

MASTERS IN CREATIVE WRITING

Mini thesis

I am not a Colour

a novella

by

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For my wife and family



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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Nobathembu lifts her hand and waves at her neighbour. She is watering spinach in her garden with a jug from a bucket. At age sixty-nine, her beauty shines. The sun is high on the echoes of Nyanga village – echoes of barking, the neighing of nearby donkeys, a truck against a slope.

Two butterflies mate in her thorn tree. In their hearts the story begins. Their wings brighten and in their own time they disappear, following their peculiar rhythms.

Various birds visit Nobathembu's garden in the early hours of the morning. She once told her granddaughter, Sindiswa, that the birds were praising the mother of all creation. Nobathembu knows them: a pair of Wagtails, many Sparrows, Finches and the shy Cape Robin. With grace, they whistle and chirp different tunes igniting the liveliness of the dawn. Strangely enough, some starlings often knock at her window with their strong beaks. At times, it feels as if they are saying; "Wake up! Wake up!"

"Why are you always early, my little ones?" Nobathembu asks them, her heart brimming with gratitude for their visit. "When do you sleep? Okay, I know you're not sitting around the fire during the night listening to boring human stories of Engcobo district. You don't know what these ears sometimes have to listen to, beautiful ones."

Nobathembu tells the birds everything. Sometimes she talks about women. Sometimes she talks about rights and power - the joy in her heart, or she speaks to them of scandals steaming in the community. Sometimes she tells them about the missing goats and the good leadership of chief Zanezulu of her amaQwathi clan. And it seems the birds listen to her, and as they listen, the news, tied to her tongue, amplifies into birdsong.

Nobathembu's garden is colourful with spinach, chillies, green peas, tomatoes and strawberries twining on the ground. A peach tree, a very old apricot tree and a row of prickly pears and fig trees enclose the silence and freshness of the garden. When she sits in the shade of the big gumtree next to her house, she believes she is blessed. It is true. According to her knowledge, this wide blanket of birds folding and unfolding around her house, is a sign that she is a chosen by izinyanya to be a healer. One way or the other, she knows she is a living reminder that God is always with people, accompanying them.

After breakfast, Nobathembu feeds the birds with leftover umphokoqo mealie pap, rice and crushed corn. Some birds sit on her head like ornaments. Some sit on her shoulders gossiping. Often, she calls them by name, before one by one they disappear in the clear brisk air.

But not everyone in the village has beautiful thoughts about Nobathembu. Some call her house and garden, a jungle. Others would run across the pages of her life, telling lies. At times her name is uprooted and her beauty stained with dark images.

“Ligqwirhakazi,” some are murmuring, entangling darkness in her circles.

That is how the world works, she thinks. To everyone who is listening, her inexplicable gifts play a different tune. There is something quite distinct and attractive in her own singing, something more bird than human. Some villagers are fascinated by her unique gift of speaking to birds. Others are moved by her courage to withstand the unmerciful heat of village gossip. The tale of birds, sitting on top of her head creates confusion and indigestion. Soon nothing makes sense. Superstitions begin to breathe. Some people move all over the yards for their hatred to breathe: she visits the witches at Gwadana; she ate her children – of six only one is left; she sleeps outside under a tree; she does her witchcraft in broad daylight – just look at the birds. Nobathembu is not breathing any of this insanity. In her eyes, the people want to puncture her character and she will not allow it.

There are of course also those who believe in her healing powers; who drink her homemade herbal medications – yes, even those nasty about her, change their tune when they need her. Then they come to her. They ask: what is going on? She speaks her truth. They ask: what is going on? She speaks her truth. Finally, they lick her truth, but then afterwards: spit it out. They continue to dig a trench.

One morning, as she is picking some strawberries to save from the birds, a thought falls into her head like a clear drop of water: people can call her whatever they want to. At first she was tempted to challenge the murmuring of the days but the melody of her garden and birds brushed away the idea of confrontation and she now prefers to sink straight into the deep affection that is floating around her. In her heart she constantly deletes pictures. She deletes pictures that breed self-doubt and self-pity. Immediately as they appear, she deletes them, inside and outside.

Each season Nobathembu's garden brings in new birds and other lovely crawling creatures – the red spotted uqongqothwane, the copper coloured dung beetle and green umntan'ezulu with its praying forearms. The soil from her garden never gets tired. It has always been generous with fruits of life, nourishing those who love beauty.

Last year, Nobathembu did not plant anything. She said the soil needed to rest. But as the soil rested, she never lost connection with the cloth of birds descending on the garden like a shout of joy. Her soul is renewed each day and it all starts in her garden.

Nobathembu is still shaking some pips from her sunflowers when Sindiswa comes running down the street. The high-pitched cry makes her heart stop. Quickly she opens the gate. The empty bucket is hanging in her right hand. She looks around to see what danger is chasing her granddaughter. Fear stands in her gut, tapping like hail. She stoops down. Sindiswa throws her small body into her arms. She struggles to breathe. Nobathembu fidgets and the sweat from her skin begins to pour. She holds her tight, rocking peacefully. Then Sindiswa begins to cry and after a while bursts out: "Makhulu! Bafuna ukundizuma." Hysterically she sniffs.

Gently, Nobathembu suggests: Shh... speak when you feel better... She looks at her granddaughter's dusty feet on the reddish soil. The throbbing heart of her grandchild collides with her silent prayer. Quietly she lifts her head as they both listen to the panting and groaning of Thatha, their village dog that looks like a grey wolf. Nobathemba stares at Thatha. He obediently tames and sits on the ground. As Nobathembu stares, Thatha raises his eyelids making his eyes look bigger as if to draw attention to the story in Nobathemba's arms.

"They want to rape me, Gogo." The words cut into Nobathembu's heart. Hate. Revenge. Her feelings throb as she tries to look calmly into Sindiswa's eyes. In her gut, she wants to kill.

“What happened?” Nobathembu tries to contain her anger. The strain in her knees makes her stand. The stones and twigs scorch her. As she listens, she slowly removes the leaves and twigs from her umbhaco dress.

“I was coming from the shop.”

“Who asked you to go to the shop without my permission?”

“I am sorry, Gogo.”

“What happened?”

“Four boys came to me. They said they wanted to rape me.”

“And what happened?”

“I just ran, Gogo. I was scared.”

“Did they touch you?” she asks examining her with her eyes.

“No, Gogo. I heard their footsteps but... I didn't turn. At a distance I heard them laughing. It was Langa, Xakekile, Siphiwo, no...no... Qabaka.”

“Uyabazi? Do you know them?”

“Ewe Mama. They are in my class.”

The fact that the boys are nine year olds, does not tame the flood of rage in Nobathembu's heart. She believes a crime has been committed. She believes the texture of crime committed is ugly. The thought of bringing this case to Dingezweni, the headman, frustrates her. She knows that the case will swim for very long through the tribal courts of the village and take much of her valuable time.

As her thoughts sink deeper, the homesteads in her village brim with silence. The few huts in a distance colour the silence with smoke as people prepare the midday meal outside. On the other side of the village the grazing land is deliberately burnt this week to improve the pastures. As she looks at the guarding aloes that scatter around the village, she decides to wash her grandchild with inqwebeba, cleansing her from bad luck.

Nobathembu humbles herself. She breathes in gently and prays for calmness to step in. Her conscious self yearns for clarity. For a moment the birds are silent. She brushes dust from her knees and walks back to the trail that haunted her grandchild. She follows the part of her that says they need to be punished.

Side by side they march through the thick grass of the valley. Sindiswa trots on her left side. Her eyes are everywhere. Nobathembu drags her as she loses the rhythm and falls behind. The clouds are high and the foreheads of the mountains vibrant in blue. The doves are cooing softly on top of the gum tree. Nobathembu listens: “This door needs to be fixed,” she whispers.

With her right hand she wipes the tears off her granddaughter’s face. She thinks that the nine year olds have pushed her thoughts deeper. When she sees the four boys across the eGxojeni valley, she asks Mqwathi, an elderly man who was walking on the opposite direction, to catch them. Mqwathi turns quickly and catches three. Hearing what happened, Mqwathi is disappointed. One of the boys, Langa, is his son.

The boys stand in front of Nobathembu trembling, shamefully. “They were three.” Mqwathi says, “Xakekile ran away.” Nobathembu asks Mqwathi to tie their hands with her scarf. She picks a dry stick that was lying in the dry grass. All at once, the stick and her angry words rattle. She hits the boys. They jump around crying. When she is tired she drags the boys by their scarves, taking them to their parents.

“Let’s take them to the police station.” Mqwathi advises. When he sees doubt in Nobathembu’s eyes, he whispers something to her ear.

Nobathembu nods. She looks around. The police station is twenty minutes from the village. Most children are still at school, when the boys, tied to one another, pass them. Grade one and two, playing outside, are stunned by what they see. Mqwathi chases them away with his igqudu – they scatter in all directions to tell their parents. Across the field, a woman urinates behind a bush. Mqwathi smiles. Nobathembu frowns. She asks him to hurry up. Nobathembu and Sindiswa are in front. The boys are trotting in the middle and Mqwathi is following at the back.

At Engcobo Police station, they wait in a special room. Sindiswa is silent. Nobathembu lays a charge. She signs the docket: 23 November 1998. Sindiswa is silent. The boys admit to what

they did. Sindiswa is silent. They cry and plead for forgiveness. Sindiswa is silent. The boys are given paper and a pencil. The police ask them to write down, “andisoze ndiphinde 50x”. Qabaka cannot spell that. The police ask him to write whatever he can fifty times.

That afternoon, the tribal beauty of Engcobo district is stained by angry mothers. Mothers who have endless questions about Nobathembu’s reasoning. Mothers who feel embarrassed when their children were delivered by police van. Mothers who strongly feel that the matter should have been referred to the tribal court. All of these mothers are highly charged. Unanimously, they claim that Nobathembu is practicing witchcraft, this time in broad daylight.

Nobathembu feels that her patience is tested when a group of women gathers outside her fence. All at once, they move around her place. They move to and fro, cursing. They are afraid to touch her gate. One of the women warns the others to be careful of umuthi smeared on the gate’s handle. Afar they hear her singing in her garden. They are irritated. Her tone of voice burns like acid in their ears. They are angry that Nobathembu does not come to listen to their grievances.

But it is three o’clock and the birds see Nobathembu with a basin. The birds in the sky fly to her garden as they know it is feeding time. The women stare at what they can only explain as “witchcraft”. When a magnificent enormous hawk descends with the birds to perch on a branch, they become frightened. This is too real to be true. They retreat struggling to stand on the ground. They retreat struggling to breathe. When her voice calls the birds by their names, women leave her place with their minds paralysed. The echo of their voices rolls over the hills whispering sounds of hate and fear.

But Nobathembu’s heart glows as she feeds the exquisite gifts of the universe. She stays with Sindiswa in the garden till the sun dips gently behind the All Saints mountains. Just before darkness envelops the day, Mqwathi knocks at her door. He shares about the boys, and the restless mothers. Nobathembu shares about the joy of the day and about the rain that is about to fall. In silence they hear the pulse of the village throbbing. They hear an angry axe chopping. They drink coffee. They listen to crickets. They see dark clouds gathering the rain. In silence Mqwathi holds her hand, closes the door and gently looks at the winking candle. In silence, Nobathembu opens the door, points at the gate and asks him softly to pass greetings to his wife.

CHAPTER TWO

Stars rest in the sky. The moon is absent. With one hand Vuyelwa quietly opens the door of her mother's rondavel. The room is cold and dark. She smells the fresh cow dung. In the darkness, she smiles. She thanks her ancestral ooDikela for a safe arrival. Outside the taxi driver flashes his front lights and then roars away.

“Kulungile!” she keeps her voice low. It is still too dark to move. Thinking of the baby sleeping in her arms, she is afraid that she may trip on the pieces of wood that often lie carelessly next to the fireplace. She grew up in this rondavel. She knows everything in it and yet is suddenly not sure whether her mother made any changes. Is it as it always was, with nothing fancy inside except a bed on the right side, a wooden table to the left with a bench next to it? Is the roof of the rondavel still leaking? How she used to hate rain because of it.

Noise penetrates from outside: a rejoicing choir of frogs, a dog howling far off. The eyes of a cat distract her. A cat? How her father hated cats. Her thoughts jump to the day he left to seek work in Johannesburg. She was eight years old and remembers how Nobathembu struggled to raise six children alone in the village. After four years her mother decided to go and find him. She came back, changed. She found her husband Jojiyeza, married to another woman and was ordered that night to sleep in the kitchen whilst her husband was giggling with his city wife in the bedroom. She described to her children walking back to Park Station in the heart of Johannesburg, knowing her life was over. She was caught by police for not having a dompass, but was released when she confessed her mission. She was all alone. Life cut her deep.

It is hard for Vuyelwa to say how she feels about her father. Deep inside, she hates him. She hates him for simply leaving his children with their mother, washing from his conscience their struggle to sleep without food; the hardship of ploughing the fields for other families; the daily working for everybody so that school fees and books could be paid. She hates him for the death of her five brothers. All died in different ways. One committed suicide, one was stabbed, two were gunned down in Soweto and one died of a heart attack. They died year after year and her father never came to bury them.

Vuyelwa knows how important it is for African men to know their fathers. Her brothers were yearning for guidance, for finding their roots in the rituals and customs of the ooDikela clan.

They continued to feel outsiders. Their friends regarded them as uncircumcised amakhwenkwe boys. So they all died inside and drowned themselves in drugs. Their reckless behaviour invited death and her mother watched the storms of life swallowing up her family. She was afraid that they might also eventually put out the light in her only daughter.

As Vuyelwa stands in the cold rondavel, she nervously imagines the future of her baby. She holds the child firmly in her left arm and with her right hand digs inside her handbag for the baby bottle. Then the wind hits her skirt, it shivers. As she moves towards the open door, she sees a short figure approaching. Its movement is abrupt and lights glitter all over the place.

“Utikoloshe?” she whispers, runs inside and with her shoulders shuts the door. There are the bright eyes of the cat again at the far end of the room. In vain she feels for a key or a bolt to lock the door, but then throws her weight against it. At the far end, the eyes of the cat are gone. She breathes with fear... Outside, there are sounds of footsteps crushing the dry grass.

