

**In-between:**  
**A collection of poems of loss and  
memory**

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

**Supervisor:** Prof. Kobus Moolman

**Submitted:** 11 December 2022

**Citation convention used:** MLA

## **Abstract**

My mini-thesis in Creative Writing aims to explore memory and childhood through the lens of spatial and temporal consciousness. The vehicle for navigating these memories, whether individual or collective, real or surreal, is a collection of original poems based in and around the Cape Flats. Childhood specifically is the central theme of these poems, as it provides the basis for all the related memories in the collection. To me memory is like a map, dotted by landmarks in time. I will explore these landmarks in the poems to discover if there are patterns in the way that memories are made and stored. I will also explore changes in the physical environment – be these ecological or to do with human development – and how these changes intersect with memory. My aim in the collection is to channel the voice of a central character – a young boy – who is trying to find his place against the backdrop of the Cape Flats setting, while contending with all its challenges. My creative writing mini-thesis will also be accompanied by a reflexive essay that discusses the concepts of memory and spatial and temporal awareness and how these are manifest within my collection of poems.

## **Keywords**

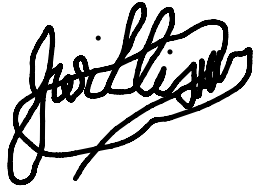
Poetry, Memory, Childhood, Temporality, Cape Flats

The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a stylized building with columns and a pediment.

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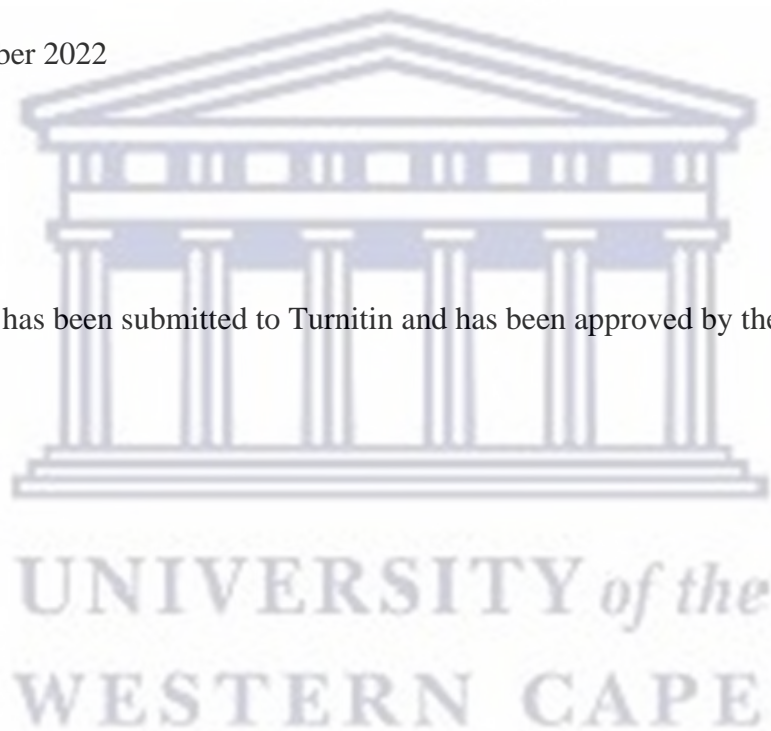
## Declaration

I, Justin Williams, declare that *In-Between: a collection of poems of loss and memory*, is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.



Date: 11 December 2022

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



## Acknowledgments

I have too many people to thank for the countless lessons, conversations and experiences in Elsie's River (and the broader Cape Flats). Running, falling, getting up and repeating has been the general trajectory of my life. This collection is an attempt at capturing those seemingly simple but profound moments.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my wife, Manilize. For rooibos, snacks and daily motivation. My parents, family and friends who I could constantly run to for anything. The prayers and kind words.

Finally, my teachers from home, creche, school, street and university. I am able to write because of their patience and allowing me to run, fall and get up. In this final stretch, a special thank you to Professor Moolman, a great mentor and friend for reminding me why I am here.



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**Reflexive Essay: Poems of memory and loss**

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## The Tapdancing Man

Grey four storey apartment blocks stand like sentinels over the Cape Flats. The blocks face one another, separated by a concrete courtyard below. The courtyards are filled with entertainers, young and old. Thin and fat. Short and tall. Their skills vary but each courtyard contains magic. The whole place does. For instance, there are boys who can perform acts of disappearance. You might leave your house in the morning wearing gold earrings. These boys can make them disappear. Making you wonder if you even owned gold earrings to begin with. And just before you can ask them, they will vanish too.

There are others, like the women who can make men forget themselves and their families. They are so good at hypnosis. The spells can last for a night. Or a lifetime. They can even turn one man into two. Living for two families who know nothing of the other's existence.

Then there are the dancers. They can bend time just like Dali. This is the stock from which the boy-child's father came. Before he became the Tapdancing Man, he was just Ballas. Peter and Mary's lastborn. His parents weren't from the flats but moved here eleven months before he arrived. His mother nearly died in ten hours of labour. (A full day + two hours overtime). The bolts and nuts keeping his mother together were coming apart under the pressure.

The sound of metal grinding against metal, being stretched and bent, was heard all through the hallways and escaped into the town. People outside were unmoved because the sounds were identical to those of the industrial areas which enclose the neighbourhood. A midwife grasped Ballas from the machine while engineers wrenched and bolted the woman back together.

The baby boy began tapping to the beat of the heart rate monitor his mother was attached to. The machine would go: beep-2-beep-4; beep-2-beep-4. He would tap to each measure. The beeps on 1 and 3, as well as the unheard 2 and 4. He was able to sense things others could not from his very first day. His father would later tell him about his birth. Claiming that his mother had "*Een voet in die dood en een voet in die lewe*". What Peter did not know was that his son, too, had feet in different worlds.

Ballas watched the vanishing boys to see where they reappeared and the hypnotist ladies to see which men they targeted. He had learned their techniques by the time he turned ten. The group he observed most eagerly was the dancers. One day, three weeks after his eleventh birthday, he walked up to the dancers. He explained to them how to move their feet more efficiently. Exactly how to place the standing foot, so energy is transferred smoothly before the lifted foot even lands. The more he explained. The less they understood. They told him to show them. The whole court stood still. They heard tapping and saw dust. But it did not look like his feet were moving at all.

