

Faculty of Arts

Around a Fire: Poems of Memory and Ritual

By Nondwe Mpuma

Student Number: 3431513

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

Supervisor: Prof. Jacobus Moolman

Submitted: November 2019

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

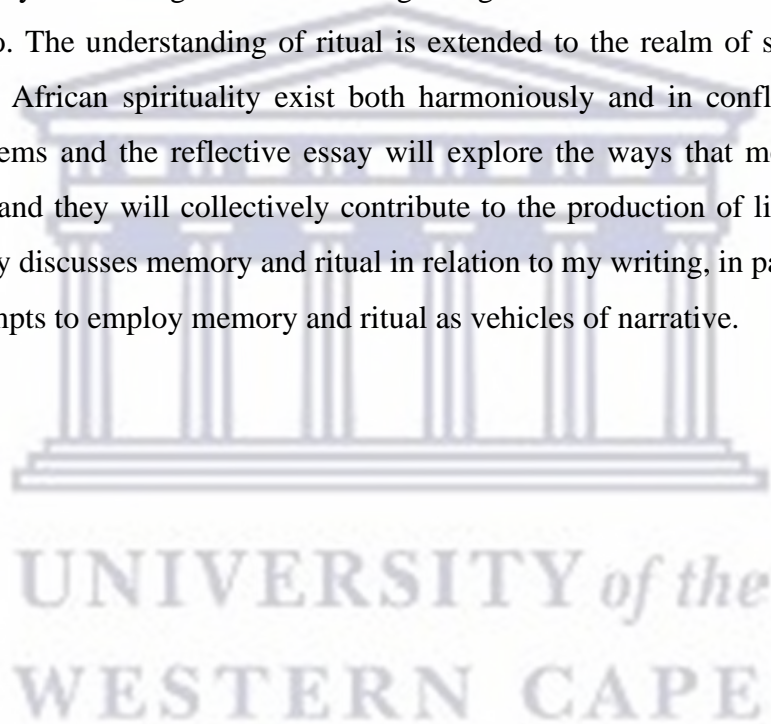
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Abstract

This Creative Writing mini-thesis offers a deep meditation on what it means to speak to ritual and memory. The thesis is compiled from a collection of original creative work as well as a short reflective essay that present a critical analysis of the creative pieces in relation to the ideas I present. The first of these ideas being, memory as an encapsulation of the past, present and future as explored by writers such as W.G. Sebald and Toni Morrison. This collection examines an understanding of memory and ritual as being uncontained, as constant providers of stimulation for a range of literary responses. Ritual will be regarded primarily in the South African context where there is the intersection of the urban and rural landscapes both physically and metaphorically. In this regard I am thinking alongside writers such as Louise Glück and Vangile Gantsho. The understanding of ritual is extended to the realm of spirituality where Christianity and African spirituality exist both harmoniously and in conflict. In short, the collection of poems and the reflective essay will explore the ways that memory and ritual interact in time and they will collectively contribute to the production of literature in South Africa. The essay discusses memory and ritual in relation to my writing, in particular how this writing has attempts to employ memory and ritual as vehicles of narrative.



Keywords:

Memory, ritual, contemporary poetry, nostalgia, creative writing, spirituality, South Africa, rural, urban.

Declaration

I, Nondwe Mpuma declare that *Around a Fire: Poems of Memory and Ritual* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

N. A. Mpuma

November 2019



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Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues, family and friends for listening, reading and for being generally supportive of this endeavour.



For Sinalo Mpuma and Thandolwethu Bidla

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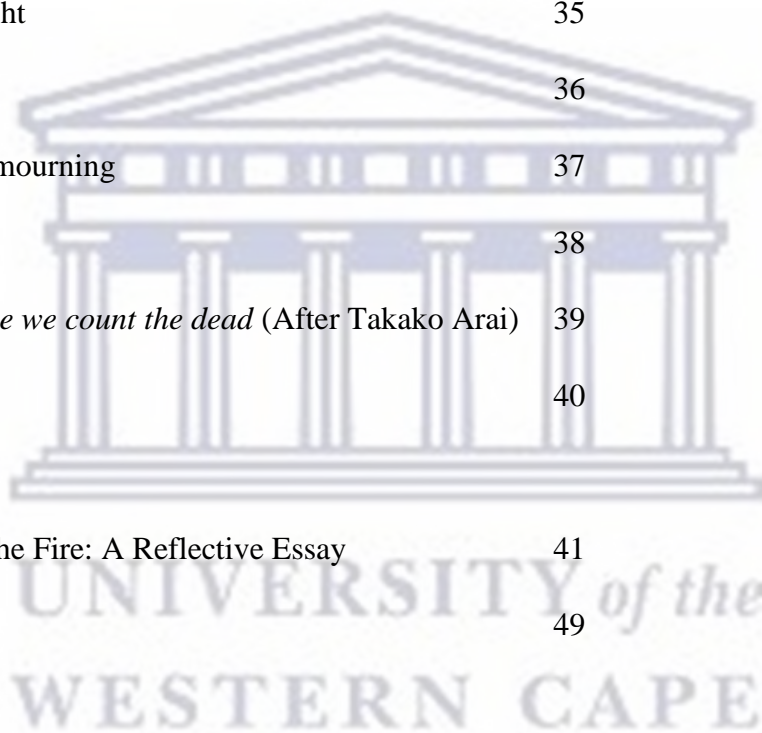
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Around a Fire: Poems of Memory and Ritual



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One

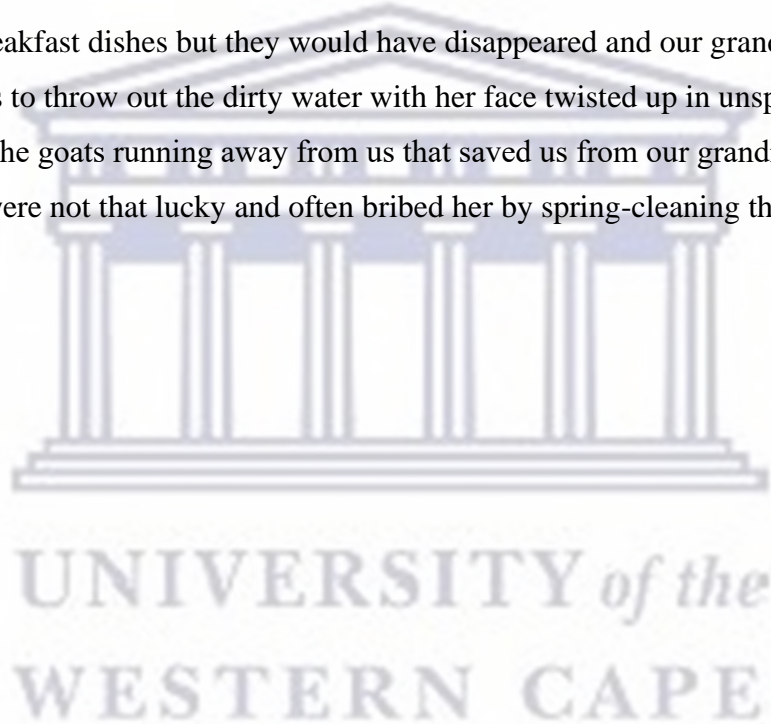
Gold digging



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Childhood

It was not too long ago that coming home during the *Bold and the Beautiful* caught us a hiding we never returned home on time when fetching water the bursts of water-filled condoms tied our legs to the tap our return from herding the goats led us to the big tree on the hill where we picked and plaited grass skipping ropes and we jumped to the months of the year *ooNozizwe ooShigoshi* and our heads spun from rounds of *ooSamthumela* sometimes the skipping rope was replaced by my grandmother's old ripped pantyhose where our young throats never tired from singing *uXoshiwe* other times the skipping ropes and the pantyhose were replaced by a plastic ball an old enamel dish and tin cans and after hours at play with shaking hands behind our backs we tried to sneak into the kitchen where we had left mountains of breakfast dishes but they would have disappeared and our grandmother would be waiting for us to throw out the dirty water with her face twisted up in unspoken anger we told tales about the goats running away from us that saved us from our grandmother's shouts most times we were not that lucky and often bribed her by spring-cleaning the home.