“Uphi uMama?” she thinks with horror and automatically begins to pray: “Thixo onamadla, I give my life to you. Please save my baby. I know I’m a sinner. Restore me before I die. Please forgive my ugly ways.”

Then a small voice is heard on the other side of the door: “Ufuna ntoni ekhaya - what do you want from us?”

“Who are you?” Vuyelwa’s voice is hoarse.

“Nguwe sisi Vuyelwa?”

“Yes, it’s me and who are you?” Vuyelwa asks boldly as if fear has escaped her body. There is silence.

“Ungubani?” impatiently she asks.

“Ndim!”

Vuyelwa recognises the voice and opens the door. A bright torch hits her face. It is her six year-old niece, Sindiswa. Sindiswa rushes up to her and clasps her arms around Vuyelwa’s legs, the flashlight dancing in the rondavel.

“Layita? Where’s the candle?”

Sindiswa extracts herself and hits a button on the wall. The dark lifeless room comes into life.

“Wow! You guys are civilized!”

The rondavel has changed beyond recall. As she looks around she sees a well-furnished house with bright white leather sofas and a television on the opposite side. The walls are red and white, matching the colours of the furniture nicely. Unspoken pleasure writes her face and she lays the child on the sofa.

“Ngubani lo?” Sindiswa goes to the child.

“This is your sister.”

“Yhoooo,” Sindiswa uncovers the face of the child. The blanket is warm and soft against her bare hands. She carefully sinks her hands into the baby’s hair and feels the softness. While she is looking intently at the face, the baby opens her eyes. Sindiswa begins to jump up and down and dives to the floor.

“I’m so happy!” Sindiswa shouts, dancing around like a puppy.

“Why?”

“I have a sister!”

“How lovely to hear that.”

“She is beautiful like a doll.”

“ Sindiswa, awoyiki ukuhamba ebusuku - are you not afraid to walk at night?”

“Nope!”

“I was so afraid just now; I honestly thought that you were a ghost.”

“Yhu awumdala.”

“Where’s my mother?”

“Uyeza, just now.”

“I ask where she is?”

“Next door, she’s having sorghum beer with MamCirha.” All the time Sindiswa does not take her eyes from the child.

Vuyelwa is still standing. She remains mesmerized by the unexpected transformation in the home where she grew up. Her heart grows warmer and calmer as she walks around the house – her mother has finally achieved some softness for her old age. Bringing in her luggage, Vuyelwa hears Sindiswa: “Ingathi ngunodoli. She looks like a doll.”

After a long silence Vuyelwa responds.

“Yes, she looks like a doll because she is small. Nawe Sindiswa, you were like a doll too when you were young. All babies are like dolls. After some time, you will see her colour changing, black just like yours.”

Vuyelwa is about to continue talking when Sindiswa turns away, pulls out a black suitcase and puts on a purple coat.

“Is something wrong?”

Sindiswa begins to laugh sharply, looking from her to the baby. Vuyelwa feels how embarrassment covers her body and quickly gets up to make herself some tea.

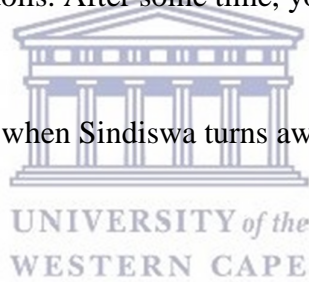
“Where are you going?” she asks as the girl rushes to the door.

“To tell Gogo you are here.”

“Are you not afraid?”

“Nope.”

“Okay.” As she pours milk and sugar, fear and humiliation begin to rise up and wash over her. She wishes she could control the mixture of rage, shame and fury inside her. She checks her phone: 22:10 and sends a message to the taxi driver. Suddenly she is sad and exhausted. She feels a cold depression descending as she looks at the baby.



CHAPTER THREE

Vuyelwa waits for her mother and niece on the sofa. The child that lies in her arms and the uncertainty that awaits, keep her in suspense. Suddenly a whirlwind roars outside shaking one of the corrugated metal sheets. It shakes wildly. The windows and the door rattle furiously. The outside toilet door bangs, and something wooden smashes against the wall. She stares at the floor. She feels she needs a little bit of grace, but faith hangs at the back of her mind like a dead leaf.

Anxiously she covers the baby with another layer of blanket. She has heard so much about the stolen babies in Cape Town. The thought of babies killed for muthi makes her sick. Her phone rings. It is the driver asking if she is ready to leave for Cape Town. He has finished his job of dropping passengers from one village to the other.

“Please give me another hour,” Vuyelwa pleads.

“What about other passengers?”

“Go to the garage, check the oil and tyres. Make an excuse KK. Please Mkhaya, wait for me!”

“Okay! But you owe me big time.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already sorted that,” Vuyelwa answers.

Vuyelwa sees the lace curtain blowing. She puts the baby on the sofa and closes the window. Peering into the darkness, she sees nothing.

“Baphi?” Where is her mother? Thinking about the taxi waiting, she really begins to panic. Quickly she unpacks the clothes and puts them in a small plastic bag. She takes the money from her wallet and puts it into the suitcase - two thousand four hundred and fifty rands. She slams the lid, it clicks and locks. She takes a deep breath and notices a traditional broom leaning near the door. There is no sound of life outside. She should not wait any longer, but her will to meet her mother grows stronger than the fear in her mind. As she is about to cover her shoulders with a shawl, her mother enters. Outside the wind is still raging and the dogs are barking.

“Vuyelwa!”

“Mama!”

Sindiswa takes a dish full of meat from her grandmother and puts it on the table. Calmly Vuyelwa hugs her mother who is big and tall. They hold on to each other as if to remove all the years that have separated them. Sindiswa stands quietly next to them, her eyes barely blinking. Nobathembu asks Sindiswa to get a key for the flat from her bag. She asks Sindiswa to wait for Vuyelwa in the flat.

“Iphe indoda yakho, where’s your man?”

“In Cape Town.”

“It would be nice to know why you leave Thobani behind. Or is he afraid of his sins?”

Vuyelwa is about to answer but Nobathembu interrupts her.

“You know, I know, he knows and ooDikela know that he paid only one cow out of the supposed ten. When is he going to finish paying his dowry? It’s been seven years without a word from him. Usiqhela kakubi. At least he should have said something if he has clean intentions.”

“Hayi Mama, stop now,” Vuyelwa fakes a smile.

“Why should I? I’ve given you all my blessings and freedom, but you keep me in bondage and humiliation. La maqaba in this village are whistling about your husband who left neither pride nor respect to our clan. He should be ashamed of himself. What is he doing to show that we deserve respect? Nothing! Vuyelwa, you have permitted this. You need to fix this. I’m not happy at all.”

“But Mama...”

“No buts....”

Vuyelwa feels crushed but she sees her mother is also struggling with her emotions. Suddenly Sindiswa opens the door, takes her grandmother’s hand and leads her out of the room. Vuyelwa is puzzled. She looks at her phone. When her eyes fall on her baby, shame soaks her.

“Oh, how will I tell her?” Sweat runs down her back. The driver must be near. She knows her mother thinks of her as somebody who does not keep her word. How is she going to tell all that needs to be told. She puts on her coat. Passing the cupboard she sees a family picture glued to the wood. The faces of her siblings. She looks at her father and unexpectedly feels she is seeing a hero. He has a spade resting on his shoulders and there is a bright smile on his face. The spade makes her recall all the many graves of her brothers resting at the bottom of the garden. She wishes they could vanish. They also remind her of all the unfinished business, of a family tale, of inside turmoil that never had any place to rest. Will light and peace ever touch our family’s voice?

“They have stolen all of my chickens.” Nobathembu shouts as she bursts into the room bringing a cold rush. Angry and exhausted, she reaches for a piece of meat and eats quietly.

“I don’t understand?” Vuyelwa swirls her tea.

“La madoda ale lali.”

“What kind of men would steal chicken?” she asks putting her purse in a small black plastic bag.

“Ingathi zange boluke - as if they are uncircumcised.”

“Surprisingly you will see them sympathizing with you in the morning.”

“Village life used to be so pure and honest. Nowadays that purity is stained by amagoduka. These migrants come back from the city full of township trickeries. Anyway, at least they are far better than your father. They do not abandon their offspring. It is better to steal a chicken for your family than to run away with your tail between your legs.”

“Things are getting worse. I’ve heard that grandchildren rape grandmothers in the villages,” Vuyelwa tries to pull her mother away from abandonment.

Nobathembu watches her as she sits next to her on the sofa.

“It’s getting worse, not only in this village but everywhere in South Africa. Even some of our chiefs and herdsman are accused of rape. Yho kuyagwetywa. This world is coming to an end. ”

“Then why do you let Sindiswa run around in the middle of the night?”

“The birds and izinyanya are watching over us.”

“I thought I would hear good things about this village. Kuqhubeka ntoni kanye kanye? What’s going on?” said Vuyelwa looking at the time on her watch.

“Those who come from the cities leave their dirt for us to clean. I wish I was a witch.”

“And do what?”

“Ndibathakathe banye. And bewitch them making the rapists lose their dicks!

“Hayi bo! How are they going to pee?”

“From their asses. All in one.”

“Stop it Mama. This does not sound like you” Vuyelwa giggles and they both burst into laughter.

“I’m serious.”

“Don’t be. It will be an ugly scene. Just imagine men with no ntoni ntoni.”

“So what brought you here in the middle of the night?” Nobathembu asks yawning but with a note of warning in her voice. The question from her mother fills her with fear. She shakes her head and forces a smile. Vuyelwa is very much afraid, of her mother, her baby and her husband. She sees a missed call and a message from KK.

“May I send a message to my husband?” she lies.

“Tell him ooDikela are still waiting for lobola.” Nobathembu grunts as if she wants him to hear on the other side.

When Vuyelwa sees her mother preparing to sit down, she screams: “Umntwana wam! Sukuhlala Mama! My child, please don’t sit on my child, Mama!”

Nobathembu jumps up. Dumbfounded she sees how Vuyelwa carefully picks up the bundle, then lays it on the empty part of the sofa. The rondavel is suddenly very quiet.

“And then?”

“This is my daughter, Mama.” Vuyelwa covers the face of the child.

“Hayi bo! Why did you not let me know this is coming? ”

“Uxolo Mama bendingxamile. I did not plan this visit.”

“Don’t start Vuyelwa. You didn’t find this child yesterday!”

“I’m sorry Mama.” She still has the phone when a message comes in. She quickly reads and sends back: be there in 20 min.

“Ubumithi nini na? How old is the baby?”

“Two days.”

“What! What were you thinking? Ngumhlola wantoni lo undixelela wona.”

“Why are you angry?” Vuyelwa steps away from her mother, looks into her face: “Mama, I need your help.”

“What help? Don’t start; I’m not opening my heart to anything. I raised you all, then your brother’s child and am now just breathing for the first time. ”

“In the morning I did call, you didn’t answer. I am all alone and you are the only person who can save me. I don’t think I will be around much longer.”

“What do you mean? Let me see the child.”

It is so quiet; Vuyelwa hears her mother gasp. This is the time to tell the truth, but the story she rehearsed in the taxi on her way from Cape Town finds no legs in front of her mother. Nobathembu keeps on simply staring at the child. Neither has the strength to speak. “Mama, please forgive,” she whispers.

“I’ve heard this before... Umbile na lo mntwana. Kutheni enje. Umfumene phi umntwana wegxagxa? Answer me, did you steal this child? Where did you get this white child?”

“She’s an albino.”

“Vuyelwa, I’m not stupid.” Nobathembu cannot lift her eyes from this white blue eyed child and shakes her head.

“This child is not from our clan. Lilahle eli.”

“Ngowethu Mama. She is our child.”

Her mother rises like a lion. “How dare you bring all sorts of problems for me to own? My life is complicated as it is. Khona, what is her father saying? Where is Thobani? Ukuyeka njani uThobani uphaphatheke esithubeni nosana olubomvu? What kind of a husband is Thobani. How come he lets you run around with a two day old child?”

“Thobani doesn’t know.”

“Who knows?”

“No one! Just you and me.”

“Oh, she’s a secret? Ubujola nebhulu? Were you dating a white man?”

“No Mama!”

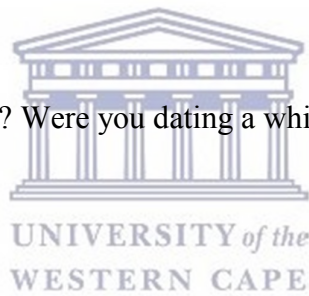
“Then what’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know...maybe it’s a miracle.”

“Then you should let your husband know about this miracle.”

Nobathembu knows her daughter well. She has never been into lies, cheating or gossip. Right from the beginning she has shown respect and integrity. She has never caught her misbehaving and yet her gut tells her now that her daughter has messed up on such a scale that she needs to lie. They have always loved one another. Nobathembu has always regarded her daughter as the last sign of hope in her life. Her only child alive. They used to laugh and tease one another but today, there is nothing to laugh about.

“Let’s go to your bedroom.” Nobathembu picks up the baby. Vuyelwa carries the luggage. As they walk outside, they saw a star shooting through the sky. They go into the flat that has a kitchen area on the left side with a table and four chairs, a sink and small cupboard. On the right



is a bed covered with a red duvet. Nobathembu puts the baby on the bed while asking herself whether she has any right to enjoy the last part of her life in peace and happiness in this village.

“There is money in the suitcase.”

“Ungakhe ulinge Vuyelwa. Don’t start.” The bitter tone of her mother immediately triggers feelings of anger in her. She understands her mother’s embroidered history of abuse and a lifetime of endless insults. She looks at her mother and takes a deep breath. Both of them are being sliced by razor blades.

“You have to fight this battle on your own, my child.”

“Could you please help me to raise her?”

“This is too dangerous here in the rural areas. I can’t and don’t want to become involved in your dark secrets.”

“There are no secrets, I’m just afraid of rejection. What if Thobani refuses to take care of his child?”

“Why? Tell him the truth. Tell him it’s... it’s a miracle.” Nobathembu is angry.

“I’m too scared.”

