings of ten ncedo birds signalling rain are jesting about who has the best V8 engine between them while two Daily Sun placards tacked up on the poles of the only mast light on Sabatha Street are MC-battling over the coming weekend's Soweto derby; a man passes Mother while she is waiting at the bus stop, the bag on her shoulder thinks the rest is needed; the blazer the man is wearing catcalls Mother's knees, but then three young boys come rushing towards her rolling old car tires and the tires make a pass at her ankles; a Siyaya slows down as it approaches the bus stop and the honk asks for her destination, except Mother's nose mocks the missing taillight so that the accelerator spits on the tarmac, the

carburettor mumbling a swear word, the gearshift stick taking particular umbrage at how poor business has been today, the way the horn keeps interrupting the car speakers and their radio talk; the handbrake is trying to find a way to participate in the conversation with the backseats about the weekend's scandals, and the driver's hand keeps patting the handbrake as if it were a little girl doing right by eating all of her fruitarian meal. The driver's mirror in the truck, when it finally arrives, winks at Mother's elbows and the door handle screams hello as Mother's hand pulls the door shut; it is only the dead baby in the sports bag at Mother's feet that misses out on the talk inside the lorry as it rumbles towards the main taxi rank in Finetown.

A CHARACTER PROFILE

Father had disappeared from my house early in the week and Inganathisonke came at the weekend to tell me she had heard he was seen in town, killing some boy who belonged to us by the BP on Mondale. No one had done anything yet. They had gotten to Mother first and killed her for not submitting, but Father was not only next on the list, he became their new mascot.

KHAYALETHU

Grandmother says, You might as well meet the other you.

I kneel down on the rock-strewn floor of the hut.

She says, You will feel like you have lived into my age after I take my hand away.

She raises her arm and rests it on my head, as if cleaning it of all the ugly thoughts, as if praying for my sins.

A slideshow of unfamiliar images slide in from my left eye into my right: Mud huts. Wide, parched fields. Children in loincloths. Mothers on the pestle. Stick fighting. Cattle nibbling on the hillside. A river somewhere close by, rumbling.

Then pitch darkness.

No face to recognize.

How he dresses or walks.

Only the voice to say I know him, he looks like this or that.

This old man, his talk silences my own thoughts:

If one of the village fathers is found to be cheating on his wife, he is called to the megalith up on the hill and all the children young enough not to know the discomforts of teenage hood come and interrogate him all night long; the penalty for the cheating father is to call on our thikoloshes to pluck his body clean of all hair, beginning with the head, his eyebrows, armpits, everywhere, including between the buttocks, one strand of hair at a time, while we the village children watch as the naked cheating father flinches in pain with each tug of his hair, his jerky movements a dance of the deranged, his cries that of a baby, and we take turns deriding him

with the foulest of language, until, at last as naturally, we grow tired of the spectacle or our mothers plead that it's long past bedtime.

...

If we wake up to roaring thunder in the morning, we know the Hyena-headed warriors of the kingdom by the well must be close by and very hungry, so we allow our tails to grow out and begin lick-sharpening our paws. *War is coming*, the elders tell us.

...

If you are foolish enough to follow your uncle's ghosts, oomakhulu bethu warned us, *be sure not to enter his pockets*.

One boy pried open a pouch that did not belong to him and a pair of piranha teeth jumped out, clattering with feverish passion after him.

He lost several fingers before the piranha was safely secured in the pouch again.

I am that boy.

...

If you know the story of the Red Blanket, then you have heard the story of how, one evening, our widowed High Mother was so in need of a man that she beckoned all the brave warriors of our land and from our neighbours the Sea People to avail themselves, and all who answered to the call failed to extinguish her hunger—many were said to have struggled to raise their members to a stiff bearing long enough to reach our kingdom, a precondition upon entering the kingdom's gates, and of those that managed to get their body part to play along with the occasion many of them spilled their seed before they could reach the queen's chambers—except for only one man, who seemed to have been molded of different clay and must have satisfied the queen's stipulations to the most important, *a man whose member must put to shame even the most well-endowed donkey*.

Our imbongis tell of High Mother Queen's good looks; they love to boast that she is so fine-looking, a married man has to lay eyes on her once and he will summarily divorce his wife; even King David, the imbongis tell us, once visited our land and the next day he sent word back to his Kingdom of Israel and Judah that his many wives and countless concubines best find their way back to the homes of their own fathers.

What everyone omits to mention is that our High Mother is a Wolf Spider.

She eats all her lovers before mating.

Why do you think our part of the land is called "where they eat their kings alive"?

...

I had a good friend for the longest period of my childhood and when I was ready to become a man and take a wife, my thikoloshe and I went our separate ways.

He was a very hairy dwarf and shied away from the usual malevolent deeds effected by the typical thikoloshe of my time, the mental scarring of children or causing illness to others, even bringing death upon his master's enemies.

Mthimbane was his name.

His penis was so long it had to be slung over his shoulder whenever we went about the village, and except for when he was visiting his witch mistress, Mthimbane and I were never not in each other's company. In return, I always made sure to have sufficient milk and food with me.

I had many disagreements with Mthimbane during our time together, but often in such occasions he would only say *By what right does the wolf judge the lion? Mnxim, suka kwedini.*

One evening during the Festival of the Sky to observe Sazela the God of Good Weather in my father's mother's hut, we made Grandmother Koko to kiss Grandmother Fadala in full view of the village elders, one wobbling-drunk woman shoving her tongue down her fellow tippler-friend's throat, Grandmother Koko's pungent breath stronger than flames, her foolish leer lightened by two lonely teeth, and the room spun wild, the fathers spitting the mqombothi and tobacco out their throats onto the mud floor, the aghast mothers slapping their thighs in despair, cackling, screeching, and cooing like the din you hear in the wild at night.

Old man Laganda got up and went silently about the room tipping over all the calabashes with his bare feet, leaving a muddy liquid in his wake, and then he picked up his goatskin bag and walked out of the flap-entrance.

Afterwards I voiced my reservations to Mthimbane.

The lion doesn't concern himself with the opinions of the sheep, is all he said.

...

When I tell my wife all these things her face breaks into laughter. Just yesterday I bought her a pair of monkey eyeballs swimming in chicken blood wrapped in an umhlanza leaf and all she could do was smile through her teeth and say *When you finally grow up, you will make an interesting friend.*

...

Grandmother says, "That is the father of all of us," removing her hand.

Inganathisonke – "Aaaaahhhhh Ngubengcuka!" – chants.

"The first," she says, "and only one," *yes Grandmother,* "you take after."

GENTLY SLOPING, THE SEASONS

There was always a clean, clear surface here too, with much disturbance below. The anagoge of this beast of no nation, when the villain stands strikingly on his own. Interior voice which was or became widely erratic in the exterior. Father wanted to befriend me, sometimes almost never. Control was necessary. My constraints allowed him to thrive. His effect on me allowed

him to transcend the naturalness and accessibility of my situation and language. A certain coldness was required on my part and his too. Refusing to yield to my consolations, although when consolation was offered I accepted it on his behalf. More so if it came from an unexpected quarter. That was me at a time I felt like a bleeding balloon on life support. The way knowledge has teeth and claws and you are always itching to use them.

Have you ever had a wet dream and whoever is your lover asks you to bend over, and when you do pushes an arm halfway up your anal hole, and when they take it out, on the palm of their cupped hand are diamond stones of the finest cut, streaked with brown kaka and blood, twinkling in the dark like a cross-eyed angel crying over the jug of milk he's just spilled, staining God's new stilettos before the dinner with Judas?

Have you ever had a dream where your own father tries to sell you but the man at the market says it's wiser to invest in you and that's what happens, and now in the dream you are older and your mother is dead a long time to you and your father is so happy that finally you can become his slave and each month you will bring home some kind of bag of something, but see, the man from the market has just called to say the market is in bad shape, that he wants to cash in, and now Father is in tears?

Have you ever felt like saying, For one thing, chicken heads and feet are reliable ministers of the world's fragrance and do a better job of mapping the amoral gaps in the Voortrekker mentality than a carrot stew served with horse dung and a dollop of neotantric cravings could defend itself against a band of mercenary rabbits; that it's a political conference delivered right on your door step, so let you and us both confront the crude, racist, infantile Africanisms that dye our yarns, "bunga bunga" to you, mah meh-damn?

THE CROCODILE PROPAGANDA

The trick was to track down Father. He had to die.

WHAT MUST GO HAPPEN NOW?

Unlike us, working to disinfect the Finetown consciousness of its cobwebs of malice, or the others, who toil to make the slaughtering of the remorseless happen – pleasure is screams, agony in boredom – Father has been turned into a captured cloud, hungering after wellness and misery in the same beat, our enemy, butchering innocents to spoil the peace in our homes and, when all those dead and forgotten in the burial grounds are weary of screaming, dupes them to restore confusion in the streets.

THE BEGINNER'S KIT

When people say, Ah the sheep is acting mdokoish, they don't realize I am in the mood to kill. By wiping their memories skoon and trotting away, leaving them feeling good about taking their own lives.

SOMANDLA

Three-thirty in the morning, not a soul in sight. We huddle by the brazier, spitting live sardines for sparks, talking about half-dumbness and the brainwashing that needs to be done in Finetowners, as we wait for Grandmother's word to kill Father while he sleeps in his makhwapheni's RDP.

A DEATH ANNIVERSARY IN THE NEWSPAPER

I need to learn how to drink wine properly, she says, before dumping the now-empty bottle we've been taking swigs at all voodoo hours at her feet – Sibonda, Inganathisonke, and me. It crashes on the concrete with a loud thud, a dance of broken shards tapping their sharp ends this way and that on the concrete floor, but Inganathisonke doesn't shield her ankles though I know she will squeak ouch should the broken glass touch her lizard ankles.

WE BELIEVE IT WAS A TRAGIC ACCIDENT

We are all tipsy, but to sneak into the house is a simple sentence.

“Sounds like you are boiling crocodiles in your head?” Sibonda says.

Inganathisonke nods.

“Keep your saliva to yourself wethu.”

I tuck in my shirt.

“Our own heads have the answers, so let's be stupid enough to listen only to the generous voices.”

Sibonda kicks the gate open.

“As long as you remember Mother told me to lead you two lovers.”

We're in.

They were supposed to get close to you to get you obeying their every command and Father is sleeping with Nomasi, infected already, and they never let you escape after that, he might as well slit his own throat himself, which is what I have in my mind for a once-happy memory as him.

The entrance is the welcome mat.

Sibonda takes out an English novel and rips off the prologue. It lands on the mat with a silent splash and the blood soaks into one corner of the page, then spreads to all corners until the page is wet through and through.

We all know the house will heave itself at us, exhaling like it's running out of breath. Sibonda has to piss on the doorframe to quiet it down, the way it flew open, windows crying, the roof ready to flee, even the microwave preaching forgiveness as we step in.

Inganathisonke is walking in front of us.

I peel the onion, dumping the peels on the floor. Sibonda whistles the national anthem, massaging his stiff penis for cum to spill and break any simmering spells buried on the floor.

Sibonda keeps stumbling while trying to pull up the zip of his tracksuit pants, but every time he trips and falls down he discourages us from helping him up with a dispirited wave of the hand, Inganathisonke saying she feels like having a quickie inside a stuffy wardrobe and I should think about it; Sibonda screams at me to start with my crying, *We need the tears now*, and I rub my eyes.

Every one of the three rooms has an elevator for a door. The ease with which their spells repel is misleading, not everything is as it looks, we know that.

Sibonda transforms himself into an enraged cloud of a thousand honeybees, deafening the house to any other noise. When Inganathisonke grabs my hand, they all speak at the same time. We know, she says. She pulls me to a corner of the living room, hikes up her nightgown, exposing her dimpled buttocks, no panties; squatting on the floor, her legs opened as if about to pee, she pushes very hard, giving birth to them.

The baby octopuses land under her with comfort, squealing almost immediately.

When the elevator to the bathroom blinks in descending numbers, a hyena laughs in the kitchen, and I remember I am a Damara Sheep and my strong bones are meant for more than mountain climbing tonight. The cloud of honeybees somersaults to the kitchen before the octopuses and I have even seen who the hyena is. Sibonda pinning Nomasi's son to the chair, all thousand honeybees of him wrapped around the hyena, twisting and turning from all the stings in his eyes and ears and nose, Sibonda holding him tight only to let go of him when the venom is working, revealing a sting-decorated face, mauled into a painful contortion. Sibonda says there's no need to question him.

“Ayina nto izakusixelela yona le nja le.”

Inganathisonke feels like fighting now.

