Constant Companions

South African Tales of the Supernatural

A collection of student writing edited by Annel Pieterse

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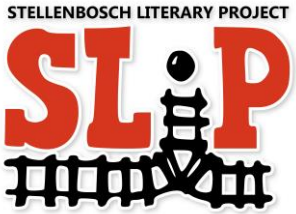

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Acknowledgements

This collection was made possible through the guidance and support of Meg Vandermerwe, co-ordinator of the multilingual creative writing program UWC Creates, at the University of the Western Cape. As part of my postdoctoral project, "Texts Bewitched: Reading the Supernatural in South Africa," I wanted to expand my own experience by managing a creative project in addition to the academic research in which I was involved. Meg's own research and writing at that time engaged the issue of the supernatural through the figure of the ghost, and she had facilitated several successful writing workshops during which the writers had to produce a uniquely South African ghost story by gathering stories of experiences of the supernatural from members of their immediate communities, and then reworking these first-hand accounts into fictionalised narratives. I discussed my ideas with Meg, and she agreed to mentor me in putting together an edited collection of ghost stories, written by students, and published online as a collaborative effort between UWC Creates and the Stellenbosch Literary Project. She committed to facilitating a series of workshops in which I could participate along with a group of select undergraduate as well as postgraduate students.

During the course of a semester, Meg generously shared her expertise as teacher of creative writing, and put me in touch with writers from the earlier workshops. I was subsequently given the opportunity to run a third-year elective seminar at the Stellenbosch University English Department, and inspired by the experience I'd had in Meg's workshops, I chose to offer a creative writing seminar based on her model. The current collection, with contributions from UWC and SU student writers, represents the fruits of these labours.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Stellenbosch Literary Project, based in the Department of English at Stellenbosch University, for hosting the collection online at slipnet.co.za. Special thanks to Pieter Odendaal and Retha Ferguson for their help with formatting and design.

I'd never get anything done without the love, support, and encouragement of my family, who give of their time so that I can pursue my goals. Special thanks to Daniel and Ben, lights of my life. Dankie, liefstes.

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**Institutional affiliations indicate where writers were resident at time of writing.*

Contents

Foreword

Many spirits haunt this collection. They have come from all over South Africa, winding their way through stories, into the pages of this book. The task of the writers was to set out to track down these stories, to find those spirits, and to give them a home in fiction.

In South African communities, belief in and engagement with the supernatural often inform the ways in which people interact with the physical world andwith each other. A literary work reveals in granular detail the relationship between the individual and the social context. This understanding can be expressed at several levels: linguistically, analytically and affectively. As Meg Vandermerwe observed during one of our writing sessions, ghost stories cut to the essence of who we are. Warning us against the temptation to slip into the Anglo-American conventions of Hollywood horror and European gothic, she advised us to connect to our "story-roots." This process of digging takes time, and is further complicated in South Africa because of the silences that still surround the narratives of previously marginalised communities. What, then, do the stories in this collection reveal about the essence of who we are? And what do they suggest about our story-roots?

In all the tales collected here, a sociological method — the informant interview — underpin the creative, literary process. The writers engage their local context through the stories of others. The unfolding of each fiction is thus anchored in reality through close attention to the details of locality. In the collection, these localities are multiple: stretching from the landlocked mountain kingdom of neighbouring Lesotho, over the green hills of KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape, across the small towns of the Karoo to the urban settlements of the Western Cape, up the west coast to the arid semi-desert of the Boesmanland in the Northern Cape.

The supernatural has many different effects throughout the stories — testament, perhaps, to the diversity of the contributions. Since our relationship with the occult has such a fundamental influence on how we structure our social relations, it is not surprising that many of the supernatural encounters in these stories reveal key social tensions. Prominent themes have to do with identity — experiences of alienation and belonging, and the issues that attend on the primacy of tradition in many communities. Greed, jealousy, and the acquisition and retention of power through malevolent supernatural means, are further themes that emerge in these

tales. In some of the tales, it is not the supernatural event itself, but rather the reactions of the characters, that serve to illustrate a particular aspect of human nature, or to comment on domestic relations.

In terms of content, we thus begin to see the extent to which ghost stories cut to the essence of who we are. But what about their form? How have the writers chosen to construct their stories? What do our "story-roots" look like? While the final goal of the writing process was to produce a piece of fiction, the stories are rooted, stylistically, in an oral account, since they began this particular incarnation as interviews. Furthermore, the interviews are supposed to be personal accounts, so at the core of the story remains the possibility that all of this really happened — a fundamental feature of creative non-fiction. Another dominant stylistic feature that recurs in many of the stories is the function of gossip: often information about the supernatural is transmitted through the informal channels of the local grapevine. In the process, we see how the shadow of the supernatural distorts an event and shapes a community's opinions. A corollary of this grounding in the oral and the foregrounding of local rumor networks is that the dialogue in most of these stories is rendered in local vernaculars. We are thus confronted by the extent to which English, as the dominant language medium of these stories, fails to fully accommodate the range of South African experiences. Our story-roots, it seems, are too multiple for the container. The challenge, then, for aspiring writers, is to work towards developing alternative forms, to build homes in which the spirits can come to rest. In this, I believe, the writers collected here have acquitted themselves admirably of their task.

Annel Pieterse
Stellenbosch, 2017

Boetie Kakjas

Izack Julies (SU)

"Jong, hulle het hom in 'n swartsak gegooi en in die tiep gaan smyt," Antie Sally whispered to my mother over the fence, as my mother and I were on our hands and knees planting the petunias in neat rows.

"Gemors wat hy is," my mother spat, almost as an afterthought.

I knew instinctively who they were talking about, even as I was trying my best not to listen to the grown-ups' conversation. It was all the entire town could talk about. Boetie Kakjas. My sister Risa told me that he was worse than Antjie Somers and any tokkelossie my young but fertile imagination could dream up. Boetie Kakjas is still alive and cursed with madness. Well, he was. My late friend Lynne said that Antjie Somers is just looking for replacements for her dead children and tokkelossies play with children, but Boetie "rapes and murders everything he gets his hands on."

"Maar Sally, ek is nie verbaas nie," my mother continues and brings me back from my terrifying thoughts and I return to my task of digging holes with my little fork. "Wie in daai familie gaan hom begrawe, die wie hy nie vermoor en verkrag het nie se ouers het hy fokken vermoor en verkrag."

I know he was a bad man, but he didn't look like it to me. When I saw him last week on our corner with Antie Myrtle, I didn't even know it was him. So I just greeted them both with a simple "Middag, Antie Myrtle, middag, Oom" and they both greeted me back and the strange oom even said I was "die bedagsaamste kêrel." It made me smile and I felt sorry for the oompie, so old and gaunt with his dark hungry eyes. I thought he was probably a boemelaar or a poor relative asking for kos and drankgeld. And I even bragged to my sister, who told me who he really was. And then she told my parents about it and lied about me sitting on his lap! You know, my grandmother is right, all that kak she talks is gonna land her in some groot kak when she's older.

Later I asked my father while he sat outside on the stoep doing the crossword at sunset, as he did every night he wasn't working, "what did Boetie Kakjas do?" My

father gave me a stern look with his grey-green eyes and folded the newspaper, its sound breaking the tense atmosphere.

"Stefanus," my father's deep voice resounded, "did really bad things and that's why he went to jail just like those Mongrels." Now I knew two things about jail: bad people go there and my grandfather said it was not fit for animals. The very following day at school I badgered Suleiman for information about Boetie Kakjas. As we sat across from each other on the grass underneath the blossoming jacaranda, Suleiman told me Boetie's tale.

"Ma Miriam says sy ma was a watermeid and his father some shaman wat met skilpaaie gelol het," he whispered while my sister and her irritating friends were making kissy faces at us. Suleiman just ignored them and continued in his usual pidgin English.

"Apparently, hy't glo sy whole family gemurder." He nervously looked around to see if any of the teachers or prefects heard him swear. "His sahir of a father, Oupatjie Stefaas, enchanted the police so that nobody could throw him in jail, but then Boetie soemma offed him after he got off for murdering his sisters." And then the stones rained down on us as we sat huddled under the blossoming jacaranda.

"Stefan, go get the dahlias, die grootmense praat," my mother admonishes me from my daydreaming. As I walk away I wonder whether what my sister said was true. Would Boetie, now dead, haunt me and do God knows what? I mean, he's dead, so no police can stop him or prosecute him.

I mean nothing could stop him when he was alive and a ghost goes where it pleases and sees you when it wants to. They say his father's spirit still possesses the finches at the river, where he practised his craft, to sing their songs regardless of seasons or migration. His precious birds are said to kill and tear apart the snakes trying to steal their eggs. Maybe he is more protective of his young in death than in life when he allowed them to annihilate one another. Perhaps that's his punishment in the afterlife, to protect that which he let die in life.

These theories seem irrelevant to my current scenario of trying to find that damn crate of dahlias. But as I look up at the roof of the shed, a bird flies frantically over my head towards the neighbour's skeletal acacia tree. And then the realisation hits me: the nest hanging from one of its thorny gnarled branches is a finch's nest. The tree seems almost like some grotesque black hand from a fairy tale book reaching for the house, clawing at the window.

Inside I see my usually cheery neighbour Stephen crying with a horrified expression on his face watching the finch as it flits around its nest covered in some dark feathery substance suspended and swinging in front of his window. Hanging from it is a dead hatchling being pecked by an owl which has reared its head to screech at the hysterical finch. And I remember what Suleiman told me under the blossoming jacaranda after those stones had stopped raining down on us and my sister had left along with her friends. Boetie killed and raped both his sisters. And Stephen is Boetie Kakjas's nephew.

Again. Again. I've dreamt of him again. Ever since that macabre incident with Stephen and the fucked-up finch's nest, I have been plagued by visions of Boetie pursuing me in my dreams.

Usually it's Stephen or Suleiman or Jean-Pierre, the rugby captain, that is pursuing me through the library and kisses me up against the astronomy section. However, in these dreams it's a dark figure in a coat that chases me through what is initially the library, which then becomes the woods by the river, and I trip over the roots of the jacarandas while I stay just outside arm's reach.

This dream or nightmare happens every time I close my eyes. Even as I sit in class now the dream keeps on being replayed in my brain. And as I see my sister's friend (and my crush) Jean-Pierre glaring at me through the window, I feel a chill run down my spine.

Ever since the funeral everyone keeps staring at me. Most of the time it just seems to be scandalised curiosity, but some like Jean-Pierre and Risa seem angry. Suleiman also seems to be avoiding me. He doesn't even wait for me at the gates of the library anymore. Instead, he spends his time with Faizal and Bazill from the madrassa.

I cry every time I think about him leaving me. I mean, Lynne may have been a bully, but she made the effort to be my friend and she knew what I was but she never judged. I miss her now, walking by myself from the school with all the other kids and adults looking at me. Judging me. Calling me a moffie when they think I can't hear them. Saying that I killed Lynne and lolled with poor innocent Suleiman. "Bloed praat en kyk hoe het sy bloed gepraat…" they whisper loudly at the shops.

I know my mother knows about the rumours. I can see it in her eyes. But she will never say anything. No woman in this town ever does.

As I wander through the streets I feel myself drawn to the old part of town, as I always have. The big white buildings shimmering in the sunlight as the bluish purple of the jacarandas surround them. And this is where the library is. The books won't whisper or sneer at me, they never have.

I hear them before I see them.

"Moffie, kom hierso!" I hear coming from inside the library's gates. They had gotten here first. I don't know what surprises me more, that it's Jean-Pierre saying this or that my own sister Risa is with him.