“This child is a curse and I don’t want to keep secrets. Ndisindisiwe Vuyelwa. I’m saved, a born-again Christian and I don’t want to be part of any sin.”

“She is not a sin, Mama.”

“Then why are you treating her like one?”

Vuyelwa wishes she could take her child and disappear.

“Ufane wazililisa. Deal with your demons.” Nobathembu snorts.

“Let me get her bottle...” as she leaves the room she immediately knows that she is not going back in there. KK must be at the Methodist church.

Her feet walk by themselves. The barking dogs do not distract her. She has nothing to justify her. All her life, she lived without guilt and deception, now the face of her child torments her. She sees the taxi lights and begins to run. Despite the frustrated voice of the taxi driver, she finds deep comfort in her seat and the fact that the taxi turns into the tar road. Away. She feels the milk in her breasts clasps her arms and tries to empty her brain.

“Gogo, what’s her name?” asks Sindiswa.

“Andilazi.”

“Is she going to speak English?”

“Bububhanxa obutheni obu undibuza bona?” Nobathembu sends a message to Vuyelwa’s phone, asking for a name and birth certificate. She wishes she could roll the nameless child in blankets and hands her to the postman to take away. Thinking of ooMama bomanyano women’s fellowship, Nobathembu’s head spins. She is going to be crucified. Again and again she wishes to simply vanish. The joy she had this morning in her garden has suffocated. Her life will consist now of unasked questions and over-rehearsed answers. Answers limping, answers full of holes.

Nobathembu’s connection with the birds is swept away each day by the sound of a crying baby. Now, it is Sindiswa who feeds the birds. It is Sindiswa who sings to the birds. It is Sindiswa who sings praises as the wings of the birds touch the sky. Nobathembu’s knees fail to touch the ground. She wishes she was stronger. She wishes she could have said no to Vuyelwa. Deep inside she wishes she could start all over again and seek for forgiveness for this desire from Umvelinqangi, the mother of all creation.

When she takes the child for immunization, the frustrated nurse from the All Saints hospital wrote: Nowayetheni Mbalo on her folder. What-is-wrong-with-her Mbalo. And that is the name by which the little girl lives in the village; the name that raises eyebrows.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thobani wakes up at the alarm's cries under his pillow. Like a frog with bent knees, he stands naked next to the bed yawning. Through all seasons, he finds pleasure sleeping in the nude. In the noise of the morning his thoughts flow from left to right. The bare cement freezes his feet. He bends down to search for his shoes. The shoes have endured his trials for almost two years.

He stretches like a snake, digging for the other shoe. He moans. He struggles and curls. A sense of failure creeps into his mind. Trying to become employed is finishing him. He opens the brown curtains. Bright rays flash in his face. He puts his right hand across his eyes. The room is no longer dark. Soft sunshine bathes his forty six year-old body. He stands there warming himself.

As always he breathes to himself his desire to build a proper house for his family. Nothing is impossible. In his mirror, the image of an African warrior is reflected. The passion and desire for change roars in him. He looks at the time on his small black phone. Shall he rush for a quick bath? His heart wants to read a short verse. Since childhood, his heart is glued to faith. He asks God to touch his tears. "Kulungile Baba, all is well, Father!"

Jauntily he marches to the kitchen, snatches out the basin, puts it on the table and pours water from the bucket. He smears soap on the damp washing rag. He sings as he washes his upper body. He then puts the basin on the floor and steps into it, washing the rest. He gazes at his penis and smiles. Finally the reality of a son is to be manifest. The vivid reality of an heir hushes him with a joyful mood and inflames the urge to get employment. God is definitely on his side.

"Gqu! Gqu-gqu!" he roars intoxicated like a praise poet with an odd feeling of completeness. He dries himself. He puts on his underwear and blue overall. As he looks into the mirror, he recalls the best times of his life.

"Go for it! Go for it!" he repeats to himself, thinking of his wife. His marriage has transformed from erotic pleasure into a deep love connection. He feels pleased. He imagines her big round breasts resting on his chest. He smiles as the image penetrates his heart. All at once his eyes rest on his phone. He dials Vuyelwa's number. A woman's voice informs him that he has insufficient airtime.

“Sexist society. Everything is genderised. Women are answering, everything!” The stale air in the room hits his senses. He opens the door. The stench is in his nose. The stench that roams over Site B township every Monday. He bangs the door shut. Glancing through the window he sees the buckets placed near his shack for collection, all overflowing. He shakes his head.

“Not yet uhuru!” He sighs, grabs his bag and hangs it on his left shoulder. Where is his padlock key? He suddenly feels surrounded by unanswered questions. The sight of his untidy room irritates him.

Thobani hates everything about South Africa. It seems to him that all the miseries of the world target black men.

“Makuded’ubumnyama kuvel’ukukhanya. Darkness shift, let the light in.” He stretches his arms. With eyes shut, he prays: for the rain to come. Somewhere someone is playing Mama Africa’s album. Her voice melts in his ears.

Then he sees the padlock key lying on the carpet where it fell when he threw it on the table last night. He picks up his half-smoked cigarette and puts it behind his left ear. He so wishes that the world could change. That the gang fights could cease. Ratatata! Their sounds torment him. Daily, ugly news bursts from the radio. In the rural areas, a woman is raped by her grandson. He switches it off. He switches it on again. He realises that his child is about to arrive. If the world could only be kind to his unborn child.

Whaaaaaack. Something has been smashed outside. Thobani jumps up. Through the window he sees a young man looking afraid with two crates of beer bottles shattered on the road. Luckily the bottles are empty. But he has to answer to the tavern owner. Thobani thinks of visiting his wife in the Groote Schuur hospital. The thought of arriving empty handed, cripples him.

He sees his traditional stick hanging on the other side of the wall. Like a trophy, the ebony stick hangs. He takes a deep breath and lifts up his chest. He looks at the stick’s elegant form. It injects pride and identity in his soul. He seizes it and lifts it like a Xhosa warrior. He recalls the tongues anchoring him in initiation school. Suddenly his fears and frustrations are uprooted. He calls out his clan name.

Gqu gqu-gqu! He runs around in his house lifting his stick up high.

“I, Thobani, son of Zwelizolile of Gwanini clan.

I call upon you, great ancestors of this great nation.

Rise up and heal all my scars. Mathambo shukumani.

Wake up bones and pour life into my trembling legs.

Today your moon is blinking darkness.

Zihlwele zakowethu, great ancestors, why so silent?

Why blind to my pain? Why strangers to my soul?

I am sick and tired of your timidity.

You are supposed to be the anchors to our nation.

You are to serve our interest in the heavenly realms.

But sometimes I feel you do not exist.

It feels like you are a great lie.

My heart becomes unwilling to thunder your greatness.

My wife and I have slaughtered and sing for you.

We drank sorghum beer, asking you to glue our broken lives.

And dammit! Still, I don't have a job.

My wife is about to have a child.

Great ancestors, damn you!

Damn you for allowing this new government to mess up our lives.

When they took power, I thought you were part of the plan.

Day by day we get less pleasure from those we voted into power.



Zihlwele zakowethu ndiyathetha.

Why are you silent?

Daily I have to carry a knife to slice my way out?

I have to protect myself from those I call my brothers?

Great ancestors!

In the early hours of the morning women are screaming.

Like men without balls we cover our ears.

I do not know who I am any more.

Why am I having this child?

Speak out! Lead us. Walk with us!”

Thobani pauses. He feels better. Silently he speaks to himself. He breathes deeply and neatly places the stick back on the wall. His eyes turn to the knife on the table. He places it in his bag. Then takes it out and puts it on the table. No weapons. He is ready for the road and switches off the radio and lights.

Before turning the corner, Thobani looks back at his rusted corrugated metal house. That is his home. This is what he has. He sees other tin houses mushrooming against each other. The voices in the morning are vibrant. The energy around is entwined with smoke, whistles and the yapping of dogs.

There is a missed call from Vuyelwa. He grins. He has no airtime to return the call. He misses her. At the bus stop he is amazed to see the sophisticated phones and high-class outfits of those around him. Unafraid he feels that today is his lucky day. Today, he will get picked up by a bakkie or truck. It is 6:45 and the bus stop is buzzing with men. Thobani estimates fifteen men are also waiting. Most are younger than him. Fear settles in his stomach. He knows his body looks fragile. But maybe it is not the looks that count, but the speed and agility to leap onto the

truck. An older man is pacing up and down like a boxer. His tight pants shimmer as if he is a pop star.

“Maybe I’m sick. No, this is not the time to bring out these thoughts. Focus. Focus.”

He must explode like a bullet when the pickup truck arrives. He walks up and down, listening to men’s conversations when he sees Vuyelwa’s number dialing.

“Are you at home?” Vuyelwa’s voice is calm on the other side.

“No sweetheart, at work?”

“That’s wonderful. What time will you be back?”

“I’m not sure, but will definitely not be late. Maybe six or seven... Why?”

“Just checking. ... miss you.”

“And the baby?”

“The baby’s not in a hurry to meet us.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Not yet born.”



“Oh! ...” A truck stops. Thobani drops the phone. He runs to the truck. Ten men. Like a springbok he jumps, landing on top of other men. He jumps as if he had a pole in his hands. The men on whom he falls, moan and shake him off. He struggles to find his feet, hanging on to the back of another man also wobbling. The man falls and his weight pushes the men towards the front of the vehicle. Finally Thobani lands on the floor right in the corner of the vehicle. He has lost a shoe and sees his bare foot resting on the steel floor. He bends down to snatch it among all the other feet on the crowded floor. There is double the amount of men on the truck. Most are standing. Others are holding on to the metal frame.

The smell from the man sitting next to him strangles him. He feels trapped. The stench is intolerable. He turns his head to the left but fat buttocks block his face. Eiy! he screams, frustration written all over his face. He covers his nose and mouth with his right hand. Suddenly

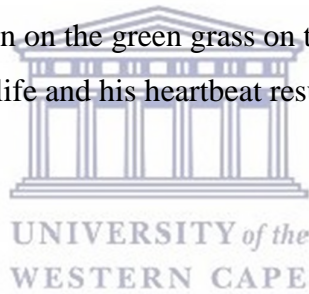
he hears the laughter bursting on the other side of the truck, but at that moment the truck hits its breaks and Thobani suddenly feels himself lifted and being popped out of the truck. He lands on his knees on the tarred road. The driver does not stop.

The men's taunting laughter in the truck as they turn the corner, brings back childhood memories of his stuttering souring his life. Slowly, he rolls to the right side while a scrap collector picks up the various parts of his R100 phone on the road. "Do you need a lift?" he asks as he gives him his cellphone parts.

Thobani does not answer. He looks at the phone parts. The ancestors are punishing him. He feels the pain of incompleteness, of brokenness. The dream and the will to make Vuyelwa proud is gone. His tears come out.

"Indoda ayikhali. A man does not cry," the man says.

Thobani thanks the man and lies down on the green grass on the other side of the road. With eyes fixed to the blue sky, he stares at his life and his heartbeat resumes.



CHAPTER FIVE

A spider is visiting Nobathembu's bedroom. When she switches on the bedroom light, she is shocked to see the large hairy creature resting high on the white wall. To her eyes, the spider is as big as a big potato. To her eyes the spider is huge. She retreats. Fear steps on her gut. She looks around: how did he get in? She sees no opening large enough. The many demons in her soul jump to their feet. Bravery slips out of her body.

"Kill it! Kill it! Kill it!" shouts the rage from the past. "Care for it! Care for it! Care for it!" pleads her recent heart which wants to love all that is created. Nobathembu stands behind the table. She looks around for a hard object. The sound of an ibis outside sparks consciousness of connectedness. What could be the message of the ancestors from the spirit world? She knows oomajola - the green snakes that visit the ooMajola clan. She knows that it is forbidden to kill the snake. Is the spider bringing a message? Every thought pushes her mind deeper. "Something is vibrating about this visitor. ... But what if it comes to my pillow? How can I have a dark guest in my shadow? Will it watch me in the dark?"

With bare hands she snatches it from the wall. Yelling, her nerves shoot, wetting herself she hammers the door handle with her elbow, feeling the spider wriggling. Outside she drops it on the ground not far from the rondavel. Shuddering she bids it farewell. As it disappears into the thick grass, she thanks God, herself and her ancestors. She looks down on her hands and for the first time, believes that they are clean.

The sound of a crying baby turns her face green. Still trembling, she rushes inside to the nameless baby girl. How can a woman of her age and wisdom be tricked by her daughter just like that? She looks at her granddaughter with regret and pain. Remembering how she changed Sindiswa's nappies ten years ago, she sighs heavily thinking of the marathon lying ahead. As she desperately rummages in the suitcase for a nappy and safety-pin, she finds herself sobbing.

Next morning Nobathembu calls Vuyelwa. She wants to know the name of the child, the birth certificate, the type of food, the type of milk – everything has changed so much in connection with babies. But above all she is burning to know: until when? And what will be the support? Angrily Nobathembu throws these questions. She looks at the baby who never lets the dummy

out of her mouth and thinking about the spider, swears that she will give Vuyelwa a piece of her mind one day.

It was the arrival of Nowayetheni that stirred the thought of impundulu into the minds of the villagers. The news of the strange looking baby spread like fire. The waves of impundulu reached Zanezulu, the chief of AmaQwathi nation. The chief is irritated. He did not want to be bothered by this. Indeed he was ashamed to be involved in such a trivial controversy. For him, greed and bribery and the termites engaging in them had to be purged. He does not want people kidnapping this unwanted child.

Ever since the baby arrived in Nobathembu's arms, the eyes have been eyeing her. Squinting eyes, suspicious eyes, poking eyes, blueberry eyes and red pepper eyes. The smiling baby makes her frown. The child's smile torments her. At times the child sticks out her tongue and showers her grandmother's face with saliva. The baby laughs aloud. Nobathembu disgustedly rubs her face. Often Sindiswa joins the laughter. These laughs land like rockets on Nobathembu's heart. Both the baby and Sindiswa are brimming with lights of happiness.