The dancer

Her waist was a well-oiled bicycle chain
with trunks for feet that shook the room like God does with thunder.
Her hands were above her head as though hanging from her half-beaded sjambok.
One stomp of her feet and we saw Xhosa
at the Lord's Supper.



Home

and we fetched them from the airport

and home arrived with nightly prayers and steam pudding

and in the evenings my mother cooked pap

and vleis and we sat around the stumpy, glass table

and watched *Animal Farm* on SABC News

and we threw stones at Napoleon

and I passed my grandfather *Eight Days in September*

and with old eyes he read until he had to walk out for a smoke

and night came

and he called utamncane and checked on the cows,

and he checked on the sheep and the chickens and his wild horses, and the church list

and the goat that had disappeared for three days

and when the beds began to call, my grandmother began *uKristu Mkhululi Wethu*

and our uneven voices were capable of breaking windows

and we knelt in thanks to the Almighty

and after the Lord's prayer was sung, grandmother taught my cousin the words to *Nkosi*

Ndithembe Wena

and after "*Amen*" we answered the beds' calls.

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The festive season

It is December.

And the uncle from eGoli has arrived. His new used-car stands in front of the veranda. We anticipate our own joy-rides down the road. He blesses us with five and two-rand coins. The smell of the KFC that he has brought carries through the two-bedroom house. We stare at his bag predicting that sweets will fall out. We imagine how we will wake the next morning with lollipop dummies hanging out of our mouths, staining our pillows.

He has arrived with evidence of his gold digging.



How to grow a peach tree

Eat the fruit

Stuff the pip with all the necessary “just enough(s)”

Just enough: wind, to blow the soil over the pip,

soil composition,

rain,

earthworms,

sun,

space and

time.

Toss the pip into the garden.



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Short

I asked for sleep.

I was told that the dog ate time.

I was given dreams and told
if I did not fall in my dreams then

I would never be a tree.

So, I never fell.



Online shopping

They come at night. They are here to pick and choose like bees. For they are practising online shopping on our washing lines. They only pick specific things unlike thieves. From us they take socks, all the socks and a hat. From our neighbour's house they take shoes. From the house across our street they take a pair of pants and a jacket. From five streets over they take a t-shirt, a pair of trunks and a vest, and at the last house they take a briefcase. It is a clear semblance of a man confused between being a 1920s gentleman and a wannabe gangster from the 90s.



Definitions

The paved road

is a path to a Wendy house accustomed to the beating of a pipe

A chair

is a stump of an old tree sitting in the middle of a kitchen.

A Jewel

is the stove in the corner of the kitchen meant to outlive us all.

The beach

is a holiday I could never reach.

Sand

I carry some of it with beach-dog oil to keep the ancestors at bay.

A gravel road

my bum has been too intimate with too many planks in the back of too many vans.

Smoke

is my grandfather's red Peter Stuyvesant.

Refinery

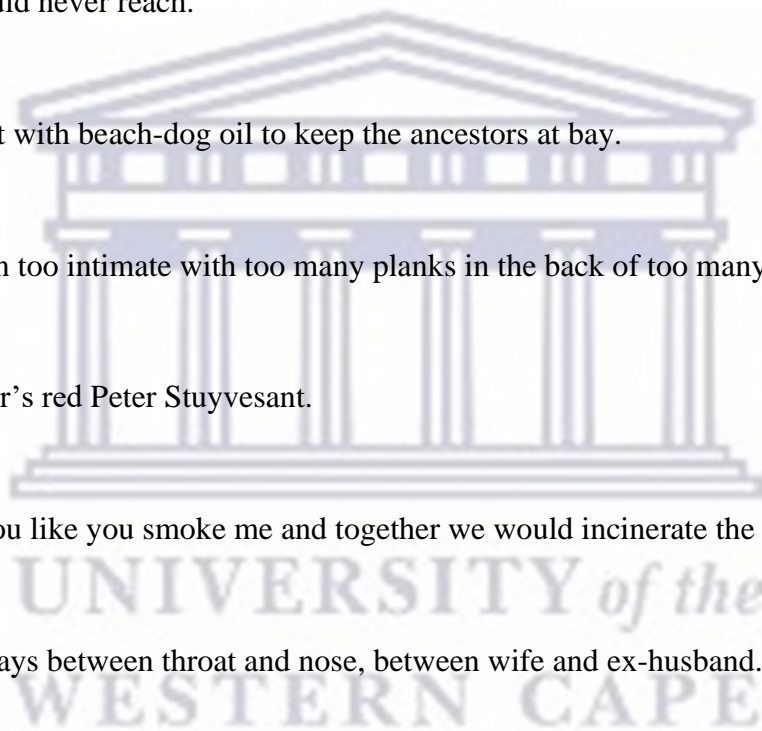
I could smoke you like you smoke me and together we would incinerate the world.

Oil

closes the pathways between throat and nose, between wife and ex-husband.

A stop sign

does the meteorite shower dissipate in your presence?



A sleepless night

Arms are wilted spinach.

At this time of night, the head is heavy with sleep.

Suck the sleep with a syringe

draw it the way laxatives do a full stomach.

Legs are peeled tree stalks.

The spine moves the bones to the left, then to the right

and finally turns the bones to look up at the shadows on the ceiling.

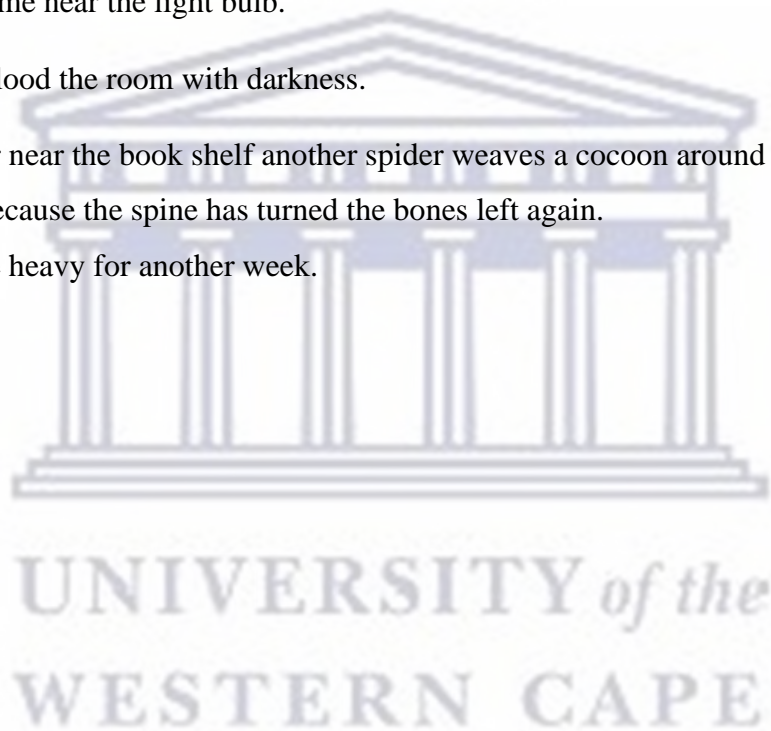
A spider is at home near the light bulb.

Night does not flood the room with darkness.

In the left corner near the book shelf another spider weaves a cocoon around a dead moth.