When her arm has moistened into a black mamba, it is the Senegal bushbaby and Colobus monkey that hold her strength. Now that her octopus head is separate from her body. She commands all her limbs into a single file: the fowls, cat, Pitbull puppies, octopuses, baby terrapins, gecko, and her stomach zoo, a colony of siafu army ants set on anything that threatens us.

One elevator swings open and a Penis Snake slithers out, a broad, flat head and a fleshy dorsal fin on the belly, seething. The ants swallow it before its anger turns into flames. They crawl into the bathroom, to be welcomed by screams we know do not belong to Father.

The first bedroom elevator empties a Japanese spider crab, its legs bumping against both walls of the living room, and a blobbed fish, making all sorts of cheeky noises as it bounces towards us.

“Sanukudlala ngathi maan, bafazi ndini,” complains Sibonda, raising his voice and swarming down for an attack. “Nithi sizozal’ upuca apha?”

The last room has a far more pungent spell than any one of us can break on our own.

Sibonda turns himself back to his human form and when he is close enough he looks into Inganathisonke’s octopus eyes and says, “Mnye osis’thandwa sam, masambe ke.”

She turns towards me, “Hambani sihambe, bafondini.”

I kiss her on the forehead, tentacles wrapped around my horns.

The doors slide open in a matter of seconds.

Inganathisonke goes in.

The honeybees rush to the crab and fish room.

“Kwanga kuyaxokwa,” she says, before the elevator door shut.

When I step into the bathroom, Grandmother is sitting on the toilet, peeing naked, but there’s a different voice in her greeting and the white hair on her head has earthworms in it, poking their shapeless heads out, twitching.

“Sisimanga ke esi,” she says.

The saliva is too hot for my mouth. When I spill it at my feet in steaming droplets, it doesn’t immediately creep towards Grandmother but loiters around my ankles, darting in between and behind my legs like a village of ticks on a dog’s skin. Grandmother doesn’t take notice of it until the saliva is climbing up both her legs and paralysis has set in, drying up her blood as it travels through her body, hardening the muscles. Only then do I recognize Nomoya, thrashing about on the floor.

LION MATCHBOX

Grandmother is by the kraal, iswepu in her hand. From where I’m standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I bleat a hello the way I know she would smile back if it was really her, and the woman turns back to look at me. Smoke is coming out of her eyes but there’s no pipe between her lips. The mirror is foggy from all the smoke in her eyes, I have to spit once on my hoof and rub the spit on the mirror and wipe with the elbow of my front leg, to see Matakane’s mother trashing about on the ground, both hands on her own neck, a suicide even I find boring.

When I stumble through the mirror after knocking it to pieces with one horn and join Inganathisonke at the empty soccer field, there is a dead me in front of her and she is missing one tentacle, the eyes that laugh first before an actual laugh comes out of my mouth, the nose with the pencil scar across it from when I fell down on the assembly floor at primary school, running to make it into class before the Science teacher walked in, the black dot ubomi on the side of my neck, my girlie nails from Mother.

“Wakhe wabulala umntu omthandayo?”

The skin is still drying up to reveal it's true owner.

“Khawufan’ ucinge, ubundithembisa nangomtshato nabantwana. Nam ndiyatsh’ ukuthabatheka.”

The smile she has on her face is the kind when a nasty surprise leaves you amazed, regretful even.

“Amadoda ngeliny’ ixesha, haz’ ukuba nguban’ owakheth’ ukuwanik’ umlomo ukuz’ akwazi ukuthetha.”

An octopus riding on the back of a sheep. We trot up the mountain to cemetery silence, no birdsong or rushing water in the stream, the trees dead still, the sun’s rays frozen mid-flight, even the wind has gone on a holiday here, except for a wave of bee flight by the hillside to our left, Sibonda raking the shrubs for Father, the pesticide spell having failed so far to show him their true hiding place.

“Akazokusilinda umalume wakho ukuba umbone kuqala,” she says.

In my head, I implore her, “Ingathi ngesikhawuleza.”

A MANNEQUIN MARCH TO THE HILLS

The gate to the farming field was fastened with amathumbu enkuku, the way a bowtie would look with the chicken gallbladder splayed open to reveal the slimy in-betweens. We knew something was wrong when we spotted one honeybee stuck inside the end of a colon, already drying up to its real form. Sibonda’s rheumy eye still had movement left in it, resisting the sucking motion, but we both knew we were dealing with something else new here, that it was better to wait and see what happens. When the fowls come crying behind us, Inganathisonke only laughed at their gullibility.

“Awuna nkawuza kuwe baby?”

I had to transform back to my real body before I found the cigarettes in my jacket pocket.

For some time we smoked. Inganathisonke taking one long drag, then stretching the tentacle holding it towards me.

I had just stepped on the stompie with the hoof of my right hind leg and exhaled when the chicken entrails began to move, untying themselves. I should have backed away, instead of leaning closer to have a better view. My balls don’t hurt as much when Inganathisonke and I argue over an incriminating SMS and she goes for them to make her point, than the large colon lunging at me and coiling itself around my throat, reminding me of the coward I was to be in this conundrum, fighting a fight I did not beg for, Inganathisonke looking for a simpler bulge to grab the intestine, if you ever wondered how to hug a person without arms and ever settled for the waist, wrapping her tentacles around my neck with angered force, exacerbating my suffocation. The monkey and the snake didn’t give us a solution, their arms and fangs rendered pointless. The ants tried to bite themselves in anywhere they could, but the membrane of the inner walls was as tough as the plastic of kitchen appliances, retaliating with a force that

exceeds a storm's. You walk for days among stones and trees, and the ancestors are nowhere an unhuman voice should intervene.

AFRICAN BUTTERFLIES

The alligator Nothole came from the first rows of ibhatata. She'd been as patient as Inganathisonke and me, brooding for our error.

How she elongated her tail, the scales leaving a singing echo every one time Inganathisonke's severed tentacle fell to the ground and was absorbed like food going into the mouth, so that when you looked at the ground after each hit there was only the unnatural crumbs of grass blades but not your whole girlfriend's dreadlocks, leaving you to wonder where they went.

How do you fight with only your head? It sounds like a trick question but isn't. Inganathisonke had to float away from Nothole to be safe from her pompous jaws, a single tentacle remaining, the honeybees swarming closer and closer in the distance, the pandeyishi trees uprooting themselves to move in closer, willing and able to deliver the final strangle. Where was Finetown to save us now?

With the end in sight, my last breath, I found the right tone to mouth the kutsukutsu sex spell, and amathumbu were nullified within my chanting the words and the spell kicking in with one breath. Slackening, they pulled back into themselves, the bowtie again.

Stir-crazy doesn't begin to describe the relieved sigh Inganathisonke gave. The ground swallowed both the legs and arms, even the tail. Nothole's head, metamorphosis high on drugs, still tried to fight back more, darting towards our feet but the ground had decided its hunger was more important, so the head too was swallowed down.

ONLY FOR SMILE, SECOND-HAND

Why I laughed may have been the pandeyishi's spell having its effect on me, but the transformation was not a dance I would have chosen at Finetown tavern on any Friday: my bones shrunk, my skin changed colour, and before I knew it my body had been condensed into a rat. Even the two teeth on the front of my mouth felt funny.

Nostrato had abandoned her pandeyishi figure, and before I knew it she was a rat herself, dangling a penis in front of me as if she had nothing else better to pride herself in. She didn't so much stroke it as spit on the dickhead and tickle her balls, pulling the thing back with her rat hand so the head of it stood out like the tennis ball-like skull of a knobkerrie, shiny in the stalled sunlight and red from its own, self-generated malignant meme.

“Ndiyifun' ifumile indutsu ke mntana'm.”

A mound of rat droppings has collected by my feet by the time she climbed on my back, already toasting to my tears and embarrassment.

GET THE DECEMBER LOOK

You have to understand, the sperm of the Norway rat has tiny hook-shaped heads that allow them to link together in their hundreds, forming a mega-sperm with several hundred tails that can power-shoot towards my egg faster than a human's single sperm. If I'm about to be pregnant with my first rat-child it's not because I'm not too careful, it's because Nostrato's power redefines the word trickster.

BLACK SUEDE JACKET

Inganathisonke screamed, that the spell can only kill me if the sperm entered my heart, and all I thought was, "Muntuza, ndifun' ikuku ngoku mna, wena ulibele k'ucula isanxwe sakho?"

The honeybees started with stinging her anus and the rat Nothole recited all her praise names in hiccups, jumping off my back and scuttling away towards the farming fields gate. I couldn't even look fast enough at the mud of blood behind my arse, the ground had swallowed the last of it by the time Inganathisonke flew past my ears, shouting, "Mvase ngamathe baby, ungam'yeki tu!"

I only drew my tail towards me to stop the flow, although stuffing in a bit of the soil would have probably done a better job.

Sibonda, missing the bad eye with the eye pouch, threw a handful of mielie on the chicken entrails and they burned to the ground the way a piece of newspaper would. I took out the milk and we all cleansed our faces with it, nullifying whatever tricks the maize, in their blooming season, would have sprayed at us.

Inganathisonke said, "Uyaphendula ophendulayo, naye uyaceba uthi ndim lo, nguwe lo pha, thetha, khohlela, suza, mangazwa nawe s'nambuzane sam, nguwo lo umngxunya, wawusithi uyancokola."

Walking through the fields is nothing, except to think and maybe understand why Xhosa widows wear black.

KHUMBUL'EKHAYA

The village was like nothing I had seen before. Unlike Grandmother's, it had no eighteen mud huts in a circle, a fence of stones stacked around them to chest height, with a general entrance in the direction the huts were facing. There was no dog or chicken pen, or cooking hut where all my brothers and male cousins and uncles roasted dough and vegetables, no bonfire for the children to apply their backs with pig's fat next to, relieving their muscles of the day's exhaustion, no farming field a short distance away, no kraal of thongothi to hold a thousand of Grandmother's oxen, bulls, and milk cows, no aunts on tractors or my sisters felling a mthathi tree to fashion out a stick for me. Here the walkway to the door of each dwelling was a bed of dying coals, the houses themselves funeral tents that could fit in more than thirty people at once.

There was a church and in the church lived the priest, and the priest was Father, or as Inganathisonke and I would later christen him, the priest was Santa Claus; after we wandered

for forty days and nights in the hills protecting the village, scouting the make between the tents, the way the people interacted with each other, adopting their hand gestures from the distance, how their heads leaned back before they hugged, how they never kissed on the lips but always and only on the hand, how they raised their arms and the other would smell the armpits before saying goodbye, after we then got lost trying to walk towards the village gates, killing innocent birds and eating them raw, shitting onto our hands because we didn't know if there was a trap under the same ground we were squatting on, and finally, we could assemble the right spell with the same meva as the forest fooled us with. We saw the harmless path towards the mountain and back and up the mountain again, then back, tunnelling into the village from the road with the boulders next to the river, the pillow and plate question with the snoring lion guards at the gate, alone on a shisanyama as we all three chose, making it in.

We had no more entered the gates than Sibonda was seduced by a 90-year-old and she sucked his dick behind the tent with the happy children and he came amasi and cried like a baby. We should have laughed him off, but Inganathisonke was in no good mood, missing both arms and one leg, my anus still leaking into my trousers.

ZOO

I should tell you how the sun rose each day and hung in the sky as would a lightbulb in my room back in Father's house. I never saw no moon, neither a different mood in the people than to host funerals each day, the priest always lecturing, but there was no crying here, everyone was always quiet.

We all came close to giving up when we counted each other in our animal form. Only four of the honeybees would yield to the spell, the others assumed human form and left us outside the African initiated church as if we were like they didn't know us at all. Inganathisonke remained as a Senegal bushbaby, to be my pet, while I winced about, the back of my pants bloodied, missing both hind legs, wishing I was back in the same outfit as outside Father's makhwapheni's house: pressed black pants, white shirt, pink sandals, floor-reaching multicoloured coat, afro spiky.

The restorative spell only worked when we found a dark tent and slipped in while the family slept.

Sibonda said, "Kwathi ngokwenjenjalo kwadaleka ingoma yakwaNtu."

Inganathisonke said, "Ndiya kwendela kuMatakane ukuba kunjalo."

Inganathisonke pointed to the wheelchair first, then the ZCC uniform, and I wore both of the man's trousers, although I was not yet as comfortable as I wanted to be. Sibonda came out wearing Ray Bans and a Hawaii shirt, the same tracksuit pants and running shoes as before.