Sindiswa always carries the baby – she feels she has a blue-eyed doll in her arms. She sings songs, she plays games, she feeds her living doll and sometimes cleans her index finger for the baby to suck. Sometimes she rubs the baby's shoulders and softly rocks her until she burps and falls asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Thobani lies on his bed like a log. His head hangs tiredly. The sight of the cement floor confronts him. Waves of shame drift from left to right. There is worthlessness in his gut. Images of Pollsmoor prison flash as he drops his eyes to the floor. Once, he tasted that nightmare. Those cold nights haunt him. Long afterwards angry keys and steel doors banged in his head. He tasted abandonment among those prison walls.

He listens to the beatings of pain in his spine. He has come from a dreadful dream. The wind puffing on his door woke him. The vibration of the slammed doors remains in his ears. He dreamt that three Somalians drove a white Toyota Corolla. They came asking for the money. In the dream he orders Vuyelwa to say he is not at home. Behind the door he froze as they threatened to kill him. The tyres screamed as they drove off.

“What does it mean?” he asks loudly.

Turning he feels the pain in his back and right hip-bone. He is certain that the dream is not true. His friendship with the Somali brothers is genuine. He is proud of his friendship with other African brothers and sisters. Suddenly he remembers his history teacher, Mr. Mvuyisi Sithole. He taught them about the history of the African nations. His classroom presented the unavoidable reality of black consciousness. It was there that he became a staunch follower of Bantu Biko’s philosophy. The teacher said: “I’m not going to teach you about the, French Revolution. I am going to teach you about your revolution.”

Thobani remembers that. From then on Thobani deliberately read more about African countries. He fiercely embraced music from other parts of the continent. He read about beautifully crafted women from East Africa. He constantly dreamt of visiting the land of Nkwame Nkrumah.

“I want to taste the roots of the land that untied the hands of Africans from colonial powers.” One day he said that. Again and again he said that. “I will be the first person in Khayelitsha to visit African countries.” Again and again he said that. He said he wanted show the wisdom he learnt from the continent.

Thobani yawns. Sniffs. There is mucus in his nose. For days he has been sneezing. Intensely he anchors his mind on African unity. He knows that he might collapse if he dives too deeply into endless anger and self-pity.

Nombuyiselo, Vuyelwa's friend, enters the house without knocking. Thobani is silent. He looks at her movements and sighs. He tries to lift his aching body. He hears how a pot falls from her hands. His rage heightens.

"What the hell do you want in my kitchen?"

"I want salt."

"Voetsek!" Thobani says firmly.

"Thsa!" Nombuyiselo responds sharply.

"No wonder I am having bad luck. You are spreading umuthi in my house."

"No wonder you are falling from trucks. You do not know how to speak to women."

"Who told you that you are a woman?"

"Mnxm."

"Could you please get out of my house?"

"I don't know how Vuyelwa got tied to a crook like you. You're such garbage. Inkunkuma yendoda."

"Ah, look who's talking."

"Listen Thobani, I need salt."

"I said no! Don't dare take salt without my permission? I swear I'll kill you. Should I die, I'll haunt you. Ndakuporhela day and night." He gazes at her thin body and shakes his head. He cannot suppress his anger.

Slowly she pours salt into a small plastic bag.

“You will pay for this.”

“What kind of man are you anyway? You are lying lazily on the bed whilst your woman is in labour. For fifteen years, you can’t find a job. My dear brother, you are pathetic. For years you cannot save yourself. What about your family? You deliberately fell from the van so that you could lie on that bed for another fifteen years? Shame on you...”

Thobani scans the room. He looks at her and breathes heavily. Then he slides his upper body down like a seal. His right hand searches, sweating with rage. He finds his left black shoe. Swiftly he turns and flings the shoe hoping to hit her. He misses. The shoe flies through the air and breaks the front window on the other side of the room.

“You missed again.” Nombuyiselo says and looks at him with disgust. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head as if she feels pity for him. Softly like a cat she reverses towards the door. Victory is written for her and the satisfaction of seeing her enemy helpless makes her heart happy. Thobani watches her as she deviously winks by the front door.

The house without Vuyelwa feels like a cage. It is built with her money. Stillness moves in his heart like venom. He feels second by second...more and more worthless. Through the words just spoken to him, he looks at his life and it tastes like a tomb. He struggles to sleep.

*

Vuyelwa enters the gate of her house in the middle of the night. It is dark. So many times she has rehearsed what she was going to tell him, but now all convictions leave her. She wishes for a whisky to wash away the dark spot of her soul. Across the street is Mimi’s shebeen. In her mind it stands like a tower of deliverance. She once made a vow never to use alcohol when her brothers were driven to the gutter by liquor.

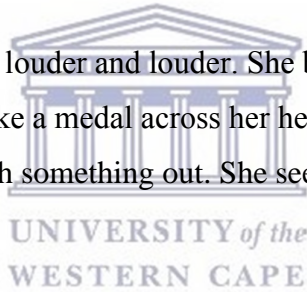
“You don’t really want to do this?” a whisper from the inside asks. She ignores the question. Like a wind it fades and the lust rises. She takes two hundred rand from her handbag and goes out, walking among strangers nervously smiling. Vuyelwa’s face looks dry. Her body burns with shame as she sneaks into the shebeen.

She passes among young and old, moving like a crab, until she reaches the counter. She orders. With the bottle in a green plastic bag, she quickly crosses the street. Closing the wooden gate of her yard, she sees people trailing in and out of the shebeen like ants.

At the front door, the outside breeze touches her skin. She wants to breathe. She lifts her eyes and sees the stars. She wishes to stay. To stay a little longer. To feel the quiet of time. She wishes to listen to voices from afar. The inside voices have been too loud. She wishes she could walk. A distance away would be just enough.

Outside Vuyelwa sits down, on the chair at the back of the house. She remembers the tree of peace that still stands in front of her mother's house. She remembers sleeping under the tree at night and the stories told by her grandmother, Marhadebe. Now she misses the voices full of laughter. She misses the delicate voices that made her feel like a butterfly. Today these voices are silent. All she hears is fear. She grabs the bottle and drinks directly from its opening.

The music from Mimi's shebeen gets louder and louder. She begins to cry. She yearns for the smell of her mother's pipe hanging like a medal across her heart. She drinks. She cries. She cries. She drinks. She wishes she could push something out. She sees her womb lying on the floor. She feels milk flooding her body.



“Isingqi siyangqisha

The rhythm is stomping

Siqhaqhekile

Torn

Siqhekekile

Broken

Siqhutywa ngamaqhwa aqaqambileyo.

Driven by rattling hail.”

Much later Thobani hears the voice of Vuyelwa outside. He limps, struggling to put his left foot on the floor. He listens and goes around to the backside. There is no one. He begins to panic. Then he sees her lying on the sand with half a bottle of whisky.

“Jesus of Nazareth! What the hell is going on here?”

His heart sinks. He remembers her words that everything is going to be alright. His faith evaporates. He feels her skin. It is cold. And covered in sand. He feels the twigs and the dry leaves on her braided hair. He stoops down and wipes her eyes.

He wants to scream. He can't. He remembers the manhood mantra. Indoda ayikhali. He knows that his dream of having a son has just died. He breathes heavily with his mouth wide open.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The pitch black face of a woman appears. Face to other face, her eyes stare. She stares looking close. She looks deep. Somehow Vuyelwa can see the shape of her face. Despite the blinding eyes of the other woman, she is somehow able to look at them. The face confronts her. She feels Thobani snoring behind her. She feels as if she remembers all the women who have passed away with anger written on their faces. They left the world angry at her. There was a rumour that she snatched other women's husbands. She tried to get it through to them: she never knew their husbands, but she knew the name she was given: Ihule, the bitch.

Could it be that these women are haunting her from the world of the ancestors? This woman stares at her as if she also needs an answer from her. She wants the truth from her mouth. But her truth is the one she cannot tell. The truth she carries is fragile and is in danger of crumbling.

The face in front of her is blank. It is rough. It sucks her mind. Her heartbeat carefully beats. It leaks fear. There is moonlight behind the curtains. Thobani snores. She shakes his bony thigh and he switches from snoring to a teeth-clenching sound. She struggles to calm herself down. How splendid would it be for others to know she has died. How and when did the rumours about her start?

The face is still looking into her eyes. She knows she is not dreaming. She wants to shout at the top of her voice. What do you want from me! Isn't being violated enough? She struggles to free herself, but she can't jump. The pitch black face of the woman stares her down and she feels how she drowns in a deep pool of anguish. She can't go back. Surviving the le Rouxs is all she can bear. All. And not the fruit of it. And then there is Thobani...

Early that morning Vuyelwa races for the train. The spark from her heart and feet is triggered by the fear of arriving late at work. Priiirrrrrrrp! The whistle blows. Mr Sibiya, the security guard, laughs as she slides into the moving train.

"Huuuum! Thank God I just made it!" Vuyelwa waves at Sibiya through the window as the train picks up speed. She tries to catch her breath but the train is really full. Men stand near the doors, headphones wired across their chests. She feels they are staring at her with cold eyes, and

her frozen breath is shallow. She sees young and old wired to their cellphones, listening to the world beyond. "Are they trying to hear their souls?" she wonders.

Ma'am le Roux's voice message makes her guilt shiver. With numb feet and hands she sits, wishing to erase some chapters of her story. Day and night, she has been wrestling with these chapters hoping to find ways to lay her truth down in this white woman's garden. Vuyelwa prays for strength to dig out the carcass that has been buried inside. She wipes her tears with her hand. She wants to move, but her path is blocked, her view is blocked and her breath is blocked by a wide range of smells floating in the air. She feels as if she is in a dungeon. The center of the train carriage is dark and her heart wants freedom. All she can hear at that moment is a woman singing about Jesus. As the woman passes through, Vuyelwa notices she is blind and the man leading her is holding a tin mug. Vuyelwa puts some coins in the mug.

"Is it okay to use the name of Jesus when making money?" A man next to her asks. She shrugs her shoulders. Who am I to say something about Jesus whilst being self so stained? she thinks. A preacher preaching in Afrikaans is suddenly in front of her with sunglasses. He paces up and down in the congested pathway. She looks at the graffiti on the carriage: there are clearly a lot of angry people out there. She shakes her head when reading phone numbers for abortion and penis enlargement creams. What about the children on the train? She closes her eyes as she sees the drawing of private parts on the window.

When she finally arrives at the Le Roux's house, the wholesome soft green air of the garden soothes her. She breathes deeply. Mr Ntsundu, the gardener, is reading the Sunday Times, sipping hot tea. She notices that Mr Le Roux has already left for work. The knot in her stomach disentangles and cheerfully she joins Mr Ntsundu pouring herself some hot tea from the flask. The tea with milk and the flavoured news from Ntsundu's commentary always refresh her.

"Is it true you will be working three days per week?" Vuyelwa asks.

"Yes! I cannot put my feelings into words. I'm delighted. I have asked Mr Kobus two years to consider my request. At last my request is accepted. Not just three, but five days per week. Every day I look in his eyes with love. Oh my God, what a relief."

"I'm so happy for you."

“Enkosi my child. Thank you so much.”

“Does that mean you will build your dream house emaxhoseni?”

“Don’t ask for impossibilities.”

“Hayi bo! I don’t understand,”

“I was born here in Cape Town...a regte Kapenaar.”

“What about your parents?”

“They were born here. Not all of us are from Eastern Cape, my dear.”

“Oh, I saw you yesterday at Khayelitsha Mall,” Vuyelwa says sitting down.

Mr. Ntsundu responds with a sharp silence.

“I’m sorry for your loss. I know how difficult it is to tell someone about your loss. I asked madam Michelle and she told me about your pain. I’m sorry Vuyie. You must be tormented by this terrible experience. I don’t know what to say. Please forgive my curiosity and please do not confront madam Michelle about this. All I wanted was to know how I can support you.”

Vuyelwa listens burning with desire to know if Kobus has not mentioned anything.

“Thanks Tata, I’m okay. In fact, I’ve moved on and the pain is no more. I wish you'd keep this to yourself. What will hurt me is to hear about it in the township.”

“You are right my dear. You have my word. I will not say anything to anyone.”

“Please, don’t tell Mr Kobus about this.

“Don’t trouble yourself about Mr Kobus. He’s a fine man.” Mr Ntsundu pauses. He looks up at her for a moment. When she smiles, Ntsundu continues peacefully talking about the ANC and his prophecy about its downfall.

PART TWO

CHAPTER EIGHT

Nobathembu hears teachers laughing as she heads to the staffroom. The teachers stare at the child clinging to her skirt. Out of sight she hears them laugh again. Nobathembu stands still. She wants to escape what lies ahead, but she can no longer postpone it. Seven years have passed since the arrival of this one clinging to her and she simply has to go through with it. Composing herself she loosens the little girl's hand and walks up to the grade one classroom. From inside, the teacher in a purple dress instructs her not to step inside. She waits. She looks right. She looks left. She feels seeds of ridicule drifting over the schoolyard. The child grabs the skirt firmly. It is her first day at Nobuhle primary school. She already feels unwanted.

Finally, the teacher appears from the classroom. Nobathembu's heart begins to ache as the teacher fires one question after the other. She stands still wishing the birds could come and snatch them away. She bites her lips. Documents are required. She has none. No birth certificate, no clinic card, no name of father or family. Nobathembu, her grandchild and the stout female teacher form a triangle by the door of the classroom.

"She is seven years old." Nobathembu sniffs, hesitant about the age of the child.

"But we can't register her if she does not have the birth certificate."

The eyes of learners walk over them. Some grumble, some giggle. The child looks at the windows and sees learners stretching their necks like giraffes. Nervously she smiles. Perhaps it is her over-sized uniform. When the teacher sees tears in the proud old woman's eyes, she takes Nowayetheni inside. Who knows – she might be a witch after all! The noise shoots up. From the outside, Nobathembu senses that the children will roast her.

"Umlungu! Umlungu!"

Her heart sinks as she hears this tag. She swallows the pain. She runs away from the flame. She spits and outside the school gate bursts into tears. For this child she has never shed a tear, but the

fright in the little girl's eyes as she left her, cuts deeply. Walking towards her house she already lifts her arms for the birds to come.