The eyes look because the spine has turned the bones left again.

The head will be heavy for another week.



From God's stool in summer

(After Anne Carson)

Ocean dune

Time eats you when the rain and winds come.

Open boat

You are Noah's ark, my ark when we rise and approach the shore.

Your hands

Met mine in the middle of giving grace.

Stories

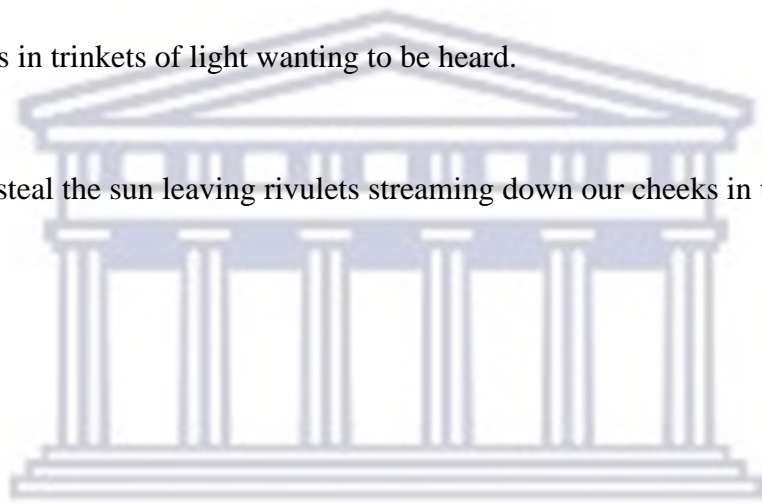
That lie before us in trinkets of light wanting to be heard.

Clouds and tears

Are thieves that steal the sun leaving rivulets streaming down our cheeks in their wake.

Dog

He howls at us.



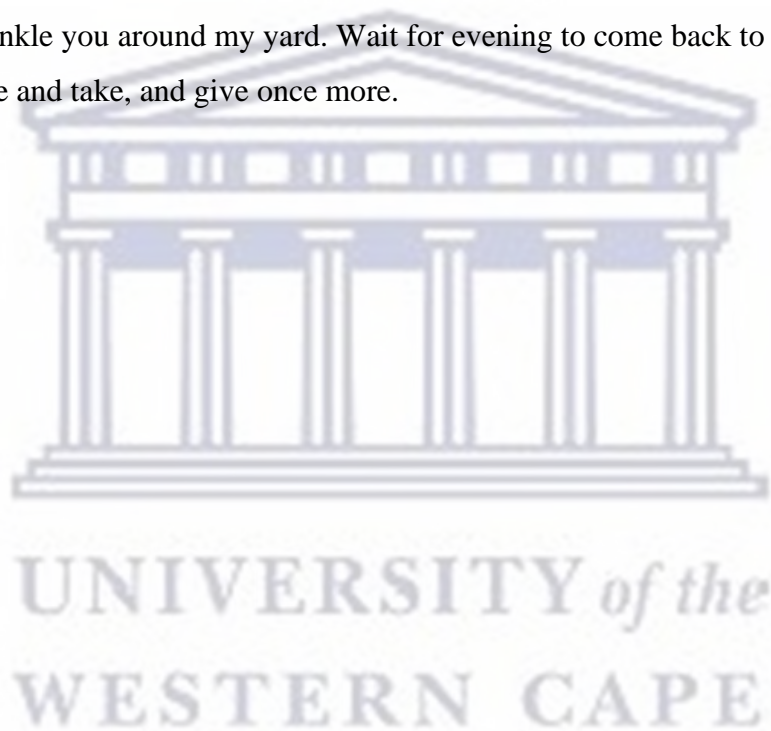
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The sea said, “come closer”

I will not throw myself into you. I will stand here. Far from your sand and shells. I will sit with you under the fading moon and listen to you rumble. I will not come any closer to your leopard leaps. I will not be your prey.

I have been told that in you,
children drown,
adults drown,
even guinea pigs too.

I wait for morning to pour some of you into the coke bottle beside me. I wait for the afternoon to sprinkle you around my yard. Wait for evening to come back to this moment, to listen to you give and take, and give once more.



Two

The boiling pot



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Loads

Nokuthula Mpuku carries the ridicule of having repeated grade one, grade two and three. Her stutter was never diagnosed as dyslexia.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries two of her children. She gave birth to one at the age of seventeen and the other when she was nineteen. Both are fathered by the man who she was carried to marry in a sack. She was seventeen and he was fifty-two.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries her mother's house. It was left to crumble after she married.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries the men who have passed through her body. This includes her other son who resembles her uncle. His passing is mapped on her belly.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries the death of her mother, uNokuzola. Even in drunken bliss, she would have fought rabid dogs for her daughter.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries the absence of her father. Perhaps, he would have taken care of his nephew-grandson. In her husband's mind, that son belongs in the kennel with her drooling dogs.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries a sack of clothes. Her husband kicked her out. He said that she could sleep with the pigs. This was after she left home with her children at noon and trudged twelve kilometres to the clinic and back. The homecooked meal had not made it to the table by seven o'clock.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries the seven-hundred-and-sixty-rand social grant for two of her sons. It feeds the family of ten.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries a daughter in her belly. One of her two sons are fast approaching eighteen years old, the age at which he no longer qualifies for the grant. Motherhood is the only job that her husband approves of.

Nokuthula Mpuku carries her names. They have always demanded her silence.

Nokuthula Mpuku sighs because she is alive.

Her arms are still able to carry.

Three ceremonies

1

The happy couple walk down the aisle with God's blessing. Comforted by their *Dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth.* Comforted by the capacity of her womb to hold and not by the years that she will remain barren and all the years that he will sow his seed in other pastures over the earth. In her champagne-white gown and him, in his charcoal tuxedo, the happy couple walk down the aisle in a church as one flesh blessed by the trinity.

2

She is dressed by her mother and sister in an indigo Three Cats dress that complements her husband's shirt. She sits on a mat, her head lowered, counting ants. Before they throw blankets over her and her new family puts her in a thick off-white cotton gown with black trimming on the skirt and shawl. The old woman in the middle of the tent, next to her new granddaughter-in-law, holds a full jug of brew, she pours three drops on the ground while calling out three of the nearest clan names and asks them to open. In quick succession the young woman is changed and more blankets are thrown over her, and he sits and marvels over what a blushing bride she is, she who will brew beer, brew children, brew a home all for him.

3

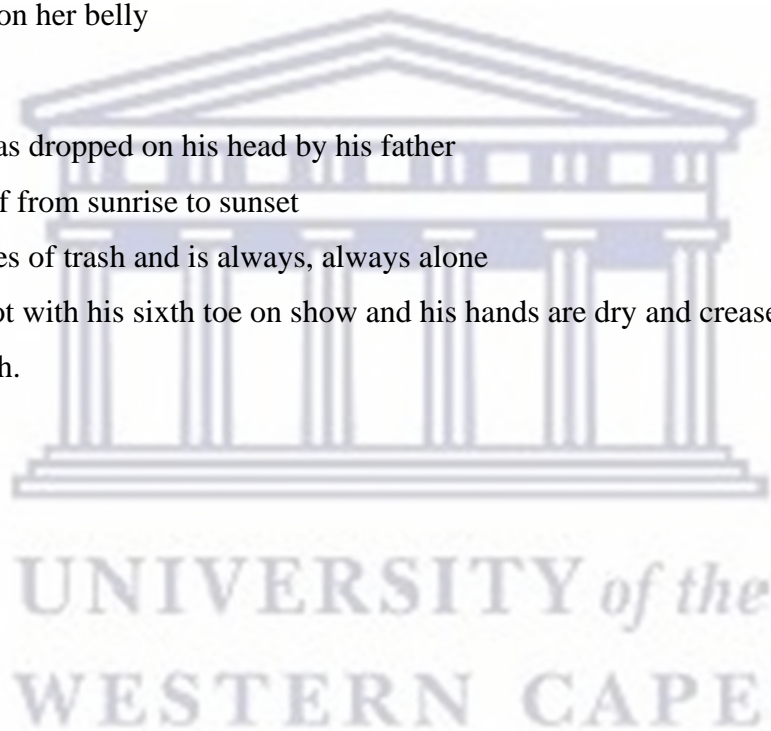
He enters her father's kraal with a gift that will make mouths move and a bottle of Klipdrift Export under his armpit. He gifts her father with a cow and takes his leave. There is no special dress for the day, she is in everyday clothes in the home that she will leave for her own. Her family throws more blankets over her that will keep her warm when he leaves.