## Lucky

You lucky to get coffee.

When I was your age kids weren't allowed coffee.

You lucky to get that part of the watermelon.

When I was growing up only adults could eat the *kroon*.

You lucky to come talk here.

When I was your age kids were seen not heard.

You lucky you can read and write.

When I was your age a lot of grown-ups couldn't.

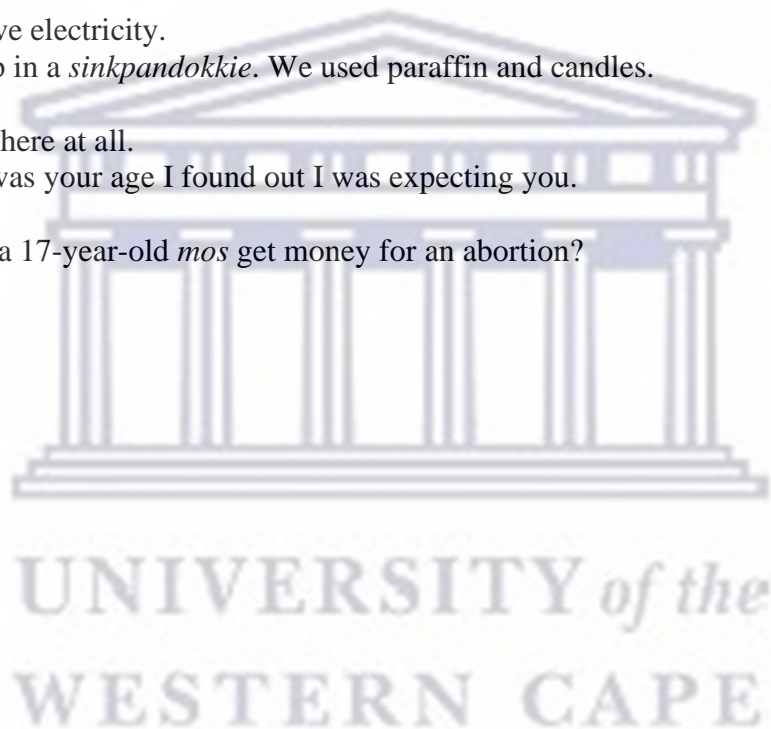
You lucky to have electricity.

I grew up in a *sinkpandokkie*. We used paraffin and candles.

You lucky to be here at all.

When I was your age I found out I was expecting you.

But where must a 17-year-old *mos* get money for an abortion?





## **Just Climb**

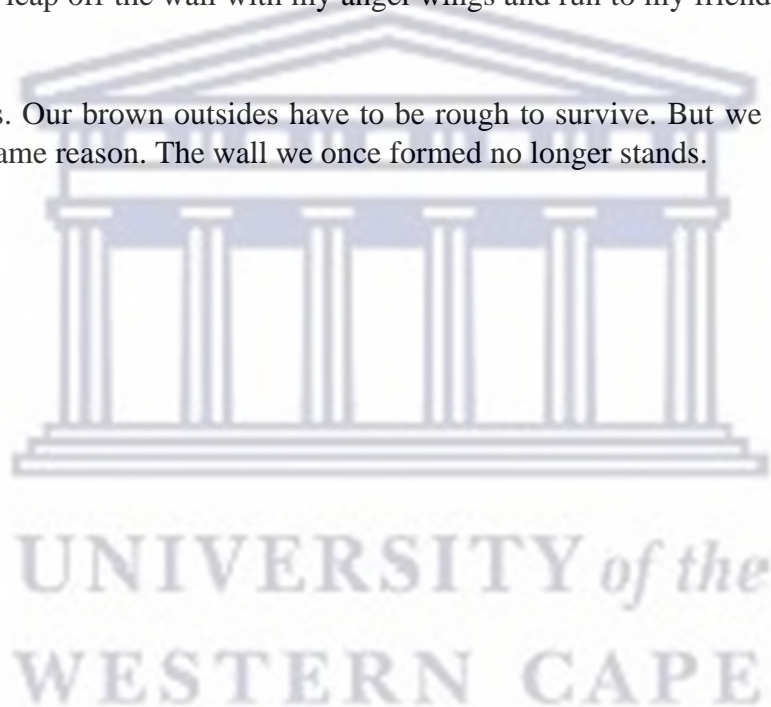
The outside of the viba is covered with rough stones. The stones are different shades of brown just like a grizzle pigeon. I climb up last.

The stones scrape my knees and my big toe through my broken shoe. The top slab hurts my fingers as I struggle to grip. I hold on and pull myself up with five steps. My right leg swings over the top, and the pointed edge of the slab wedges itself into my groin. I lift my left leg over.

My calves hang on the inside of the wall. This side of the slab is smooth cement.

I look over my shoulder to check if my Oupa can see me from our front gate. Then I turn to the soccer field to check for security or their German shepherds. I look up to Table Mountain. Full scan complete. I leap off the wall with my angel wings and run to my friends to get the game started.

We are the slabs. Our brown outsides have to be rough to survive. But we also have to stay smooth for the same reason. The wall we once formed no longer stands.