I run before they can say anymore. I run straight across the street into the museum's gardens. I can hear them running just behind me. I run through the open gate, onto the riverbank as my backpack laden with books pulls on my shoulder painfully.

For a moment I believe I've lost them all and then I see Jean-Pierre and Risa rushing through the bushes at me. Lynne. Suleiman. Where are you?

"Kry die vuil teef," Risa snarls and Jean-Pierre grabs my arm. I scream and turn to run towards the river and hear gggrrrrrrrrrrrr as my sleeve tears straight off and I run towards the stepping stones that we used as a bridge for our games when we were younger. Risa had played those games with me.

"Help!" I scream as I try to hop from one slippery and smooth rock to another. "Ons moet jou keer Steffie, before you become like him!" Risa yells at me. "But you are the one acting like Boetie!" I yell back.

Our yelling is interrupted as a nest falls from the overhanging trees into the river, scattering the jacaranda flowers carpeting the surface. A finch's nest.

Almost immediately the air is abuzz with the shrill sound of the screams of the finches. And as I see a figure stand in the shadow of the jacaranda, I realise my nightmares have come true. Yet I pray in this moment that hidden in the shadows is Suleiman and not Boetie Kakjas.

None of this matters as I am beset by angry birds while trying to maintain my precarious balance on this rock.

And then it happens. I slip. And the water greets me with arms covered in jacaranda blossoms.

"Help hom JP, hy kan nie swem nie!" I hear my sister scream as I try to fight against sinking. She starts crying "Oh Jirre, oh Jirre, wat het ek gedoen?" while I spit the jacaranda flowers and water from my mouth. Jean-Pierre has disappeared

and I can only see the figure in the shadows as I reach out for help, water and twigs filling my mouth.

No one can save me, I realise as I continue to sink and the sunlight of spring disappears. My heavy bag pulls me deeper and deeper as the spots fill my eyes and my chest burns. I should have listened to my mother when she told me to stop fastening the Karrimor around my waist. "Maak los die donnerse belt, gaan jy bungy jump?" she always said. And as always, she was right.

...the songs of our river, oh blessed mother...

She comes here every day. I see her from my spot under the tree. She does not see me. No one ever does, perhaps they can't.

Risa looks like she hasn't slept in weeks. And she cries constantly. Praying, apologising and calling my name are all she does by the river. I have also seen Jean-Pierre come here. Probably in search of the bravery he lost when he left me to drown. But the one I despise the most is Suleiman who comes here crying his crocodile tears, asking forgiveness and what not. But he doesn't stay long, the birds won't let him, they attack him. I think they can sense my dislike.

I am alone most of the time. People believe the river to be cursed and haunted. I only have my books and they are enough. Lynne does not come here, she prefers to watch over her family. I visit mine at night to comfort them in their dreams. I have not seen Boetie or Stefaas yet. But I know it won't be long.

Izack J. Julies is an aspiring writer and undergraduate student majoring in History and English at the University of Stellenbosch. Born and raised in the small town of Robertson in the Winelands of the Western Cape, Julies grew up in the small, formerly Coloured library, which nurtured his imagination and allowed him to escape into the worlds of his favourite writers. Julies lists K Sello Duiker, Adam Small, JK Rowling, Eleanor Herman, Alice Walker, Harper Lee, George RR Martin, Nadine Gordimer, Cynthia Freeman and Anoeschka von Meck as his major influences. Julies is both an avid reader and writer of online fanfiction.

Second Comings of The Headman

Sinethemba Bizela (UWC)

The Headman waits for the season of initiation to make his second comings. This one is the headman of the initiation school in the bush, not of the village that you might be accustomed to. Even today his story sounds like fiction every time we talk about it. The Headman claims our imaginary "farms" – the site of clusters of huts in the bush – as his own. The huts of abakhwetha of Phakamisa Township are below the cliff which faces the Buffalo River. In the summer mornings initiates sun themselves on the fallen rocks of the cliff. They watch the green waters of Buffalo snaking whisperingly between Phakamisa and Ndevana Location, avoiding Berlin and Mdantsane, only to be rejected by the shores of the Eastern Beach in East London. It is in this green river where The Headman washes and adorns himself by smearing all his body with white ochre, used by initiates, at the break of dawn. He still carries his stick and hangs his rabbit-skin bag on his left shoulder. When initiates feel warm wind and inaudible mumblings at half-past eleven at night, they know that their headman has arrived.

The headman of initiates is an early bird in the initiation school, the first boy to be circumcised on each farm, in each season. The one who motivates the new initiates, telling them to be strong and endure pain like men. But this one is hungry for power, because one cannot be a headman forever. Initiates get healed and educated and then return to their respective homes as new men. But The Headman does not lose his headmanship. Every season he is an umkhwetha. He gets circumcised every season before anyone can. No, that is not exactly how it happens. He circumcises himself. The Teachers say he is prone to nostalgia, for memories get the best of him. This is possible, strange as it sounds, because there are men who visit us. They spend hours reminiscing about their days of "mountain" schooling. The other day there was this old man called Nyaniso. He came to visit us in our first week. He went on pouring out his fond memories for us. His eyes twinkled like an excited child, not knowing that we were half-listening, because our focus was on the excruciating pain in our genitals. Our eyes were blood-red due to smoke and pain, but we kept on pretending to be listening attentively. We wanted to show him that we are men, we don't feel pain.

Elders like Nyaniso say with confidence that no one dies here unless it is witchcraft. And we know the story of The Headman. They say The Headman was seen at the wake of his funeral, still wearing his notolo: the white blanket, with two black stripes at the top and the bottom, usually worn by initiates. But his had blood stains around his waist. Even women who were peeling vegetables for the funeral saw him and expressed wonder.

The Headman died in his first week in the initiation school, just before he could finish his seventh day and drink water, eat "normal" food, and be relieved of eating half-cooked inkobe. Friday night, his departure started as an ordinary stomach-ache, but as the night hours progressed, his stomach raised like that of a heavy woman. Then it began to look like a condom filled with two litres of water. As The Headman looked skeletal like any other initiate in the first week, his stomach pulled down to cover his crotch. Dakisa, his teacher, stood agape. He froze, because he never saw this amazement in all the years of his career as the nurse of initiates. And The Headman was tossing and turning with pain that went beyond the one in his genitalia over the smoking hearth which separated their "beddings." Dakisa then shouted, "Makhankatha!" calling for his fellow teachers in the neighbouring huts. "Umkhwetha uyafa!" – the initiate is dying – he cried. It was Feketha who first emerged in the knee-high entrance of the hut, and the others followed to see this dying umkhwetha. The dilemma began. They had to decide whether to go and report to his family so that he could be taken to hospital, or to give him water and proper food before they could slaughter a sheep for him in the morning when elders would come to relieve him, or hastily seek a nearest traditional healer for medicinal herbs. But the first option seemed unlikely, since it would render The Headman a man who is not a man or turns out to be a bird-rat, a bat. Neither a man nor boy, but something we despise. But our headman is a man, for he died in his farm, not in hospital. Dakisa and his colleagues spent hours debating while The Headman was dying with pains. Finally, Dakisa took out his cell phone from his red overall's pocket and called the ambulance. It came past five in the morning. And The Headman was cold. Still like a wood log.

The Headman was known as Yokosa Mdeni at Nosizwe High School. We still remember his memorial service in December 2002 as if it happened yesterday. His

grade eleven classmates were seated in the front row of the quad, next to Yokosa's family. It just felt like the sun had set at midday when a fellow student has died. We don't get used to the death of a young one. And there we were, witnessing a memorial service of the initiate. A very unusual event, indeed.

Poor Afika. The eyes of female pupils were fixed on her, accusingly. She was Yokosa's lover and gossip held it firm that both she and her mother bewitched Yokosa to death. They say they Afika and her mother abducted Yokosa to their home's wardrobe, since he favoured Bekiwe over her. The story goes that Yokosa had been dumping her, but stubborn as she is, she never accepted his nonsense. His funeral meant that they would compete over his body for the last time. They will compete on who will cry him a downpour. Tears are important in funerals. They measure the size and deepness of one's love for the deceased. Especially widows. They are put under scrutiny at the funeral of their husbands. But there was a counter-narrative. It maintained that Yokosa was bewitched by his own father, because he owns a baboon he rides at night. It held that Yokosa was a threat and obstacle to his father's scandalous ways. People knew that Ngwamza sleeps with his three daughters: Senzi, NoPolony and Zonke. When Zonke – the youngest – fell pregnant, NoPolony couldn't endure the burden of her family's shame. She left and cohabited with her boyfriend in Zwelitsha, the mother township to Phakamisa. They say that Ngwamza's obedient housewife knows about it, but she cannot report her husband to the police since he is the sole bread winner. We would know which daughter he sleeps with on the pay day. He usually takes out the one who currently warms his bed. Yokosa's is a family that sleeps with each other, bayalalana, so says the gossip. And those who saw Yokosa at the wake knew that he will witness his own burial, because he lives posthumously, since he is seen. Wonders of Phakamisa!

Our predecessors know about Yokosa, The Headman. They say he is not a man of words because his tongue was cut before he was abducted from his hut and made into a zombie through black magic. He just enters your hut and sits near the entrance. He never greets, but just pours himself iinkobe on the lid of the bucket and eats. Silently. He is the only umkhwetha with hair, because every initiate is bald-headed. His white blanket is now brown and flea-infested, his teeth yellow like the mealies he loves. His left hand is always closed in a clenched fist.

One night The Headman came and we were with Dakisa, our teacher, in Khalazo's hut. The hut was dark, the smoke of the fire smoke blending with the marijuana smoke fuming from Dakisa's thick zol. And The Headman came. He sat near the entrance. With the wisdom of middle age, Dakisa knew that the isithunzela – those abducted through black magic – have a powerful muti in their clenched fist. It is this muti magic that makes them disappear. This night Dakisa would capture The Headman and take his muti, so that he would cease to be an isithunzela and make his way back to the living, albeit without speech. In the lands of witchcraft, places like Gwadana, Mkhathini and the like, the tongue of the abducted is cut so that one cannot communicate with the living. Khalazo was a new initiate. As the custom dictates, when there's a new initiate we wait until the elders and the initiator have left the bush so that we can visit the novice. The purpose of our visit is to narrate the journey we have travelled as seniors on the farm, telling him what to avoid doing in order to be declared a man. Dakisa got this job of being a teacher to Khalazo due to the fact that the latter stays in Kuwait, Phakamisa South, where the mother of Dakisa's child lives. He is not only known for his love affair with NoPicture, but for his services that are popular. In our area, Phakamisa as a whole, Dakisa is one of the very few traditional teachers registered at the Department of Health in Bisho. We were playing riddles when Dakisa dived for The Headman. But The Headman skimmed from where he was seated. Dakisa fell. The honourable visitor stood in the centre. He had the hearth between his legs, still burning as though it was braaing his testicles. Dakisa fell on the bottle of Commando brandy with his face. He fainted. But our attention was directed at The Headman who was standing, contemplating his exit. He jumped and magically summersaulted through the ribs of the hut, making a spectacular exit, perhaps to impress us, his subordinates. We expected to see a hole where he exited. And there was none. The cardboards and plastic were sealed, poles intact. Dakisa got up dazed, not knowing what had happened. His mouth was swollen and bleeding, making his teeth reddish white when talking. It was in the morning when we assured him that he was not dreaming that he got injured while attempting to capture The Headman.

If The Headman was captured by Dakisa and got his hand unfolded, he would have made his permanent second coming. And this would have rendered Dakisa a hero and brought reverence equivalent to that of a diviner. Or maybe he would have

been initiated to be a diviner, so to bring back all the abducted from the dead. There are many ways of calling. Some come in a form of dreams, some in a form of deeds. But this one, his calling is to nurse penises.