Identifying witches

The old lady who is the last of her generation walks past
the pleats on her face fold all the way down to her neck
she totters as though every step needs a pause before the next
she lives in a rondavel
she is a witch.

The little girl whose clothes carry the smell of smoke
with her legs folded and held captive by her stick-like arms sits alone
last night's empty dinner plate is drawn in ash on her lips and
drawn with ribs on her belly
she is a witch.

The man who was dropped on his head by his father
speaks to himself from sunrise to sunset
he picks up pieces of trash and is always, always alone
he walks barefoot with his sixth toe on show and his hands are dry and creased
he, too, is a witch.



Family garden

The hoe rubs blisters where my fingers connect to my palms.

The blisters are a reminder that the soil does not plough itself, that food is not rain.

The food - weeds, mealies, pumpkins and sugar beans - grow in the sweat of summer spreading over plots.

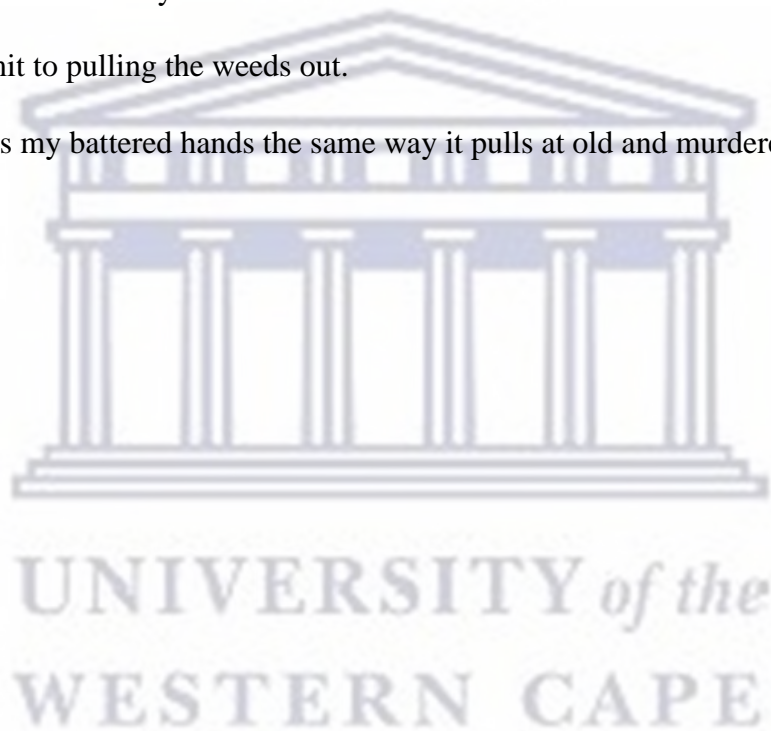
The weeds, rising despite their soreness amongst the food, are easily picked out.

The spade cuts across the soft centre of my right foot as the ground declares war.

The war against the human by rock and soil.

The hands commit to pulling the weeds out.

The rake caresses my battered hands the same way it pulls at old and murdered plants.



List of things that are bad luck

Watching donkeys give birth.

There are things that must never be seen
lest we lose our sight.

Sweeping at night.

One can never be too careful with the approach of the witching hour
and no woman readily volunteers to be a spinster.

Eating with the left hand
doing anything left-handed.

There is something disturbing about having similarities with monkeys and not being right.

Being behind someone or
giving something to someone behind their back or behind someone else's back.
Backs carry many burdens and most frightening, the burden of bad luck.

Closing all the doors and windows during a storm.

Lightning requires an entrance
and an exit.

Refusing ceremonial meat.

The ancestors hold
generational grudges.

Mumbling angrily about a parent.

They are closer to where feet turn and toes point to the sky and once at this place
they become those who hold generational grudges.

There is a goat for every occasion

There was one for my birth. Where my father's hand held mine and touched it to the goat's forehead and my grandmother spoke her hopes and my light into the goat's death. There was another when I passed grade three. The goat was a gift, not to be killed. But it was a buck and fathered many children but none of them could be his because all kids belong to nannies in goat-verse. At the age of eight it perished. And when my bleeding started, it was the first time I wore a goat on my wrist. Its gall bladder was taken out as an offering to the shades. One tear was dropped onto my hand to lick and the rest of the liquid moisturised my skin. It's no wonder I glow.



Chewing bubble-gum at the virginity testing ceremony

An older woman came up on the stage.

She had no speech written out, but the outer corners of her eyes were slanted by an abundance of wisdom.

Her speech began with “*ndizothetha ngenyama yezifebe.*”

Chewing gum will force your legs open and pull a baby out of you.

The tension between the upper and lower molars will pull more babies out.

Suddenly you will be a female dog whose mouth has been pinned open for all dogs.

Once your teeth clamp down on it you are destroyed for life.



The diagnosis

I understand that your belly cracks beneath the weight of the air that the blood pushes to your tail bone and that your eyes every now and then see dark spots and you suspect that you have dizzy spells and you think that sitting feels like you have borrowed your grandmother's eighty-year-old body and kneeling brings no relief other than allowing the air to settle heavily on your tail and ovaries and I remember from our last meeting that when the headaches come your head becomes a forgotten boiling egg and that you think the murmurs in your hands indicate that you have a mild case of vertigo and that laying down eases the air in your waist and you get an urge to pig out on junk food and your mouth is as dry as a burnt piece of steak and you guzzle water down like an endless river and if I am to understand you correctly all these symptoms occur at that time of the month?



Dues

The *belle chose* was always meant to be a leaking pipe.

Red in the body, flowing south.

Drops dripping dizzy.

Dizzy tells you: sit down.

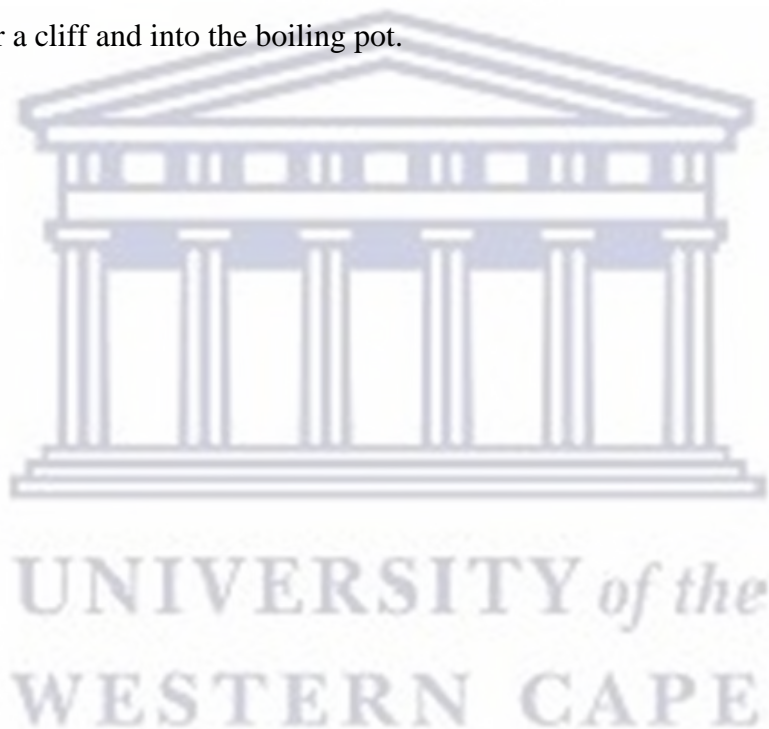
Dizzy tells you: ride the wave of the first cloth.