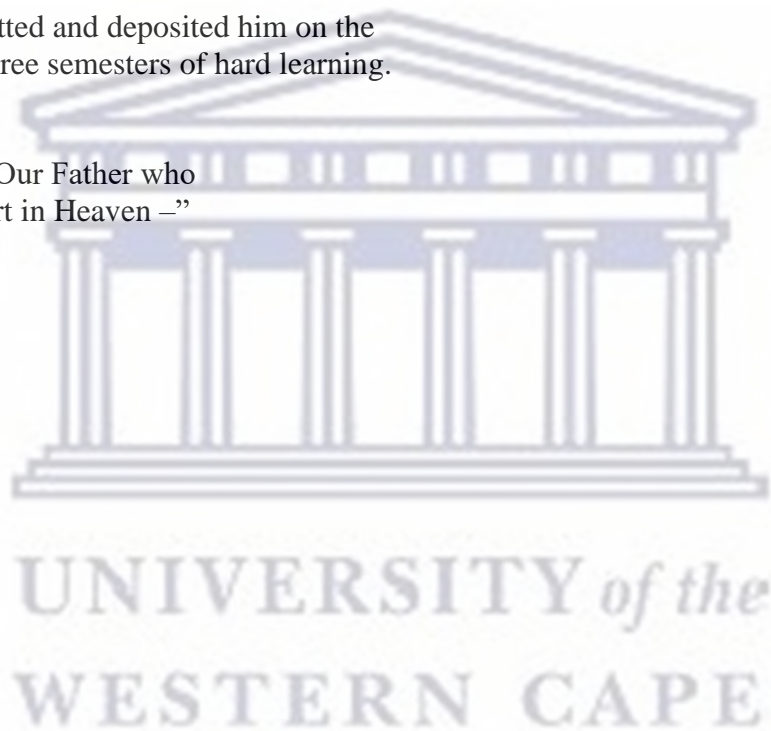
## Cold

Cold crept over his body like a colony of ants.  
Up the sleeves of his tattered green jersey, down  
the collar and up his pants' legs. He was drowning  
and could no longer feel anything else.

The birds were silent. The wind carried  
plastic bags and Coke bottles down the  
road. An Airbus struggled through a  
thick mess of clouds. He counted the planes,  
but his flight never came. He was bound  
to the concrete and tar.

His mother squatted and deposited him on the  
sidewalk after three semesters of hard learning.  
His father . . .

“Our Father who  
art in Heaven –”



## **Eternal – Goodwood Children’s Court (Caught)**

The windowsill is broad enough for a twelve-year-old boy and two of his friends to sit on. No birds ever perch there. The sky-blue paint is supposed to remind us of heaven.

Father. Vader. Padre.  
Tata, see you next time!

Down the dimly lit hallway, the wooden door is left open for ventilation. I see a woman under her man’s sole. Trying to find air.

The girl-child recognises the danger and tries to lift her father’s safety boot. But she is only four.



## **The Factory Woman and the Tapdancing Man**

The factory woman clocked in. Card clipped. Through the off-green turnstile. The boss just got the latest order. A big one. She senses overtime coming. The factory woman has a boy-child at home. There is a tinge of resentment in her love for him because he has his father's feet. The resentment is the difference between four or five spoons of sugar in a cup of tea. No six-year-old would ever be able to notice. His father's feet did a tap dance on her heart. While she was distracted by the rhythm her heart turned into a broken fluorescent light. His father's feet then carried their owner away, dancing the entire distance.

The factory woman had to work extra hours for food and toys. Food to make him too heavy to use his father's feet. Toys in case his metabolism is too fast. Her feat works and the boy stays indoors. The factory woman meets her daily target and produces twenty litres of tears without fail. It is to be used as brine for canning and bottling the food the boy will eventually eat. (Staff discount.) But the boss is happy because targets are met and profits are being made. Excessive amounts of a compound called EDS (Endless Deep Sadness) are poured into the food. As the bosses know profits come first and there are no complaints from consumers.

Sadness and fat are cousins. You can remove them by going to war. (Exercise for fat. Substance abuse for sadness.) Or you can feed them hush money. (Surgery for fat. Therapy for sadness.) However their presence in your life cannot be erased. Liposuction and its permutations are a testament to this. You can have fat drained, but your skin will hang. You can nip and tuck skin, but you will have scars from the cutting. Even if the scars heal, there will be memories. Sadness is of the same sticky nature. The factory woman does not see this yet and the boy-child does not feel it yet, but weight is slowly packing onto his spine and his joints. It may soon crush him.



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## **To Kill a Cat (Nine Lives)**

To kill a cat  
you have to be very sure.

To kill a cat  
you must have a reason.

To kill a cat  
your parents can't be home.

To kill a cat  
you must know it's family history and where it came from.

To kill a cat  
you have to be nine years old or be living in a nine year-old body.

To kill a cat  
you will need a hose pipe, bricks and sticks.

To kill a cat  
you must be able to run with splinters in your feet.

To kill a cat  
you must have at least two witnesses present.

Once you have met the conditions, you must do it fast and thoroughly. You have to bury the cat yourself and make sure the hole is deep. The last time Marc and I tried to kill a white cat for eating two of our pigeons, we trapped it, sprayed it with the hose to make sure it was heavy. Then we barraged it with bricks and beat it with sticks. It was dead. Then we walked away thinking we had done a good job. Our mistake was not burying it ourselves. We left it there for his father to find and acted like we knew nothing about it. The following day, the same cat was back on the pigeon flight looking for a meal. We are still running from it.

## **Hector (on a Cloud, like Jesus)**

I'm always late, and my family always scolds me for it. I never care. I'm always late, but this time I am sorry. I got here just about 20 years too late. Let me explain. I'm sorry for not being there to march with you and your sister.

When the bullets burrowed through you and the shells bounced of the boulevard, time stopped. For a nanosecond. That was enough. Your blood flowed through the street, under each person's feet. Learners, teachers and police. Their soles were tainted. When the crowd dispersed the sun evaporated each drop, leaving dried flakes of iron for the birds. The clouds began forming with a scarlet hue.

The cloud never broke. The potential for rain stopped. The cloud now hangs over me and has turned my vision RED. RUM can't numb. I have urges with no sense of place or time.

Maybe Ashley had the cloud before me. Like Roshi had the Flying Nimbus before Goku. The master can't die if the student lives as the student takes the life force of the master in each lesson. The cloud hangs over me like the tablecloth over our mountain.

*“Jy's vol duiwels! Jy moet trug gaan kerk toe!”*

I out-smoked the Devil and now keep him chained under my bed to grant me wishes. He is a nagging, picky kid but will do anything for lemon meringue tart.

The cloud swells and darkens and gives me neck pain and *kroes* hair. I have to force the rain out of it if I want to avoid hypothermia. Or being crushed.