These days The Headman never comes. When he does, he comes in a form of a singing wind: wsi wsi wsi wsi wsi. The wsi wsi sound encircles the hut which houses Dakisa. For the Headman never misses his half-past eleven. We hear that he now walks the streets of Phakamisa at midnight. He waits for those who walk alone drunk. He follows you until you get to darker streets where he would make you get lost and find yourself twenty kilometres away from home. People are advised not to walk alone when they come from "Spaza"– Noluvo's Tavern. And some of the street lamps of Phakamisa are no longer functioning, so this means that a couple of streets are not safe.

The Headman targets both men women. We don't know how he changed his sexuality beyond the living. We are still amazed at the way he became so sexually deviant in ghosthood. Elders make jokes about this. They say that this child of Ngwamza is a horny ghost and burst into laughter. Women who have been covered by his blanket are now heavy, but they never deliver.

The most effective way to dodge him is to scribble on the tarred road with a brick or anything that will make letters visible, so says the ancient wisdom. They say the dead are intrigued by letters; they find them mysterious, because they cannot read. It doesn't matter if they died literate. Anything written bewitches the dead. And now The Headman is trapped in the pre-language state. Time travels fast like eyes and these days The Headman is the headman of the streets, making countless second comings to drunken women and men. He walks in that wsi wsi sound until the crack of dawn swallows him but only to be vomited out in the heart of darkness. So he comes and comes and comes and coooooommmmes on you.

Sinethemba Bizela was born in a small township called Phakamisa, in King Williams Town. His maternal grandmother performed iintsomi — the Xhosa foklore tales — and cultivated his imagination through the art of storytelling. In 2013, Sinethemba attained his BA in English Studies and History at the University of the Western Cape, where he had the privilege of meeting writers such as Sindiwe Magona, Meg Vandermerwe, and Antjie Krog, in the multilingual creative writing program. While working towards his BA (Honours) in English Studies at Rhodes University, Sinethemba was a coordinator of Cycle of Knowledge,

an initiative of the Rhodes English Department, and Writers' Movement, a group of poets from Joza Location in Grahamstown. He is currently studying towards an MA in English at the University of the Western Cape. His poetry has been published in the journal *Writing360*, an initiative of UWC graduate students in the English Department, and, recently, his short story was included in issue 10 of *Prufrock* magazine. He writes poems that are meant for both the page and stage.

The Monate Story

Emily Dittig (SU)

I am going to tell you this story, but I will only tell you it once. If they knew I was telling you this story, I could be in serious trouble. They are a very powerful family; they are called the Monates. And this story begins at a funeral of a little girl named 'Nini Monate.

I was there when 'Nini was born. We grew up in the same small town in Lesotho, called Mokhotlong. We lived a few streets over from the Monate family complex. I was fifteen when 'Nini died, the same age as her older sister, Sarah. I would walk with 'Nini and her sister to and from school every day. In our small town everybody knew the Monate family and everyone knew 'Nini. She always had a way of capturing people with her beauty, but she was never outright flashy about her looks. She almost hid it from the world, which made everybody want her even more. I, however, never fully trusted 'Nini and never quite understood why everyone would fall head over heels for her, but the more I learned about her life the more I began to understand. The times I visited her house, we had to enter through the backyard because only during special events could non-Monate family members enter through the main gate of the complex.

Every time I stepped in 'Nini's house it gave me the chills, like there was a ghost haunting the place. At 'Nini's house we would sit in the living room or kitchen doing homework and chatting. When their father came home he always went to 'Nini first and would grab her up, swing her around and give her many hugs and kisses. I could see the jealousy on Sarah and Lintle's faces. Many people who knew the family could easily say that 'Nini was the favoured child. She was so smart and talented. There was only one moment where I could see disappointment in her father's eyes. 'Nini's uncle had died trying to steal a car in Bloemfontein for the Monate taxi company. The funeral took place on a Sunday in the middle of December. The most I can remember from that day was that it was extremely hot. 'Nini was pulling at her dress and fidgeting in her seat. I thought she was going to explode from the heat. During the slow part in the priest's sermon, I watched 'Nini get up from her seat, go behind a gravestone, and lift up her dress to fan out. What she did not realise was that the gravestone was not high enough to cover her

underwear and legs, so she ended up flashing the funeral procession, including the priest. That was the only time I saw her father punish her. After the funeral, at every special event that I attended for the Monate family, someone brought up 'Nini's unfortunate incident. It would forever haunt her until the day she died.

Everyone thought they knew who 'Nini was, even myself, but soon she became the biggest mystery in Mokhotlong and it all started the day she died. Her death was sudden and quick. She never made it out of the house before she died. The day after she died I did not see Sarah or Lintle at school. When I began to hear rumours about 'Nini, I went straight to Thebe, 'Nini's cousin, and asked him what had happened. He only knew vague details, the most I could get from him was that 'Nini had been in her room and then suddenly fell to the floor convulsing and foaming at the mouth. Her family called the hospital, but by the time they got to their house she had already died. Just like that, with no warning and barely even a sound, she had left the earth.

We walked to the funeral on that Sunday morning. You could already feel the heat of the day rising like the sun. I wore my nicest school uniform and my best black shoes. My brother and I walked side by side as our parents strolled behind us. When we walked into the cemetery, my mother and father greeted 'Nini's parents with their condolences. Then we wandered over to take our seats near the back. In a traditional Lesotho funeral ceremony, the priest begins with a very long sermon, then the hymns are sung, and after that family members and friends come up to give speeches about the person who has passed. After all the speeches are given, the entire procession rises for a final song and then carries the body to its final resting place. This funeral was far from traditional. The priest did begin with a sermon but he spoke for only five minutes, which is the shortest sermon I have ever heard. After the sermon was given there were no hymns — the priest went straight into allowing family and friends to give speeches. One of 'Nini's uncles walked to the podium. He gave a short talk about 'Nini's life and her accomplishments. Thato, a friend in her year, followed, reading a beautiful passage from 'Nini's favourite book. Another friend from 'Nini's class went up and spoke, but at that time I began to zone out, looking around, trying to see if I could spot the Monate gravestones.

The Monate gravestones all had the same shape and size, except for Papa Monate who had the largest and darkest gravestone. There had been many Monates

to die in this town due to their profession: stealing cars from South Africa and then bringing them back to be used as taxis in Lesotho. You could always distinguish a Monate Taxi from the rest, because they all had the signature white seashell on the grill. It is said that the Monate's witchdoctor had blessed all the shells for them to use as protection. Occasionally, the shells failed – which is why their plot in the cemetery is the largest. The priest then announced that we would have a final song and then begin the procession of carrying the coffin towards the gravestone. I snapped back to reality and stood to sing with the rest of the crowd. The song was soon over and line-by-line we walked from our seats to stand behind 'Nini's family. We all waited while 'Nini's uncles and father lifted the coffin and carried her towards the Monate plot. When we reached the open pit, we stood in a semicircle as four men from the cemetery lowered the coffin into the grave. As the workers began to cover her body with cold brown dirt, 'Nini's mother fell and broke down crying. While her mother was breaking down in despair, 'Nini's father just stood there frozen like a statue. He had this eerie calmness about him as he watched the workers cover the coffin. As soon as they finished, we followed the funeral procession, walking past the grave to give our last respects. I followed swiftly behind my mother and walked past 'Nini's covered grave looking at her for the last time — or so I thought.

As we walked through the Monate complex, I looked at the circle of identical brown houses that surrounded the large white Monate mansion. I had only been to 'Nini's house at the end of the block, but the Monate mansion was in the middle of the complex and I had never seen it up close. I walked closely behind my mother and father, up the white marble staircase and in through the large mahogany doors. I felt a shiver go down my spine. My mother carried her famous chakalaka straight into the living room and placed the dish on a large silver table. All the women had brought food for the family and other guests to enjoy. While the men slaughtered a cow in the back and were cooking it over the braai for the entire gathering, the women of the Monate family all stood in the kitchen talking in hushed voices. The other women sat around the living room on couches and chairs. As I followed my mother into the living room, I watched my father walk towards the backyard area where all the men were sitting. My father immediately walked towards 'Nini's father, he put one hand on his shoulder and then took the other hand and shook it firmly. This was a common greeting for men of my father's age during business

transactions, weddings and even funerals but what caught me off guard was the reaction of 'Nini's father: his face was frozen like a zombie. I stood there watching for what seemed like forever when I was suddenly broken out of my trance by the voice of an older woman saying "Rebeka, Rebeka."

I turned and greeted her, "Dumela Mama."

"How is school, how are your marks this year?"

"I am doing quite well, Mamajone."

"Your mother and father must be so proud."

"They are very proud, thank you!" I responded, even though she had already walked off with her plate of food.

When I finished loading my plate with food, I walked towards my mother who was sitting on a small couch. I settled next to her and listened to the women gossip. One woman was in the middle, talking when I sat down. "This is so tragic, 'Nini was such a bright young woman."

"I know, she had so much potential, but she died so suddenly. That's what makes this so tragic," another woman chimed in.

The first woman lowered her voice. "I heard that the girl died suddenly because of a curse that was set by a rival family."

One of my Mother's friends questioned the woman: "Now why would a rival family curse and kill a little girl and not a head Monate family member or even her father?"

"Possibly this was a warning for the Monate family, that their rivals want more."

A random woman sounded in with her thoughts: "I heard that the witchdoctor who works for the Monates blessed too strong on muti and it killed the poor girl."

My mother joined the gossip: "That's absurd! How could their witchdoctor make muti too powerful that it would kill someone?"

I just continued to sit through the gossip, occasionally looking towards the backyard. Since it was getting late, the smaller children were allowed to play in the yard while the men sat and smoked. Mamajone began to talk, and although her voice was weaker than that of the other woman, she still had a commanding presence, since she was the oldest one in the room.

She began slowly. "None of these theories are true. A few days before 'Nini died, I saw her father walking out from the witchdoctor's home with a blank

expression on his face and a white seashell necklace in his hand. Then a few days later 'Nini suddenly died in the middle of the night."

I did not understand at first how the two parts in Mamajone's story had a connection. I was about to ask my mother when out of nowhere a young woman who I had never seen before cried, "No, that cannot be… 'Nini's father would never sacrifice his favourite daughter for more power and money."

Mamajone continued, "Oh but yes of course, he is still a Monate and Monates are known for doing whatever they need to in order to be more powerful. And it must be a favoured child for the sacrifice to work properly."

A middle-aged woman objected, "Nonsense! This is all nonsense! The girl died of a seizure and that is that!"

Mamajone finally said in the lowest voice, you could barely hear a word, "You can believe what you want to believe but I will tell you this: be careful of the Monate family. They are very powerful."

Just as Mamajone finished her sentence, my attention shifted to the yard where I could see two little boys fighting over a small toy. I was about to turn back to the women's conversation when I noticed a white shell necklace poking out just above the neckline of 'Nini's father's shirt. I moved down on the couch to get a better look. Could this shell necklace be what Mamajone had seen when he left the witch doctor last week? 'Nini's father turned slightly from his conversation and our eyes met for only a split second, but I could see something in his eyes, a gray cloudiness, something I had never noticed before.

My mother turned to me and said, "We are going to leave soon because it's getting dark, so please finish your food." I hadn't noticed but the sun was setting and it was leaving streaks of pink, orange, and yellow across the sky. I finished the food on my plate and stood to say goodbye to the women in the living room. I walked over to the table and placed my dish where my mother had placed hers earlier. I met my mother, father and brother near the kitchen to give our final condolences to the family. My mother gave 'Nini's mother a strong hug and said, "We are very sorry for your loss, 'Nini was such an amazing girl." The entire walk home no-one said anything. We just sauntered back in silence. I didn't think about 'Nini much after that day. It seems when they buried 'Nini, she was forgotten and never spoken about.