Dizzy tells you: well done fertile girl. You are now a woman.

Now, the old *belle chose* is a broken furnace

and that time of the month is Umzimvubu

plummeting over a cliff and into the boiling pot.



First love

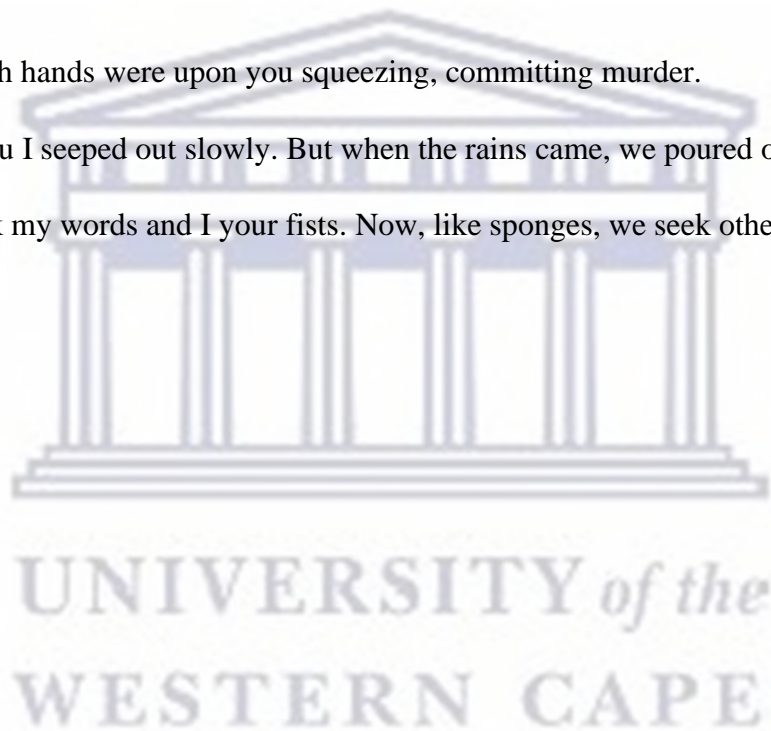
Like a sponge you sucked and sucked me until you were bloated.

That was in summer. When the sun burned brighter
and at night even the city lights failed to dim the stars.

When the clouds came, they did so with the inevitability of waves in the ocean
and you leaked.

Leaked as though hands were upon you squeezing, committing murder.

From you I seeped out slowly. But when the rains came, we poured out of each other.
You took my words and I your fists. Now, like sponges, we seek other liquids to fill
us.



Three

**Tilting with quiet
laughter**



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8 things no longer on the dining room table

The cracked brown vase that held plastic flowers from long before I learned to sit still at the table.

The high-heel glass ashtray that was always filled with old grocery slips.

The blanket-like tablecloth that came with the cows.

(It must have died with them too.)

She, dancing and laughing on the table when we were alone at home.

(Now she lies in the garden between our uncle and great-grandparents.)

The chairs that accompanied the table.

My uncle dancing to some ancient song, looking at me, asking, then saying:

Wawuphi Ndweza? Wawufile Ndweza. Then laughing.

The Tupperware lunchbox that grandmother lent to her sister.

(Its loss accompanies her to the dinner table.)

The video cassettes of her funeral and my uncle's funeral and of his unveiling when she read aloud the words on his tombstone,

and her unveiling where I carried the sheet that covered her tombstone.



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Pig

Grandfather wakes up at four on the dot.

He walks out of the house at ten-past.

The men arrive at half-past-four.

At five on the dot

The pig lies on its side near the kraal that smells like goat shit.

The knife is being readied for its three hundred and forty-sixth kill.

The pig lies nameless because we all knew that this day would come

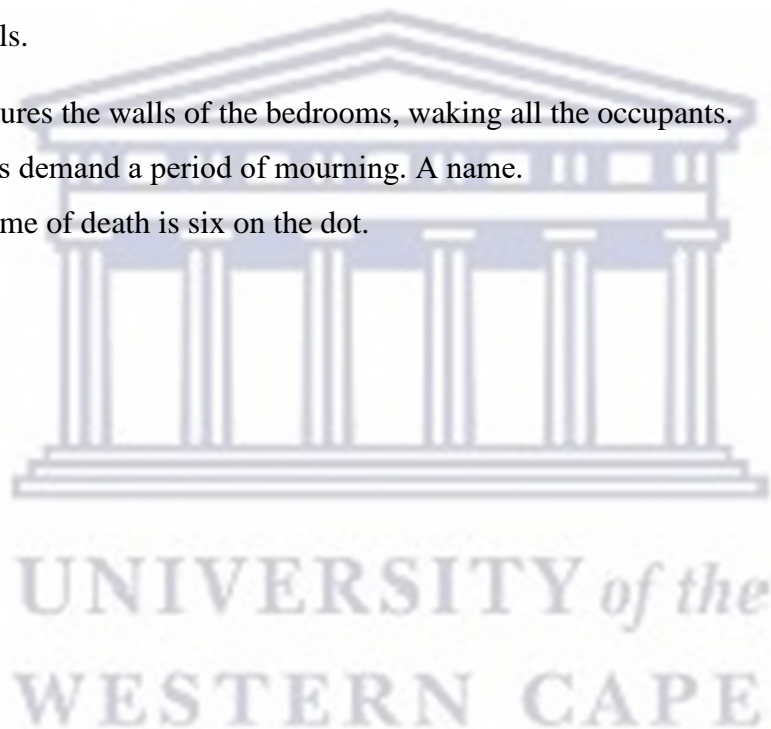
Grandfather slides the knife up and down a whetstone away from the pig.

It, the pig, squeals.

The sound punctures the walls of the bedrooms, waking all the occupants.

The pig's squeals demand a period of mourning. A name.

It is quiet. The time of death is six on the dot.



Box

I need a big box of shoes where I can bury the cracks of my feet and hide my dirty socks.

A box of *Garra rufa* to smooth the cracks.

I need a box that kisses loam and sand with equal passion.

A box of worms for birds to feed upon.

A box of secrets where the cure for phantom friends is enclosed.