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## **Elsies' Pools / Elsie Baddens**

Barefoot and bare-chested we walk,  
a towel over my shoulders and  
Ben with a 2L Stoney bottle  
full of iced water. There is ten rands  
in my pocket and two blocks to  
cover. We cross the field of lizards  
and thorns and walk quietly past  
the old age home. The brown fortress  
is within site. Rhonda complains about  
the lava stream that used to be  
Landros Ave (our path to school).  
I tell her to stop acting like  
a girl. We need to make one stop  
at Tietie Fati's for our paaper bites.  
Chilli for me of course.

We leave and walk all along the perimeter wall  
of the swimming pool. A left turn,  
onto St. Nicholas Street  
(6<sup>de</sup> Straat as my Ouma calls it). It is  
usually the quietest street in town  
as there are no houses on it  
between Salberau and Landros Avenues.  
However today there is a buzz. First day of summer.  
It is loud, like a swarm of flies  
around an unbothered corpse. We find our  
place in line among kids from our school  
and some high schoolers. The kids from JS Klopper's  
are too cool for pool. There are no teachers  
or rules now. The only objective is to  
swim and leave with everything you came with.  
Of course, some leave with more.

After two weeks, we finally make it to the  
window. The beautiful lifeguard  
with the blonde highlights asks how  
many. As the eldest child  
I answer and place three R2 coins on the counter  
as coolly as I can. She smiles and lets us in. Shouting  
at the kids trying to tailgate. We pass through  
the CCT-blue turnstiles. The scent of chlorine  
burns my sinuses. The complex has three pools.  
One for toddlers, one for 5-9-year-olds, and the  
other for teenagers and adults.  
I am 11 and the trolls are 10. We miss all the categories.  
The cool kids our age swim in the big pool.  
Decisions have to be made.



There must be something in the water (besides chlorine and piss). I don't remember anyone ever drowning here but I do remember other deaths. Jackie's brother was murdered outside the swimming pool on an August afternoon. The following December, almost everyone claimed to be pulled under by a dark-skinned man. Then one morning in the June holidays my Ouma came shouting for me to wake up. I was reluctant but it sounded serious. There was a fire. Someone's house was burning. We needed to help. The smoke didn't smell like an accidental fire.



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## Cape River Frog

Winter came stomping from behind the mountain.  
People ran and hid behind brick walls and blankets.  
We ran to the tiny marsh behind the mosque.  
Mom told me that the whole field used to flood.

The city put a drain in the centre to prevent the  
field from flooding. Winter still tried. So when winter  
made its footprint behind the mosque, we traced it.  
We would go check for bubbles every day.

Some days I'd go alone. Three weeks after the first  
major rains, the water would start filling up with  
hundreds of tiny pupils. Becoming an eye capable of seeing  
everything, irrespective of when or who it happened to.

The tadpoles brought life to a neglected body  
of water. It was our secret.

A secret we didn't know was that we were tadpoles too.  
Elsies River was our habitat. The canal that may or may not  
have been a river once, runs east to west. I don't know where  
it springs or where its mouth washes out. No one does.

The river flows through Elsies Industria, dutifully collecting  
waste and toxins. The poisons from the factories enter our  
gills. Our parents realise that we need to change. All of them  
want to see the princes in us. Toxins cause adverse effects.  
Parents hate screw-ups, so they beat the froginess out of us.

Each blow or lashing is like a mallet and a chisel being  
applied. Impatience and experience make some parents  
hit too soft or too hard. Those who hit too hard shatter  
the marble. The bai doesn't sell plaster to fix broken  
children. All we can find in this town is brandy, gatsbys and meth.

Once upon a time, there was a princess strolling by a pond.  
She saw a frog (it pretended to be a prince). She approached  
it and picked it up. Giving it a thorough look, she decided to  
kiss it. The frog opened its jaws and removed the princess' head.

## Earthworms

My friend caught earthworms  
and told them his wish.  
He had seen that earthworms  
do not have to die to move  
between this world and  
the one below. The one where  
his uncles put his father. When  
he asked, they told him that  
his father was with Jesus and the  
angels.

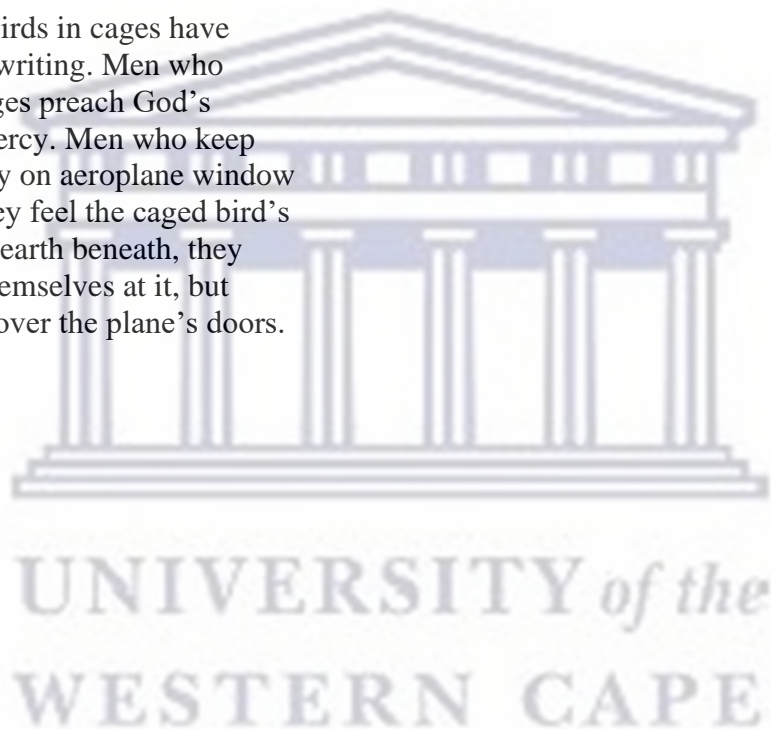
The earthworms always  
showed up in the backyard  
under the leaking pipe.  
The pipe's tears kept the soil  
moist. The worms could move  
freely. They had no eyes to  
give my friend pitiful looks.  
Jesus was in Heaven with His  
Father and came to church on  
Sundays. He was not underground  
with my friend's father. My friend  
knew the truth but had to be still.  
His mother surprised him one day  
with a brand-new father.  
The church had donated him  
to the widow and the orphan.  
Uncle-Brother Roger was now the  
head of the house.