It was a warm afternoon in mid-October at the annual strawberry festival. I was walking with some of the girls in my year when I saw her. It was like she appeared out of thin air. It was 'Nini, but slightly taller, she was walking behind her sisters Sarah and Lintle as they entered the festival gate. I was frozen, literally. I just stood there and watched the three of them walk by as if they were walking home from school. I wanted to call her name out but something stopped me, something reminded me of what Mamajone had said after 'Nini's funeral: "Be careful of the Monate family, they are very powerful." I returned home and did not say a word to my parents.

The next day at school I went straight to Sarah and I frantically told her everything that I had seen at the strawberry festival the day before. She calmed me down, took me outside and sat me down on the bench. Sarah began talking in a low voice, telling me that she had seen 'Nini across town a few weeks earlier. Sarah said she waited a few days before approaching this girl who was identical to 'Nini. When Sarah met to talk with this girl she learned that this girl *was* 'Nini. she had the identical face, taller body but same exact birthmark on her upper right shoulder. Sarah sat and talked with 'Nini for hours about where she was living, how she got there, and what had happened to her. I asked Sarah to tell me everything, but the school bell rang and the only thing she could say was that the girl was truly 'Nini and that she could tell me more after school. As soon as the last school bell rang, I leapt out of my seat and raced to meet Sarah at the same bench, where she began her story.

This part of the story I can only tell you once because even to this day it frightens me so much that I cannot bear to hear it again.

Sarah started by telling me that 'Nini had been living at a farmer's home across town. The family had found her wandering on their farm and decided to give her a place to stay. 'Nini told Sarah that the night she died she had seen a ghost of Papa Monate through the window and that is when she started convulsing and foaming. She felt her spirit rise out of her body and felt Papa Monate take her spirit by the hand. 'Nini thought she was going to be led to heaven by her grandfather, but instead she was taken by him and other Monate spirits towards the mountains. 'Nini said she lived as ghost-spirit for the past two years in the caves guarded by other Monate ghosts. The caves were sealed by a barrier and guarded day and night. They forced her to perform rituals and drink sheep's blood. One day when

the Monate spirits were not looking, ’Nini passed through barrier and escaped from the mountain caves. Once she passed though the barrier, she regained her body. ’Nini wandered down the mountain for days until she found the farm and family that took her in.

I learned from Sarah that her father and other Monate relatives refused to believe her when she told them that ’Nini had come back to life. They warned her never to talk about ’Nini ever again. As far as I know, ’Nini still lives on the farm across town and Sarah still visits with her in secret. But ever since ’Nini resurfaced, the Monate’s power has diminished, they have less control over the town, and they have many more rivals taking their power.

I have since then moved away from Mokhotlong. I have tried to put this mystery behind me because it still haunts me to this day. I was told that if I write down what haunts me I can finally make my peace. I have made my peace but I really hope ’Nini made hers.

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I'm Still There

Nicole O'Ryan (UWC)

Bokkie is the nickname I gave my granddaughter. My youngest daughter Francis, who everyone called Hatta, fell pregnant when she was 16 years old. The baby's father offered to marry her but she refused, she said she was in love with a white boy named Benny.

"What do you mean now you want to marry a white boy!" I said.

"He loves me, he said he will reclassify himself as coloured," said Hatta.

"And what about the baby?" I asked.

"He says his mommy won't allow us to get married if she finds out about that."

"If you really love this boy Benny then you shouldn't marry another man," said William, my husband.

"Are you stupid!" I shouted, but Hatta was already thanking her father. The conversation did not stop there, but in the end she would not listen to me.

"Where will the baby come out, Ma?" Hatta asked when her labour pains started.

"The same place it got in," I told her. I never spoke to my children about pregnancy or how people fall pregnant. When I was about to give birth I would tell the children I was going out, and then later I would just come home with the baby, that is how things should be. I heard a girl whisper to her sister one day when I went to deliver another lady's baby that I brought the baby with in my bag, because whenever the midwife left there was a baby.

"William, go fetch the bucket!" I shouted. He was standing on the outside of the door, waiting for my orders.

"What must I now do with an empty bucket, huh? Where's the boiling water? Where's the towels?" I said again, as he came running in with the bucket.

"Must I do everything myself!" I said. He picked up the bucket again, keeping his back towards Hatta. This was no place for a man, but I was a midwife and I was not going to let people see us at the hospital, and I would not ask a neighbour to come over and help.

When Hatta gave birth I named the little girl Delia Francis. A year later Hatta got married and moved in next door with Benny, but the baby stayed with me. Hatta had two daughters with Benny soon after she got married. And as Bokkie grew older she assumed that Hatta was her sister, in those days children did not ask questions as they now do, parents named their children in the hospital and then changed it later when they got home then baptised their child under that name. We all had things we didn't want to talk about.

"How old are you?" a neighbour would ask Bokkie.

"Twelve," she would reply.

"Who says so!" I would say.

And so, none of the children was sure what their names were or their age and they did not seem to think this was important to know. When I dropped out of school to find work, I told them I was 16 years old. I knew I couldn't be that old but I got the job, just like that, no long stories.

"Why is my name the same like Hatta's?" Bokkie asked me one day while we folded the washing. She must have been 15 years old then, I remember because it was, say, a year before she fell pregnant.

"Just don't keep you big!" I said. "That is big people's business."

Now I must say I didn't set her straight when she assumed Hatta was her sister, until the day she got engaged to Reginald. I hated Reginald, or Reggie as they called him, and I will tell you why. Bokkie was in love with a nice boy from work, and the boy was in love with her. She would come home and tell me all about how nice he was to her. Then Reggie came into the picture and started charming Bokkie, but Bokkie was not interested. She would come home and complain to me about him. All of a sudden, Bokkie starts telling me she has feelings for Reggie! I asked her about the nice boy at work but she was min gespin. I asked if the boy had done something wrong to her, but she said no. Then one day as I was checking Bokkie's jacket pockets for tissues before washing it, I found a piece of paper. On the piece of paper was Arabic writing. I would not have thought anything of it if I didn't see her name written on the paper. I went straight over to the imam's house - he lived not too far from our house. It was an Arabic love spell, he said and I should flush the piece of paper down the toilet right away. I waited for Bokkie to get home from

work and showed her the letter but she would not listen to me. She said Reggie was not Muslim and he had no reason to do it. She never cornered him about it.

"Wel,l if you don't want to learn then, you must feel," I said, but sometimes I wonder if I had flushed it there somma just by the imam's house, if things would have turned out differently.

Soon after Bokkie came over with Reggie, she was pregnant and they wanted our permission to get married. My eyes filled with tears and the sadness formed a lump in my throat. I was silent for a while. I looked at my husband but his head was hanging down. I would not look at Bokkie. I cleared the sadness from my throat and said, "Go ask Hatta."

"But why must he go ask Hatta, Ma?" asked Bokkie, my innocent little Bokkie.

"Hatta is her mother, not me," I said to Reggie, ignoring Bokkie. William's head snapped up at me, he always said I was too hard on the children, but I did not blink or try to explain, my heart was as cold as my body that morning, years later, when I found myself without it.

Bokkie and Reggie got married. She was happy and I made my peace with it. A few months later, I was invited to a langarm party at Reggie's parents's house where Bokkie and Reggie now lived. Bokkie was glowing with her stomach high in the air. My heart was happy that I was wrong about him.

Later that night Bokkie's stepsister came to her and whispered,"Pretend to go to the toilet." The toilet was outside, Bokkie was confused but she walked outside to the toilet and opened the door. There was Reggie and another girl. I was not there to see her walk in on them. But I never forgot her walking into the kitchen, her stomach now looking too heavy for her little body. She did not cry a lot, but tears rolled. I begged her to tell me what had happened but she could not speak. I shook her but I don't think she saw me.

Someone had told me once that people who have their foot amputated still feel their foot itching and lis to scratch it. Now I can't say I remember dying, or seeing The Light. I remember getting into bed with Bokkie on my mind and then I remember standing next to her bed watching her sleep. I heard Bokkie say I died

from a brain haemorrhage, but that didn't mean I was going to leave my Bokkie alone with that rubbish Reggie! So I stayed here and watched her family grow.

Reggie seemed better. They had four daughters and five sons, but the second eldest son died from diarrhoea when he was only a year and eight months old. Every Friday when Reggie got his wages, he came home and brought every child a packet of chips and a chocolate, no matter what age they were. The rest of his wages he would give to Bokkie, all he would ask for was some money to go bet on the horse races; Sea Cottage is the name of the horse he always bet on. He would come home on Saturday evening and pretend he didn't win and then go to Bokkie and throw up the money in the air and they would laugh and Bokkie would pick it up and make sure the bills got paid. If there was money left over, Reggie would send Sandra with a bag to Mr Pin's house around the corner and she would come back with Reggie's bottle of brandy. Bokkie would get her big bottle of Pepsi which she would leave next to her bed while she slept and sipped on it through the night. The children got more chips and chocolate and the Salty Cracks was important to have when friends and family came to visit. When there wasn't enough money to buy Salty Cracks, Bokkie would lay out slices of bread on the table and take a small glass and press out three circles from each slice. She then took the grid out of the oven and balanced it on two saucers over the plate of the stove, and toasted the circles of bread. She put polony, avocado, cheese or egg on it, and sometimes she put two or three on top of each other and made colourful double or triple decker savouries.

One day Mrs Willenberg, Bokkie's friend and neighbour, came to her and told her to go with her to the horse races.

"I have a lot of work to do."

"I have to show you something Bokkie, I don't know how to tell you."

"What is it, tell me, I don't have money to go," said Bokkie.

"I will pay for you. You know I have the money."

After a while, Bokkie said she would go. Mrs Willenberg told Bokkie she had a dress for her to wear. She was the type that didn't take no for an answer, she wasn't rich, but she could afford to have more things because she had no children. She was the only woman that went with to the horse races every week. The men had already

left earlier in Mrs Willenberg's husband's car and she and Bokkie had to take a bus. Bokkie didn't leave the house a lot but this day I felt I had to go with her.

"Put on some lipstick Bokkie," said Mrs Willenberg on the bus. Bokkie smiled politely and put on the lipstick.

"You know Bokkie, you're a very pretty girl but you should come out more and be fun…take a drink or dance." Bokkie didn't reply – she just gave a weak smile, but her mind was far away preparing for the worst.

"Let us find Reggie so you can surprise him," Mrs Willenberg said. She didn't wait for an answer and Bokkie had to follow her. I wish I had tried to stop her from going.

Bokkie spotted Reggie from a distance, Mrs Willenberg must have seen it also, but she did not say anything, she only started walking faster, scared that Bokkie would not see in time. But my Bokkie did see, she saw Reggie holding another lady and when he saw her walking towards him, he put his finger over his lips and shook his head so she knew not to make a scene. He looked away from Bokkie, sure that she would not try to embarrass him. The woman he was holding did not notice and continued to speak, pointing at something in the distance, her head leaning on his chest, comfortably, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist. Mrs Willenberg gave Bokkie the bus fare to go back home, alone. Mr and Mrs Willenberg only came home much later when the races were done. It was then that I noticed my Bokkie's innocence was gone and so were her tears. Reggie came home with Kentucky Fried Chicken that night. It was 1974, and Kentucky Fried Chicken had just opened. All the children stood in the kitchen, too happy to notice that their mother did not come out from her room. Reggie bathed his youngest children in a sink bath in the kitchen as he did every Saturday and Sunday.