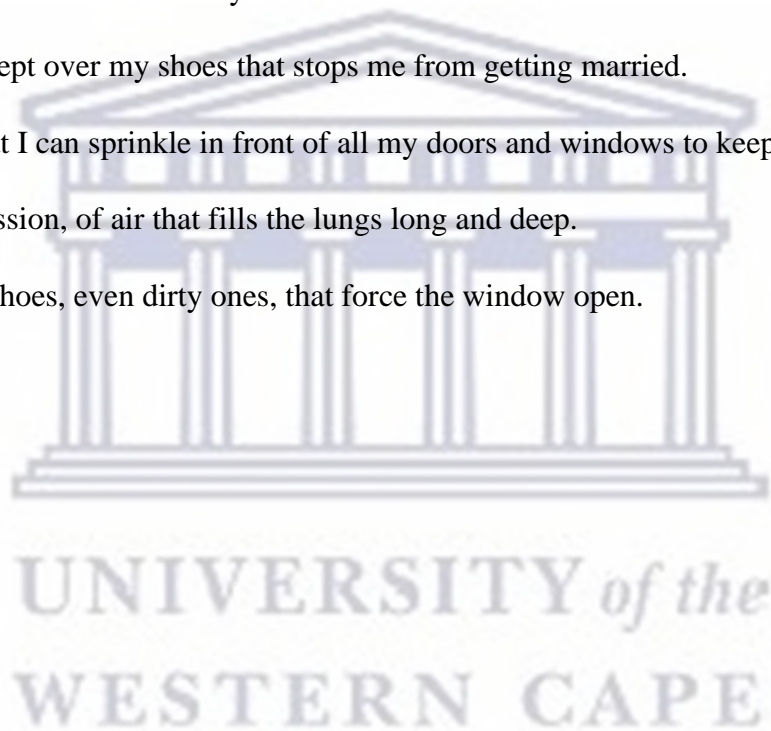
I need a box to throw in old Toughees and my grandmother's tattered leather shoes until I burn them to chase the snakes away.

A box of dirt swept over my shoes that stops me from getting married.

A box of salt that I can sprinkle in front of all my doors and windows to keep the light inside.

A box of compassion, of air that fills the lungs long and deep.

I need a box of shoes, even dirty ones, that force the window open.



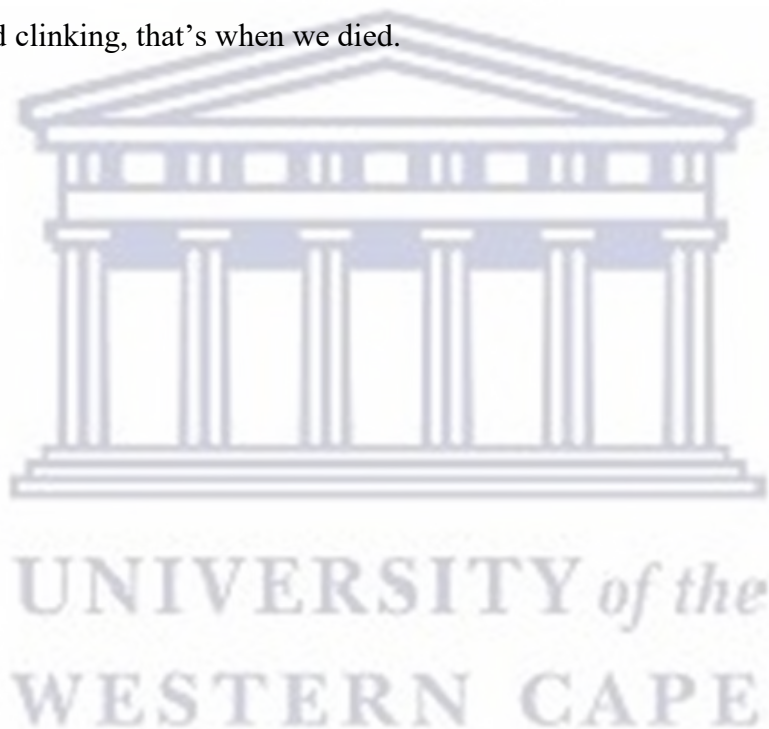
Ladies of the night

We were two used Black Label and Stout bottle caps
with our thumbs sticking up at midnight.

We ended up on the side of the road like lumps of coal turning to ash.

Like the caps we were picked up and used for maths sums, and
somehow landed in the middle of the road
where a car ran us over.

Then we had holes drilled into our middle,
were tied to someone's ankle and
when we stopped clinking, that's when we died.



Dementia

To my knowledge it was peaceful. She just went to sleep.

In my mind's eye I see her in a smoke-filled kitchen during winter squinting.

I see a kitchen that will never again hold the scent of paraffin and wood burning on cold days,
a kitchen that will never know the freshness of warm cow dung on its walls and floor.

I see her as she would look at me sitting on the stump her eyes would be soft almost tilting
with quiet laughter.

Now the sound of her voice is less than a whisper, the image of her face fickle as a ghost.

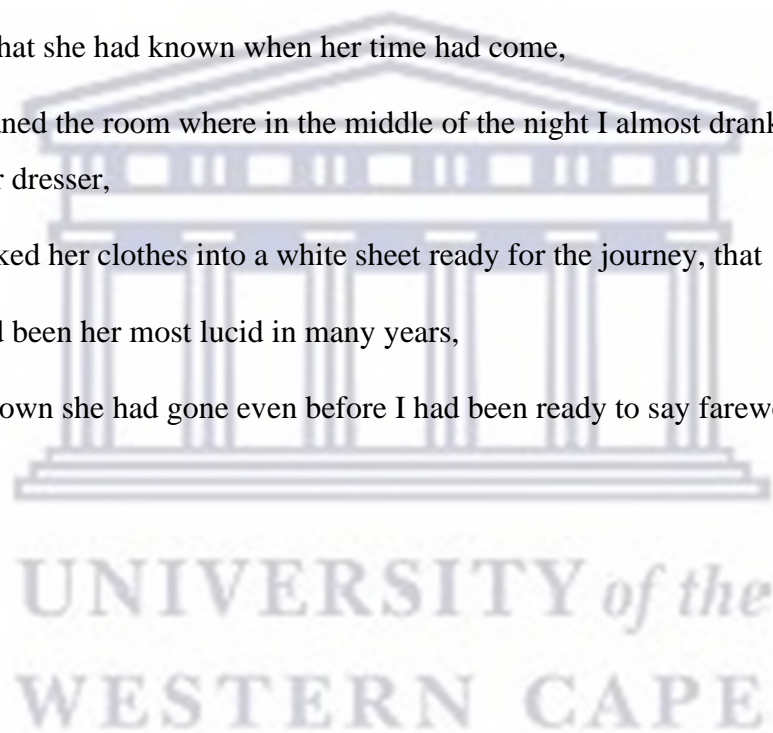
Now, knowing that she had known when her time had come,

that she had cleaned the room where in the middle of the night I almost drank her marble eye
in the cup on her dresser,

that she had packed her clothes into a white sheet ready for the journey, that

that moment had been her most lucid in many years,

that I had not known she had gone even before I had been ready to say farewell.



The first day of mourning

A crow perches itself on the corner of the rooftop.

The society ladies, like belly dancers, sway into the yard with boxes of Long-Life milk balanced on their heads and Shoprite plastic bags swinging back and forth.

In the kitchen, pots of Glen tea are boiling away.

In the mattress room a lone figure covered in black from head to toe sits with her head lowered.

The society ladies enter telling her that they are there to hold her, to shed tears and to strengthen her.

They say:

that God gives and He takes,

that He is there to hold her hand like a baby learning to take her first steps,

that she should be happy that her husband is at rest in the land of milk and honey,

that his bones will join the old ones and she can always call upon them to protect her,

that he is at home below.

She, with eyes cast down to the blanket folded across her legs, thinks of how the sun sucks the life out of a fallen leaf.

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

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Appendages

Your mother has attached herself to your heart.

Your father, to your kidney.