The teacher snatches a cane from inside the cupboard. She taps it thrice on her desk. Quickly, the room that was scorching with hisses becomes still. She tells the learners to sit down. They have all shoved together to get a better look at the girl's eyes, but the sound of the cane drives them to their chairs. Finally, they all sit down. Nowayetheni stands. Her brown skin has turned white. Fear dangles inside her heart like a spider on a thread. The learners' squinting, stretching, blinking eyes torment her.

The teacher pulls out a chair. She instructs her to the seat in front of her. Nowayetheni looks at the door. Her grandmother is not there. She tries to get up, but the teacher quickly rushes to the door, sees the old woman on the other side of the school fence, waves, smiles and closes the door. She sighs inwardly: the sooner one deals with this bundle of washing the better.

"Lilahle eli," she murmurs as she sits down. "Mehlo-aluhlaza-blue-eyed-one - tell us about you. What is your name?" The teacher looks deeply into her eyes.

"Ndingu - Nowayetheni." The class bursts out laughing. The teacher struggles to control her own laughter.

"Who is your father?" the teacher smiles. Deep inside, she knows she should not have asked that question.

"I don't know."

"Misi, why is her eyes blue?" one of the learners shouts.

"It's because each one of us is different... but I want all of you to open your books and write down the five vowels for me." The teacher scratches her neatly plaited hair and gets up, "I am just going next door."

Nowayetheni intently watches the teacher leaving the room and then begins to cry.

As if it is a sign, the learners jump from their seats to touch her. They poke her. They touch her hair. Someone tries to tilt her head back to see her eyes. She just sits and smiles bravely through

her tears. Then some learners warn others not to get close to her: remember, she's coming from Gwadana - the land of the witches.

Long before the school day ends, Nobathembu is waiting at the gate. The girl runs to her. She smiles. They hug each other.

“Was school good?”

The girl shakes her head. She looks back. Two teachers wave their hands. The girl frowns. Nobathembu struggles to smile.



CHAPTER NINE

Lord, clean my feet

my lips

my heart

as I step towards your throne.

Touch me with your gracious power

ulungile.

Let your holy spirit

rest within and beyond.

I demand your touch

to dwell in my eyes

because I am lost, ndihlangule.



“Gogo! Gogo! Where’s my mother? Where’s my father? Gogo why did you name me Nowayetheni? Gogo! Why do I have blue eyes?” The little girl piles up these questions the moment they peacefully enter the wooden gate of the church. Her questions fall on Nobathembu’s ears like hail. She is caught off guard, since all she had in mind was a moment with Reverend Sabhokhwe – for him to pray for her. For comfort. For strength. Honestly, she has no answer to most of the questions. Answering them will just leave more scars.

Nobathembu was born in Engcobo in 1943. In all the years of her life, she has never experienced a moment in which an eight year-old child asks one question after the other. Four questions, to be precise! This child has an uncultured behaviour. She zips her mouth and pulls the child up the steps.

From a very young age she joined Sindiswa singing to the birds and Nobathembu immediately recognised her gift. So she sings with her, sings to her and assisted her in changing the gentle,

delicate sounds to conversations with various clusters of birds and songs with irresistible melodies.

But today the child does not want to sing. Today she is restless. She has endless questions, so it is with gratitude that Nobathembu opens the church door, hoping the child's mouth falls silent. Yes, indeed... Jesus has thankfully snatched her from the wind of questions. It is silent and empty inside. Entranced by the bluish light that falls through the stained glass windows, the little girl moves forward. She smiles and lifts her arms as if she is walking in a blur of air. The walls of the church are white-washed. Six lit candles flame at the altar. It is the first time the child experiences silence in the church. Previously she was too lively, too distracted by other children, but now here with Gogo in this empty church, it has become an entrancing space.

But inside, immediately, the grief of Nobathembu becomes raw – overwhelmed she holds her granddaughter by the arm. Deep inside she longs for her life to regain its joy. As she touches the child, she connects with loss. The feeling of an exhausting anxiety falls heavily on her shoulders.

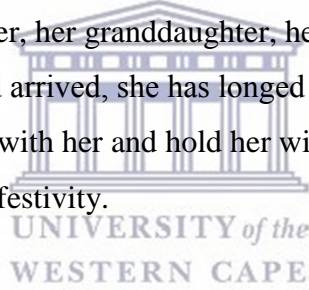
The child sits with her grandmother at the back row. She counts the church benches and gently lays her head on her grandmother's lap. Nobathembu prays silently sitting on the cold bench. The days in Nyanga village are frozen by the winds. Her eyes desperately run across the walls. Her eyes search. For three years she has tried to trace the shape of the answers she has to provide to the raised eyebrows of the community. She wishes she could stay at home and hide herself like a tortoise. She wishes her tale to be erased. It has been so many years now, jumping and limping, running away from questions she cannot answer. Everywhere in the village the same question is asked: "Ngubani utata wakhe? Who is the father of this child?"

This question landed in her life right from that very first day Vuyelwa left her daughter like a sly bird in the village nest. Nowayetheni! The sound of her granddaughter's name makes her shrink to an ant. She wishes she could fly like an eagle and look at her life from outside. The child's arrival has stolen her silence. She used to sleep under her umnga thorn tree in front of her rondavel and listen to it sing. She enjoyed its flickering shades. She tasted balance. She had untouched valleys and mountains resting in her soul. Now she feels the devil's shadow in every street of the village. She can find no solace. She feels so heavy.

Nobathembu stretches the bottom of her jacket to cover the legs of her granddaughter lying next to her on the bench. The wind outside hisses wildly, shaking the loose corrugated zinc of the roof. Her floral dress, which she wears when going to church, seems to be the wrong choice for the day. She sighs deeply as if she's carrying a corpse. She remembers the day she had to lock her granddaughter in the rondavel, because she was tired of hearing: "Libhastile." The bastard child. She longs to escape this. To flee. To leave the stain to the church. She wishes to be clean.

One of her friends advised her to slaughter a black cow: the child is umxube, a mixture that needs to be officially accepted by the ancestors. Since that day, their relationship was over. And now she simply wakes up to fetch wood or cow dung. She cleans the house. Prepares Sindiswa for school and ploughs in the field till sunset - heaviness shrouding her every movement.

"Look at her blue eyes. She is pretty but weird. Lilahle. Why did Vuyelwa dump her? Be careful, they will snatch and slice her for umuthi. She's albino." All these words fall on her like stones. At first she was angry. At her daughter, her granddaughter, her friends, the village, God. Her rage turned to silence. Since the child arrived, she has longed to touch her granddaughter's lion coloured skin in a normal way, to be with her and hold her without any shame, to play with her hair and dive into her blue eyes with festivity.



Dear Lord,

I live in a womb

of broken men and crumbling women.

Like a reed I dance

back and forth,

making no sense

of the tide that is not drifting.

I wish I was born in a land

filled with seedlings of love.

Touch my tears.

Nobathembu remembers the day she ran to her house after she heard that her rondavel had been struck by lightning. The child was inside. While she was in the supermarket, a neighbour rushed to tell her about the burning roof. She exploded. She wanted was to save the poor child. She ran through the cold rainy air like a cheetah. She ran with tears rolling down her cheeks. Her steamy breath and mournful groans amplified her pain. She trotted past the cornfields. She slipped and fell – Her chin landed on a large stone. Bleeding, she ran. She heard cows and the sound of stick fighting. She heard the sound of the winding river burping. She ran again and felt the rain coming to an end.

When she finally could see her house, there was no sign of fire. Various sounds spilled through her clenched teeth. She closed her eyes when she saw the burnt roof, covering her face. Then a hand touched her from behind: Sindiswa holding Nowayetheni by the hand. When the lightning struck her house, they were outside playing upuca. She wept with joy. Yet her mind felt like a grave and since then everything remained blurred.

The child wakes up in the church with a smile on her face and comes to sit on her lap. What is she to do with this thorn of shame in her life? Suddenly the girl stands on her lap and points to the picture of Jesus framed in the centre of the front wall. She scrambles down her grandmother's lap and imitates the pose of Jesus on the cross with her hands stretched out. She smiles at her grandmother and looks beautifully free. Nobathembu wants to snatch her. She is bringing in foreign behaviour. Afraid to be judged she picks her up and holds her firmly.

Nowayetheni cries out and looks down at her arm where her grandmother's grip is reddening her skin.

"I'm sorry." Nobathembu mutters and lets her go. The girl pulls her forward and makes circular dancing movements before the altar, then runs back to hide in Gogo's long skirt, her laughter filling the space with golden light. Shaking her head, beginning to smile, Nobathembu slowly imitates the dancing girl and lifts her arms. Her feet follow and then, suddenly, stumble into joy. She begins to sing with birds and melodies flowing from her swaying throat. The quiet enclosure of the church brightens and glows with the elation of these two congregants. Release bursts from

their skins. For the first time there is peace in the grandmother's eyes. For the first time, her granddaughter's eyes are beautiful as they are.

Reverend Mlungiseleli Sabhokwe hears exquisite voices illuminating the church on the inside. He opens the door, closes his eyes after beholding this spectre of light that shines through his church. He stretches his arms up high and silently glorifies the God of many names in his prayer.

"Mama please, you have to join our church choir. You are hiding a gift of God. Your singing just now calmed me. I believe today that you were called to release the thorns in my heart."

"Enkosi mfundisi. I didn't know you also have challenges."

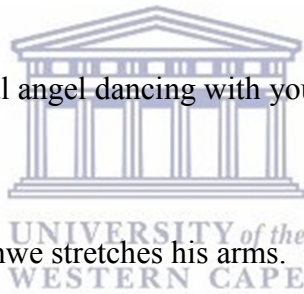
"All leaders need counsellors. We go through so much pain and if we are not careful, we may destroy the people we serve."

"That's so true, mfundisi."

"Speak my child, who is this beautiful angel dancing with you?"

"This is Nowayetheni?"

"Come beautiful child." Rev Sabhokwe stretches his arms.



Nowayetheni runs to him. She smiles. The reverend smiles. Nobathembu smiles. The reverend takes out the triple X sweets from his pocket and offers her some. She shakes her head and Nobathembu says she does not like sweets.

"Good for you. No wonder you have such a beautiful voice. Your grandmother is teaching you very well."

"Thank you, mfundisi." Nobathembu gives the child a pen and a paper to draw. She rushes to sit on the red carpet in front of the altar.

"You have a bright child. Tell me, what brings you to the church this afternoon?" Nobathembu just stares at the floor.

"Mama, why did you choose, may I say, this terrible name for your grandchild? Did *you* name her? It literally means, what is wrong with her? Don't you think that is unfair? Do you know that

there is power in a name? I honestly feel your grandchild is born to shine, but her name is attracting pain in her life. I humbly suggest that you change it to Nowa.” After Sabhokhwe’s words, Nobathembu wipes her eyes because she recalls the insults and horror her grandchild experienced when she went to school.

“Our names represent to us and others what is good. Give her a name that will give her honour. This angel deserves utmost dignity.”

“Thank you, mfundisi. Every day, the pieces of my life are coming together. Thank you for listening. I really didn’t know why I came today, but now I know. Today my grandchild is Nowa.”



CHAPTER TEN

Winter rain is falling. The drains rumble. Many shacks are flooded. Somewhere a shovel scrapes stubborn rocks aside to allow better flow. The soil is wet and earthworms appear. A sound of hammered zinc is heard. Thobani has hardly fallen asleep after his night shift as a security guard. He looks at the roof of his two-roomed shack with gratitude. There is no leak. Vuyelwa is in the kitchen looking for an empty bottle for paraffin. She finds it and takes a fifty rand note from her purse.

“What the hell is going on outside?”

“It’s your friend.” She looks through the bedroom window. “Indeed; it is Kholekile Futha with a hammer and a nail in his hands.” Irritated, Vuyelwa pulls the curtain swiftly. From her wardrobe she takes a long black jacket to cover her floral pajamas.

“I’m so tired of this noise,” she snaps.

“I agree. Another fucking hole in his roof! Fok man! How long will we have to knock these fokken hokkies together in this country?”

“But why the hell does he wait for the rain before he does it?”

“Where are you going?” Thobani wipes his eyes with the back of his hands and yawns.

“Do you need something from the shop?”

“Amavovo... a packet please.”

“Tjoe! These cheap cigarettes.....”

Thobani remains in his bed, irritated by Kholekile. All over the township, he is known for nailing his roof after the rain. Far off, to other parts of Khayelitsha township, the echo of his hammer reaches. Thobani’s tired tall body lies on his bed like a log. He stretches his arms, breathes heavily trying to release the tension that is sitting in his shoulders. He feels the chilly air in the room and gets up to fetch his spare blanket from his small wardrobe. The childless years

are heaping on my back, he thinks. A photo album falls on the cement floor as he drags out the blanket. He takes it and jumps back to bed in the center of the room. The howling sound of wind against the loose zinc on his roof suggests some more blankets will soon be needed.

Under the warm blankets he looks at his parents' photo album and smiles at the pictures, but then hears the sound of empty bottles outside. He kicks his blankets and quickly wears his black jeans. The sound drives him takes two empty bottles and rush off to the shebeen.

It is one of the busy days at Site B. It is Saturday. As always, small boys are rushing to the playing field carrying all sorts of bags on their backs. Some members of the community are putting on their best clothing for a funeral. Funerals provide special place, to socialize and brag about expensive outfits. Some go hoping to meet a hunk or a crush. It is true; men and women often get new boy- and girlfriends at funerals. Thobani thinks as he enters Mimi's shebeen.

"Stlama?" the bar-tender asks.

"Nope! I didn't drink last night."

The man takes two carry packs of beers from the double door fridge. Thobani places them in his shopping bag. He shakes his hand in a stylish tsotsi way and leaves without greeting his friends. He is still tired – his heart wants to stay, but his body refuses.

Thobani's mind goes back to his parents. His father had always been a very stylish dresser wearing colorful suites. On one of the photos he looks clean, but Thobani knows he has some dark secrets. A year ago he received a phone call from someone who claimed to be his brother from Katlehong in Johannesburg. His name is Sonwabo Mokaba and he sent a picture. The resemblance was undeniable.