Bokkie had her children to worry about and I knew she would never leave Reggie, she would not even corner him, she knew it would make no difference. But my anger was bottled up and ready to explode. For the first time since my death I felt my nerves twitch, the nerves in my body I no longer had. It was that night as Reggie tucked his son into bed in the back room, when he walked right past the picture of me on the wall as if he didn't see me there, that I started to twitch. As he was about to switch off the light, I banged my fist against the frame of my picture. Reggie and I were both shocked to watch it move - I didn't know that I could move

things. He walked to my picture, watching it swing from side to side. My hand gripped his shoulder and cold shivers spread from his shoulder to his arm, suddenly he turned and tried to shrug off the feeling. "Forgetting" on purpose to switch off the light, he took off down the passage. I put off the light for him. Now I know he noticed the loss of light because he was all of a sudden in darkness but he did not turn around. I followed behind him slowly, surprised that I could hear my own footsteps.

"Bokkie! Haal jou ma se foto van die muur af!" he said, bursting into the room.

"Wat?" she asked, lifting her head off the pillow but not turning towards him.

"Ek sê haal die foto van die muur af!" he shouted.

"Jy soek vir moeilikheid," she said, putting her head back down on the pillow, pretending to go to sleep while Reggie lay awake in bed.

The next night, my picture still hung skew in the back room. I tried to make it straight but Bokkie's daughters Pricilla and Sandra walked into the passage and saw me. They ran into their room, scared because they did not recognise me or maybe scared because they did. They were always scared of me, even when I was alive because I did not allow children to sit in my sitting room, children always wanted to touch my things and no one was allowed to touch my wireless but me. And children, they always wanted to play with my cat Ginger but it wasn't a play thing, it was there to catch the rats, it mustn't get spoiled. After they saw me they could not fall asleep and were still whispering about what they had seen. I was restless, and it was vrieting on me that Reggie had gone to sleep peacefully while Bokkie tossed and turned. As I walked down the passage, I saw the two girls together on the top bunk bed. I had an idea. I walked into their room slowly, scraping my feet on the wooden floor to make sure they heard me coming. When I got to their room I rattled the metal ladder on the side of the bunk beds. They thought I was climbing up. Shame, they were lekker bang, but sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. Sandra, Reggie's oogappel, shouted, "Daddy!" while her older sister Pricilla prayed for me to find rest. Reggie ran into the room thinking that someone had broken in. When his daughters told him what they had seen he shouted at them that there was no such thing as ghosts and that they should not let their boyfriends bok so late. But he allowed them to move their mattress into his room. When they had all gone to sleep I shook Sandra so that she fought in her sleep. Reggie heard her struggling and

came to wake her up to tell her to sleep next to him and Bokkie on the big bed. When they fell asleep again, I was beduiweld that Reggie, that rubbish, was comfortable enough to fall asleep again. I sat on his stomach so he couldn't breathe and gripped my hands around his throat. But Bokkie shook him awake because she couldn't fall asleep. Reggie did not go back to sleep that night.

Reginald, Reggie's second eldest son, liked to smoke pipe. Every night when he came from work, their dog Lassy would meet him at the bus stop to walk home with him. One night Reginald came home, and Lassy ran to the bus stop to meet him, but this night as Lassy came closer to him she howled as she saw me and tried so hard to turn around that she skidded in the sand and ran back home. Now Reginald, standing there dik geroek, looking around him but not seeing me, felt suddenly very uncomfortable so he took after the dog and ran home too. He got home and put on the light quickly but I put it off again. It did not cross Reginald's mind to turn and close the door. He ran and dived onto Reggie's bed. Reggie jumped up swearing in confusion, he was sleeping alone that night because Bokkie was in hospital, she had an ulcer. As he realised it was Reginald, he shouted"Wat de fok is verkeerd met jou!"

Reginald started pacing and told Reggie what had happened. Reggie sighed and moved up in the bed so Reginald could sleep there, but Reginald shook his head and said,

"Huh uh…huuuuh uh! Jy's dan die pa, ek is die kind." Reggie then knew he had to sleep in front.

Reggie did not feel safe in his home anymore. He would come home from his nightshift at work and walk backwards into the house. He threw salt over his left shoulder and threw salt in front of every door before he went to sleep. He soon picked up a pattern between what he did and when I pestered him. Sometimes when he behaved for a while, I would touch his shoulder anyway just to remind him that I was still there.

Nicole O'Ryan lives in Cape Town where she works as a Associate Authentication Analyst at Symantec. She wrote the short story "I'm Still Here" in 2014 as part of Meg Vandermerwe's Creative Writing Honours course at the University of the Western Cape. This story is an

interpretation of true events. Her writing interest lies mainly in imagining 'the other' and writing against gender stereotypes. This is her first short story publication.

Walk Beside Me

Annel Pieterse (UWC)

When midday comes, there is a hum in the air, and waves of heat shimmer across the dry semi-desert plains. Small, hardy shrubs and succulents cover the expanse in a scrubby green fur to the horizon, where the Hantamberge rear up and roll away.

The dirt track that leads to the homestead runs straight down the veld from the national road in the distance. A windpump gives a lonely creak as it traces its unvarying arc against sky.

Ouma likes it here – she says you can see seven horizons far. Sitting on the back stoep, one can spot the dust cloud of a bakkie turning off the national road and hear the drone of its engine a good forty minutes before it gets to the farmhouse. It's hard to arrive unexpected in this part of the world.

The house is dark after lunch, the shutters drawn against the pulsating bright light. The adults are all resting. She lies on her pallet, watching through the crack between the door and the floor. When Oupa's feet pass by, she knows that nap time is over, and she can go out to play.

For his afternoon tea, Oupa always brews thick, bitter moerkoffie, which he sweetens with plenty of sugar. They sit out on the stoep and he pours some of the coffee into a saucer, blowing on it before he offers it to her to take a sip.

She doesn't often see playmates her own age. She loves playing with Nannies and Piet and Klonkies, but they are all much older, and mother doesn't like that she spends so much time with the labourer's children. They are real boesmans, descendants of the people for whom the Boesmanland is named. When Klonkies runs with her on his back and wants her to squeeze tightly with her little legs, he tells her "!Xam, Lita, !Xam," and they show her how to eat the bitter, juicy !Xobba plants, succulents that grow in the region.

One morning, she is playing in the shade behind the water tank. She hears the quiet trickle of the overflow as it runs down the outside wall of the storeroom where Ouma keeps meat and other perishables. She is watching a dung beetle as it makes its industrious way across the loose red sand, pushing a single round, black

drolletjie. It leaves a thick central trail, the imprints of tiny beetle feet on either side. As the beetle passes the corner of the stoep, the trail curves to the right to avoid two little black shoes, at the end of two short legs in frilly white socks.

Her eyes travel upward: a pink dress, and above the capped sleeves, two dark plaits looped above the ears of a little girl watching her with dark, keen eyes.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"I'm Henda," the girl replies, squatting down to push up a mound of sand that the beetle deftly skirts.

At teatime, she sets two places at the low table where she likes to eat. "Mamma, Henda also wants some tea," she tells her mother.

The adults exchange amused glances. "Who is Henda, Lita?" asks her mother.

"She's my new friend, she's come to play."

The adults smile indulgently and put out an extra rusk with the tea.

They are mildly less amused a few weeks later when a third place is set at the little table, and a demand is made for yet another cup of tea.

"And now?" asks Oupa. "Who's joining you for tea today?"

"Henda," she replies. "And Lera Briggs."

Mother looks bemused. "Where did you hear that name?" she asks.

"She told me," Lita replies.

"And what does Lera look like?"

The child is quiet for a bit. Her mother prompts: "What colour is her hair?"

"Like mine," comes the reply, "but short." With her hand, she indicates a bob-cut, just above the jaw.

"Die verbeelding darem," says Ouma. "Where does the child come up with these things?"

She likes to play with Lera and Henda. She worries when the adults don't take enough care with doors, or forget to put out tea for both of them. When she senses one of them falling behind, she holds out her hand and tells them, "walk beside me, hold my hand."

One morning during tea she bites into an aniseed pod embedded in her rusk, grimacing at the strange taste.

"Look at her face," Lera says to Henda.

Intrigued by the foreign phrase, she repeats it aloud: "Look at her face."

Her mother and Ouma stop their conversation and both turn to her.

“What did you say?” asks mother.

“Look at her face,” she repeats.

“Who said that to you?” asks Ouma.

“Lera,” she replies.

“Waar sal die kind tog aan die Engels kom?” Ouma wonders.

“She must have picked up some English from one of the visitors,” Mother ventures.

A year later, mother agrees to teach the sub-As in the closest town, on condition that Lita may come to school with her. With all the new friends, she is very busy, and doesn’t have much time for Lera and Henda. After a while, she no longer sees them.

She fares very well at school. She attends university, completing her Masters degree in statistics. She marries a young engineer. They have two children. She enjoys being a mom, even if it’s hard sometimes, early in the morning when she’s desperately still trying to sleep, dreading the moment when that cheerful “Hey!” signals that it’s time to get up. But she does get up, and she takes the little hand and walks beside them as they explore the world.

On holiday, they rent a seaside cottage on the south coast. She wakes up chilled one night. The waves are so loud they seem to be pounding at the door. The bedside lamps are both off, but a faint light shimmers in the room. She sees Lera Briggs standing at the foot of the bed, wearing a white dress printed with tiny flowers, tied in a bow at the back. “That’s a different dress,” she thinks.

Then she hears it, like a whisper: “Look at her face. Look at her face.”

She looks at the face of the little girl before her: the familiar bob is slicked down, dark from the water and the bits of seaweed clinging to it. Now she sees that the dress, too, is soaking wet, and she feels a weight pressing on her chest as she struggles to breathe.

“Turn on the light. Turn on the light!” she pants, trying to wake her husband. He fumbles for the light, but when it comes on, Lera is gone. The kids, awakened by the light and noise, stumble sleepily into the room. She tells them she’s had a bad dream.

She never sees Lera again, but sometimes when she’s alone, it is as though she hears short, faltering steps behind her, and she fights the urge to reach back and say, “walk beside me, hold my hand.”

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Constant Companion

Shirwileta Williams (UWC)

I could see ghosts from the time I was born. My ma told me, when I was a baby, I never slept and I cried a lot. My Ouma, who I called Mama, said to Ma, "Rosie, Tommie sien spoke, hulle trek lelike gesigte vir hom lat hy bang kan word."

Mama told Ma that I must sleep by her because the ghosts knew she could also see them and they would leave me alone. So I slept by Mama for a few years and the ghost didn't scare me anymore, but I still saw ghosts once in a while. I didn't see a lot in graveyards or hospitals like people think and they didn't all look the same. Some looked like normal people but they didn't have feet and some were black almost like shadows with no faces, but none of them ever spoke to me, they would just look at me.

When I was 23, I moved from Beaufort West to Cape Town to work as a teacher at a school in Athlone. That time I was charfing a girl named Sara who lived in Ladysmith with her ma them. Every second Friday, after school was out, I drove down to Ladysmith to see her. When I first got to the Cape I was driving my pa's car. He let me borrow it so I could get around until I had enough money to buy my own car.