My friend asked the earthworms if  
he could visit his father or if his  
father could come visit him.  
The earthworms told him that only  
they could move between the two  
worlds and that people had to stay  
on the side that they found themselves  
at all times.

## Men Who Keep Caged Birds

Men who keep birds in cages  
always sleep with their socks on.  
Their shoes are pointed toward  
the door. Men who keep birds in  
cages eat their food hot. No time  
to watch it cool. Men who keep  
birds in cages make sure  
doors are locked at 10pm. Men  
who keep birds in cages  
smoke twenty Dunhill's a day.

Men who keep birds in cages have  
the neatest handwriting. Men who  
keep birds in cages preach God's  
wrath not His mercy. Men who keep  
birds in cages cry on aeroplane window  
seats because they feel the caged bird's  
pain. Seeing the earth beneath, they  
want to throw themselves at it, but  
have no control over the plane's doors.



## Bruises

My cousin punched me in the face  
to stop my vanity.

My father lashed my back  
so that I would never turn  
it on him.

My ouma hit me with a  
broom to teach me tidiness.

My aunt held a fork to my  
throat to teach me about  
the food chain.

My mother strangled me  
to show me the value  
of every breath.

“For a charm of powerful trouble;  
Like hell-broth boil and bubble.  
Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.”

I cut myself sometimes when  
my blood boils. To lower pressure  
and protect the vessels. Bloodletting  
lets letters fall on sheets. All red ink.

My cousin punched me in the face  
because I was smaller.

My father lashed my back  
because he was a slave-driver.

My ouma hit me with a broom  
because she was a witch.

My aunt held a fork to my throat  
because she thought I was  
hiding a silver spoon.

My mother strangled me because  
she knew what this world was like  
from a very young age.

## Pennies

A penny costs R2.50. Ask the bai to warm it in the microwave till it bursts.

Four to five can be used to make a pot of *kerrie* for a household of eight.

Pennies can be used as fuel to get kids through primary school. High school has other dietary needs.

Daring to push away a plate of penny polony *kerrie* can get an eight-year-old a *klap* or worse.



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## The Brown Couch

Don't jump on there!  
That couch is way  
older than you. That  
couch was here when  
I was *a snotgat laaitie*,  
like you are now.  
That was the best  
couch on our street.

BROWNSUEDE  
BROWNLIKE  
BLACKLABEL  
BOTTLES

BROWNLIKE  
BLOBSOFSLIME  
(when Oupa has the bad fits  
and throws up pieces of his liver)

The brown couch,  
the couch with the broken  
bones and wrinkled skin. The broken  
couch with the brown bones and wrinkly skin  
and sunken cushions. The brown couch on which I kissed Robyn.  
The brown couch on which the Tapdancing Man asked Oupa and Ouma  
if he could marry the Factory Woman (while I peeped from the thirteenth step,  
swearing curses down on his name and feet).  
The brown couch with the broken bones and wrinkly skin on which  
three generations sat together to watch "Generations at 8pm every week night only  
on SABC 1 - Mzanzi, fo sho!"

Don't jump on there!  
That couch is way  
older than you. That  
couch is old as Adam.  
The wood is from the  
tree of knowledge of good  
and evil. It holds all the  
family secrets and your  
future in its brown skin.



## Forehead

Forehead hits wall.  
Wall does nothing.

Forehead hits wall.  
Mouth opens:  
“*Ek het nie die geld  
gesteel nie!*”

Forehead hits wall.  
Tear ducts open.  
Water from the  
Dead Sea flows.

Forehead hits wall.  
Gloved eleven-year-  
old hands turn pants  
pockets inside out

Forehead hits wall.  
Wall does nothing.  
Except support and  
respect privacy.

Forehead hits wall.  
Mouths open:  
“*Hal gou jou gloves  
af, boeta.*”

Forehead stops  
hitting wall. Neatly  
folded notes, R270  
in value, drop onto  
linoleum floor.





## Playing Outside

Bottle brush tree.

“*Wat soek julle hotnots hie?!?*”

Fig tree, fig leaf

Fruits of the spirit

rotten to the core. Let’s

run *gou* to the bottle store.

Richelieu brandy, change

for candy - SUIKER LEKKERS -

KAFFE BOLLE

Big Time, Bubaloo. Sorry to

burst your bubble but board

is due, my Chappie. You’ve

bitten off more than you could

ever chew. Stuck under a blind

man’s shoe. Slight inconvenience

but places to be and toes to step

on. He’s not stopping.

The hamster loves his new wheel.

“Should we tell him?”

“I don’t think he’s ready for this.”

They don’t know I’ve already met

death outside. He undressed me

and tried to find a way in. So I

keep quiet and let the grownups talk.

People ask me why I’m always so  
blue. I’m from Neptune Street.

It’s what I’m destined to do. I

wish I had the guts to tell them.

Grownups think they’re stronger

than children because we cry.

They don’t cry. Then have heart attacks.

We cry and go back to play,

running through Ruyterwacht looking

for white girlfriends. We know it

won’t happen but rules are for grownups.