UMTHWALO

During the services there was always Khwezi, saving us from a drowning. One Sunday she might have a new set of locks, another day a blade chiskop, then relaxed hair, even an Indian

weave, always the cute gap in the top row of her shouting teeth, always lovely in her soundness, always ntombi-like in thinking, in minding her parents on the third pew, in how she spoke at the end of the preaching, in how she stood up and sorted or straightened her blazer before taking out the tissue from the breast pocket, dangling it in the air ‘til the rest of the congregation was convinced their gripe was with themselves and so should close down mouths, in how she raised her fingers as though meaning to touch the barbed-wire-knitted ceiling, a knuckle ring in both fists, and said, *The only real hit song is here, hide your pretentions!*, in how she paged through her bible, the twelve spies, the two among ten among those mongering hearts. Or as she said, “Like, mamela. Aba bantu bayiten and ufun’ ukundixelela wena uthi babini qha abanothando kwinkosana nenkosikazi yakho?”

I was sorry she never got to really know me.

“Luthando olu bantu. Lu thando olungazenzisiyo ndiyanixelela.”

SANKARA’S COMING

Winnie was the young girl I met when I went to the priest’s church. She was more than a receptionist, the way she was breastfeeding a child when Inganathisonke and me came into her office one morning, her skin the colour of a black and white photograph, the way I fell in love with her greeting, “Ihamba ingoma ide iyekwe ukuphindwa.”

Nontsikelelo was not in the mood. She waved me past with a very quick riddle we knew but had no interest in answering, “Andisanifuni maan.”

Nwabisa I don’t think ever left Santa Claus’s office, being the first and ignored wife of the imperial Santa Claus.

“Qamba ndimamele,” Nwabisa said.

The way Inganathisonke looked into my eyes as if she was going to tell me my next dreams or that I have a cancer of the tongue and I should be mindful of all the smells in my body. Only the way she said it was, “Uyayazi xa umntu wakho efun’ intwe mnandi, but wena uyaqond’ ba jonga, le iyakaka, mna andizokuyipha tu tonight?”

HEAD, THE GRASS SONG

Usually when we reminisce Inganathisonke will ask me how does it feel to be a celebrated? A celebrated what, she never says. Just a celebrated.

AND APPLES

Father was paging through The Book of Enoch when Inganathisonke and I sat down on the office couch. He didn’t even pretend to be suspicious about us as the married couple who had been requesting a therapy session all twenty-nine days since we’d entered Khumbul’ekhaya and wandered about the village, stealing food from people’s tents, pissing into the wells when

no one was looking, meditating by the library tent at the centre of the village when there was nothing naughty to do.

“I have come to understand that people who have no imagination cannot understand my work.”

Why he is addressing us in English should not take me by surprise. I have never heard him speak the language back eNdaweni, despite the bibles he read at home. Everyone here too, they speak in no other language, don't even mix it up the way we do sometimes in Finetown, what we call Xhonglish. Inganathisonke, Sibonda, and I speak English too now to blend in.

“What is it Mr and Mrs Sankara, the honeymoon is over and now the fool who makes a living off your pay checks has to pretend to like you?”

Inganathisonke and I pretend as if we find this humorous, fingering each other's stolen wedding rings while the worker men preparing a tent for another funeral outside the window are taking a smoke break and cracking their smiles at some kind of gossip.

“Everyone has to work for their money,” Inganathisonke says.

He's not even trying to look insulted.

“That must be it then.”

“We agree.”

“If I can perform this miracle in ten minutes, I'll be a happy man.” He's referring to the funeral, I think. He has no time for anything else than that and his church. He seems to take it all seriously. Even our visit, despite his impatience.

“We have no indifference on us, fool,” I think to myself. “Only swear words and a hobo's acceptance of things and how irredeemable they are.”

The sanguine tone does not last.

Father says, “And so you want to tell me what?”

He looks at me while we speak, the way an African traditionalist parent will address all the children in the room while looking at the eldest boy, since girls apparently don't count, the way the bible lists ancestry by the males borne to one house.

About Jesus' sisters, I wish I could say, but Inganathisonke saves me, “It's not our marriage. We have been having troubles with the people in the tent next to us. The father is a tokoloshe who drinks all day, all week, all the time, and sometimes he walks into our tent thinking it's his and will not leave our bed even when we call his wife to plead to him.”

Santa Claus laughs, the first time I've ever seen him do so.

“I like that man,” he says. “Probably knows God better than you two in love here.”

I nudge Inganathisonke in the ribs, remind her of our purpose and the plan, the actual words we have to say for Father to give away his power; words were what we were here to fight.

“Mphanda, you haven't spoken to me.”

This was going to be harder than Inganathisonke and I thought.

The words would not get out of my mouth. Speaking was not in me.

“Fa...”

I almost called him by the only name I used.

“Why, should I call all my wives in?”

You saw them when you came in, they have work to do, I want to say but don't. I raise my head so I look at him with a putrid stare.

“Don't sit there like you don't know how good people have to be hurt in bad stories,” I want to say, or go back to my language, the way Finetowners would say Utheth' ukunya ke ngoku joe.

Inganathisonke saves me, says, “We are both born-again, my father. We would like you to explain the Old Testament to us, why God said an eye for an eye, vagina for fingering, Afrobeat to iqhilika.”

He almost laughs, but catches himself before the song leaves his vocal chords.

“Can I ignore that you are saying it wrong, then go on to live with myself, the secret, how you twist God's words to serve your own goal?”

Is he meaning to correct our sentences?

“But look here,” he lifts the book he was reading when we came in so Inganathisonke and I can see the highlighted verses and dog-eared page and church stamp on the bottom margin, “I only focus on the forgotten and silenced histories, nothing else is real in the bible than this,” then raises one hand to caress his beard, still purple from the last time I remembered it, slowly, like he's brushing the tail of a pet cat, “and you both should know babies can't be fed solid food until they grow actual teeth.”

Inganathisonke wants to laugh a laugh that says, And now here it comes, but I tighten my grip on her hand, enough to pull her back and remind her of our duty.

DIRECTION

The idea was to push the sun towards the western horizon, no matter if it melted from its own sweating or broke into little gold bars we could carry in our pockets, or maybe confetti, like we'd opened an exploding birthday gift, the job just had to be done.

AN OLD WOMAN'S DOEK

The trick word was Sodom and Father fell into the rabbit hole before the nkanyamba disrupted the whole lesson.

Inganathisonke had been saying, as we planned, “Children’s artwork reminds me of violent movies sometimes,” and he smiled like he wanted to laugh, “especially the crayon stick mummies and the small child holding mommy’s hand,” and I could see the laugh coming into his eyes, “and how they never have wild dreams in the drawings, except those days when they talk about soccer or rugby or,” and that’s when he bellowed from his stomach, actually stood up and clapped in happiness, dancing the kwasakwasa like he was not 60 years old, dressed in a Santa Claus suit with a purple beard instead of white; dance towards the door of his tent and back, his boots, old enough to be an war veteran’s, missing laces, “and no one thinks of the doodles as graffiti, but I do.”

What Father thought was itching of the groin was the spell taking serious genesis, what he thought was the heat in the room too high and needing to open the already-opened window wider was the spell killing his need for sleep and killing his coherence, what he thought was his stinking socks jumping on the floor, dancing to his own song, was the spell in its dying stages, seeping in and moving up through Father’s toes, ankles, knees, stomach, chest, Adam’s apple, beard, and because he was singing anyway, mouth wide open, “And we all know that kind of naturalized art cannot be hung on a museum wall”, into his mouth, drying up all his saliva.

MISTA SANTA CLAUS

Somehow Mondale Street when you are limping along on your only waist in the world, your arse singing its own revenge, is not the same as when you are happy to be back in your hometown, greeting all the boys and girls, popping into the spazas if you spot an old girlfriend on the opposite pavement, or the music is just getting to you and no weight-lifting will get you more than one warm home-cooked meal.

Father is the one hunting me down, throwing all the Chinese-made toys at me; a train set explodes at my waist, Barbie dolls turn into real sparks while my eyes spin wildly in their sockets, amazed at the ingenuity.

The walkie-talkie showers the same spot where my right foot just upped and left, dragging myself along to the beat of Father’s aim with its constant rain of sparks.

UHM, PLUMS

I should have been asleep in my foam bed by now, not out here, playing shepherding to Father. In kwaNtu, us boys were supposed to mind the cooking compound and girls a whole day of making friends with the cattle.

FRESH BREAD

“Ke, ukuba uvukile kwabafileyo,” Grandmother says, pipe at her lap, “masithi nguyu uNoloyiso oyaziyo intlungu yethu bantwana bakhe.”

A SHORT LONG STORY

“Alifikanga ligalelekile!”

Sanelisiwenguwe is too happy for me and I don't understand why. I'm still the same brother who'll cook a meal for her and like to kiss her on the forehead when she has a cold, unless it's the Nevada blazer she knows means something to other men my age.

“Ho-yooooo-o-ooo-o-o-weeeee,” she sings.

HOAX

Two of the octopuses are left alive and Inganathisonke is still in a wheelchair; Grandmother says it would be more exciting to see if I can be faithful to a woman in a wheelchair than a docile girl who is too clever to pass through a mqombothi strain to gain her freedom from being horribly plain. Sibonda is the only one who's been helped, all his wishes gained as his reward, both eyes restored, my aunts marvelling how he walks without his feet staying too long on the ground, the man is happy to be back in kwaNtu he even quit his councillor job and handed in his ANC card.

He tells us, “Mayihambe iyokunya iDA yenu, mna ndonele ngoku bububhanxa obungapheliyo.”

OCTOPUSES HIGH ON CRACK, BAY-BEH

They both hover back, leaning against the wind, on the opposite ends of the same road, as if they were traffic lights themselves.

He is smoking a potato tuber as though it was his hand-rolled tobacco cigarettes, still playing Father Christmas with his suit of red velvet and white trimmings. I don't how to stop him from doing that, it's embarrassment on another level, even for me, laughing and angry in the same breath.

Father exhaling annoyed flames instead of nicotine, Father thundering, “Andizalanga gwala kakade. That' unyathelo msunu wakho, uz'obon' 'ba ndibhinqe ngantoni.”

Why would Mondale object, though? The home of the nobodied screams of Finetown. Prison to the street-corner preachers, the ganja boys with their dreadlocks tied into a neat bundle that curves to kiss the back of their necks, the scrapyards pushers, man and women who know no other way to get sliced bread on their hands, to feed the whole family at the end of the day, the stay-with-me's who didn't care for imiphanga and went to sleep because they want to fit in without appearing too eccentric to the other neighbours.

Father is itching to attack, the octopuses are questioning my crooked smile, whether or not it's a command instead of me saying I speak now, pointing at Father, go, KUBO!?!

Inganathisonke was one of them. I didn't force her, she overruled my wishes, lowering her skirt after squatting and telling me, “Andingawo amarhewu mna, wona amuncu.”

“Mxelele mntan’am.”

Grandmother was not ready to participate, even if the hair on her neck was a flame, and her piglets were kneeling at her feet by the rubbish bin, where she stood in her new stilettos.

“Nzakuva ngawe ke boo.”

She was already floating towards the baby octopuses.

TALKS WITH THE GOVERNMENT

Finetown has two kinds of streets. The narrow and the potholed. You are lucky if you find a narrow and equally potholed one in the suburbs on the hill, but in other pockets of town the potholes find you and even want to talk back, if you’re not in too much of a hurry. One even proposed to Inganathisonke the other Wednesday, offering a discarded bag of Nknaks floating on its calm surface as an engagement ring until it could afford a real one. I was the one who wanted to laugh when Inganathisonke said the fashion spell out loud, bottling air into real gravel and throwing it with her eyes into the pothole, silencing it mid-proposal.

“Umasipala uyakuvele atyabeke itar yakhe, uyabo?”

I just wiped the excess oil off my face with both my hands, smiling as in laughing at her joke.

“Jonga nje indlela ekulova ngayo nqu nooceba bethu!”

Sibonda is the one coming to the house with his Shoprite bags and cooks his meals without leaving anything for me.

“Ngendlel’ enindishiye ngayo eKhumbul’ekhaya, hayi ntanga uyakumunca nje intupha uzixolise ngeminqweno, a’khont’ uzakuyizuza ngokubila kwam.”

Inganathisonke defending me, “Li gokra la magokra eli nje. Uyakhumbula embambisene noyihlo kwela tyholo ngasemqolombeni, usithi wena makame uzokumdlakadla uSanta Claus, wabe ubaby eqinisile entanyeni katat’ akhe, ndlela le waye bila amaqanda uSanta Claus, hhe jonga, hayi nam ndandisuprised ukubanamandla. USofanguwe akalolilo igwala tat’ ekhaya, yho! Yinja engabotshwa mniniyo le.”