One Friday when I was by Sara them, they told me that Sara's friend, Susanna, died from blood poisoning that morning. We went over to Susanna's house that evening to pay our respects to her parents and when we got there her body was still there. That was apartheid times and if you were coloured you would die waiting for an ambulance and if you were already dead then they knew they could take their own sweet time to fetch the body, "want hulle weet jou ouma moet nog ko en die aunties moet nog die lyk was," is what we would always joke. Sara asked me to go with her into the room. I didn't want to, but she was crying and so I ma got up and went with her. Susanna was lying in her bed, it looked like she was sleeping but her chin was hanging on her chest and she had a bandage tied around her head to keep her mouth closed. There were women standing around her, some were talking about having to wash the body and some were standing in the corner crying and praying deurmekaar.

I felt so out of place because men don't go in the room even if the dead person was a man. I told Sara I was going to sit in the lounge with the other men. While I was sitting there I saw from the corner of my eye someone coming through the door. When I looked right it was a woman, but she was floating. Then she turned and looked in the direction where I was sitting and I saw that it was Susanna standing there in the middle of the lounge. She didn't look at me, she just looked at all the other people standing around the room and then she smiled, looked down and went right back out the front door.

That was the first time I saw the ghost of somebody I knew. I never told Sara or anyone else that I saw Susanna's ghost because they would think I'm mad. Mama would say it was Susanna's spirit that I saw and not her ghost. She said spirits just come to say goodbye before they go to heaven and a ghost is stuck here because they didn't know they were dead or had some unfinished business with the living or couldn't find their way to the light.

A few months later I had enough money for my own car so I sent the money to Pa and asked him to buy me a car. One Thursday night Pa took a bus to his cousin, Unkie Davie, in Oudtshoorn so he could check there if there was a car he could buy for me. Unkie Davie knew a place where he had bought his car for cheap. Pa bought me an off-white Volkswagen Bug. I wasn't very impressed, but Pa said it's all I could afford. He told me it was a good car for the little money I sent. Pa drove the car down from Oudtshoorn that Friday afternoon and the Sunday morning he drove back to Beaufort with his own car that I'd been borrowing from him.

The Monday after Pa left was my first time driving my car. I got up early, very excited, and got ready for work. I walked out the front door and picked up the newspaper on the stoep and then went to my car standing in the street. It had to ma stand there until I cleaned the garage out so there was place for the Volksie. When I got in the car and adjusted the rear view mirror, I saw a white girl sitting in the back seat looking at me and smiling. I just stared at her at first, then I thought I would ask her what she was doing there and if she needed help. As I turned to talk to her she was suddenly next to me in the passenger seat. I sat still for a minute just looking at the smiling girl and then I realised that she was a ghost, so I put my newspaper down next to me, gave the girl a nervous smile, turned in my seat,

started the car and drove off to work. I wasn't worried really that she was there, but I didn't know then that she was going stay.

He's staring straight ahead at the road. He frowns and clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth at the red light and stares at it intensely as though he thinks he could scare it into turning green like an angry parent waiting for an apology from a child who has done something wrong. When he frowns, his eyebrows make one long bushy arch across his forehead and his lips purse tightly together. Habit. I used to bite my nails. Mom said it's disgusting to bite my nails with all the dirt that collected under them, but it's not like they ever got dirty. She never let me play in the sand.

He sees me, but he says nothing. Doesn't he think it's strange that there is a white girl in the car? Is apartheid over? Did we win? Maybe he's just too scared to speak. Maybe he's used to ghosts like my cousin Sue-Ellen. People think she belongs in a madhouse because she speaks to her ghosts in public. I don't think my being here scares him. How strange he is, this coloured companion of mine…

She didn't say anything to me when we were driving and I didn't say anything to her. I didn't have anything to say to a white ghost girl. In any case, she probably couldn't answer because none of the ghosts I saw tried to speak to me. Even if they saw me, they never tried to say anything. We drove in silence and I didn't feel afraid or uncomfortable with her being in the car with me because it was like she belonged there. I didn't know why she was in the car and it didn't matter to me, her being there didn't bother me at all.

When I pulled up at the school, I picked up the newspaper and my bag lying in the back. I looked at her again and she smiled and I smiled back. I got out of the car and shut the door. When I turned around to lock the door, she wasn't in the car. She was gone. I looked in the back window to see if she was there on the floor, but there was nothing. She was gone as quick as she came. I wondered where she went and if she was going to come back. I thought to myself that I must phone Mama and tell her what I saw when I get home. Then I walked to the school building with my briefcase and my newspaper in my hand. But for the rest of the day, the smiling ghost in my car was on my mind and I wondered if she would come back.

We stopped in front of a building that looked as though it may have been a school. I wasn't sure at first because it looked so run-down. There were many broken windows, and nothing but dead grass on the field on the side. The walls were beginning to peel off their old washed out coats. It looked as though the school had been bleached of all its colour. The children who were walking by the car were neatly dressed but their clothes were as worn out as the school building, obviously hand-me-downs from their older siblings. One little girl caught my attention. Like many of the other children, she was clothed in a passed-down school uniform and the soles of her polished black shoes were worn thin, but what caught my eye were the brand new bright yellow ribbons at the end of each of her pigtails. They reminded me of the ribbons I tied around my niece's pigtails on her first day at her new colourful school with its royal blue roof and its large lush green soccer fields and tennis courts and swimming pool. How privileged we are. I always knew we were, but seeing this, seeing how poor and how underprivileged these children are I wish that I had done more when I was alive. I fought but I had no idea then how important what I stood for was. Every rally, every protest, every poster, this is what it was for.

When school was out I nearly tripped over my own feet to get to my car. I wanted to see if the girl would come back to the car and if she would talk to me. When I got to the car I first did an inspection through the front and back window, but she wasn't there. I wondered what ghosts did when they weren't watching us. Did they go to the movies or to clubs? Did they all meet up and talk about their day spooking people? I felt a little disappointed that she wasn't there.

After having a cigarette outside, I got in the car and closed the door and when I turned to put my bag and newspaper in the backseat, there she was sitting next to me, smiling that beautiful smile. I was happy she was still there. That was the first time I looked at her properly and noticed how pretty she was. She had blue eyes and soft straight blonde hair and she was wearing a white t-shirt, jeans and a pair of black takkies. She was still very young, no more than 20 or so. I smiled at her, turned around and started the car and went home in silence with my ghostly passenger in her seat next to me.

Just before I got home, a song came on the radio and I noticed her sit forward in her seat. I looked at her and she smiled at me, then she leaned back in the seat

and put her head against the headrest and closed her eyes. After I stopped in front of the house I was boarding at, I sat in the car waiting for the song to finish before I put the car off. We sat there quietly listening to the song. I kept thinking she would sing along, but she didn't. I thought to myself that she maybe doesn't know the words so she can't sing with. When the song was finish I looked at her to make sure she was still there, then I switched off the car and got out. When I turned to lock the door she was gone again like before. That's how it went from then on: when I got out the old Volksie she disappeared and when I got in, there she was. She was my constant companion.

There was this one time when I drove home on Modderdam road with my companion next to me, and I saw a girl on the side of the road. She was a white girl and she had on a black tights and a red top and she was staring at my car. I thought maybe she was lost and needed help but I wasn't sure I should stop to help a white girl on the side of the road. I might get in trouble if the cops passed by. When we got closer I saw that she was floating off the ground and I thought she must have been the famous Modderdam hitchhiker ghost that I had heard about.

"Here, die wit meisie spoke soek net my bloed," I thought to myself.

When we got close to the hitchhiker I looked at my companion and she looked at me and she smiled and when I looked back, the hitchhiker was gone. I think that maybe when she saw I already had a companion she wasn't interested in me.

A few months later, while I was driving home from the movies, I was listening to Elvis and singing along with the King. It was late evening and it was dark already. I was in a good mood because I had found out that day that I had got a job at another high school, so I was going to get more money. I was all smiles and I was tapping on the steering wheel as I sang out loud, occasionally turning to my ghost buddy and singing to her.

He was not paying attention to the road. It was dark and he was singing instead of watching the road. His hands were beating against the steering wheel when he should have been holding on to the wheel and looking out for traffic. I switched the light on inside the car to get his attention. He looked at me and smiled and kept on singing. He must have thought I was trying to see his face. He hadn't paid any attention to the worried expression on my face. He just kept on

singing and reached his hand up switched off the light. When we came to the stop he started singing into his hand as though there was a microphone in it and he looked at me and sang and laughed at the same time. Then it happened.

It was so sudden. Without looking to his right he began to cross the four way stop. A bakkie came speeding toward the car. I took hold of his steering wheel and drove us off the road into the open field on the side of the road. I heard him scream "wat de fok!" and then he slammed his foot on the brake. We came to a hard stop.

I was still singing and having fun when she grabbed hold of the steering wheel and turned it so we could go into the open veld. I pushed hard on the brakes and stopped fast and hard. I heard loud hooting and I thought it was for us, but when I turned to look to the road it was a bakkie coming right over the red robot. It just missed the car behind us. Then I realised that if she hadn't turned the wheel that bakkie would have hit us. I looked at her with big eyes and she just sat there smiling at me. Jissie, I could have been dead you know. I put my head on the steering wheel and breathed to calm down a bit. She saved my life. I lifted my head and said "thank you" and I turned to smile at her, but when I opened my eyes, the only person smiling back at me was my own reflection in the other window. I looked to see if she was in the back seat but she wasn't there. She was gone, but I was still in the car. For days after that incident, whenever I got in the car, I looked to see if she was there. After a week I decided she must have moved on to heaven. It was lonely in that car without her. Even though we didn't talk, I liked having someone in the car with me.

It was two months later, when I was visiting Sara them that the gear box on the Volksie broke. I stopped on the side of the road and walked down to Sara's house with the shift stick in my hand. It had broken off when I forced it into gear. When I got to Sara's house, her pa and brother, Boeta, laughed out of the keelgat at me walking in there with a piece of my car in my hand.

"Ek het vir jou gesê jy gaan daai kar nog breek as jy so hard gears change. Waarnatoe loop jy met daai ding, jy kon dit mos in die kar gelos het?"

When they were done making me look stupid, Sara's pa said they would tow the car to the mechanic's house, but I must go inside because Sara's ma had put my food in the oven and she would get cross if I didn't go eat.

The next morning I went with Boeta to the mechanic and he asked me where I had bought that car. I told him my pa bought it for me in Oudtshoorn. Then he told me he fixed that car up while he was working in Oudtshoorn. It belonged to an old man's granddaughter. I asked him if he remembered where she lived or where her grandpa lived and he said he didn't but he thinks her name was Samantha and she was a Psychology student at UCT. He told me she died one night in a car accident when another car crashed into her when she was crossing over a four way. I thought maybe that's why she disappeared that night in the car — she had saved me from dying like she did, so she was at peace to go to heaven.

I'm an old man now and that was so many years ago, but I still think about her now and then. I looked for her family when I went to Oudtshoorn to visit my Unkie but her grandpa's neighbour said he had already passed away and her parents lived in England now. She told me Samantha had been buried in the local graveyard. I went to her grave before I went back to Cape Town. There was a picture of her behind a frame in the corner of her tombstone. She was smiling that same smile I knew. Beloved daughter, granddaughter, sister, auntie and fiancé, that's what it said on her tombstone. It's been so many years since then but when I close my eyes, I can still see that beautiful smiling face of the girl who saved my life, my constant companion.

Shirwileta Williams is a postgraduate Arts student at the University of the Western Cape. She has completed her Bachelor of Arts Degree with a minor in Creative Writing and has gone on to complete her Honnours degree in Philosophy with a minor in Creative Writing. Constant Companion formed part of her Honours in Creative Writing portfolio. In 2015 she completed her Postgraduate degree in Education. She is currently studying toward her Masters Degree in Creative Writing, with her thesis focusing on writing against the stereotypical portrayal of the Karoo coloured as afarm worker working for a white farmer. She has been published in *Authors Magazine* in 2014 and briefly wrote a column for the same online magazine in 2015. She currently works as a research assistant and writer for the University of the Western Cape's Media Office.