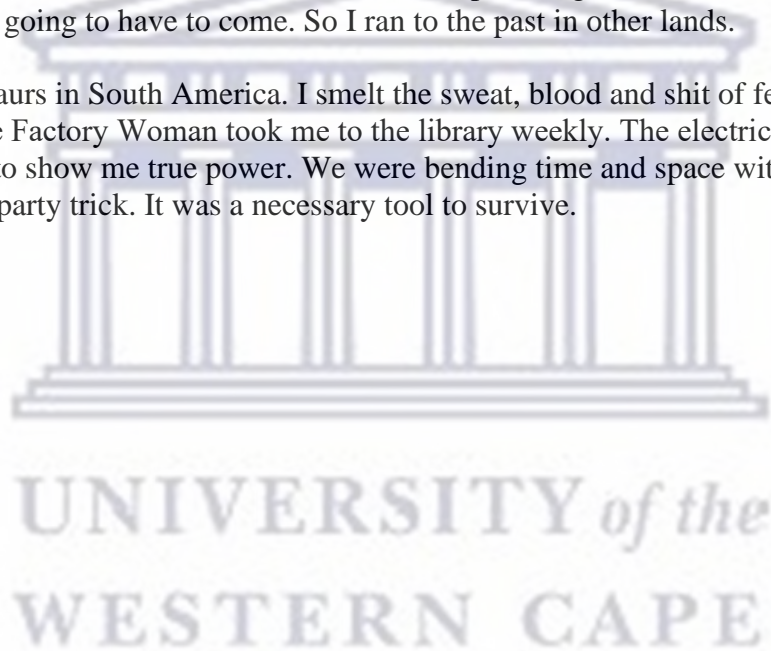
## Neptune's Kids

Red Nokia 5210. Removable rubber casing. Casing on and off like the Factory Woman's moods. On and off like short-time. Unromantic candlelight. Loadshedding saves face. There's no electricity in the house.

Diana Ross moonshines as a babysitter. "Do you know where you're going to?" She keeps asking. We get inside Uncle Harry's broken down Opel. A yellow station wagon from the 80s that died too early. It now works as Neptune's children's time machine. Maxwell was always the driver because it was his Pa's car. The rest of us fought tooth, nail and fist for passenger. *Linksvoor*. But girls would always win because Maxi liked showing them his *harewurm*. The rest of us had hairless earthworms.

Everyone wanted to go to the future and see what life would be like. I was too scared. I always thought the devil would win and Jesus would leave us here because of our crooked ways. Ben stole from the bai. I cursed the Tapdancing Man. Maxi showed his penis. Punishment was going to have to come. So I ran to the past in other lands.

I hid from dinosaurs in South America. I smelt the sweat, blood and shit of fellow slaves on the Clotilda. The Factory Woman took me to the library weekly. The electricity didn't have to be on for her to show me true power. We were bending time and space without knowing it. But it was not a party trick. It was a necessary tool to survive.



## Dread

The park (with the red gravel pathways  
the big wheel spins and we laugh and scrape  
our knees and hands falling) is right next to  
The White House where Uncle Boy  
is the president. He decides who lives and dies  
and sells and buys.

I run upstairs to get to the bathroom first.  
I run upstairs and turn around midway because  
the kettle isn't switched on at the wall.

*“Hou op hardloop op my fokken stairs!  
Hier bly mense langsaan!”*

“Sorry, Oupa.”

Vegeta, the dagga-smoking pit bull terrier,  
lies in the shade, chained  
to the park's bent fence.  
His tail is a conductor's baton,  
he uses it to indicate to the flies  
that their part of the concert is over.

The priest is warning the congregation  
against idolatry. My mom gives  
me the look and I know I will not be getting  
Yu-Gi-Oh! cards for my 11th birthday.

Kendrick Lamar is singing the blues about his  
alcoholic grandpa:

“Granddaddy had the golden flask,  
backstroke every day in Chicago.  
Some people like the way it feels.  
Some people wanna kill their sorrow –”

“Oupa! *Skrik wakke!*”

My grandma denies what rigormortis  
is screaming at us. She gets up and goes to the toilet.  
I am alone and check Oupa's pulse. My mom  
comes into their room and asks me to pray.  
I can't. He had a seizure, fell, and knocked his  
head on the cement stoep. Mom's birthday.

My cousin Sandra and I looked at each  
other as soon as it happened,  
we did not say a word, but we were thinking the same thing.

Vegeta walks on Neptune Street, and everyone runs to greet Aya-man Randy. Everyone asks if they can walk his dog. No one does.

No job? Sell or shoot for Uncle Boy, he'll make you an Ou and get you a M3. If not, become a rasta. If you're caught in the life, get saved by Jesus, or follow Muhammad or Haile to escape. The only other way is in a box. That's how it used to be.

Desperate now, the money is not the same. No one has German sedans anymore. Aya-man Randy took the reverse route. He now sells the substances he once preached against. The recession and Zuma and the virus destroyed all options. No more dreadlocks.

I run upstairs to get Oupa's ID.  
I run upstairs because I forgot my phone.  
I run downstairs because the kitchen window keeps banging.  
I run upstairs to hide because there's a *vuil gies* downstairs.

Half of my face was swollen at Christmas.  
I think I fell off my bunk bed onto the cement floor.  
I walked to my friend Cheslin's house and the people on Halt Road all stared at me, I was just hoping not at my other grandma. She has a way of making you feel guilty for anything. If she saw my face, she would be concerned about how it looked and reflected on her family, not about my pain or the embarrassment of having a bowling ball for a right cheek.

The red gravel reflected life. It was both stable and unstable at once.  
We would fall and scrape our knees and hands. Bleed.  
Uncle Boy died from cancer (all his boys died from bullets tearing their skin apart) and my grandma cried for her brother.  
My father only cried for his mother's sake. He was resentful because the uncle was ruthless and cared more about his business than his family.

## ESSAY: POEMS OF MEMORY AND LOSS

### Introduction:

A recent move back to my hometown in Elsie's River after living in Belhar for over two years, changed my view on the places that I thought I knew. This move coincided with my academic studies at the University of the Western Cape, which highlighted an emphasis upon spatiality and awakened a range of dormant memories made in those spaces. At the time, the memories were emotionally overwhelming. But I took a step back and reviewed the paths I had navigated to reach where I was.

The move took place at a point in my life where I had to step into adulthood. I had just got married. Previously, I had had jobs, paid taxes and made debt, but none of these experiences had the same effect as marriage and relocation. As I packed my belongings into boxes and bags, I had to do the same with my memories. Some were damaged by time and neglect. Others had almost been erased. However, the dim awareness that something once used to occupy a certain shelf or a corner was ineradicable. These feelings slowly permeated into my writing, to the point where they eventually flooded my thoughts. My earliest childhood memories came back to me and I urgently needed to know why and how they existed within my individual as well as in my social consciousness. Following upon this idea came stories of my parents and grandparents' childhood. I now knew what I had to focus on for my writing.