“Thula wena,” he jests, “ungumfaz’ onjani ukungawayek’ amadoda athethe ezawo?”

“Asoze ndiqalis’ nokuqalis’ ukuba ngusinyeke mna tat’ ekhaya, nawe uyayazi lo nto.”

“Jonga ke mfo wethu!” he says, showing me the plate of pork bangers fish fingers mix veg noodles, licking his lips to rub it in. “Sinemali singabanye.”

He doesn’t mean to be that mean, he is always pretending to be something he is not, the case of Castle Lager in his car boot, the raw brown beans he keeps in the glove compartment, the pictures of all the little children playing and living back in kwaNtu, all of it as if it was not his true self, just to be remembered for being a striking character, to be spoken about glowingly at his funeral.

GRANDMOTHER

Grandmother's grave has a mnquma kraal of its own. In the garden behind the cooking compound, there are ten others, of all the women who were supposed to be high mother after Noloyiso but couldn't be because of her rape and murder, even Sibonda's white tourists, when they come with their bus and cameras and guidebooks to tourists attractions in Finetown and the surroundings and kwaNtu pops up somewhere down the webpage, between the colonial museum by Gogogo Street and the last remaining stature of a British colonialist on horseback on the corner of Taljaard and Bantu streets, they are attacked with the details of the rape and murder, much as they don't retaliate with anything close to resembling an apology for their fathers carving Africa into pizza slices and picking on the anchovies and cheese and avocado.

THE SOPHIA OF SHIELA'S DAY

The ghost of Finetown only came when it was dark as darkness could be behind the shacks eNdlovini, drunk fathers balancing their hands on the zinc walls both sides of the narrow space in between, waking up innocent babies, Mothers switching on the battery-powered radio to hear what time it was when the DJ rambled, the dog barking on the fence, alerting the dusk before the moon is finished with her dream.

Blackness was always a light on its own, no decoys needed to seduce whiteness.

I know a man who says his grandmother is a better musician than nature. He believes it whole. I look back at my own life and cannot find a reason to invite him for supper, the pots will not handle his calls for repatriations, the way his clothes will say hello to everything in the house, asking after the bedsheet and toothbrushes, whether razor blade is feeling better today or does Dettol soap know what school she will go to next year.

The Finetown ghost is the night itself, it eats no food but the edible screams of its people.

Or as Mother would say, eselwe, *I woke up dreaming bad and it was the darkness knocking with a cold wind, so I want to go back to sleep now!*

Father turning over to face the other wall and pulling the pillow nearer to his head, *I just think there is a way to stop with this screaming in your sleep.*

EMBO

The outie in the makoti dress hugs Father first, then the girl with the bandages.

The street committee women just wave hi at him.

Ingathanisonke is always trying to stir up a brawl, "Hhe bethuna, anivasi na? Amanzi axabene nabani apha kuni?"

Human limb on brain work, we say our prayers.

The women, Father, even makoti outie and sundress girl remain in their people bodies. We – Grandmother, Inganathisonke, Sibonda and me – are comfortable in our changed forms.

Grandmother says, “Ndingenelela nje kuba ingathi umzi ugcewele mbombo zone ngoku.”

The honeybees circling towards the makoti outie and sundress girl at the same time, splitting their wave into two.

Inganathisonke and the baby octopuses throw slurs at the street committee women, chaotic, rude dress-downs.

Father beckons me with a wave of his flaming tail, saying, “Ndisezipho zakho nyana, iz’ uyihlo abulise.”

“Zipho zini ezo na Nzotho?” Sibonda asks.

“Hamb’ ubuza mkhuluwa.”

Before I move in and head-butt Father at the ankles, Sibonda suffocates three of the women just as Nostrato squashes over two hundred of the honeybees with her bare fists, taking away what limbs of Sibonda’s I don’t know.

Inganathisonke blows me a kiss before Grandmother changes into an elephant, her agitated trunk swatting the air by one ear as if waving an annoying fly away.

They speak as if reading a story out loud to an audience.

Father says, “Ugqaphs ngowabantwana kwedini, sondel’ apha ndikubonise amalangatya kahili.”

Sibonda says, “Nyani ke amakhwenke makacace emadodeni, ubuhlanti ayondawo yokudlalela.”

Father says, “Kukwazinja zath’ umlilo nalapha bhuti. Thetha ndive.”

Grandmother starts on her ntsomi while Nomasi pulls clean all of her right ear, “Waze wathi utat’ ulahle, mna asoze ndiwele kulomfula, ngcono wena mbotyi,” Grandmother reads, the spell weakening Nomasi, and whacks Nomasi on the mouth, the hoof shoving her at the waist so she reels back, staggering, until Nomasi can right herself, too far from Grandmother’s trunk to reach when Grandmother attempts to get another hit on her.

THE POLICE GOSSIP

2011 Father welcomes Nonunion, his second wife; too young to be my mother, too old to be my girlfriend.

2012 Their daughter, Somanini, pukes at my feet on a night when I am returning from Ta Wiseman’s and have come into the main house for food before going to bed. I let Nonunion know by the look of disgust on my face that I wish I could slap her twice across her chin for making me clean up the floor. But Nonunion only says, *I can’t help it if she is the lastborn who was supposed to murder your mother with an elastic band.* Later in the day, after I report her

to Father and expect a beating on her, Father says, “Uthembekile endimkhonzayo.” Like it’s the default response he can give to any question. Like he knows who’s the villain but has made his choice. “Ubukhe wacingisisa ngokuthabatha ubushumayeli nje ngesakhono, nyana?” He must be going mad, I think, since he knows I have learned to speak with my hands and not my mouth.

2013 Even after the police come and question Father, he will only say, “Mna ndazi kukho izidumbu ezibini aph’ ekamereni kum, uSofanguwe unegazi ezandleni zakhe, akanandlela yokutsho ukub’ kwenzeke ntoni.”

“Kodwa taima ubutshilo nje nawe ukuba le chap sisimumu, uya—”

He was in his forties (first policeman), butter skin, as we say in Finetown, speaking of Khoi blood, more so those born and raised in rural Wild Coast.

“Akasiso isimumu, uzalwe nje ngokuba umbona, engakwaz’ ukuthetha.”

“Ubutshilo grootman.”

“Nqo. Nawe undivile, sitheth’ int’ enye tat’ upolisa.”

They were draping white sheets over the bodies, and Nonunion’s was soaked of blood way worse.

“Masithi wena bhutiza, unyana lo, uSofanguwe, uzamile ukundibiza pha ekamereni, ukuthi nazi izidumbu zomfazi nodade wabo, nto nje mna nditye ixesha, ndaliginya lingandenzanga nto phofu lo na, ndingamniki ngqalelo unyana, ndimbhebhetha, ndisithi makahambe aye pha kude, akaboni ndixakekile yibhayibhile, elibele kukunalula izandla zakhe, endenz’ igeza. Intunga hayi yena shem uyivulile, ndiyamnika kwelocala.”

THE KISS OF JUDAS

My gods are all the stars blinking themselves blind in the Finetown night sky tonight, even if they submit to a different criterion than yours, I love them anyway, High Mother’s especially, she who made as many mistakes as I had accumulated before the war with father.

A SPOONFUL OF MUD AND TWO DROPS OF PEE

The American tourist speaks into his recorder, says, “Girl, what would you say you love about Africa?” Shoves the thing at Inganathisonke’s face like she needs Zambuk for her lips, or he’s holding a perfumed wrist for her to smell. The way he twangs it makes Africa sound like a disease to be scorned at, like a special Aids reserved for countries. The only thing stopping me from knocking down his reading glasses and grabbing at his Pokémon notebook is Inganathisonke, legs pressed hard against each other because of an urge to pee, egging on Mista USA with the belt cell phone holder and Elvis tattoo on the neck.

American tourist: “Does it really snow here? And when it comes, does it come up from the rivers and floats to the sky and shit?”

Inganathisonke: “Pants are really comfortable, a girl wearing them is a good thing, I think.”

American tourist: "It must be scary leaving in such a large country with all the huge provinces and shit and their borders, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Uganda, fuck Nigeria might as well be another continent to you people?"

Inganathisonke: "Africa is not a country."

American tourist: "This is for my blog."

Inganathisonke lets go of my hand.

"Here's another question."

I switch on the kettle.

"Do you have pets here?"

Inganathisonke: "Have you been to the zoo?"

"I have."

"And what do you think?"

"I'm surprised there hasn't been a hippy movement to shut down the fucking lot of them. They're probably on their way, though. With their peace signs and shit."

American tourist: "I think Brooklyn would suit you."

Inganathisonke: "What do you want to know?"

The sugar doesn't taste sweet enough, so I scoop one more teaspoon into my enamel cup.

Two other tourists step into the kitchen holding their bodies like Father's kitchen is a gallery room, and what's worse is one of them is a black woman. Sibonda can tell I am not enjoying this, but he's more worried about Inganathisonke.

The show is over now my people, he says, being the decorated tenderpreneur he could not stop himself from becoming after the war. He has new prosthetic legs and his walk betrays his impotence. Smiling is the best make up and money does talk; Sibonda herds his people from behind. The American tourist doesn't even say goodbye to Inganathisonke.

MONDALE AT 2AM

Father could be carrying a hospital in his pocket, but the way he's enjoying himself, taunting me all which ways, can only mean to deceive me of his true state of mind. After head-butting him, he swiftly lands a slap across my face and I find myself rolling towards the stop sign on the corner, knocking against a hawker's school desk, tired little shrunken fruits bumping against my sheens and then rolling off towards the sewage grate by my feet.

Father spits on the ground as if in disgust, but it's only because my saliva is still too fresh in his body to slow him down to a statue's pose, or even an seizure on the tarmac. I know I have to get another head-butt at him to empty more of my mouth.

He takes off the suit, very slowly, until he's back in his overalls, rolled at the waist, exposing his humpback.

Grandmother has stepped on both of Nomasi's ankles, breaking her legs in half. The honeybees whimper in attack, their stings without much poison since Nostrato eats the honeybees live, one by one, licking her fingers just to spite Sibonda.

Father says, "Khawubukel' apha." His flaming tail extends to be a hosepipe, shooting fire in my direction. Something swooshing past the side of my face, throwing me off balance so I find myself taking a few steps back until I am leaning against the overturned school desk just as the heat of the flame taps past my nose, branding me a black and smoky crooked line stretching across from my shoulder. A baby octopus twitches on the road surface, its whole head reduced to a smoldering cone.

"Uzakubhatala tat' azala!" Inganathisonke has already moved towards an inch of Father's face, but Father dodges her tentacle. She swivels around until she's on Father's humpback, latching onto him with all her strength, injecting him with her venom, the holy water she carries in her tentacles. Father's flaming tail doused to a ghostly scent and rendered cumbersome.

A honeybee general breaks away from the rest of the cloud and whizzes towards a Lucky Star can by the school desk. The queen has to come out of hiding in order to regenerate what is left of her army. Sibonda must be struggling with Nostrato, to summon his brain and risk actual death. Grandmother blows her trunk to slow down Father's movements to the gravity force of a moonwalk, giving the honeybees enough leeway to transform their stings into glowing bullets of gold. They do not fire them like guns, but instead heave themselves away from Nostrato and linger above her head. Their rain of golden stings twinkles in the Finetown dawn, a kaleidoscope of tiny stars that pour into Nostrato's head, leaving it riddled with holes, a bust of Swiss cheese.

Inganathisonke jumps away from Father's back. Comes to rest on my back, Grandmother lifting all her legs, to only bring them down on the tarmac, leaving the ground to vibrate by itself, destabilizing Father's aim with the flames. Each time he throws one at me, he has to pluck out a strand of hair from his purple beard, losing a bit of his power with each. By the time he throws his weakest flames at Grandmother, then Inganathisonke and me, he is staggering as if drunk, until at last he collapses to rest on his knees, panting, exhaustion the only expression of his eyes.