Something at the Bottom of My Black Label

Cleo-Ann Josephs (UWC)

I climb off the train station at Da Gama and make my way through the shady alley reeking of dead rats. I pass the corner shop and, as usual, buy the Voice. I make my way to Oompies Inn for a Black with Boeta Gray. It has become our little tradition to end the day off with a beer, it numbs the struggles of life. I walk into the dark tavern and find him wallowing in misery under dim light. You would never say we are brothers. He is the one who drinks for a living whereas I live for a drink.

"Aweh, Ta'Gray, what do you say?"

Glassy eyes gaze up at me. "Nee, ek sê ma niks. Wat van jou, my bru?"

I take a seat opposite him and place the newspaper before us. "Ag, nee, jy wiet mos, is ma net nogge dag. I survived it. But I'm gatvol of this damn job, my bru."

He stares at me, "Wat kla jy, jy het 'n job. Kyk hoe lyk ek."

I retort, "salute ja, kyk hoe lyk jy. Ek dog jy het 'n job loep soek, maar jy sit met 'n foken kis by jou voete op 'n blerrie Woensdag."

He shrugs his shoulders. "Bieza, jy wiet wat gat an, ek het 'n foken job loep soek. Ek smaakie vanaand vi jou kakie. Los my net uit, asseblief!"

I am surprised that he actually tried to find work because by the looks of it, he has been babysitting that case of beers for a few hours now.

"Okei, Okei, let us put this day behind us. Tomorrow we try again, neh, my boeta?"

I see a fleeting glimpse of a smile. "Salute ja. Nou sê my, wat sê die Voice vandag?"

I open my beer, "I see here is something about a demon that possesses people through the TV."

"Moenie kak praatie!"

I look at him, "Godse waarheid, Ta'Gray!"

"Bieza, sê jy os moet die foken TV verkoep?"

I laugh, "nee, Boeta! Let me tell you about this kak."

I take a long refreshing sip of my cold beer and begin to tell him the story.

"So, Boeta, it says here this auntie's laaitie has been behaving in a funny way. She doesn't know why."

Boeta Gray is not looking at me; he seems to be looking at ancient markings on the wooden bunk while twirling his index finger around the brim of his long glass. I carry on with telling the story.

"The auntie said he heard strange noises coming from the dak, but didn't bother with it until the noises became unbearably loud. She called a specialist to come have a look at her dak; but there was fokol form of nestation."

This got him looking up at me with his mouth wide open in amusement.

He says: "Gat verder, lat ek hoor."

"She verduidliks that her laaitie had trouble tieping because 'something' was plaaing him at night. He didn't want to tiep in his own room."

Boeta Gray mumbles, "Foken bang broek, ja."

I continue. "Because 'something' was teasing him and tapping at the foot of his bed die hele foken nag. The next night, the auntie decided to tiep in the same room as her laaitie. Now, listen here, Ta'Gray, she and her son heard something like bakstene falling on the dak above them and when she went to look on the dak the next morning, there was fokol."

All of a sudden, I hear Boeta Gray burst out in hysterical laughter. "Moenie liegie! Ek glo diti, Bieza!" with tears in his eyes.

"Wag, Ta'Gray, laat ekie stuk verder vertel."

Boeta Gray is onto his next beer. I realise my thirst.

"She immediately phones the priest to come perform a cleansing ritual on the house."

Boeta Gray retorts, "dai kak gatie werkie."

"Salut, néh, die pastor kom toe daai oggend en doen sy ding, hoorhie, 'for a brief moment the cleansing worked', maar die volgende aand toe het die laaitie swart, blou en pers houe op sy rug."

He looks at me with astonished, bloodshot, glassy eyes.

"Ek het mos gesê dai kak gatie werkie."

I snap, "Ta'Gray, kan jy die kak glo?!"

"Nog nooit, Bieza, dai auntie het sieke har laaitie gemoer, nou sê sy dis 'n foken spoek."

He ruptures with excited laughter, "jislaaik, die mense kan ook allerander kak aan die koerante verkoep. En daar is mense wat die kak opvriet."

"Jy sê daai ding Ta'Gray."

“Waarvoor foken raas d’julle twee soe?”

I hear a familiar voice behind me. I hastily turn around and it’s my good old friend, Bingo.

“Wat de fok soek jy hie, Bingo?” Boeta Gray asks as he jumps up to embrace Bingo, but stumbles over his drunken feet onto the cold cement instead.

“Ek soek d’julle twee ongeleerde raasbekke!”

I hand him a glass. Boeta Gray rises from the dirt, sits down and looks at Bingo bewildered. “My bru, Bieza, het my nou net vertel van die auntie wat bakstene op haar dak hoor val. Sy dink is spoeke, want haar laaitie het houe op sy rug.”

Bingo asks, “van wat?”

He answers, “wietie van watie, mar ek dink sy moer die foken klong.”

Laughter rises from deep in Bingo’s throat as he manoeuvres around the bunk to sit next to Boeta Gray.

“Maybe isit waar,” he whispers.

There are two Black Labels left on our table. I can see that Boeta Gray has had his quota for the week. So I open my next beer and gaze at Bingo. He looks puzzled.

“Wil jy iets sê Bingo?”

“Ja, ek het al dai storie gehoor.”

We both look at him with suspicious eyes.

“Bieza, het dai kak anie met jou gebeurie?”

I look at him bewildered, “nee, my bru. Toe ek nog ’n laaitie was.”

He smirks. “Hoeko sê jy nee? It het gebeur, toe jy mos ’n laaitie was.”

I try to compose myself, but the beer seems to have run through my veins and loosened my tongue.

I begin to say, “ja, it het gebeur, mar ek glo vas, it was my verbeelding.”

I am interrupted by Boeta Gray. “Aweh, Bieza, jy het vertel dat jy lanks Oums een aand gelê het en jy’t bakstene op die dak hoor val. Toe jy vi Oums gekyk’et toe wys sy jou om te gat slaap want jy hoor dinge. Os het nog die volgende dag gat kyk en da was niks. Jy’t nooit weer daoor gevra.”

I snap, “ja, daar was niks, so dit was niks.”

Bingo laughs, “oortuig jy vi os of vi jouself?”

“Ag, julle kan loep kak. Laat ons loep, die bier is warm!”

We stagger out of the tavern. I help Boeta Gray upright as he is as drunk as a lord, which he often believes he is. And Bingo is following us with the Voice in his

hand. We walk two blocks before reaching home and it is like arms day, having to carry my brother most of the way. By the time we reach home, I am sober. Bingo pounds my fist, hands me the newspaper and he is on his way. I unlock the door and dragg my brother to his bed. I go to the bathroom, brush my teeth and undress. I look over to the bed opposite mine and Boeta Gray is sleeping like a baby. I place the folded newspaper on the bookshelf above my bed and chuckle lowly to myself, still thinking, "dit was nog altyd jou verbeelding." I open the duvet and climb in. I think about my brother and the tough day he had. It seems to be a reflection of his entire life. These thoughts exhaust me and I eventually fall asleep. Suddenly, a hand pulls on my right leg. I can swear it feels human. The hand pulls me halfway off the bed, feet dangling over the edge. In the blink of an eye, I roll right out of bed screaming like a colic baby and hit the cold tiled floor with a powerful thud. Boeta Gray wakes with a massive fright because of my screaming.

"Wat de fok gat an?",

"Boeta Gray!! Gray!"

He raises his voice, "wat? Wat!"

I am speechless.

"Bieza, wat de fok gat an?"

It feels like someone is in the room with us. Boeta Gray finds the light switch.

"Hoekom is die foken kamer soe moer koud?"

I feel goose bumps all over my skin and we are in the heart of the summer. I shrug unconcsiously.

"Gat jy my nou sê wat an gaan?"

I try to tell him what happened, but I am trembling unbearably from my shoulders to my ankles. I can not get a sentence formed.

"Wag hie, ek gat jou suiker water kry."

I sit down on the bed and my eye catches the newspaper. I freeze. I do not remember leaving the newspaper open on the bookshelf. Boeta Gray returns with the sugar water.

As he gives it to me, he asks, "hoekom lyk jy soe bleek?"

I drink it in one go.

"Sê my, Bieza", he begs.

He sits down on the bed facing me and I begin to tell him what just happened. His face goes from mere concern to pure fear. He whispers so softly, I tilt my ear towards him,

"Moet net nie kak praatie. Ek glo dit nie."

I look him straight in the eye and I see that he does not doubt that what I experienced is the truth. He believes me and so do I.

"Boeta Gray, is jy seke it wasie jy nie?"

He looks at me confused. "Nee, Bieza, ek het getiep. Ek het nog nooit krag om jou van 'n bed af te ruk na ek 'n kus uitgesuipet."

I nod.

"As dai koerant op bladsy twee oop lê," he begins, "dan moet jy wiet, dai spoek het 'n draai ko maak hie vanaand."

The room begins to feel a bit warmer.

I mumble, "dink jy soe?"

"Ja, my bru. Nou moet jy dit glo."

We sit on the bed looking at each other.

"Gat jy hie by my kom inkruip?"

I look at him with a brooding face. "Nee, my bru, ek glo. Jy kan by my kom inkruip."

I tuck my duvet tightly under my mattress and slip back into bed. I see the sun rising through the window and I close my eyes. One last thought before I fall into a deep sleep. There was definitely "something" playing around my bed, trying to show me their existence. I should not make a mockery of them because next time, they may just pull me right out of life.

Doekoem

Qudsiya Gierdien (SU)

My heart pounding in my chest, I knew my mother wouldn't approve of the conversation I was about to open with her — or rather, attempt to open. As I crossed our little lounge, typical of a house in Bokaap, with a fraying rug in the centre and old dark wood furniture, all smelling of years of incense and furniture polish, I became acutely aware of how conservative my mom was. She refused to throw out any of her mother-in-law's old things, keeping every doily and every brass tea set and trinket as they were when my father was growing up in this very same house. I doubt that she, a woman who clings to tradition and fears the intrusion of the outside world, would entertain the conversation I had been debating for days with myself whether to have or not.

She was sitting at the enamel kitchen table, chopping mangos for her atchar. Behind her, the open patio doors allowed a subtle yet refreshing breeze into the otherwise still and heavy household air. She sat in a stained salaah top and worn doekie which was tied hastily behind her head. The light streaming in from the open doors highlighted the creases around her eyes and sun-toughened skin. In her late forties, my mother was a robust woman, having spent her youth working on the vegetable market in Salt River. She was accustomed to hard work. Although a housewife for over twenty years, her time at home had very little impact on her hardened manner, I thought. She skinned and sliced the mangos with such efficiency and purpose it seemed almost mechanical. She looked up at me and I immediately felt out of place. Standing awkwardly in the doorway, painfully aware of my loose hair and Western clothes, I felt like an outsider. The reason why I was standing there didn't help at all. I knew the moment she knew what I was thinking I would be an outsider, an intruder, in fact.