I have been writing for as long as I can remember. My earliest notions of myself as being able to tell stories came through essays in primary and secondary school, as well as through Rap music. I have always admired people who are able to use words, not just to tell stories but also to entertain and extend the limits of what we generally think can be done with words. Writing across my various courses – poetry, prose and creative nonfiction – I found my writing-self constantly drawn to using the voice of a child. This is the basis of my creative work here; specifically dealing with the idea of being lost, and how being out of place can force one to quickly sum up and evaluate one's current surroundings. None of the characters in my collection are truly at home or ever grounded, since place for them is always volatile and at risk. This speaks to my own childhood (and early adulthood), as many of my friends went down completely different life paths. Additionally, moving back to my hometown in Elsie's River made me assess what had happened to all these friends. And this reflection has contributed to my thinking process behind this current collection.



My creative life as writer and as musician has benefitted from my study of different writers and musicians. I am more mindful now of how and what I read. Additionally, I have learned to approach writing in the same way I do composing and sampling music. I have learned to apply the same methods of constructing harmonic progressions as a basis for a piece of music to creating settings and environments for my characters to live in. I have also discovered that there is an equivalent between narrative and a character's personal quest and creating melodies and counter melodies.

My research essay in my Honours year was based on the 2019 novel *Triangulum* by Masande Ntshanga. This novel is heavily reliant on temporality and is delivered in a 'multi-media' format, and it inspired me to experiment with different poetic styles. I have also taken inspiration from the different works I encountered in my time studying creative non-fiction as part of my coursework Masters programme. Such pieces include Julia Martin's short piece, "The Temple and the Trees", and Italo Calvino's "Six Memos for the Next Millenium". These pieces taught me how to observe real life spaces and how to extract the stories contained within such fleeting moments. During the non-fiction course, I came to the realisation that the key to adding imagination or creativity to non-fiction is through subtle measurements. It is like adding salt to coffee or caramel. It may seem counterintuitive as coffee is already coffee and caramel is already caramel, but the small added amount of salt may just bring out the flavour in a new way which the person consuming it has not experienced before. In my poems in my mini-thesis, here, this method has been incorporated with the skills learned in my poetry course to create richer imagery and perceptions which more fully reflect the nature of my fictional protagonist's surroundings.

## Chapter One

The poems in my mini-thesis are based on childhood experiences and speak to the concepts of memory and temporality and how these relate to the formation of identity. Further, at the intersection of memory and identity, the speaker's reliability is brought under the spotlight, and one begins to question which parts are fictionalized and which are not. Thus, my reading for my writing has covered works with regard to each of these subjects: memory, temporality, identity, and fiction, mostly within the framework of contemporary African literature, but also not neglecting relevant works from elsewhere around the world.

When exploring memory, I have drawn heavily on the work of David Medalie; specifically his article, "Remembering Life Under Apartheid with Fondness: The Memoirs of Jacob Dlamini and Chris van Wyk" (2016). In his observations on Van Wyk's two books, *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* and *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* Medalie argues that the memoirs share a "richness of a life lived despite apartheid" and he acknowledges "their refusal to represent township life solely in terms of deprivation and dearth" (45). The emphasis of this approach stood out for me as there is a strong correlation with what I aim to do in my writing project. I have experienced almost all the negatives that the township has to offer on a first-hand or very close second-hand basis. In my poem "Bruises", which deals with the normalisation of violence, the speaker's understanding of the violence he witnesses and experiences is emphasised:

My cousin punched me in the face  
because I was smaller.

My father lashed my back  
because he was a slave-driver.

My ouma hit me with a broom  
because she was a witch.

In this poem the speaker comes to certain realisations across time and this captures his ways of coping with big and small violence throughout the collection.

However, the speaker does not allow such experiences to blind him to the many positive things that have happened. This can be seen in the poem "Elsies Pools/Elsies Baddens". The opening lines are framed as a grand journey for three children discovering their own agency in this Cape Flats setting:



Barefoot and bare-chested we walk,  
a towel over my shoulders and  
Ben with a 2L Stoney bottle  
full of iced water. There are ten rands  
in my pocket and two blocks to  
cover.

Medalie's approach gave me extra impetus to continue on this path. A salient point he makes is the "state of in-betweenness" as found in Ufrieda Ho's *Paper Sons and Daughters* (2011). This condition of "in-betweenness" relates directly to the environment on the Cape Flats, as it is neither made up of informal settlements nor leafy suburbs with multi-bathroom homes. It is a place where some people could have pools in their yard, while their neighbours down the street have multiple Wendy houses (shanties, a bit better than shacks) in theirs. This mixture makes for a powerful dynamic between those who have and those who do not. In my project I have sought to capture a more nuanced and complex view of the environment my characters exist in, neither solely good nor solely bad aspects, since I do not allow the characters to be wholly defined by their social circumstance. Medalie explains it in this way:

The emphasis here is not on how apartheid contaminated any hope or form of normality through the imposition of its egregiously aberrant practices; instead, these memoirs [Van Wyk and Dlamini] seek polemically to demonstrate the persistence of normality as an expression of the extraordinary resilience of specific communities. (43)

Writing in post-apartheid South Africa may produce a false sense of safety from the previous apartheid system. The year 1994 might seem like a vault door slamming shut on the days of segregation and institutionalised racism. However, even though it may no longer legally be in place, its effects will be felt forever in this country. Medalie quotes Gordimer's "Living in the Interregnum" in which she defined apartheid as "above all a habit [where] the unnatural seems natural" (44). This is relevant to my work as the temporal and spatial conditions that my poetry collection are set in are in what I would call a state of extreme absurdity. The absurd specifically here is manifest in the form of poverty, drug abuse, violence and displacement. However, the prevalence of these factors do make it seem as if they are the norm. Gordimer's "unnatural natural" and Ho's "in-betweenness" intersect, in my opinion, on the Cape Flats. The "in-betweenness" is now the norm, as you might hear your neighbour's children splashing in their pool, knowing that your Wendy roof leaks when it rains.