He looks for an ashtray in the cupboard. In the past he often wished his parents could still be together to form some kind of foundation for his own son by Vuyelwa. But after the baby died, Vuyelwa refused any kind of ritual to heal her and over the years seemed to be needed more and more at the le Roux house. He breathes deeply, wishing he could erase his doubts. As he lights a half smoked cigarette and pours himself some more beer, Vuyelwa barges in trembling, carrying a snoek fish and a bottle of paraffin.

“It’s all yours, my love.” Her voice is tender.

“Enkosi. Is everything okay?”

“No!” Vuyelwa answers.

She hesitates. What lies between them is impossible to even begin to approach. She wants to be out of this room, this shack, this marriage. Forever. But she and Kobus need him to hide their secret. She has so many secrets. Now that she knows her status she simply has to go back to Engcobo, she wants to hold that one, that nameless one, even if just once... “Michelle needs me in Constantia,” she lies curtly.

Thobani nods. He feels a deep sense of frustration, but says nothing, as he has been saying nothing all these years – her ample salary sustains them. Swiftly she undresses, picks her clothes, sways her boobs into their place and runs to the wardrobe looking for a special dress - one of those that never get wrinkles. The die-hard dresses that are used by so called, “women on the run”. She slips into it and like a magnet the black dress moulds her curvaceous body. She puts on red lipstick and turns around in front of the broken mirror. From her suitcase she takes a two thousand rand wig and miraculously she looks like one of those women on magazine covers.

The joy in Thobani, watching her, is naked. He looks at her and wishes he were a praise poet. This is her. She is here in this humble shack with him. For some reason she has chosen him. He bites his lip thinking about all the attention she will be getting from the vultures of the mother city, but somehow, she always comes back to him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nowa sneaks inside Mthembu's kraal looking for the fresh cow dung for her grandmother's rondavel. It is early morning and a great silence hangs over the village. The steam from the cows calls her. Slowly she walks among the cows standing in the kraal. Like her, they seem calm and focused. She kneels and with her bare seven year-old hands picks up the cow dung and carefully puts it in a plastic bag. She watches the misty breath from the cow's mouth as she chews the cud.

Last night she felt so joyful to be where she was, to with her grandmother, that she promised Sindiswa to make her grandmother happy today. In the early hours of the morning, still somewhat dark outside, she tip-toes quietly out of the rondavel to get fresh ubulongwe for smearing on the floor of the rondavel.

The ground is warm; her feet are sinking too deep in the sticky mud. Nearby, the dogs begin to bark. She panics. She is on the wrong side of the fence. She slips. She struggles to stand. She is afraid to be seen, to be caught by Mthembu's family. She listens. A tractor roars, a hen cackles. The dogs continue barking furiously. Human shadows begin to drift on the outside. Nowa holds her plastic bag tight.

“Bathethe! Yowu moer!” Mthembu yells scolding the dogs, angrily rubbing off the dog's dirty footprints from his trouser. Now women talk in high pitches. She hears the sound of the chained gate. Like a stain, she sits resting her blue eyes on the mud. As her eyes sink deeper, she wishes she could vanish and fall in her grandmother's arms.

But she is in the centre. She is stuck. She listens with her eyes closed. A black and white calf runs wildly towards her and bumps her flat to the ground. The mud splashes all over her. She screams and slithers like a cockroach leaving her plastic bag behind. In the half-light of dawn, she notices Mthembu picking up a stone. She screams. Mthembu's eyes are unsure if this mud covered figure is human.

PART THREE

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vuyelwa opens the gate. Eyes from the minibus lie on her back. She hears the voices rattling behind the windows. The driver hoots farewell. She waves, but as she turns, five women are standing in the footpath staring at her. Two of them carry axes and ropes for fetching wood. Hastily Vuyelwa lifts her luggage and rushes to the door. At the door, tilting her head to the sky, she prays for a miracle and places her hand over her heart. It is trembling. Shaken, she fixes her eyes on the door of the rondavel. The voices of the women grow softer as they pass the open grassland. She wishes she had properly greeted them ... The smoke escaping from the hut is as oppressive as her heart.

Exhaling slowly, Vuyelwa knocks. Part of her wants to run back to Cape Town. The other part knows she has to address the numerous scars on her mother's heart. She has to finally face the agony of her lies. And her arms are longing...

She knocks again. Silence. Why are things being made even more difficult? The guilt and fury in her thoughts explode into numerous questions that need to be answered. Suddenly Sindiswa opens the door. She sees her aunt whom she shared her childhood with. She struggles to breathe. With a fierce cry, she bumps her aunt out of the way and flees.

Vuyelwa counts: five, six, seven, eight steps to reach the open door of reconciliation. The smell of cow dung and coffee in the air, calls up the presence of her mother. Where is she? Her phone beeps. It is a message from Thobani. Her heart bounces back and forth: Vuyie, don't tell Nobathembu that I'm not working. My lobola is coming. #Hahahaha! hope you had a safe trip. Ndiyakuthanda.

Walking past a dog barking, Vuyelwa opens the short broad door of the cooking rondavel, but is met by fuming smoke. Immediately she recognises the culprits: the soggy barks of the firewood lying in the fireplace. The grey wheel-rim in the center of the house reminds her of sitting with her brothers around the fire eating from one dish. It simply was what it was, love. Today, all of them are gone. Today, living here means to live in a cascade of piercing glances.

“Nothing has changed,” she whispers as she sees flames hatching and releasing smoke like isitimela coal train. The bunch of intanyongo mealies hung above the fireplace and is dark and dusty. Then Vuyelwa sees, on the other side of the smoke her mother sitting at the table sipping coffee. Immediately the atmosphere becomes tense.

“Mama, why are you sitting in this smoky place?” Vuyelwa nervously feels the heat of the room.

No sound comes from Nobathembu. Inside the old woman are voices: The dead are still, so am I. I want to die. You have made my life a torturous footpath. You have considered me rubbish.

“Mama... let me explain! Mama ndixolele. I am so sorry.” Vuyelwa begins to sob and on the smeared floor, sinks to her knees in front of her mother. But Nobathembu keeps her eyes on the floor, then gets up, pulls out an iron board and quickly connects the iron to the socket. Vuyelwa stands up, takes the iron from her hand and whispers: “Put it back. I want to talk to you.”

“Do you know how long it is, since we are not talking?”

“I’m here Mama.”

“Well, I’m there.”

“I want to be with you, Mama.”



“So why now? Last time you were here you threw my life in turmoil... So what is it this time?”

“Please Mama, let us not waste time. I need to talk to you.”

“I have work to do. Maybe there’s time this afternoon. Or is this again a 5 minute visit?”

“Life is too short to wait, Mama.”

“Oh? Are you dying?”

“No... yes, I mean no, but it’s not the point, Mama!”

Nobathembu takes a jug and pours water into the iron. The steams kill her daughter’s words. She takes her umbaco and places it on the iron board and irons. It hisses and sputters and her fingers desperately clench the iron handle. Vuyelwa becomes frantic. This woman who hides behind

steam and smoke, is her mother, is the human being that knows her the best. She tries to get hold of her, but Nobathembu pushes her away like a piece of garbage. The dog barks. Outside is a chaos of sounds of goats and pigs being herded off somewhere. Nobathembu has finished ironing her dress. She puts it on.

“Where are you going?”

“Ejakeni - to drink.”

“But the ceremony never begins so early!” Vuyelwa pleads.

“Voetsek! The days where you can haunt my life as you please are over. I have earned my freedom.”

“I’m trying to make a conversation with you.”

“Fokof with your conversation! I don’t want to talk to you. I don’t need to talk to you. My life is as it is. And it is enough – so you just stay away!”

“Mama, I know I did wrong. I’m here to tell you about my life. I know the whole village is talking about us. Everyone laugh at you. For many years, I’ve put you in shame. But I am here to say: I am deeply sorry.”

“When I messaged you about a birth certificate and a name, you ignored me. I didn’t exist. This information we needed from you twelve years ago. Now we’ve made our own history.”

As Nobathembu opens the door Vuyelwa can see wetness in her mother’s eyes. A circle of women is standing by the gate, waiting for her. She walks towards them. They form a circle around her and disappear down the road.

Vuyelwa stands quietly in the rondavel. What now? Then an urgency takes over – she has to follow her mother. She has to come out in the open for the whole village to see. Her shame has to be broken. Quickly she closes the door and follows her mother. The village rings with echoes. The sky is vast and the maize stands tall in the fields.

Vuyelwa sees the group ahead of her. She sees how some of them turn to look at her. Among them she can make out her mother’s stubborn walk. Then suddenly her mother topples and falls.

In anguish Vuyelwa sprints. In a ditch Nobathembu lies with her ankle twisted and the front of her body full of the ashes that is usually dumped next to the road. A broken glass or something must have cut the mid-section of her right shin. Vuyelwa bends over her, but Nobathembu refuses her hand.

At that moment Nowa comes down the slope and sees Nobathembu lying on the ground. Yelling she runs, sidesteps the strange woman standing near her grandmother. She helps Gogo onto her feet. Vuyelwa stares at Nowa as if she has seen a ghost.

“Who are you? What have you done to Gogo?”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nobathembu struggles to stand. Finally she does. She limps to her house leaning heavily on Nowa. Like a tortoise, Vuyelwa follows. When she looks at her daughter from behind, she immediately knows some chapters of her life will have to be reopened. Inside the rondavel, Nowa seats her grandmother on a chair. Then, for the first time, the old woman bursts into cries. Upset that the sounds escaping from her grandmother seems like pieces of deep torment buried in her soul, Nowa quickly pours some salt and water into the basin. Gently she places the bleeding leg in the water. She gets scissors from her school bag and cuts a piece from her t-shirt to place on the dripping wound. Fortunately the gash is not wide.

“I tried to reason with you.” Nobathembu whispers, looking at her daughter for the first time.

Vuyelwa’s thoughts move from one station to another. She feels so much shame in her chest.

“I’m sorry Mama.”

“Mama?” Nowa stares hard at Vuyelwa. “Mama?” So this is the one. This is the woman on the picture stuck up in the rondavel. She begins to tremble as she ties Nobathembu’s leg. Tears fall on her hands and her grandmother’s leg. The image she once buried in anger is now in front of her. Vuyelwa does not know how it happened – she suddenly holds Nowa in her arms. But Nowa’s rage swirls. She jerks back her arms in horror, but Vuyelwa holds her waist firmly.

“Let me go!”

“Nowa, I’m your mother.”

Nowa violently frees herself, runs out the door slamming it behind her.

Outside, she falls to pieces. Blood is pounding in her veins. All the anxiety and the bitterness buried in her soul grow like wild fire. Suddenly, she utters a cry. She runs. The storm inside her is uncontrollable. She runs through the field towards the river.

“Mama, what must I do?” but Vuyelwa sees Nobathembu is unaware of what has just happened and is struggling to breathe.

“Thixo ndincede!” Vuyelwa cries, afraid her mother is dying. The air is heavy in the room and Nobathembu seems to lose consciousness. Vuyelwa rushes to the bucket of water and pours some over her head. The old woman gulps to consciousness. She raises her head but looks confused.

“Where is Nowa?” Vuyelwa goes to the window and sees her running down to the river. She looks at her mother. The eyes are telling her. She knows what to do. In a moment she can be seen running down the footpath towards her daughter.

Through the fields and frosty grass, Vuyelwa runs to the river. At a distance she sees the young girl sitting on the bank of the river next to a tiny thorn tree - her eyes staring at the water. Next to Nowa, a dog sits silently, guardedly watching Vuyelwa. As she comes nearer, the dog jumps up to stop her. It barks furiously. Then Nowa calls it. Obediently, it sits down next to Nowa. Determinedly Vuyelwa sits down on the grass and looks into her daughter’s eyes – the same eyes that have been ravaging her life so repeatedly, so ruthlessly and so lucratively.

“What do you want?” Nowa brushes the dog’s hair gently around his neck.

“I have come to talk to you.”

“Why now? For years and years, I live in this village with bitterness. So what is there to talk about?”

“Nowa!” Vuyelwa stretches out her right hand to her daughter. There is the soft sound of water lightly flowing. There is a locust in the nearby imisi basket grass leaping with its brown long legs - somehow Vuyelwa believes that it is a sign, a sign of healing and forgiveness.

“Who is my father?”

Vuyelwa touches her daughter’s skirt.

“Don’t touch me.”

Vuyelwa’s heart churns as she sees fear in the blue eyes.

“Is it true that he is white?”

“Yes.” Vuyelwa sighs.

“So, what are you waiting for?”

“What do you mean?”

“Go on! Is he ashamed of me?”

“No!”

“Then why has he not called me?”

“It’s just a horrible mistake.”

“Bububhanxa bantoni abo?” Nowa’s heart explodes with anger. “So I’m a mistake and that is why you dumped me here? Like a nothing? A nobody! When is my birthday? Do you know that the teachers call me kafertyi?”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t ask me! How should I know? Am I black? Like you? Am I coloured, a white kafertyi who others can laugh at? Or a monster that is all of this? Who’s my father?”

“It’s Kobus.”

“Kobus... Is he alive?”

“He’s in Cape Town.”

“May I see his picture?”

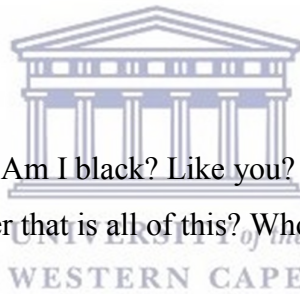
“I don’t have one with me.”

“Why? Is he actually a secret?”

“No...It’s just that I have a new phone.”

“Am I also a secret to him?”

“No! Of course not.”



“So why doesn’t he come to see me?”

Vuyelwa sighs as she twirls a blade of grass. So many things not sayable. So many things ambiguous. What actually is her relationship with Kobus these days? Taking this child back with her would destroy too many lives.

“So you want to see him?”

Nowa sniffs. “Do you know I don’t have a birth certificate?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean you don’t know what I mean?”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“I’m sorry for not taking responsibility.”

The girl hides her face in her hands. So useless! So utterly useless is this conversation that she for so many years desired. Vuyelwa looks away over the river: both are unable to cross the enormous divides, both are unable to tell the other of the scars of our lives. The unbearable heat of the sun makes the sky dizzy. Nowa sees a Heron next to the water. On one leg it stands as if it dreams.