What made it harder to kill Father is the makoti outie. Unlike the sundress girl, who died within the first round from a water-filled blow to the head from Inganathisonke, the makoti outie could transform himself into any object in line with his surroundings, blending into the geography of violence as though he was Mondale's bastard child. He has no real power with him except being a quick thinker. Grandmother will have pinned him to the ground, ready to stomp his head into a goo of mealie pap with her hoof, and the outie will change form in an instant, or Inganathisonke suffocating him close to death, wrapped around his head as if a bank robber's pantyhose mask and the outie just transforms himself into rubbish bag positioned at a safe distance, even tries to enter Inganathisonke as smoke through the sucking pours in her tentacles. It's only later, when Father rises from the street floor, his flaming tail half restored, that we

figure out a way to spot the outie anytime a new feature of the road seems out of place. Why have a no parking zone sign outside the doors of Bafana Store, or a Spar trolley outside Shoprite's doors? There is no way an F1 flag can appear on the roof of a parked Bantam, it just doesn't make sense. A household dustbin nestled against the traffic light, or a yellow Beetle in the middle of the road when we didn't see it coming, as if it ran out of petrol, no owner in the driver's seat? The first thought was to use Sibonda. The honeybees were capable of handling the makoti outie, but Grandmother came up with another plan. She had to transform herself back to her human form, amaprint, cikilise sneakers, the walking stick, and then the mannequins came, breaking out of the Jet and Jumbo and Fashion Express as if on a prison break, windows shattered, all of them an army positioned in front of Grandmother.

They amble as Zombies everywhere, and anytime some feature of the street deserves closer inspection, the mannequins will stop to lower their heads and read into it. By the time the makoti outie appears as a train set on the stairs leading into the KFC, one lady mannequin jumps onto him. I guess he doesn't have the luxury of planning, Father stammering *You are too greedy for your good boy, Jesus would have adopted you*. The remainder of the depleted honeybees shit bullets of sting on the outie's face.

FINISH LINE

It felt like a gangbang, of course, but I was having my say.

Father didn't see the cobra of saliva crawling to stand behind him and rise up into an attacking position. The fangs were as slimy as the rest of the body and I was not going to spoil his hopes and let him take his eyes off the fog of honeybees buzzing towards him.

DAYDREAMS

My dead sister visits me often in my dreams and she's always older each time, no longer crawling in her SpongeBob onesies and sucking on a pacifier, or the other day, when she was giggling as I lifted her up with my arms from the sandy floor of the crèche playground and lowered her onto my lap, to experience the swings for the first time.

This afternoon, she asks me in her toddler voice, "Utata wakwenzantoni na bhuti ukuba umbulale ngolahlobo?" The last time she appeared in a crib, but I didn't ask why she could talk to me and not me at her. We both seemed to understand the need to make up for lost time.

"Akho mntu uzakukholelwa xa ubalisa ngam, uyayazi lo nto phofu?"

She's cradling a black nodoli with batteries at the ribs and a speaker in the stomach. It squeaks greetings and other nonsensical talk everytime she hugs it too tightly.

"Apho ndihlala khona, ndikhuliswa ngamabhulu."

She reads my head, doesn't even try to look confused at her name.

"Bandibiza uCharlene pha ya, kodwa hayi mna bhuti ndizalwe ndifidwa iinkobe ezicujiweyo ngumama, isiXhosa lulwimi lam ndide difik' engwabeni."

FINISH LINE

Father crawling towards the taxi rank.

Father muttering curses, “Ngumqundu wendawo na le, akh’o nezembe eli xa ufun’ ukuzibulala.”

Father resting against the Cell C payphone container.

Father not bothering to reply to Sibonda, he also without the use of his legs, now that he has turned himself back to his human form.

“Kwantu phendula,” Sibonda says to Father. “Ulwimi lakho luphi na, ulihlafunile, yintoni wathi cwaka mntana katata?”

Father speaking to himself, “Mnye qha onokuniqanda ngoku, kodwa bambulala bengenalusizi.”

Grandmother saying, “Hlukana nokumana ucinga ngoNoparty, ulungiselelwe amabhayi ngokwaneleyo apha akhoyo.”

Father pointing at me, the suicidal thoughts invading his heart now, “Ndicende ndimnke ngembeko kulomhlaba, nyana. Andizalanga mntan’ unentliziyo emdaka, noko.”

DAYDREAMS

We have our days where she visits me and I know it. She is nine.

On this day, she takes my hand and walks with me into the street. All the people are white, but are singing to House songs and they complain about how bad things are with the government, that they should vote out the councillor next time, about last night’s episode of Skeem Sam, about how at so and so’s funeral at the window the bishop lied about what killed Sandy, he said it was TB that left her skinny and housebound but everyone knows she had shared her virginity with Shaun from the corner house and everyone knew Shaun ruined all the women he slept with, left them hating every other lover they had after him, even his babies were not kind people.

FINISH LINE

Grandmother could not take it any longer. The spell was taking forever.

DAYDREAMS

Charlene, my sister, is almost thirteen.

There’s a boy at school, she tells me, and he keeps touching her on her shoulders when they talk but she’s too shy to tell him to stop doing that, that he should not stand so close to her bum when she invites him to her sister Megan’s 21st and dance to DJ Tira.

FINISH LINE

Grandmother saying, “Ityala lakho Nzotho wabalekisa umfazi kum, umsa kulamarhumsha. Babezakuthini ukungamhlafuni okwedlezinye.”

Grandmother saying, “Bonk’ ubomi bam, ubuyintsomi nje yomntu.”

Grandmother saying, “Singa ba kaNoloyiso thina, intomb’ ezimabele amboxo, intlok’ eziqin’ okwelitye laseGwadana, amaxilongo athi chosi kuvele kubehele. Asilahleki tu ntondo thina, wena uphose kwelokulibala owona mpha ungaphelwa zinkozo.”

DAYDREAMS

We are walking towards the hall and she is happy in her princess dress.

“Andikuthembi wena bhuti, uhleli usithi ndimhle kakade.”

I tell her the beauty pageant will go well, that I’ll be the first one to clap when she starts prancing on the assembly concrete, that I’ll even stand up and open the umbrella for her should the rain fall as she walks across the assembly floor outside the classrooms, that I’ll hold her hand even if the clouds come down onto the earth and try to spoil her moment.

“Ah wena bhuti kanjani, uzimisele ukubayi charmer ne?”

FINISH LINE

The way we killed our enemies was by drying them up into a log or a stone or the kind of dead bird you see on the road sometimes, wings open, legs raised, flattened by a car tire or hit by lightning.

DAYDREAMS

She says, “Nguwe ozakundixelela ukuba mandikhethe eyiphi indlela.”

How we get to kwaNtu is no question I am able to answer for now.

“Khona, ndimbona nini losisi kudala ndiva ngaye.”

She means Inganathisonke, but she calls her Inga.

“Hayi jonga, ndiyabona ukubambe ngobhongwana.”

There must be a smile on my face, since she says what she says next, “Ndifuna ukuyiyizela ukodlula bonk’ abanye oosisi bam xa utshata.”

FINISH LINE

Father is reduced to bird poop, no one would think anything of him by the payphone container, the municipal street sweepers who sometimes wander into the taxi rank on slow mornings to

gather the rubbish, discarded Shoprite foam trays where there was a piece of fish before, or the empty paper bag of oily, fried chips, even the lonely plastic shopping bag.

DAYDREAMS

“Umama ungaphaya kwelithango,” she says, scanning the edge of the farm. “Usebenza pha.” Nothing else gets explained, as in all dreams.

“Xa esibona uzakothuka, kodwa kufuneka singabinjalo thina.”

She swallows her own tears when they reach the corners of her mouth.

“Ingxaki zezi zinja zalomlungu qha.”

A plan is hatched. Scaling the gate, the beef slab keeping the dog occupied while we sneak up to Mother’s flat at the lower end of the Boer’s estate.

Charlene does all the scheming and I see no reason to damper her excitement at the break-in.

FINISH LINE

On the day Grandmother will die, the family gathers around the grassmat she lies on in her hut.

Grandmother says, “Ndikuthembile nyana, nto nje ndinovalo. Ndakuthini ukufikela koodade bam, kanti wena ndikushiy’ undihlaza ngomdudo womngcwabo emva?”

She looks as healthy as they day I first saw her at Father’s house.

“Hayi noko nkondekazi, asizomveku ukufika apho.” Uncle Smallbig, as we call him, doesn’t even put down the enamel bucket he is holding.

“Umqombothi uyalibazisa kodwa Dangatye,” Grandmother says.

“Kuba ndizakuthini, ndikhuliswe ngomabil’ ebanda na xhekwazi?”

MY OTHER SISTER SANELISIWENGUWE

In the years when I live to see my own couplets run around on the street with their diski playing, she will be my neighbour, the first one after Inganathisonke to hear about my dreams, Charlene and Mother visiting me. She will not have married yet, but will have two children of her own and “Thulethu’s Haven”, a thriving tavern what used to be a garage, to her name, even though she will never drive a car in her life and, the way I will see it, will not harbor any interest in ever learning how to. She will die in her early fifties, of an overdose of sleeping pills, the only sister to ever use Mondewenja when addressing me.

FINISH LINE

The cart came to a lumbering stop outside Bafana Store, Father sweating through his naked back, the midday sun as if targeting him especially this afternoon. A man carrying a guitar

came out of the door: 5litre oil-tank as a bout, fishing line and wires for strings, galvanized nails for adjusting tonal quality, a plank for neck; the vendor with the calamine dots on both her cheeks picked up an uhudi at her feet. The song wasn't so much a song of anything, but chanting of the things Finetown would not allow itself to forget: the battle of egazini up on the hill, the prophets who'd warned the tribe of the impending danger from the sea-coming people. Father had a long solo about the tribe fighting among each other, arguing about who was right and whose eminent words should be believed. The last verse was a stab at the untruth that Noloyiso had a child out of wedlock, Father mouthing the words the way a praise singer might be angry and overjoyed in the same note: "SingooMpukwana, yini na bakuthi? Xhoma umkhonto qalela, inkomo iyala ukukhala. Sasaza imbewu kuqala makhaya, ezi zibane zalamangomso ethu azinakusibonisa nto singayaziyo kakade." The spectators gathering around the cart, Father leaning on one of the wheels and singing in a sad tone, while the woman and man strummed and yodelled their harmony in spurts of call and response. Even the police, after discovering the true nature of the ceremony, danced to the singing.

"Ngumgidi na lo, bethu?" one mother cried out, unsure.

"Hayi ke ngoku nawe mfazi, wakhe wawubona phi umgidi estratweni?" another said.

"Ndazi phi," the first answered, "izinto zihleli zitshintsha kulemihla yethu. U-ewe nguhayi kuqala, uvuka namhlanje kusithiwa uhayi iyamcaphukisa into yokufaniswa no ewe, awazi nje mawuthathe eyiphi."

There was no need for me to hide the novella I had in my hands, anticipating the teasing should any of my classmates discover me here, or disembark from the cart, Father having made sure I had the best seat in the house.

THE GOSPEL OF INGANATHISONKE

"Sesisenza unam-nawe nje ngoku," Inganathisonke will chide me in my eighties, my fingers too lazy with the arthritis to rouse her clitoris. "Ngcono singaziqaleli ingxuba-kaxaka, mlingane."

Nevertheless I will persist, kneeling down even with all the pain in my bones and the heaviness of my balding head of wispy white hair, to place my tongue on her nipple, cupping the other breast in my left hand.

She'll say, "Tshisa ngonyama yam! Andiyo'nkomo ikhabayo mna, enza wena ndibone."

The sound of her quiet scream, moans too shallow to represent honest happiness, will be enough to last me an erection for the whole afternoon.

STORIES IN DRAFT

THE ACTIVIST

Fact and fiction weaved together, written in an essayist style: talking about the generation who mothered the so called born-frees. Must feature the line “I must tell this story, about the appalling yesterdays of those that left us our names and little else that is not heartache” in the opening paragraph.

The narrator, a black woman in her mid-30s, meets a 60-year-old Sandra Laing¹ in a shebeen in a black-majority/mix-race South African township and both have “the discussion of our lives”. The protagonist was one of the women protesting and burning panties outside the court during the Jacob Zuma rape trial; now she has cut ties with the Friends of JZ clique and is fresh from a tumultuous affair with an ANC councillor (she was his mistress). Zuma is never, ever mentioned in full but merely alluded to.

“America tried to kill me as a writer, with indifference, with insults.”

Use this quote by Anaïs Nin, misappropriated in view of the sensitive nature of the “facts” of the story so that all three of these women—the main character, Laing and Nin—have something in common, to serve the ending, to be uttered by the narrator:

Mandelafrica tried to kill me as a revolutionary. With indifference, with insults.

THE POLITICIAN

- a) First half of the story to be told in the historical present: a girl visits her manservant of a father at his employer’s home during the 1969, June school holidays, and she discovers that her father, an African, has a very close friendship with his employer, a single, childless “Coloured” woman in her early fifties. A week later her father and the Coloured woman are arrested by apartheid police and outed as communists; the pair feature in the national news for a week. The Coloured woman is released on bail, dies weeks later from a letter bomb; the girl’s father, while in police custody, dies under mysterious circumstances, within days of the Coloured woman’s death.