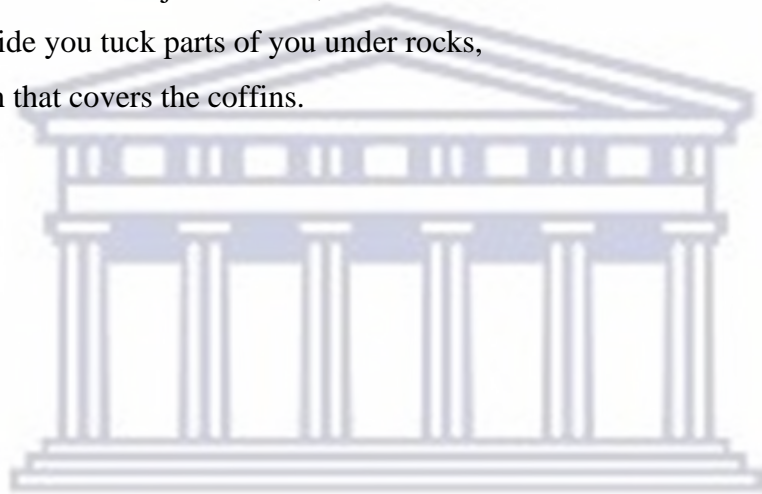
Your children, to your limbs.

What have you left for yourself?

Over time your mother mends the tears, your father is a filtration system,
your children slowly begin to detach themselves from your arms.

You know now that time is a jealous man, all he ever does is take.

So by the graveside you tuck parts of you under rocks,
air, under the ash that covers the coffins.



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Morning is the time we count the dead

(After Takako Arai)

First, the ones who come out of the womb silent.

Second, the ones who die before the fall of their deciduous teeth.

Third, the ones who have fought and lost against old age.

Fourth, the ones who mourn the ones dying.

Fifth, the ones who live dying.

Sixth, the ones devoured by abnormal growths.

Seventh, the ones who fly themselves out of windows.

Eighth, the ones who mourn the ones who should be dead.

Finally, the ones who mourn each morning.



The goodbye

As you leave remember me as I remember you, as you lie in the box with eyes closed, as I peer over your tears dripping into your forever box, as you are carried over to the hole, as I hiccup your favourite hymn, as you are lowered down into the earth, as I wipe my tears.



Sitting Beyond the Fire: A Reflective Essay

Around a Fire: Poems of Memory and Ritual is a collection of poetry that seeks to interrogate the potential use of memory and ritual as concepts that act as more than themes but also act as methodological tools in the act of writing. In the conception of the work, the idea was that these concepts would provide a gateway into writing about the past, present and future. They would also be a gateway to using poetry as a way to question ideas of culture, tradition and spirituality in both rural and urban spaces in South Africa. It is intended that the poetry is able to make readers “at once actors and spectators” in the sense that they appreciate what is written, how it is written and their overall experience of reading the collection (Woolf 8). In this regard, I conceptualise the function of words such as created metaphors from idioms, old wives’ tales as well as cultural and spiritual beliefs. I attempt to bring these ideas into focus by providing concise details that all readers are able to read the collection with a feeling of being represented in one way or another.

It has also occurred to me that the poems do not work to provide any definite ideas on the themes that have been appropriated for my use in the collection. There is no definition of memory or time represented in any clear fashion. It is also useful to note that the poems were not written in a vacuum where they are all forced to fall under the proposed themes of memory and ritual. I wrote the poems over a period of three years which resulted in the emergence of other themes that can be regarded as important as the proposed themes that this essay pointedly highlights. In this reflection there are particular aspects of the process of writing that I wish to address, first and foremost, the title of the collection and how ritual and memory have been used practically and theoretically in the work. I will also discuss the theories, musings and writers who have played important roles in framing the writing and thus provide some reflections on the collection which will shed some light on the methodological processes of writing this collection. Another important note is that this essay will introduce different themes which I may mention in depth at some moments. However, these themes should be read as an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of the ideas presented in the collection as opposed to being seen as contradiction and detractions from the title themes of memory and ritual.

The title of the collection has been a working title from the time it was registered with the department of English as it feels as though it does not capture the essence of the collection as it stands. Whenever one thinks of African oral stories, it is quite common that people imagine an older person, usually an older woman, sitting with children around a fire and telling the

story. This is certainly the case with how South African children's television has conceived of storytelling beginning with Gcina Mhlophe in the 2000s. The title, "around a fire," is meant to invoke the kind of warmth that one would experience around that fire along with the kind of sublime wonder that the story being told would elicit. The qualities of warmth and wonder are what make many of these stories and memories of these stories so memorable. The collection in some ways borrows from the feelings created by such spaces and recreates them by using childhood nostalgia as the poetic voice in some of the poems. It is also interesting that Michael Chapman interprets the oral tradition as "a usable past," in such an interpretation I can refer to the title as something that truly is past considering the significant decrease in the popularity of the oral tradition but can be usable with the inferences that we make when we hear or read "around a fire" in the South African context (18). The second part of the title deals with the thematic concerns that should potentially connect the poems in the collection.

When we think about memory, we cannot separate it from time as we learn that time is a contentious philosophical discussion that calls for the collapsing of concepts of past, present and future, while at other times insists that only the past and present exist. I believe in continuities where when we think of the past, present and future we think about them as having a quality of continuity that could be circularity as presented in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* where the narrator suggests;

"that we [do not] understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all [...], and the longer I think about it the more it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision." (261)

In this we see that the past is something that returns instead of something that we return to as this supposes that the past has agency. I understand this as also suggesting that the past is an active participant in the act of memorialisation. When looking at the collection we can see that it is not only the past that returns in poems like "Childhood," "The Festive Season" or "Home" but we witness the return of the dead (e.g. "Ten things no longer on the dining room table" or "Morning is the time we count the dead"), the present (e.g. "How to grow a peach tree") and the imaginings of future (e.g. "Three Ceremonies"). These returns were not immediately visible as memory is so often cast as being something that is past and we can infer this reading in the structuring of Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* where the three sections are titled

“Inherited Memory,” “Buried Memory” and “Postmemory.” The first two sections suggest that memory is of the past while the last section suggest that memory needs to be overcome.

In this collection, memory is considered as a constant companion when we write ourselves into any kind of imaginary. In continuing the strand of thought that considers memory as an active form of literary formulation, we can look towards Toni Morrison’s creation of the term of re-memory. Ashraf H. A. Rushdie notes that the term has been “a nice addition to the vocabularies of both psychology and narratology” (138). I will pick up on his point of narratology, where Rushdie goes further and implies that “[t]hese “rememories” not only exist outside the agent’s mind but are available to anyone who enters the sphere of action” (139). These words support Woolf’s point about poetry as well as the proposed function of the collection which I have begun to view as a creolisation of tradition, culture, religion and language. The rememorying in this collection is one that looks to the past in a similar manner that writers in the period between 1910-1948 used “negritudinal concepts of African identity, pride and unity” as a way of returning to the source of their identities (Chapman 203). By this I mean there is a kind of celebration and critique of African identity that is infused in the collection which hinges on individual and collective memorialisation.

We cannot deny the influence of memory in South African poetry as exhibited in Putuma’s *Collective Amnesia*, Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese’s *Loud and Yellow Laughter* and Musawenkosi Khanyile’s recently published collection titled *All the Places*, to name a few. These collections represent contemporary outputs by young South African poets who allow us to enter into the worlds of their speakers by creating spaces that contain things that we recognise from our own memories of living and knowing South Africa. My collection *Around a Fire: Poems of Memory and Ritual* enters into a poetry landscape that is actively critiquing and complicating the ways in which black people have written themselves into the South African imagination. One of the things that may have had an influence in my approach to writing is the revising of Njabulo Ndebele’s “Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some new Writings in South Africa” where he claimed that “the history of Black South African literature has been largely a history of the representation of spectacle. [...] It is the manifest display of violence and brutality that captures the imaginations of the spectators” (41). The language that is used in the collection is simple and silent in the sense it does not invoke any violence or brutality as a primary concern. If there is any violence or brutality to be read in any of the poems, it is a secondary act that arises as one’s understanding of the poem becomes clearer. Ndebele’s article has had

a massive influence in challenging me to explore what not writing spectacle looks like without detracting from the quality of the work.