“Gogo!” the Heron reminds her, “I have to see how’s Gogo,” Nowa hastily jumps up and hisses.

“Do not follow me!”

Vuyelwa stands up, her voice clear but fierce, “I’m not going to let you go again.”

“Leave me alone! To you and my father I’m nothing but a colour!” Looking at her mother’s astonished and hurt face, she shouts: “Yes, if I was black you would have kept me in your life!” She turns and runs towards the village.

Something in Vuyelwa’s pocket vibrates. She has a missed call from Kobus. He should have been here with her... When her cellphone rings again, Vuyelwa is surprised to hear his first words: “Are you with my daughter?”

“Ucinga njani? Are you insane? What are you talking about?”

“No! No! No! I’m sick and tired of all this pretending,” Kobus bursts on the other side of the line. His voice sounds slow with lust. “Please, come back, I cannot continue like this...”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There is frost in the window as Nowa puts on her thick brown jacket; she blows warm air into her freezing hands. Again and again she wishes to hear her grandmother saying: this is the last day of ukwalusa and looking after these stubborn goats; this is the last morning that you have to make porridge; this is the last day that you have to suck milk from goat teats, yes, you will never again have to fetch fire wood or cow dung. She shakes her head remembering Nobathembu's refusal that electricity be used. Water should be boiled outside for tea. Just the thought of making a fire makes Nowa completely fed up. And if people come to visit, it is tea after tea after tea. Many a times, she wanted to flee. Sometimes she simply went to the gate to inform visitors that her grandmother is not at home.

But this "last day" is not happening. After her mother's visit, her life continues as before and she sees her dreams getting smaller, her wishes floating down, down towards the Kei river. No mother. No father. Nobody will ever come for her. She is thirteen now and begins to hear how the voices of boys weave a melody just like the whistles of the lovebird unonqane. She wants to walk away from the daily chores threading women through the valleys and hills of Nyanga village.

She takes off her reddish slippers and puts on big boots. The excitement of the dog outside hastens her – the dog gives tiny barks. Sindiswa twists and turns peacefully on her bed. Nowa shakes her. Sindiswa simply has to stop attending the Golden Salvation of Pure Christ Church of Africa. Since the day Sindiswa returned from a special church service, claiming to be reborn, Nowa struggles to sleep, for Sindiswa began speaking in tongues during the night. In the morning, Sindiswa does not recall any of this: not that she preached, swore, snored or spoke in tongues. She is astonished that Nowa has heard her chanting a Muslim prayer as she is now a Christian and a preacher. Her mother's older sister is a sangoma. Her mother's younger sister had a stroke in the church revival and says she is a Buddhist now. To Nowa, this is nothing more than a bookworm's mind playing tricks.

Nobathembu has also given up on her church. She believes it does not have Jesus anymore. Deep inside, Nobathemba knows that she keeps her daughter away from people who can hurt her.

Nowa puts on her woollen hat and covers her curly hair and ears. She opens the door, but jumps back in and puts on her denim trousers. The dog has slipped in and growls around, running forward and backwards inside the rondavel. Nowa pulls him out and goes to open the gate of the kraal. The goats come rushing out storming after the dog. Like a leader he slows his pace, leading the goats to the field. One by one they follow each other to the banks of the river. Thick green uqaqqa finger grass has covered the pathway leading to the river. Now Nowa whistles calling the naughty goats by names to get on track. The goats are seduced by the thick green leaves of the umnga tree. They all listen to the dog and march down the banks of the river. As she turns her head, she sees the smoke of fires and the different colours of the huts brightening in the rays of the new day. She sighs deeply and smells her clothes. The deep smoky smell brightens her heart.

She cracks the frost as she steps through the field. Her trousers are wet at the bottom.. She raises her stick chanting like a young girl celebrating intonjane. Her song swims across the plains and she hears its faint echoes. Someone is listening to her. She swings her stick around as if a bull is charging her. She ducks and swerves, ferociously striking, hitting the imaginary foe that seems to stand in her way. Nowa begins praising, calling the ancestors to bless the family with cows and not goats. But please, she pleads with the ancestors, tame these wild goats as they often get lost because of greed for greener pastures. And they infuriate Gogo when they eat from her vegetable garden. Please help me, these goats follow their own noses towards Engcobo, they steal, they invade private territories. The insignificance of everything irritates her. She wants cattle and stick fighting.

“Unfair! It’s unfair! Why can’t I also fight. I am not afraiiiiid!” Like a true warrior she lifts her chest, she will become the best stick fighter, holding bravery in the darkest forests of the Nguni land.

Beneath her boots and cold feet, the field warms up. She sees everything through the lenses of victory: the goats graze gently and as she calls them by their names, they come and peacefully lie down in front of her.

As she picks a stem of grass to suck, her eyes fall on her coffee-coloured skin. Why do the young men not speak to her? Actually, she has never had a proper conversation with men or women. Is

it the colour of her eyes? Sindiswa once said that it was very difficult to look into that colour, one feels being swept up by wind. Possibly young men don't want kind of eyes in their offspring. Or even worse: that she will have an albino child or something? Or that she with her skin and eyes and her grandmother with all her birds are part of witchcraft? Sitting in the steadily thawing landscape Nowa suddenly feels relieved. She would be on nobody's list for marriage by force. She would not have a fatherless child. Nowa looks across the soft undulating fields and hills around her village and is filled for the first time with a great peace about herself.

The sound of a tractor stops her thought from making backstrokes. She sees Mpayipheli's tractor moving up and down in his field, pampering his soil. He is the only man with a tractor in the village. Everybody knows he starts ploughing at precisely seven o'clock every morning. But everybody also knows he does not share his tractor. If you want it, you must pay for it. He is wearing a long black jacket and a hat. Nowa cannot see his face clearly, but she remembers his nick name: Ntshebezbhokhwe! - goat beard!

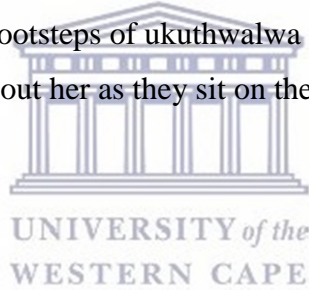
Nowa looks at the fields of those who could not hire Mpayipheli's tractor and begins to wonder how it would be to live in a household where a man is the head of the family. A man like Mpayipheli whom people describe as one of the distinguished people in the village - indoda emadodeni- a man among men. He has a big kraal and sometimes returning late after searching for a goat, she can hear his family chatting by the fire. From afar, he seems to her like a hard worker who lifts the spirit of other men. She sees some men who just lift their eyes to the sky waiting for flakes of wealth to land in their pockets; men waiting for their lives to produce riches by themselves. Nobathembu said it was Mpayipheli who planted all the pine trees at the foot of Mathole mountains. For a minute, Nowa looks over the landscape: she sees Thatha chasing a straying goat and when her eyes touch the figure of Mpayipheli on his tractor, she wishes to wrap her arms around the village.

She gets up and walks towards some thorn trees. She pulls down her trousers and shoots a stream that steams and simmers in the ground as if fire has been lit. Standing up she smiles at the ants now nearly drowning in her pool. She listens to her body and feels the cycle of life coming. Ever since she started a few months ago in school, right in the classroom, she makes excuses not to go to school till the day of the menstrual period is over. She knows hers last days. Sometimes nine. During this time she sits on her bed, cut pieces of cloth, change the pieces and sits again till the

cycle of life is over. Her grandmother cautioned her to keep her cloth far away from people, especially men, as it is disrespectful. Nobathembu told her not to speak to boys, eat eggs, drink milk or eat umvubo sour milk during her period. When asked why, Gogo just snapped, “Shuttup!”

She would also use layers of umbaco cloth and sit on it till the evening comes. She washes umbaco with a bar of green soap at night so that men will not see it. Nowa knows about tampons. Nobathembu knows about cloth. When Nowa tells her about the tampon, grandma just grins. Every month she misses eight days at school. She wonders what her mother uses? Fiercely she suppresses the stirrings of regret that she refused to finish the talk with her mother. It is over. Past.

The morning is crisply blossoming. From a distance, the village houses are scattered like wild mushrooms. Small figures move about emptying the kraals. She smiles. She is here and she feels safe. And for now does not hear the footsteps of ukuthwalwa galloping. Although only thirteen, young men are already fantasizing about her as they sit on the other side of their beds.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The school bell rings in the clear sky. Quickly Nowa runs down the slope, berating herself that she didn't move down sooner. When she reaches the school gate breathing heavily, she is one of the late comers. The grade eight teacher carrying an orange water pipe, unlocks the steel gate. "Follow me!" They line up, one after the other following a trail and the trail is long. On a Monday, up to fifty learners are sometimes late for school.

Mr. Nkozo is stout and short. "Mehlo-aluhlaza! Blue-eyed one! You are late again." His face is cold and angry. The stench of alcohol from his mouth suggests that she can expect no mercy. The time in his office passes with beating, yelling and drinking cold water. His water drinking increases as the sun rises and he fights his hangover. Then he sags like a bag of flour and goes to the toilets. After extra heavy blows for the "white one", Nowa marches to her classroom. She refuses to cry. Whatever people want to do to her, she will never ever cry. With difficulty she sits down and let her thoughts jump to the day that she will finish grade twelve. Her father will then come to her and she will tell him the names of all the birds in her grandmother's garden. He will be surprised to hear how she names the trees, the different grasses, how she identifies roots and mushrooms. He will be proud about how she can smear a floor and he will tell her about Cape Town and the people of Intab'etafile. He will take her and show her where her mother is working.

But suddenly she turns ice cold. She lifts her head. It is as if something forces her to rise and walk to the wide-open window. Flocks of birds like thin blankets begin to cover the sky, Swallows, Doves, Frets, Mousebirds and among them flashes of colour: a blue Kingfisher, red Bishops, yellow Weavers, tiny crisp-green Honeysuckers, a yellow crested Barbet. The rest of the class stop their talking and watch her and the birds: some fly like tadpoles, others glide like kings and queens. The sky is ignited with colour and undeniable beauty.

Mr. Nkozo enters the classroom and then something even stranger happens. As if in a dream, with her hands slightly raised, Nowa walks out the door and immediately the birds cluster above her. Those who do not find a place to sit, flap their wings – everything done in absolute silence.

Now the students begin to mutter in confusion. Nowa hears them and feels no joy. They are swallowing the truth that Nowa can silence birds. They chew the truth to the bone and soon the rumours will start that she is definitely a witch as well.

At this exact moment in the principal's office, two young men enter and settle down on the wooden seats. One of them combs his beard with his fingers. He clears his throat: Nobathembu has moved on. He lifts the truth and hangs it on the principal's shoulders. It remains in the room like it has been dumped for so many years. Like a worm it moves and relapses unexpectedly into deep silence.

Nowa is called. She extricates herself from the birds and hears that her grandmother has fallen at Nonyentu mountain. Mr Nkoso opens the bible, but she wants nothing of it, she wants to go to where her grandmother has fallen.

“Uswelekile na? Is she dead?”

When they don't answer, Nowa runs towards the foot of the mountain. The road leading there is rocky and full of muddy holes. She runs as if her whole life depends on it. She sees Mr. Mpaypheli's tractor coming from the mountain and realizes it will pick the body up as there is no undertaker in the village. She runs but feels herself enclosed in a boundless silence. Her legs move but her heart is as still as her face. From a distance Nowa sees young men with gumtree branches shading the body of the woman who had made her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

There is a steady knocking at the window. The wind blows and plucks the loose zinc on the roof. The noise at the window grows louder and more persistent. Somebody wants to get in. Is this the attack so many young girls fear?

“Who’s there?” Several dogs yap far away. Her skin is steaming and ice cold. She sits up on her bed, then switches on the lights.

“Who’s there?” The clock on the wall says 2:33. The knocking carries on and has become very loud. She jumps for her phone. Maybe the neighbours will come and help. She thinks of Mqwathi, her late grandmother’s friend sixty metres away. She’s all alone.

There are no bars on her windows. Footsteps outside are crunching, crunching the dry grass and twigs – ready to invade her space, her body, her life. Damnit! Mqwathi’s phone is on voicemail. She looks around: one door, one window and one knife!

Bang! Glass fly all over her room. As she runs for the knife, a piece of glass cuts her right foot. The curtain blows high in the wind. What on earth is outside? She begins to cry and yell hopefully loud enough to wake somebody. To her utter horror a hairy face appears in the opening. A goat! As she screams it stares straight into her eyes. Oh God! This is not real. The goat scrambles onto the small windowsill and jumps easily onto her bed. It is a very large female goat with sharp horns pointing to the sky. She walks slowly towards Nowa swaying her big udder.

“Voetsek! Voetsek! What do you want?” But already something at the back of her mind tells her: this is not a goat, this is not normal, this is witchcraft. I am being attacked by the spirit of darkness. She moves back in fear, stumbles and falls on her back. Within a second the goat stands on top of Nowa and moves its lips as if it wants to say something. She gets hold of herself and grabs the throat of the goat to push it away, but it stabs at her with its horns – jerking her head back is the last things she remembers.

When she opens her eyes it is 8:19. She lifts herself with difficulty from the floor. Her night dress reeks of goat and there is blood on her foot and glass shards all over the floor.

Shivering she runs to tell Sindiswa who is sleeping in Nobathembu's bedroom. She is shocked to see how Sindiswa is. She lifts her arms in great jubilation, ululating "Halala! Halala! Halala! Nobathembu is back. Sibulela amaQwathi, ooDikela, ooNoni. Yes! The spirit of Nobathembu is alive. Your grandmother has come back."

"What do you mean, Nobathembu has come back? To do what? To pee on me? Don't talk nonsense!"

"Your grandmother is back my child. We will celebrate and welcome her spirit into this family. AmaQwathi, have been waiting for this moment. If she ever comes again, Nowa don't fight with her. She's here to guide us, to love and protect us."

Nowa is not ready to welcome the goat into her life. When people talk of the izinyanya, the ancestors, they talk as if the ancestors have a right to control one's life. When Nobathembu was alive, she believed like a Christian. It is nonsense that people die and then become ancestors.