¹ Sandra Laing was born black, but to white parents... [in 1955, the genesis years of apartheid] Abraham and Sannie Laing were white, their parents, grandparents, great grandparents were white, yet their daughter was dark. By a biological quirk, the pigment of an unknown black ancestor had lain dormant for generations and manifested in Sandra... Born to a conservative Afrikaner family, Sandra’s fate was to not be what she was supposed to be... “I’m much happier with black people. I am, I was, very shy with white people. Even today I still think white people don’t like black people because of the way they treated me.” From *The Black Woman with White Parents*, The Guardian March 17, 2003.

- b) Jump 29 years later into new South Africa: the girl of the “communist” African is the deputy minister of police (the first woman to assume such a high-profile position in the country) and is named among three officials held responsible for a mining massacre that left twenty-two miners dead in the northern regions of Limpopo. The deputy police minister has dreadlocks that have, even by the standards of her predecessors, made her something of a celebrity in the national tabloid press, such that she has been christened The Sangoma Cop.
- c) She will, in a few years, become the president of her political party and consequent to that rule the nation, the country’s first of many tyrants (the story must hint at this very early).

THE TRADITIONALIST

A story of five initiates into manhood (abakhwetha), including the oldest among them, a forty-plus-year-old Zulu-speaking man named Sol/Solomon, who has a wife and two children back in Johannesburg, where he lives and works as a handyman in Meadowlands; because Sol is the child of a Xhosa man (and Zulu woman), he wanted to be circumcised the “proper” way. Sol drinks nonsensically/consistently and is a hit among the unwed mothers of the village (especially those who are known to imbibe).

There is no initiate death here from botched circumcision, etc., just a long speech at the end of the story by Sol’s father, a former Bus driver in Soweto now retired to his home in rural Transkei, speaking at the homecoming ceremony of the fully-healed initiates, their circumcision period having ended, (this should constitute half or more of the story, with some flash-forward scenes in between) and Sol’s father lamenting the death of initiates elsewhere in Xhosaland and what a pity it is now the government is even forcing people in other parts of the land to send their boys straight to government hospitals to get circumcised, meaning they were abandoning the veldt—and their true culture, he must say—entirely.

“Who will call these boys real men?” Sol’s father asks at some point.

“Not me,” answers Sol loudly, clutching a Black Label can to his chest, breaking with mgidi/traditional ceremony etiquette, for ikrwala/graduate is supposed to be the image of a mature and exemplary young man, quiet, forever regal in his posture, as he sits with the other graduates outside the kraal gate. “That, to me,” Sol says, slamming the ground between his legs with a fist, “is a boy.”

THE LOVERS

The story of Abenathi and Thulethu should read a lot like intsomi, where certain events summarily lead to the conclusion of two youngsters falling in love and a wedding fit for a polygamous soccer star to end the tale, except Thulethu got pregnant by Abenathi before there was talk of lobola and then Abenathi went into a depression after he learned about the pregnancy from Thulethu’s peto, Babaliwe; when Abenathi confronts Thulethu about it, Thulethu tells him of the subsequent abortion at Mama Yambo New-Day Medicines on the corner of J and A Street, the main bus station in Finetown.

Abenathi goes to the pharmacist on C Street and buys home a box of headache pills, which must do the job, for his nozala finds him in his bedroom on a Sunday morning whilst she is

preparing to go to church and Abenathi is lying on top of his bed still dressed in a red Converse overall with matching takkies, staring up at the ceiling, unconscious.

In the story, Abenathi must have just turned seventeen the week before the suicide. Thulethu, at fifteen, kills herself four days later.

Their burials will be held on the same day at Abenathi's home: because Abenathi is of royal blood and his distraught father, a government-remunerated chief of some long-lost Gcaleka kingdom manipulated out of power by the British sometime in the 1600s, volunteered to bury his son's girlfriend as well, since, as it was communicated to Thulethu's destitute single mother, "We have no word for girlfriend in our culture. Any girl that a boy sees is his future wife, whether there is intention or not!"

And so this is how it should the story end: on the day of their funeral, both Abenathi and Thulethu's bodies have been transported back to Abenathi's father's ancestral village and are now seated on reedmats in a corner of the hut, two still fresh young corpses awash in beauty creams, both wrapped in cattle hide as blankets and propped up with pillows behind their necks so they are reclining on the floor; the village xhwele/witchdoctor will preside over the funeral as though it was a wedding.

ThreePM WINDOW, NO GUNS, INSTRUCTIONS

- I. you and your girlfriends Sisonkethina/Mandisawam/Ndodakaziyethu head to the prison
- II. bribe the prison guards at the gate with a quote or two from Ongkopotse's graduation speech
- III. the best way to steal the baby, as you should know, is to babysit while the mothers go get their daily tattoo for the afternoon
- IV. a shopping plastic bag will work fine for carriage, as long as you make sure to puncture holes through the sides with a pen
- V. if you struggle to find a taxi outside the gates, walking never killed anyone, you know
- VI. once you get to the second taxi rank, ask for trains, even when you don't see any and, actually, have never seen any in your life and don't expect any here, of all places
- VII. one of the next lines is important in understanding the meaning, if any, of this story
- VIII. they have bouncers outside the taxi rank, so no one just comes in as they please
- IX. Sisonkethina disappears with the bouncer you find
- X. when she finally returns, she is licking her fingers as if she's just dined on a plate of good chicken wings, and wena you think, *oh bantu, sucking on his toes was that good*
- XI. all of you go through the gates, the bouncer herding you from behind like his stolen flock
- XII. the bouncer cannot stop laughing hysterically every time Mandisawam asks the question, "Am I the only one who feels like snacking on a bar of soap for lunch?"
- XIII. the baby is starting to cry in the plastic bag
- XIV. when you peek inside to see what the problem might be, it is undoing its own nappy and the kak smells like when a hobo passes you by and you smell absolutely nothing but natural, decaying air, because his body stopped caring about the seduction we each subject ourselves to every day in front of the mirror

- XV. before you close the bag is when you realize the baby is growing bald
- XVI. cry at this point, if you still know how to
- XVII. or shush the baby
- XVIII. by saying, “Intombi ayikhali sweetie”
- XIX. or, “Hush dear princess, what will your kingdom make of you”
- XX. when you come to the first shop and locate the “tools to discipline your child with” aisle, you can choose either a) leather belt, b) flip-flop, c) tv remote, d) plastic coat hanger, e) wooden cooking spoon, or f) an “I still lurv yu momzito” sticker
- XXI. when you come to the second shop, a bookstore, you must call the manager and ask him where, in the romance section, will you find a book on Queen Mantathise
- XXII. ask him, Will we ever know what really happened to Great Zimbabwe
- XXIII. in the taxi, take the child out of the plastic bag
- XXIV. try not to scream and die of shock when you realize it has clothes on and a Brazilian weave that comes down to the bum
- XXV. the politics of twerking is the first lesson you must give her
- XXVI. at the gates into the informal settlement after you have gotten off the taxi, let the child walk on her own bare feet
- XXVII. “taste the air, my princess,” you must say, and watch the child kneel down near the puddle by the communal tap and cup the water in its little hands
- XXVIII. you are not allowed to say anything when it begins to moan in pleasure
- XXIX. the first stranger to stop your retinue on the road and say “the elders spoke of the coming princess but we never knew her day was so soon” gets to keep their eyes, after tomorrow’s genocide
- XXX. whether it is sunny or rainy is the deciding factor
- XXXI. when it comes to the coronation

- XXXII. this is the day the clouds fall to the ground and trees uproot themselves to dangle upside down in the sky, like faulty bulbs no one cares to fix
- XXXIII. you might want to start fist-punching the air above your head at this point
- XXXIV. black-power style

HAPPINESS IS SOMEBODY'S NAME

Of course I am honoured to deliver the first K. Sello Duiker Memorial Lecture. When the organizers called me last week, they told me I was not their obvious choice, that two other writers had agreed to come before me but for serious reasons both of them had to be hospitalized, one after the other, which I have to say, even for someone not new to such things, I found very strange. I'm not going to name names, though I will say one of them is a great friend of mine and I heard some weeks ago his makhwapheni battered him outside a tavern and she ended up going to jail for a night; this friend now has a bandage on his head that's not going to come off anytime soon, so no, he definitely couldn't have come. The other writer is a woman I greatly respect; I was told she had a premature birth and is still in hospital now, some complications with the baby. So yes, within a week of today the organizers were in trouble and they had to make an urgent call, that's how they came knocking at my door, playing Father Christmas, begging me to do this talk.

They weren't too happy that I really didn't feel too gallant about Sello's work, even when I told them yes, the closest I came near *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and *Thirteen Cents* was a Bargain Books reading I did years ago in Stellenbosch; I was browsing through the bookstore before the reading and I came across Sello's novels on a display table, some tribute farce. I might have even picked up the cursed goods and ran my fingers across the cover designs, but then of course we had to start with the reading and I knew either I was going to have to dicker with the organizers over Sello's novels or stick with the beers I had asked Kobus to organize. I had him stash them in his office and bring two dumpies each time he could see I was running low; so you see I couldn't have asked Kobus for extra freebies, it was either the books or the beers, and trust me to know a surefire gamble when I see one.

I was on the stage after the Q&A when a woman who had the benefit of a cane came to the chair on my left and sat down; she had my book of poetry ready for an autograph and I gave her a smile while I rummaged my pockets for a pen.

She said, It's nice of you lovelies to write about these things.

What things, I said.

I meant... your black issues.

Black issues?

I don't know if her hearing aid was starting to malfunction or her eyes were playing rugby with her vision, but I could see she had no way of seeing how close I was to flinging my book at her face, signed and all.

Kobus intervened then with another couple of dumpies. I took one and forced the other on him. His moustache was getting to be too much as it is; it was sufficiently hot in the room and Kobus

was already sweating profusely, and naturally this was worrying me; there were enough six packs of these things to go through before the night was over, so he needed to freshen up.

(Esethu Esethu readjusts his microphone. An audience member says, Preach dzaddy, preach! Esethu Esethu waves delightedly, as if at someone he is on familiar terms with.)

I have to be honest, I also wasn't too sure what Whites had to gain from Sello's works and what I could forgive and not let pass in all that talk about Black boys having Caucasian 4-5s burrow into their anuses. Friends of mine who'd read Sello's books kept celebrating that one part, the dicking and the anusing. It was original, unusual, even ground-breaking for its time, and so on and so on. The English undergraduate I came back with to the B&B that night after the Stellenbosch reading actually cried, told me she was hurt – that's the word she used – by the love, or lack of, in the novels. We might have kissed and undressed after that point, I can't remember for sure now.

(Esethu Esethu takes off his spectacles and rubs his eyes, then returns the spectacles to his face.)

I have to say I was frank with the organizers of this lecture shem, and they seemed to like it. When we set about negotiating my fee, I told them I had a list of demands they had to meet before I could agree to the lecture.

I asked them to hire a Siyaya for me – where I come from is quite far from here, as you all probably know – so I could bring my family and friends with me.

I asked them to put me up in a shack somewhere untouched by Google Maps, not too close to town but certainly away from my wife, who hates me of course but will never agree to a divorce (the last time I gave her the papers, she tore them into shreds the size of a sticky note and ate them, one by one, all of them) and so she is with me now mostly because she understands Hlumile and I are inseparable and she herself cannot be separated from Hlumile. "Hluza" is our son. He is ten. So I said to the organizers, Yes, have my wife at the guesthouse and there will be some cousins to take care of my uncle's medication while he is here.

I told them, Buy me a new set of vaslaps and a zinc vaskom, with the necessary toiletries, Sunlight, Vaseline, you name it, and some food to last me two days, cool drink, Sasko buns, Morvite, milk, cooking oil, tomatoes, onions.

I said, And any live chicken from the hawkers at the taxi rank, that should keep me alive.

The young man who called me to talk about the fee said, And spices?

I said, Voestek kwedini, what do you think I am? Fuck spices; then put the phone down.

He had to call again twice before I picked it up.

Okay, okay, he said. No spices.

I don't put salt in my food.

No other vegetables?

I don't have to tell you.

Okay, what else?

I told him I have an old girlfriend this side and I want to see her, to do some remembering over a few and maybe pick up where she and I left off. Of course they were going to pay for whatever travel she might do and any other expenses she and I were going to incur in my time here.

Okay, okay, he said. Your old flame. Done.

(Esethu Esethu makes a hand motion of writing on paper and ticking off boxes. Audience laughs.)