This drive towards empathy is very noticeable in the last section of the collection where there exists a balance between sadness and restraint. There is a quality of quietness that is present in Mxolisi Nyezwa's poetry and in particular in the memorialisation of his son in *Malikhanye* and this quietness produces a haunting quality to the lines

now you sleep
in your childhood
prisoner of love
in eternal skies. (n.pag.)

The poem haunts us further because the poem feels incomplete and we as readers have to fill in the gaps. This quality also exists in Louise Glück's *A Village Life* where she describes a village

All the roads in the village unite at the fountain.
Avenue of Liberty, Avenue of the Acacia Trees—
The fountain rises at the center of the plaza;
on sunny days, rainbows in the piss of the cherub. (6)

The place seems ethereal with the avenues that exists from different places in the world such as liberty avenue in New York and the avenue of acacia trees from Cairo to the pyramids. I find this quiet quality very intriguing and that it may have entered into the collection's overall mood. This quality of quietness is linked to how these poems have avoided the "violence and brutality" that Ndebele refers to (41). It is the quietness that invites the reader instead of any violence or brutality that the poem may invoke in the reader after the poem has been read. This means that readers are not attracted by spectacle but something other.

Some influences are not obvious in my work like my reading of Genna Gardini or Emily Skaja for example. But, in *Matric Rage*, the speaker in Genna Gardini's "The Archivist" concludes;

So, I smoke the scalpel of memory instead,
and scour love in its clot, as time consults
like a ruler. And each inch knows this
is the telling. This is the business of my life:
to talk that bread out of its dripping

with the small, sauced animal of my knife. (17)

In its entirety, the poem explores ideas of memory, ideas of the past, present and the future. The ending is impactful because the theme is made even more obscure than the first few lines that create an easy logic of the poem. This obscurity led to the creation of “How to grow a peach tree.” These kinds of readings are as important as those not mentioned or discussed in this essay and they include novels, short stories and all forms of literary criticism that I read when I was writing the proposal, the collection and this essay.

H. I. E Dhlomo writes, “[m]erely to go back to the past is not tradition. It is death. Past, present and future are not separate. True tradition is rooted in the past, lives and speaks in the present, visualises and inhales the future. It is not tradition to neglect the contemporary scene” (quoted by Chapman 204). Here, Dhlomo makes the connection between memory and tradition which also inherently includes ritual. His statement reinforces the idea that tradition changes and thereby invites reevaluation and critique. In my collection I am interested in ritual and how it is interpreted through African spirituality and Christianity. This meeting of different religions is encapsulated in Lidudumalingani’s opening lines in “Memories we Lost” where the speaker says “[e]very time it left, I stretched my arms out in all directions, mumbled two short prayers, one to God and another to the ancestors” (93). As one who lives the reality of being brought up as a christian who nevertheless observes traditional rituals this speaker encapsulates my lived experiences. The collection tries to give some Xhosa rituals another space in the English lexicon. This has developed an understanding of my work as being multilingual in one sense, the insertion of isiXhosa in some of the works is one that accepts that English can be inadequate in expressing things that are not inherently English by development and design.

There are a number of echoes of the contention between ritual and religion in contemporary writing. Vangile Gantsho in her poetry collection *Red Cotton* writes extensively about the *ukuthwasa*. It is interesting that the title of her collection invokes the skirts worn by *amagqirha* thereby referencing an African Spiritual belief system. In the poem “breathing under water,” Gantsho’s speaker concludes

Mama and I never truly touched
A god of someone’s god has always kept us apart
Her in prayers
Me in the water. (13)

This speaker echoes Lidudumalingani’s speaker who narrates “[m]y mother preferred her numb. I preferred a sister. A laughing sister, a talking sister, and a sister who looked into my

eyes and cried and laughed (102-103).” The speaker in the poem accepts that she and her mother cannot meet because of their different beliefs while the speaker in “Memories we Lost” runs away from a ritual that would have rendered his schizophrenic sister “numb” as their mother would like. These writings are examples of how poems like “Three Cremonies” can be read in the collection or understanding how “There is a goat for every occasion.”

My collection has been intentionally fashioned according to the influence of what I had been reading or reliving at the time of writing the poetry. There are three obvious examples of works that have been inspired by particular poems. The influence of Anne Carson’s “Powerless Structures Fig. 11 (Sanne)” from her collection *Float*, where the speaker recounts the life of a woman who has died. What became an obvious interest in this poem is its structure where each stanza has two lines where the first line creates a signifier and the second represents the signified as we see below;

HER FUNERAL

is in Sankt Johannes nine years after his.

THAT GOLDSMUGGLER

she fell in love with in Amsterdam is how he appears in her eulogy.

BLUSH NO

I never saw her blush.

OPEN BOAT

driving rain we go on a tour of the harbor she sits unprotected smoking. (n.pag.)

This structure yielded at least three poems that almost follow in this manner (“Spacing Out and “From God’s Stool in Summer”) but the poems in this collection have different approaches in their logic and the use of the signifier and the signified. “Loads” was inspired by a class exercise where there was an attempt to create a character and a narrative around the character similar to Toshiko Hirata’s “A Woman’s Life or Nakayama Atsuko.” In Hirata’s poem it is both the theme and the use of repetition that I found useful for my practice. It made me question the kind of woman who could be a companion to Nakayama Atsuko in the South African context of which “Loads” was the result. “Loads” differs in the inclusion of locale and the influence of ritual. The last poem that is obviously influenced by another is “Morning is the time we count the dead” which is a line borrowed from Takako Arai’s “Give Us Morning.” Reading “Give us Morning” led to a reflection on how we deal with mortality. The logic of the poem is that it tries to record those who are chosen to be counted in death.

The final commentary to be made in this essay relates to the choices that have been made methodologically in the collection. This collection situates itself firmly in contemporary poetry as there is no strict adherence to any genre of poetry. Despite my interest in traditional genres of poetry I have yet to use one in its traditional sense. The only definable genre in the collection is prose poetry which is related to wanting to use natural speech patterns instead of meters and rhyme schemes. A literary device that I have favoured as a guide in my writing process is mainly rhythm. I find that it is rhythm that directs the ways in which the poems can be read and is also used to create the mood of the poems. Rhythm has implications for whether a poem includes punctuation or not and also has implications for where the breaks in-lines occur. In relation to rhythm I have also used a lot of repetition because of its persuasiveness. "Childhood" and "The Diagnosis" share a lack of punctuation but this absence in punctuation serves different purposes. In "Childhood" I wanted to create childish exuberance while in "The Diagnosis" I wanted to create a feeling of being overwhelmed. There is repetition in "The Goodbye," "Loads," "Morning is a time we count the dead" and in "Dues." Another device that warrants mention here is diction as it relates to the word use in the collection. The words that are used are simple and common and this creates accessible descriptions and imagery.

This essay is like a broken mirror, although broken each piece is still functional and when the mirror fragments are glued together its core function is still intact. I have discussed the manner in which I read the collection at this moment of completion and how the functions of memory and ritual include and are included in other ideas like negritude and multilingualism. A theme that has not been discussed in the essay is the memorialisation of the body and its functions. The essay has tried to briefly sketch how the poems come together under memory and ritual as well as how they are influenced by current writing in South Africa. The methodological process of writing poetry clearly shows that one cannot truly write without reading regardless of whether the reading directly informs the writing or not since reading can teach you what to do and what not to do. I have gone to great lengths to not provide a literary analysis of the collection but to give insights on how I read the collection as I try to remember the process and ideas that went into its development. Any intellectual ideas not developed have been left for the critic to ponder on as the space that is available can only allow incomplete insights.

*the sea is so heavy inside us
and i won't sleep tonight.
i have buckets of memory in a jar
that i keep for days and nights like these.*

"Sea" by Mxolisi Nyezwa



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