"Hey, Gogo is no goat. If it was an Eagle that visited me, I would believe it was her. You know Sindiswa, when they phoned from the city to say my mother was too ill to attend the funeral, I realised that all I have in this world is the spirit of Nobathembu and that it is all around us and in its bounteousness I must live. Gogo forgave all that have wronged her, her husband, her daughter, the village. Now I know why she did it: she wanted peace of mind with the universe."

As she speaks Nowa feels at great ease descending on her. For the first time since her grandmother's death she feels herself in complete evenness, regaining sanity and warmth within herself. That afternoon, at three o'clock, Nowa smiles as flocks of birds land in the garden. She holds up her arms and they enfold her like a living cloak of feather and colour.

Tonight she will begin to sleep under the gum tree.

MA (CREATIVE WRITING)

MINI-THESIS REFLECTIVE ESSAY


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The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building with columns and a pediment.
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN CAPE

Main Supervisor: **Antjie Krog**

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Mini-thesis title: **I AM NOT A COLOUR**

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Introduction to the context of the creative work

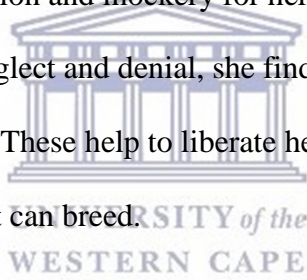
This text is a novella inspired by abandoned, blue-eyed children living in black communities. Although there are many inter racial physical characteristics among the amaXhosa, my focus is specifically on blue eyes – the children who would be called mehlo-aluhlaza. I have seen and experienced the violation and verbal abuse these “mixed” children suffer; many are regarded as bastards “Imigqakhwe”, as evil ones bringing in foreign emotions and thought into the community. Those with blue eyes, more than those with the light skins, are being targeted more viciously, because they are regarded as more endowed with malevolent spirits.

So what is going on around and inside such an isolated child’s head who is considered to have “stained” cultural roots? These questions came alive as I began to plot the story. I felt compelled to bring such a child’s story to life (through my protagonist Nowayetheni), because I felt that such children’s identities and voices are constrained and silenced by narrow-minded notions of culture. I remember seeking and interviewing more and more black people with blue eyes so as to get a feeling of the different backgrounds this kind of narrative could have. It heartened me that many people shared, or lived, this kind of life.

As the story seemed very much confined to black rural people, I have to highlight a few facts for those who have not yet come across the sort of prejudices that I attempt to capture in my novella. Blue-eyes can be accompanied by skin-tones ranging from light and pale, to quite dark. Because most black babies look quite light-skinned when they are born, it is not always easy to distinguish between the natural colour and the blended-with-whiteness colour. Sometimes the issue of albinism is thrown in to deliberately avoid the shame of a child being stigmatized for having inter-racial parentage. And of course, the darker the skin accompanying blue eyes, or the

clearer and purer the blue, the less classifiable a person becomes and therefore more vulnerable to be called something evil like a witch. It was very interesting to discover the images and phrases people use to shape and reshape their lives and attempt to escape from their setting, their cultural beliefs and from themselves.

Margaret Atwood, in her book *Negotiating with the Dead. A Writer on Writing* (2002) discusses motives for writing and determines amongst others, that writing is, “to record the world as it is”. So the title of my novel, *I am not a Colour*, is inspired by a friend, one who has an inter-racial heritage. The title speaks of the main character’s emerging defiance and the new identity she begins to create for herself in spite of and despite the prejudice she endures. In the beginning, Nowa is overwhelmed by discrimination and mockery for her blue eyes, but by living through her mother and biological father’s neglect and denial, she finds solace in herself and in her grandmother’s teachings and garden. These help to liberate her inner self from the scourge of discrimination and the self-loathing it can breed.



The historical context of the novel

The novel explores the life of and prejudice experienced by a “mixed race child” in the black community who still experience the devastating legacy of Apartheid. Black women working in white households were always vulnerable, but where I initially assumed that rape was the origin of all these children, my interviews revealed a wider range of much more complicated relationships. With the Group Areas Act in the past, but still part of the background, the novel highlights the inequalities, resentment and taboos created by the Immorality act and offers a historical context for some of the lingering prejudices held by black people in the townships

towards those who look white or possess some typically white physical features such as blue eyes.

I have made use of three generations of women to negotiate the complex and often entangled themes of guilt, shame and anger. The mother, Vuyelwa, finds herself trapped in a kind of domestic triangle (herself, her husband and Kobus le Roux). After the birth in the hospital, the mother knows she has to hide the child of mixed race parentage (Nowayetheni) both from her husband and her boss, so she invents a stillbirth while secretly abandoning the baby with her mother in the rural area. The vulnerable grandmother is furious as she not only has to raise another baby in her old age, but has to live with all the snide remarks, cruel questions and witchcraft accusations. When the mother finally decides to make contact with her daughter after many years (she suggests to the old woman that she is dying, then immediately retracts it) it is disastrous. It becomes too much for the young girl to be confronted by a total stranger who suddenly wants to be her mother and also tells her that her father is white and living in a comfortable rich neighbourhood. Nowa realizes that she is a discomfort to everybody, a potential disrupter of their lives. She turns to her grandmother and begins to mould her own independent identity restoring her own sense of self that is more than a colour.

The novella provides insight into the themes of abandonment and prejudice through characters who are wrestling with their own “otherness”. Although Nowa’s voice only appears much later in the novel, her anger and pain is the main fuel of the story (the grandmother also provides strong fuel); all the humiliations and rejections leave her overly conscious of her will to rally against stereotypes and to empathize with those with albinism, those considered a piece of racial shame and those embodying evil spirits. The text makes it clear that the tensions and

prejudices are multi-generational and thus reparation, that is to restore as far as possible the relations, also has to be multi-generational.

Narrative voice and multi-lingualism

Initially I thought I would use a first person narration since it could provide the reader with intimate emotional and psychological insights. But because of the importance of the plot, the movement among four characters and two landscapes as well as the long-time lapses in between, it became too cumbersome for a first person narrative to convey, so the third person narration seemed more appropriate for fluid transitions among complex characters.

But first let me deal with the “style” I am using. I have self-published several books in isiXhosa (*Ubuntu Bubomi, Liduduma Lidlule, Sekunjalo, Yinto Engekhooyo Leyo, Ndisinde Cebetshu, Ungowam,*) – it is therefore the language of my creativity. The characters of this novel are themselves isiXhosa with strong rural roots, so I had to maintain the thumbprint of the isiXhosa way of phrasing. African languages have a literal and figurative meaning. For example, the word *ndiyazidla* literally mean “I eat myself”, but figuratively means “I am proud”; *letlokoa* literally means “straw” but figuratively means “vanity”; *Pelu ea ithatha* literally means “my heart loves itself” but figuratively means: I am happy. For these isiXhosa voices I use mostly the literal meaning of the words, phrases and idioms – in other words, the reader can access Xhosa-usual through English unusual. I also remain faithful to isiXhosa’s way of giving „dead“ things 5 agency e.g. “the dung breathes”. Dung is linked to cattle, and cattle are linked to the ancestors, so in a way it is quite normal“ for it to “breathe”.

Professor Russell Kaschula suggests in his “The Oppression of IsiXhosa Literature and the Irony of Transformation” (2008) that South Africa’s multilingualism should be seen, first and

foremost, as a, “resource rather than a problem”, and I share his viewpoint. The novel is written in English but the rural characters live with a much more vivid idiomatic phrasing than the mother and her husband in the township who often brings in Afrikaans words and phrases to express the individuality of their background among coloureds and Afrikaners.

For me the hardest work was to find language for rural nature. I grew up in Gugulethu, in a congested environment, separated from nature. Even though it was a challenge, my research in the rural areas saw how isiXhosa elders from the Eastern Cape opened up a wealth of birds and other animals, myths, stories and rituals. By using the five senses and a representation of daily rituals and living landscapes of rural and township communities, I tried to create a palpable and powerful sense of place for the reader.

The writing of the text has also been influenced by the poetry module I took. As I wrote I found rhythm in the voices of my characters. Though the voice of the text is rhythmic and lyrical, it differs from character to character: the nature laden, sharp wisdom of the grandmother, the younger girl busy with her clothes and boyfriends, while learning to cultivate nature from her grandmother, the anxiety ridden thoughts of the mother, the sad futile thoughts of the cuckolded husband who probably knows what is happening, but the money keeps them respectively alive.

Literature Review

Whilst writing, *I am not a Colour*, two important novels informed my work. One was Toni Morrison’s novella, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), inspired by the fact that one of Morrison’s childhood friends wanted to have blue eyes. The little black girl became obsessed with how having blue eyes could change her life:

The Bluest Eye was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed, also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on a beauty scale. The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her.

(Epilogue in *The Bluest Eye*, 211)

My first reaction to this book was a sense of sadness that the child's view of herself is influenced by a force that persuades her to see beauty through the eyes of a white person and a white aesthetic. Being dark skinned and with dark eyes, Pocola can never attain the "ideal look" and consequently literally and symbolically comes to embody its opposite – "ugliness". Toni Morrison's novella captures the self-loathing and crisis of identity that results.

My text also deals with questions of aesthetic, identity and racial acceptance. However in it the black girl possesses blue eyes but she is despised for it. Within a South African, black aesthetic context, girls in particular are often made to feel inadequate and have a sense of self-loathing, this time because they do not meet the isiXhosa ideal of racial "purity".

Morrison's novella also highlights the secrecy, and yet simultaneous shaming that often surrounds the sexual abuse of girls and young women. She does this by making use of colloquial African-American phrases which indicate that a terrible and taboo secret is about to be revealed:

The opening phrase of the first sentence, "Quiet as it's kept," had several attractions for me. First it was familiar phrase, familiar to me as a child listening to adults, to black women conversing with one another, telling a story, an anecdote, gossip about someone or event within the circle,

the family, the neighbourhood. The words are conspiratorial, “Shh, don’t tell anyone else,” No one is allowed to know this.” (212) 7

My text interrogates the complicity of female members of the community who blame the woman with a mixed race child as if she had any choice working as a domestic worker and supporting two families with her income.

The other novel that informed mine is Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) – especially as there is not much fiction that explores the sexual exploitation of those moving from the rural areas into city townships and suburbs during the Apartheid years. Mda achieves a first-person narrative voice with a combination of gravity, acuity, humour and scope. He addresses the taboo of a “mixed-race” child born into a black community:

The midwives who attended to Niki were not astonished either. Of late they had been helping quite a few black women from Mahlatswetsa Location and the neighbouring farms, who had been giving birth to almost white babies. Or to “coloured babies”, as they were called. As if they were polychromatic. Or as if everyone else in Mahlatswetsa was trans-parent. Some barn women were already cuddling their own coloured offspring, while others stomach were expanding by day. It was a bursting of forbidden sluices that we were all talking about in Excelsior. (59)

Lust and loathing are the key themes in *Madonna*. Women in this narrative are lessened and projected as if they have no voice but seem to be willingly entangled in the circle of lust as, “the barn women”. The excerpt suggests that the midwives were accustomed to the reality of “coloured” or “mixed-race” babies delivered by black women in Mahlatswetsa Location.

Again, my text differs in the sense that it explores not only the lives of the offspring of the “barn women” living in communities in South Africa, but also the complexity of the relationship

between the domestic worker and Baas. Initially I treated the relationship between Nowa's mother and her employer Kobus, as rape, but whilst writing I found myself exploring the question of what if the relationship became more than that? What happens when two people are attracted to each other but racial prejudices are still rampant – especially in the white community. Does every partner have to keep their marriage mate to remain respectable middle class people? And what happens when those called *lawundini*, or *amalahle*, want to reconcile with their white fathers and vice versa? So in a way the story wrote itself through my own curiosity. 8

My text also differs from the Mda novel in other ways. Niki and her friends in *Madonna*, seem to have no sense of integrity or inner self and seem only engaged in lust. My character however, reclaims her self-worth within a relationship that has multiple emotions – among them perhaps love.



Short Summary of Creative Process

It is my first experience to write in English. It has been difficult at times, especially to express a thought or sentence in the ways that I want. So I collided with the English grammar and initially began by writing long sentences. Gently my supervisor brought that to my attention and I learnt to shorten sentences and be aware of repetitive tones.

In the beginning I focused only on the psychological context of separation, oppression and re-traumatization of those not fitting the colour coded lenses of the perpetrators. To weave such a plot had been challenging. But the more I wrote, the more I connected to the complexities of rejection, abandonment, guilt and loss and the depth of my emotional connection surprised. The writing process had truly been transformative. I have learnt much - especially during the editing

stages. Looking into my file I see 14 drafts and I know: draft after draft, my writing skill sharpened. Draft after draft, the characters in my novel changed my life.

This creative work is a novella of approximately 20 000 words. Initially I thought I would write only five chapters for the purposes of my degree. But once I started to write I felt creatively compelled to write several more chapters. I am truly grateful to my supervisors for guiding me back to focus on each character's uniqueness and then experience the thrill of weaving each into the fabric of a much more contained narrative.

Conclusion

The writing of the novel entitled, *I am not a Colour*, has been a new, tough but enjoyable process. All my life I have been able to write books in isiXhosa, but this time I didn't know where to start. I spent much time trying to get the voice of the narrative. I could not connect with the first person voice. Initially I read a variety of novels, some by local writers and others by writers from abroad. Even though I appreciate their authenticity, I somehow failed to connect with the literary style. I decided to try to develop a voice that would honour the musicality of isiXhosa and its figurative lyricism as an honouring of authentic voice in the novel, although I quickly learnt that to the English ear it may sound too florid! So I tried to keep tight control by pruning diligently as an acknowledgement of clashing literary aesthetics. I hope to have succeeded in maintaining the necessary fine balance. I have to confess though, I thoroughly enjoyed myself. As a teacher I lived for the stolen moments in which I could return to my fiction. I am grateful for the creative writing modules I have completed. The invaluable insight and techniques I attained have been inspirational in my craft. I hope that some of this joy will spill over to the reader.

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Plagiarism declaration

I, Madoda Gewadi, certify that this portfolio is my own work. I understand what plagiarism is and I have used quotations and references to fully acknowledge the words and ideas of others.