Good.

Fine.

Good.

I almost forgot to ask.

Silence from my side.

What will you be reading?

I have books here, I'm not bored, I'll find something for the road.

Your talk, the lecture.

Silence from my side.

I want to know what your talk is going to be about.

I put the phone down.

He called again, bless him, and finally we agreed he could bring me Sello's last novel. *(Audience member says, The Hidden Star. Esethu Esethu nods his head in agreement.)* And sure as a green light in traffic he handed it to me the day I arrived, and that's the only book of Sello's – I am ashamed to say – I got to read.

(An audience member shouts a question at Esethu Esethu; he fidgets on his wing chair on stage, but catches himself before too many eyes can notice.)

Oh yes, it was a nice read; as an attempt at changing direction, at finding a new way to write his stories, *Hidden Star* is commendable.

(The audience member says, Thank you.)

Now, I'm supposed to be here to talk about K. Sello Duiker, to talk about Sello's work. You will have to forgive me, I cannot bring myself to do it; instead what I would like to do tonight is relate a story that happened in my teens and I did try to talk about it yesterday with my old girlfriend and her people at the shebeen but they had too many questions and I was in no mood to entertain them, so here I am. I won't make any promises now to explain why this story and why here in Sello's lecture, but maybe later, before ending my talk, I will find a good excuse, so long as enough of you don't leave the room too early.

(Esethu Esethu takes off his blazer. He is wearing a black t-shirt underneath. An audience member shouts, Nice t-shirt dzaddy! Esethu Esethu can only smile.)

Now, there's one way I want to tell you this story, and that is I want to tell it backwards: we start with the ending and conclude with the beginning. Okay?

(Affirmative noises from the audience. Esethu Esethu picks up a paper cup from a table near where he is sitting on stage. No one knows what's in it.)

My old girlfriend is what is used to be called a shebeen queen. She's the only woman I've ever met who has a balding head and is proud to have it – her afro comes up from both sides of her head and the back and sits like a crown on her head, a clean ring in the centre. Once I tried to see what could fit in there and not fall off if she were to walk around carrying something on her head and we found a clean enamel bowl in the cupboard and filled it with tap water and put it on her head; we had to empty the water twice, then she managed to walk across the room without dropping it on the floor. I was very proud of her.

(Laughter from the audience.)

The shack I have been staying in since coming here serves as Tabitha's shebeen. "Tabitha's Jewel" it's called and I like it, for obvious reasons. The beer is within easy reach. Good people to talk to, as well-oiled as I like to be myself. There's even a stop sign pinned on the door when you come in, missing the p. Then there are the rare jems. Pennywhistle Jive. Harari. Even our queen Brenda before she started singing gospel. The bed is in one corner of the room, behind a lace curtain Tabitha pulls from one wall to the other at night when she goes to sleep. Her shack has no windows, so for fresh air sometimes the door stays ajar throughout the night.

On both days I was with her, she sat on my lap and we had to call a girl from next door to serve the customers, throw out any unruly man or woman, and whack the cassette player on the side whenever it stopped playing.

(Laughter from the audience.)

Something most of you might not know about me is that I am a twin, or as I prefer to call myself, I am half of a twin. I'll tell you what I mean. My mother was the youngest of my father's seven wives and my father was igogo, a seer, the same way Nongqawuse and many other men that came before her like her uncle Mhlakaza, and even Ntsikana, were amagogo. There are very few of them now, what you usually see is a traditional healer, what we call igqirha, someone to collect herbs in the forest and burn something brown and looking like a tree root when you have a stomach problem or headache that won't go away, but there was once another breed of igqirha eliligogo; these had the power to see beyond your health and could look into your heart to see what troubles your spirit. If you know the klipspringer antelope, it can climb up the mostly unlikely object and once at the top will view the surrounds to get a full picture of what's happening, that's an igogo and my father was one.

I don't have to tell you my father had many children, you can figure that out by yourself. But from my mother, it was only me and my twin brother. On the day we were born, our grandmother planted umhlontlo behind our mother's hut and anytime we got sick she would pluck a bit of umhlontlo, mix it with rainwater, and feed us the bitter concoction until we got better. We were maybe eight or nine when my brother fell ill and I didn't. He had to be housebound until he recovered. I could tolerate the first few days, but when a week passed and still my brother hadn't stirred from his grassmat I began to agitate for more freedom in movement, a break, some time to be outside, and my mother agreed that yes I could leave the

hut so long as I was on an errand. My grandmother wasn't too happy about that, of course, especially when I started abusing my mother's generosity and errands to the village stream became half the afternoon with the other boys in the playing field when I normally needed less than an hour at the stream even on a crowded day. One morning I led the goats and cattle out of the kraal and after I had abandoned the livestock at the grazing field continued all three hours to primary school; the class teacher couldn't understand why I had to be locked up with my sick brother in the same hut if I was healthy. It was not for me to explain my uniqueness, that amaXhosa believe twins are one and the same person, that when one catches flu the other is taken to be in the same condition, no matter the unaffected one exhibits no symptoms. That when one twin dies, the other has to lie in the coffin for a moment before the dead twin's body can be placed inside; that even after the burial, the surviving twin will have to answer such questions as, How are you my sons this morning, Where are you two coming from just now, etc., etc., when only the living twin is being addressed. So I shut up and sat on my desk.

(Laughter from the audience.)

My father named me Esethusimile. Esethusandile was my twin brother.

After two weeks of ill health my brother died.

And now here I am, carrying his name over rivers he did not live long enough to see for himself.

(“Mmmm” noises coming from the audience.)

I moved to the township I still call home now a few years after my brother's death. My father was taken by TB – “taken”, I use that word deliberately; in my culture no one is ever supposed to die, you live without stop, even after you are buried you are still alive to those you leave behind. My mother wanted to join her sister in Finetown, and so she swapped the doek and scarf wrapped around the waist of a Xhosa housewife for a nurse's uniform at Novili kaNgangelizwe Clinic. High school, and Whites with their favourite sins, came after that, and I learned enough there to discover my stories wanted to be told and no one was going to do it if I didn't do it myself.

(Esethu Esethu takes off his Reebok cap. He has grey hair, uncombed. The same audience member who complemented him on the t-shirt now screams, Yes dzaddy, me like it! Esethu Esethu ignores the admiring comment, continues with the talk.)

This is the story. An old man, my friend Kingdom, and five sexy female tokoloshes.

(Laughter from the audience.)

On the day the old man dies in his sleep, a group of policemen storm the clinic where my mother works and fire stun grenades and teargas, killing two newborns and injuring several old people who'd come to collect their medications.

Tabitha, last night, while I was telling this story, interrupted me.

Said, “But baby, hayi kodwa noko.”

I only had to remove my hand from her breast and immediately she understood she was being rude.

“Qhubeka ke Sethu.”

And so I did.

(An audience member says, Qhubeka ke Sethu!)

But you see, she thought I was stretching it too far and some of you tonight might be too – the police, the clinic, the wanton force – but it really did happen.

(A member of the audience sneezes and Esethu Esethu says, Bless you. The audience member gives Esethu Esethu a thumbs up sign, to let him know he appreciates that.)

Somandla, that was his name, the old man.

At that time we had prayer meetings at each other's houses days before the funeral and Mthondo Street was no different. When the neighbours came to Somandla's house we all left gobsmacked at the cruelty of his last moment. The severed eye rolling on the floor. An X on his forehead, clearly made with a sharp object like a Minora blade will leave on your palm. No blood anywhere else to provide clues, body or... *(Recording is unclear.)* We were told all this during the prayer meeting and reacted as you too would when the news comes on the speaking box and something you never expected to hear is said, or I should say read.

That same day school had ended early and Kingdom and I had gone to the clinic still in our high school uniforms to join the protest against the endless delays there, how our patients' medicines arrived too late to reverse the damage in their bodies, and my mother and the other nurses preferred their children knew all that was going on there, so the sooner Kingdom and I arrived and there was enough of a crowd to really start burning some things, they told us about the new law they did not agree with, to circumcise all boys a day after they were born and not even call the father to let him know he did not have to bother sending the child to the mountain like Kingdom and I had already been led at sixteen; your son was born today and made a man tomorrow without your knowledge, and that was that. I was ikrwala myself at that time, fresh from my exile in the mountains of Finetown, a changed somebody.

(Esethu Esethu reels back in laughter briefly. An audience member has just said, Oh, you're a man? I was going to ask you about that.)

I am, yes.

(Good, the audience member says.)

Shall we meet afterwards and... *(Recording is unclear.)*

Somandla is discovered in the morning and the gatas come in the afternoon, ready with their weapons. Right. Now, the sexy tokoloshes.

For those of you who know little about Finetown, I want to explain a few things. Finetown is these mountains that look like two breasts a child made with sand in the beach, then you pass the "Welcome to Finetown" sign and afterwards the first houses and the actual town itself is sandwiched between these breast-looking mountains; Mondale Street is the mainstay, then there's the municipal hall and the bank and the only shopping centre with decent shops; right.

On any map of the province, Finetown is by the border with its neighbours, Msobomvu and Langa; right.

Finetown headlines every time the national crime stats are released, I don't have to talk about that tonight; right.

(A flash of light sneaks onto the stage. An audience member is taking a photograph, but our staff are quick to trot towards her and remind her no flash is allowed. Esethu Esethu shows no hint he notices any of this.)

About the tokoloshes: Somandla's sister comes to where I am standing by the Jojo tank with my friend Kingdom, drinking water from cups. It's early evening and the prayer meeting has just ended.

She says, Mamelani bafana, I know the tokoloshes drank his blood, there is no way it spilled on his face and just disappeared!

Kingdom says, Uthini na ol' lady?

Nodelivery, that's her name.

She says, I know they did nyana!

Now see, Kingdom is a youth pastor at his church, in fact he just delivered a powerful sermon on the dark forces "poisoning our lives", to quote him, "and turning Finetown into a Sodom and Gomorrah of South Africa", and any moment now I expect him to raise his hand and place it onto Nodelivery's forehead; I have seen him do it before, right now he has the leftover nostalgia to do it.

I get you, I say, to defuse the tension. I hear you mam' Nodelivery.

Did you not see them just now? she asks. Akhange nibabone?

See who?

She says they were in their short dresses and high heels. Umhlola kaJesu! Hayini bantu, they were wearing almost nothing, ndiyanixelela yho!

(A wave of laughter from the audience.)

Kingdom does not respond and I don't respond.

They were not even ashamed I saw them! Abanaso tu iskaam abahili!

Thank god Kingdom's older brother interrupts us at this moment.

(Esethu Esethu lifts a fist to his mouth and yawns. He goes for the paper cup. Wipes his lips after he is done.)

Kingdom's brother saves us, takes the poor woman back to the house and we never see her again, not that night, not the day after, or in any of the other prayer meetings that week, not even at Somandla's funeral at the weekend.

(Esethu Esethu takes another sip from the paper cup. An audience member says, Tshisa Kingdom! Screaming her remark. Esethu Esethu lifts a fist to her, as if saying, Yes lady, to Kingdom!)

And now we come to the dream.

(Esethu Esethu readjusts his sitting position.)

I love dreams, who doesn't love dreams here?

(Hands shoot up from the audience.)

Especially if they promise true love or a better bank balance?

(I do, I do, people are saying jokingly; I don't, one man in the first row says in a very serious tone.)

Well, I do.

(I do too, says a woman in the audience.)

It all happens in the dream. I am sleeping in my backyard shack behind Sista Bettina's RDP; there are five years between my mother and my aunt; we call her Sista Bettina, after some House song. For some reason I forgot to cleanse my face of imbola this night, I'm not obliged wear it to sleep, ubukrwala is a very public display, the laws governing your behavior are more real outside your door than in your heart; though Beautiful next to me does not seem to mind. She's in my class and we haven't slept with each other yet – I'm not the condom type and she's holding out on me until I yield, as I will do later.

Beautiful has turned around so she has her back to me and I've drawn the blanket up to our chins, Beautiful and I spooning – that's all I remember before closing my eyes. So sure, I fall asleep.

The gate is under a shaded area. I recognize Kingdom easily on his knees next to Somandla's headstone at the least crowded corner of the graveyard, digging. His smooth grunts overlap with ardent lunges into the jagged topsoil, heeee-ah, heeee-ah, heeee-ah.

Khawuleza ndoda, he says, breathing heavily. Be fast, be quick.

I heave the words out of my chest as I hurry up, Hhe mfo, umenza'ni uSomandla kodwa?