## Chapter Two

Given the fact that my writing mainly comes through the voices of a young person or child, childhood itself needs to be discussed. Jack Kearney's article "Interrogating Conceptions of Childhood in Contemporary African Fiction" looks at "the way children in contemporary African fiction may be seen to be active in the construction of their own lives" (46). The idea of children having agency is central to my poetry collection. The matter of identity is reliant on a child's capability to define and develop their own being. This issue is especially prevalent on the Cape Flats where children are exposed to various negative situations. So their parents often try to protect them by telling them to remain childlike or so-called innocent. In many cases, this happens way too late, as the child is already exposed, and the damage has been done. In the poem "Lucky", in which the speaker is the boy's mom, she makes him aware of how privileged his life is in relation to her childhood. She does this to instil gratitude, as well as serve as a warning to not step outside the lines.

You lucky to be here at all.

When I was your age I found out I was expecting you.

But where must a 17-year-old *mos* get money for an abortion?

Furthermore, I will not fall into what is described by James, Jenkins and Prout as the "prevalent tendency to protect children from the harsh realities of the adult world" (in Kearney 47). In my experience of the Cape Flats, I have observed that the veil between the adult and child world is incredibly flimsy. Little protection is offered and this lack can lead to a child falling off the ideal straight and narrow path. The lost child is a common trope on the Cape Flats; whether this is physically lost (or abducted) or being morally or ontologically lost. My collection focuses on such an individual's journey. Additionally, when representing his life, I wanted him to appear as "alive, reaching and very much of today", as Langston Hughes remarked on Gwendolyn Brooks' collection *Annie Allen* (2).

In terms of creative sources, my project is informed by the work of many creative writers such as Brooks, whose pieces "The Bean Eaters" and "The Children of the Poor" have deeply inspired me. Additionally, I have also drawn inspiration from the work of another Pulitzer winner, but in the form of twenty-first century rapper, Kendrick Lamar. His 2012 album *Good Kid, m.A.A.d City* has been a part of my life since its release and has been a strong influence on my work, due to the similar themes of growing up in a ghetto and dealing with all that comes

with it. Even though there are thousands of kilometres between the two locations – his being set in Compton, California, and mine on the Cape Flats – there are multiple parallels. However, my collection relies solely on word and line to deliver its message, rather than rhyming or music.

I have also been influenced by the work of Nathan Trantraal and Ronelda Kamfer whose tone and language-use (as well as their bitter humour) I can directly relate to, and which is represented in some of the Kaaps speech patterns used by my characters.

In my comparative reading between the circumstances of children on the Cape Flats and elsewhere on the continent, I was surprised to find many similarities. In line with my focus on lost children, a study on youth in post-conflict Liberia edited by Elizabeth Levey, “A Qualitative Analysis of Parental Loss and Family Separation Among Youth in Post-Conflict Liberia”, has been insightful. The study focuses on the state of mind and being of children who have lost parents or have been separated from their families. The study states that there are “132 million orphans worldwide”, with “56 million” of them living in sub-Saharan Africa (1). The latter number almost reflects the entire population of our country. All orphans are not necessarily ‘lost’ but losing a parent before the age of 18 can have a massive impact on a child. In Levey’s study, many of the Liberian orphans had lost their parents to either war, disease (like AIDS and diabetes) or drugs. For me, this has a correlation with the Cape Flats. One of the orphans interviewed in Levey’s study had his parents killed by rebel forces. He then joined the government troops to avenge his parents’ death. However, this only “led him on a path to violence and drug use” (8). The Cape Flats may not be as war-torn as Liberia during the peak of its conflict, however there has been a state of low-level ‘civil war’ for generations. It is not of course widespread enough to be a full-blown war, but it is too obvious to be ignored. The USSR and USA had the Cold War in the sixties and seventies. I view the Cape Flats as being in a ‘Luke-Warm War’.

One of my closest childhood friends, for example, is currently in prison for a very similar reason to the young man in the study on Liberia. His brother and some cousins were shot to death due to a family member being in a gang. He felt the need for vengeance and nothing that any of us as his friends or family said could quell that feeling. He too was left an orphan when his father (his hero) committed suicide about two years before his brother was shot. There was not enough time to deal with that trauma before the next one befell him. In many ways, I cannot blame him for choosing the path of destruction to find his peace. I would love to say that this case is unique but variations of it occur all over the Cape Flats. An article from the journal “Social Work” by Van der Westhuizen and Gawulayo reveals some statistics from the so-called

murder capital of the world:

Gangs and violence on the Cape Flats are viewed as two sides of the same coin. This perception is supported by reports of incidents such as the 17 killings of innocent bystanders in 16 days in 2014 (Bowers du Toit, 2014), 10 people, among whom two children, killed in one weekend in December 2018 (Le Magidi, 2018), 13 people killed in July 2019, including six women and three youths (FW de Klerk Foundation, 2019), and the gunning down of a 30-year-old pregnant woman and a 7-year-old girl during February 2020 (Head, 2020; Petersen, 2020). (118)

According to this study, 130 gangs operate in this area where 70% of all crimes committed are directly attributed to them. People in this environment are stuck in an unending cycle of violence. And as the numbers show, children are not spared, nor do you have to be a member of a gang to be affected by their operations.

But although the gang culture's presence is felt throughout the collection, I do not focus extensively on this, as there is much more to life on the Cape Flats, as I hope I have succeeded in revealing in my poems.



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## **Conclusion**

The boy in his role as protagonist and speaker serves as conduit for multiple ideas. Firstly, the protagonist in his own story sheds light on how little time one gets to be a child on the Cape Flats. You will soon have to be able to fend for yourself when losses, challenges and adventures come. Secondly, in making the boy the speaker, his voice is immediately brought to the forefront. He needs to speak and take control of his personal narrative and that of others like him who do not know how or are not there to tell their own. This relates to the concept touched on by Kearney, in which African children are “active” in the “construction” of their own lives. Children in this collection are not only defined by age, as we see many adults acting on impulse, which very often leads to violence. This culture of violence is depicted in my collection, as a way of being absolutely truthful to the reality of the children and peoples’ stories I am telling.





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