He ignores me, just continues digging with a child's plastic toy spade. I'm surprised it doesn't break in half, the ground here is all stones and hard earth.

When I get to him, Kingdom does not even look up; he throws aside the spade and starts scooping out a handful of msundululu with his hands, dumping the wailing earthworms on Somandla's headstone, then claps his hands together and much of the soil falls off his hands. He picks up the fattest and longest worm and extends his hand towards me; I cringe in disgust long enough for Kingdom to move his hand away, towards his own mouth, and lower the wriggling invertebrate down his own throat, like he is merely enjoying a string of delicious spaghetti.

(Mumbles of repulsion from the audience; Esethu Esethu is unperturbed.)

I meet the tokoloshe outside the gate.

She says, I have to give you a bee-jay bhuti.

I say, I don't have a condom on me nje?

Her klap throws me off balance and I twirl a moment too long before I land on my buttocks; it's so swift I don't see her hand until it's obscuring my view of her.

I get up quickly, no resentment at all in my mind.

Yes or no, that's the only way you're getting past me.

I recover slowly.

I notice she's dressed in a very skimpy negligee, but can't distinguish her pubic hair with all the hair covering the rest of her body, the other tokoloshes too, on my way towards the graveyard, had this bear-hair covering every part of their bodies except the face. It's only her red lipstick that glows brighter; her eyes are exaggerated in a cartoonish way, and the only reason I can tell how big her breasts are is the swelling on her chest, as if she had two balloons underneath.

(Weak ambiguous noises from the audience.)

She kneels in front of me and I drop my pants to my feet. My penis is so shrunken, any of my pinkie fingers would be better substitutes, but she seems to know what she's doing; the way her tongue emerges out of her mouth calls to mind a tape measure, the metal strip slithering out of its aperture and stretching towards my dickhead. It's the tongue that rouses my 4-5 into a hard-on. I have always thought a tokoloshe possessed human teeth, but this one doesn't; her teeth-less gums burn my dickhead a little at first, before I get used to the heat of her mouth. She takes in just the dickhead and licks, licks, licks, licks, until I can't help it but pull her hand towards me so she can take all of my 4-5 inside her mouth; the cum oozes in sporadic spurts into her mouth and when I pull out a few droplets dribble onto her bottom lip, but she won't swallow any of it, just spits it on her hands and rubs the whole goo on her hairy head.

I hike up my pants and scoot past her.

(Two women from the audience get up and head for the nearest exit; Esethu Esethu realizes this and says, Oh sorry people, but you must all know my work by now, I don't have to apologize for that.)

She says, Here is your son.

I was given specific directions and the sense of urgency was unmistakable, but I am a long way from the graveyard and starting to panic.

You'll be conceiving him the sooner you kiss him on the forehead and be on your way. The graveyard is waiting.

The tokoloshe has an onesie that matches the baby's.

She comes closer and lifts the baby up to my face.

(Another woman from the audience gets up and heads for the nearest exit.)

I kiss the baby.

The tokoloshes are insisting on accompanying me through the deserted street. Mthondo is a long way behind us now, and the taller one talks all the way.

Everyone used to say me and her were hair-to-scalp close, always together as the dirt sleeping on the ground. We still are, we just refuse to be go the way of smoke chased by a strong wind, even here and now.

When we reach the T-junction, we take the street leading to the graveyard.

What's your names? I ask.

It's not your place to ask, says the quieter one, flames in her eyes.

Don't mind her, says the talkative. My name is Nonkosi.

And her?

She doesn't like her name.

We stop outside the gate to Sofanguwe Teashop.

Go through here and you'll find the graveyard quicker, she says.

I walked the deserted teashop, through the scrapyard, and emerge onto an open field. The tokoloshe with the baby meets me after that.

I had been returning home, hunger in my eyes and exhaustion in my muscles from soccer practice, and was walking past Somandla's house when he called me to the gate.

It was beyond 5pm already.

You'll find her in bed, don't wake her up.

I made it plain to him I think there must be a big mistake.

Ungumnqundu kwedini, he says, raising his voice. Yintoni, umuncu kangaka na wena?

Mxim, I say, and wave him away, what with old age and his ramble, it just makes sense.

(Esethu Esethu yawns unashamedly; he says, addressing the audience, I should be getting done soon. One of our staff members walks onto the stage and places another plastic cup on the table. Esethu Esethu motions for him to pick it up and hand it to him. Says, Thank you, afterwards. The staff member walks off the stage.)

When I walked into my shack, there was a tokoloshe with less hair on her skin, sitting up and reading the Bible.

Some parts have nice stories, she said, closing the Bible and laughing hysterically as I closed the door behind me.

(Esethu Esethu takes a sip. Then says, I am very tired now, I'm hoping none of you will be offended if I summarize my story here? There are a few yeses coming from the audience.)

Tadeusz Rozewicz comes to mind with his blunt report, "The old do not care because they are old." But Nicanor Parra puts it plainly the way I like it, "It makes me sleepy to read my poems." Of all those, Dambudzo has no time for pleasantries and I like him best that way; he is "the luggage no one will claim", he is "the loud fart all silently agree never happened", he is "the rat every cat secretly admires".

("Mmmm" noises coming from the audience, and mild laughter.)

At least you know how I feel being up here and trying to impose wisdom, sense, logic and every other lie on people whose lives are very anti-ABC; it cannot be done, not now, not when seeking the truth has lost its shine.

Every time I remember the dream, I see the horizon filled with crosses; it ends unresolved, no murder, no easy resolution, no anything turning the plot on its head, no somebody to say, "Hello, my name is happiness and I live here, down this street called Mthondo, I know the stench as a White child knows money."

In the dream, Kingdom calls me before I leave for soccer practice.

He says, Oh mfana, jonga' pha, nab' utywala, ndihleli nentwana zam apha, zwakala.

I promise to pass by his house, if I'm not too tired after all that running after a soccer.

He says, Yeka ntanga, uphosiwe.

And so I put down the phone, but not before a word about the next day of school, hatching a plan.

It's Friday mos ngomso. The best time for me.

He says, Ja, okay, sho ke.

(There is a commotion from the upper rows; a group of black women are standing up to leave and several people have to stand up to make way for them.)

Happiness is somebody's name, you say. Well, I agree. But what that means, what that does to the owner of the name, is a question I would rather not ask.

(Esethu Esethu takes a sip from his paper cup and readjusts his seating.)

I was sixteen when my mother first took me to a tavern; I took two sips of the beer, spilling some of it on my pants, and after that whenever we went to "Thulethu's Haven" she let me be, said, Ah you'll be alright, bambelela qha wena. I guess she was named Patricia for a reason. Maybe that's what taught me the danger of being too dutiful.

Once she called me over to her table and pointed with a long nail at the two young girls she was sitting with.

Which one?

I stared at her, dumbfounded.

Choose.

Sello was a man of many gifts, no one doubts that. He knew the importance of the work we do while we sleep.

Some days it's better to stay in bed with the covers crumpled up on the floor, to forget the whole ball of kaka, this world and all its sore singings.

All my life I had been praying for one thing, to be somebody's Ben 10. It can still happen.

(Applause from the audience begins slowly, but peaks in over a minute; Esethu Esethu leaves the stage, forgoing a Q&A.)

NOLOYISO IS IN LOVE

1. It was spring; I was there and so was she.
2. On the path to the stream, the ncum-ncum were weeping loudly, as was their tendency in this world, and she tried to discourage their crying but there were too many of the ncum-ncums and their crying had no peak, so that, in the end, all she said was, *Qamatamdali, forgive them their frenzy, all of them.*
3. Goat head, the horns, except for my beard; I went and said hello.
4. The hillside was annoying with its songs of wild daisies, the cows were in the grip of a laughing epidemic, and none of the siphingo bushes wanted to blather in our presence.
5. Her skin said to me she was cold, so pasty, no shadow wanted to be associated with her, my woman, who looked to me as though she had oiled her naked body with ash, hoping to wear the fading heat as a blanket, covering the parts of her that no longer held meat.
6. A delicacy I introduced her to was a dead grasshopper soaked in mango juice; later, while her hands were still good, she would take turns, rubbing the ointment on her joints.
7. I watched her, all of that first day, and each time I could not get close enough to see, beyond something charred and sagging, between her thighs, something dry, something shriveled, something glimpsed through her loincloth each time she bent over to pick up a stone of prayer or a dying flower for the basket of thorns balanced on her head.
8. One breast was already shrunken beyond form, the other missing a teat.
9. Ask the samango monkeys, no one owned as fearsome a pair of buttocks as hers.
10. Her eyes were not with strength, all the same, otherwise she would not have taken hold of my penis, that first afternoon, breaking the tip off, when she was aiming for my hand, by way of greeting, as best as she knew.
11. The next day I brought her a live boy from the village by the hills and all she said was, *And you call yourself an ancestor!*
12. I had never seen anyone so disappointed in me.
13. I fell into a deep sleep many moons ago and my burial lasted the whole night.
14. I suspect she was of the tribe who dump their dead in the wild. It is for the feasting of the vultures, lions, hyenas, on their cadavers that their ruin is hastened in this world of the wait.
15. *Sing me a song, she says, or tell me a lie that will not hurt me.*
16. The first morning together, before we went out to drink from the sunlight, she took a sharp stone and shaped my nails into a hawk's claws, hands, feet. Then out we went into the world.
17. She liked to say, *You dress me in smiles, you might as well have wet my womb with your sorrow.*

18. I was new at the waiting period, but had already sent word to the great gqirha of my people who had embalmed me, that I needed easing back into the world of living flesh soon; word had reached me that before long the sacrificial beast would fall.
19. She was not so tolerant.
20. *You will have to forgive me if you touch me there and I feel nothing towards you; I survive on the backs of rabbits, and that does not help where it needs to most of the time.*
21. Her skin is beginning to peel off.
22. The flies never give her rest, eyes, nostrils, mouth, ears, open wounds, and everywhere else in her body. Even the maggots are starting to eat her up.
23. It was her idea not to share the same lying place as me and every time night comes she attempts to cry, but her screams have sunk so deep down her gut she would have to defecate to get them out.
24. *I started life about the same size as a flea, she says. Now look at me.*
25. I keep having to assist her with the lion droppings.
26. One afternoon not long ago, one of her thumbs fell into the stream while we were conversing with the fishes and none of us spoke of it.
27. When we enter what we call home, I am the one who rolls the rock shut after us; when we lie down on the floor, she uses my feet as her pillow and I to her in similar taste.
28. *Do you even know how to cook isigwamba?*
29. Not to say she never gave me her name, or retraced her whereabouts before she came here.
30. By the first full moonlight of the season, I could see her cheeks sink back into her face, her own flesh beginning to disappear.
31. *I try not to swallow my own phlegm when I sleep.*
32. The way to hold a black mamba dangerously close to your face and kiss and fondle it without suffering an attack, I learned from her.
33. *You cannot call me by my name, or else the wind will fight with you if I come too close.*
34. The bloating occurs largely in the abdomen, though some also in the mouth. Her tongue is well into swelling.
35. *When I was young I knew of a sacred celebration where all the young children were sent away to live in the wild and everyone old enough to own a loincloth was left behind to have all the joys of being old.*
36. *We are all born of many fathers.*
37. Her head bobs forward and back in a steady rhythm, even when she has stopped walking; the lips have peeled back to reveal a full set of teeth.
38. *I am all yours, you know, as long as you continue to dream.*
39. Already her waist is bent to the side in a way that makes walking very hard.
40. *I had no children and my husband died very young.*
41. Everywhere she treads, the juice of what is left of her body trails after her, snaking gravy footprints in her wake as if she had snails on the base of her feet.
42. We drift off. Overtime.
43. A day comes that she moves out of my cavern.
44. I hardly see her anymore, though sometimes I come across her footsteps in the wild, if I am attentive enough.

45. One season departs.
46. Another reaches us.
47. *A man can eat the whole world for heartbreak, but that will not change the heart any way.*
48. The days are too long, the nights quite fleeting.
49. One day in the winter, I hear a clang of cowrie shells bumping against something hard in the wind and I go out to look.
50. *The wind has brought me to you.*
51. Eventually, all that remains is a skeleton.
52. *Let me in, I have come to lie down...*
53. No one fears the ununderstood anymore, I think before rolling the rock shut behind us.
54. I am still waiting for my sacrificial bull to fall, or is it that my world is no more?
55. So I can finally join them.
56. My people, in the only world I knew before this one.
57. Our only song the buzzing gossip of the mosquitos, she lay down on the floor and I fitted her with the best garments of hide and all the utensils she would require to face the world of her tomorrow.
58. *I have come to rest.*