My thoughts were cut short as she told me to come help in her brisk and slightly abrupt way: "Vir wat staan jy so? Kom help!" I was grateful for the invitation, something about helping in the kitchen made talking easier. Being preoccupied with peeling and slicing set my mind at ease somehow and I think my mother knew it. She would often invite me or my other siblings to help with a task in the kitchen when she knew something was bothering us and it always managed to tease out even the most troubling of issues. We continued in silence for a few minutes as I

struggled to match her efficiency, my hands already sticky with sweet mango juice. Finally, falling in to somewhat of a rhythm, I broke the silence: "We have to write a short story for English, Ma." No answer, so I continued, keeping my eyes on the piece of mango my knife was slicing. "It has to be about the supernatural, you know like ghosts and stuff." She paused for a moment, looking at me intently. She put down her knife and wiped her sticky hands on her top. I felt uncomfortable under her gaze, I hadn't looked up yet but I could feel her eyes on me. I thought about stopping, about dropping the subject and changing my mind, about telling the lecturer I couldn't do it. It was too late though, my mother knew. She might not yet know exactly where I was going with this but she knew I had brought up this story for a reason. I kept slicing, a convenient excuse to avoid eye contact, until I had finished slicing the piece of mango and started on another. I succumbed to the soothing effect of working in the kitchen and before I could catch myself, I heard the question slip from my lips: "Do you think I could interview Antie Rifa? You know, about the work she does?"

For a hopeful second I glanced at my mother. She was staring at me, her expression not angry, but worried. Her voice sounded very tired when she eventually spoke, the robust efficient woman gone and in her place sat a worried mother trying to protect me from things she felt I didn't understand. All she said to me was, "these aren't things you play with, Tahira. You might not believe in it but it's real." With that she picked up her knife and started slicing again. The conversation was over. All traces of tiredness gone and all that was left was the hardened expression I had grown up studying for answers she wouldn't give me.

I finished helping with the mangos, but my mind was crowded by thoughts of how I would tell the lecturer I wouldn't be able to interview anyone. I had this brilliant idea but no access to the information at all. Without my mother there was no way I could speak to Antie Rifa — I was seen as a child and it would be the epitome of disrespect to ask her questions on such a serious matter on my own.

I left the kitchen. Feeling like more of an outsider than I had felt when I had stood awkwardly in the doorway, it wasn't about my clothes anymore. I knew my mother would be keeping an eye on me now. She could be a suspicious woman and she definitely had reason now that she knew I wanted to know more about Antie Rifa's "work". I went to stand outside in the sun for a bit, the rich smell of incense and furniture polish combined with the spicy sweet smell of my mother's mango

atchar was becoming overwhelming. A smell I had always considered familiar was now pervasive, getting in the way of my thoughts.

Stepping out of our small home I found myself right on the pavement, the warm afternoon sun felt comforting on my skin. I welcomed its embrace and the open space after spending the late morning with my mother in our cramped little kitchen. I felt free to think out here. I must come up with a plan. How would I get the information I need to write my story? I made my way down the steep incline of the embankment to the street. I enjoyed the feeling of the cobblestones under my shoes. I started wandering aimlessly, trying to think of ways to approach Antie Rifa, but nohing I came up with seemed plausible. The further I got from my house the clearer it became to me there's no way I could ask her. I'd have to get the information some other way.

Antie Rifa, being my grandfather's eldest sister and also never having been married, became the centre of our family. She acted as a sort of axis. Most of the women in our family formed part of the inner orbit, closest to her. They shared knowledge of what went on during her healing ceremonies and would sometimes even help. I, on the other hand, was nowhere near that level of intimacy. I found myself on the outer edges, too caught up in studies and questioning tradition to be allowed into their circle.

I wasn't quite sure what Antie Rifa did in these healing ceremonies, these things were always very secretive, but I did know she kept a little book of notes on these rituals in her bedside drawer. I had seen it before on one of our visits. Perhaps on our next visit if I could just get a few moments alone with that book I'd know enough to write my story. Suddenly, I realised I was on the edge of Bokaap, very nearly in town. I slowly made my way back up the steep hill to my house. Sliding my feet slightly on the cobblestones, I felt relieved. I had a plan.

Friday came, the day we visit Antie Rifa. I could tell that my mother had our conversation on her mind. I could feel her suspicious glances and I could see the worry just beneath her stern exterior. We piled into the car to make our way to Antie Rifa's home in Kensington. Staring out the window as we drove, my brother and sister's bickering barely bothered me. Where usually I couldn't stand their back and forth arguments about who's taking up the most space or who should hold the cake my mom had baked, today I had bigger things on my mind, their arguing simply served as background noise.

When we arrived, while waiting at the gate, my mom whispered to me: "Ken jou plek." I knew what she was referring to, and immediately replied that I do know my place. If all went well, then she would never know. All I needed was a few minutes alone in Antie Rifa's room. I didn't see any harm in that.

My mother's youngest sister, who lives with Antie Rifa, opened the gate for us. As we entered, the aroma of chicken curry, cooking on her old coal stove, greeted us. It's a smell that takes me back to my childhood every time, for as long as I can remember we had visited Antie Rifa on a Friday and for as long as we'd visited we'd always be greeted by food cooking on that coal stove, no matter what time of day we arrived. Antie Rifa was in the prayer room and we saw her muttering prayers as she thumbed her prayer beads. She nodded as we walked past and we made our way down the long narrow hallway to the kitchen. Once in the kitchen, my mother took a seat at the table and fixed me with a stern look. I smiled nervously and took my place next to her.

Antie Rifa entered the kitchen. A short, round woman, her skin was wrinkled and delicate looking, as though she was made of tissue paper. She took her seat next to her coal stove and started feeding it small logs of wood from a box at her feet. The scent of fresh wood being consumed by the fire was delicious and warm, as it accompanied a delicate layer of smoke. I focused my attention on the little hatch through which I could see the orange-red flames dance and flicker. The way she looked after that fire you would think it was alive, always poking and prodding it, feeding it, giving it air through the little hatch. I thought to myself, maybe that fire's so important to her because she doesn't really have anyone else to look after. Never having married she didn't have a family of her own, no husband or children, just that stove and the food she made on it for guests like us.

The conversation between Antie Rifa and my mother was about my cousin who was getting married. My mother was asking, "do you know the family she's marrying into, 'tie Rifa?"

"Ja, Kasker, an Indian boy, his father passed away when he was very young, he was raised by his stepfather but his mother made sure he kept close ties with his father's family."

My mother was interested in the fact that he was Indian. "Indian?" she asked "They have a different way of doing things don't they?"

"Ja, hulle issie soos ons nie."

Quickly losing interest in the conversation, I wondered whether now was a good time to try and get into Antie Rifa's room. My mother seemed pretty interested in hearing more about this guy, so I took the opportunity to excuse myself. As I walked down the hall and got closer and closer to the room my heart started pounding in my chest. I felt my head throbbing. Just as I reached the door I heard her call, "Tahira, come make the tea!"

Startled by Antie Rifa calling my name, I quickly spun on my heels and went back to the kitchen. Antie Rifa and my mother were still talking about the groom-to-be. I put the kettle on and waited for it to boil, all the while avoiding eye contact. I wasn't sure whether my mother knew what I was doing or not, or whether Antie Rifa somehow knew, but I wasn't going to give away my guilt by looking either of them in the eye. Instead I made the tea sweet and milky, the way they like it, and served it on a tray so that they wouldn't notice my hands shaking.

I had to act fast, we'd only be there another hour or so and I needed to have something at least to tell the lecturer. The only other chance I'd have was when Antie Rifa and my mother went to perform the afternoon prayer. I should have thought of that the first time, I scolded myself. That would be a definite window of at least fifteen minutes where they wouldn't notice me missing. If I had thought of that initially, I wouldn't have been as nervous as I was. I could feel the anxiety building up, I needed something to tell my lecturer, and the only way to get it was through that little notebook.

Tiptoeing my way down the passage again, I finally found myself alone in Antie Rifa's room. Glancing over my shoulder briefly, my fingers tingled as I reach for the drawer where I knew she kept the notebook. The moment I saw it, my heart started beating so fast that I felt faint. My head was spinning slightly as I held the smooth, leathe- bound notebook in my hands. Again, the smell of incense hung in the air, only thicker and more oppressive this time. It clung to the back of my throat, my breath was short and laboured, I felt sick. I flipped through the book looking for something, anything I could write about. The air seemed to grow more dense by the second, pressing on my chest, causing my heart to beat in my ears. I felt light-headed, fighting off my own gag reflex. Finally, my eyes settled on a passage, the sprawling Arabic letters so clear when all the rest had seemed to be swimming on the page.

Let not these words fall upon the deaf ears of the disbelievers.

It was just too much. How? Of all the passages I could have come across, why this one? The room started spinning. I don't remember closing my eyes but everything became dark. Then there was only silence and the lingering taste of incense before I fell into the blackness.

I'm not sure what happened next, but I slowly became aware of Antie Rifa sitting at the bedside. Her warm hand gentle on my forehead, reciting softly, her eyes closed. I realised I'd been tucked into her bed. It felt strange, yet comforting. My mom came in with a cup of hot rooibos. Again she looked worried, rather than angry. I tred to sit up but my head felt heavy. It usually does after a panic attack — I guess that's all it was. I took the cup between my hands and savoured its warmth as I sipped the sweet, hot, deep amber liquid.

We drove home in silence. The atmosphere in the car was crushing. I didn't know what to feel. I had found Antie Rifa's warm hand on my forehead comforting and for the first time I longed to be part of the network of women in our family, to partake in the prayers and rituals for the sense of closeness they created. I had felt it earlier and it was real. I went to bed that night confused, not sure what to expect from my mother the next day. I had seen a sense of sympathy in her eyes earlier, when she brought me the cup of tea, a sympathy that I had not seen before. I wanted to experience that again. I was too tired to think about it for very long and before I knew it, I was fast asleep - a deep sleep, the kind where you don't dream, where you wake up what feels like only a moment later.

I was woken by the spicy cinnamon wafting in the air as my mother prepared the dough for the koeksisters we'd have on Sunday morning. I made my way groggily across our small lounge to the kitchen, the familiar blend of cinnamon, furniture polish and my mother's favourite brand of incense seeming only comforting that morning. I was glad to be home. I wanted to feel at home, I didn't want to be an outsider. I stood in the doorway of the kitchen, watching my mother knead the dough. With each fold, the smell of cinnamon intensified. She looked up at me and said "kom sit." I grabbed a stool and sat next to the old enamel table where she was working. It felt good to be close to her. I felt closer to her than I had felt in a long time and I wasn't quite sure why, but I wasn't about to spoil the moment by overthinking. Sometimes you shouldn't think, you should just feel.

After a while she wiped her flour-covered hands on her apron and turned to me. Her face somehow seemed softer. I didn't see the hardened woman I usually saw when I looked at her.

"What are you going to do about that story?"

"I don't know, Ma," I said, and smiled. "The koeksisters smell great."

The Ghost Bungalow

Chad Brevis (UWC)

It was after he hit me that he told me the story.

"Stop crying now! I'm goin to tell you a story!"

I was drawing my name in the mud and Daddy caught me this weekend. After that hiding he gave me, for God-knows-how-long again, and the shouting and the swearing again, I sat there a little cross again. "Why God? Why man?" I don't care what happens to him. "Wish a bus can come knock him and his big beard over and make him go away...all of them."

Uncle Stevie smiles at me. God can keep him. He loves me. I think.

He has smaller hands than Daddy. I don't want to call him Daddy. I think.

The feeling inside me was bubbly. It mixed with the smell of whiskey and smoke to make a wet mud pie of crossness inside me. Another weekend like this. I looked at how he showed off in front of my uncles and mummy. I wanna show them they make me cross, but I'm too small. Mummy's just so with him. She hugged me after the hiding then put me down and shouted at me to "sit there and grow up." Then he wants to tell me a story to stop the crying.

Mummy watches me from the kitchen so I don't get up. She wipes the table with a tissue paper to get the wet streaks away. I wipe my cheeks with my sleeve to get the wet streaks away. Then he growls like a lion: "Stop crying! I'm going to tell you a story now...stop it! We packed up and left home, a bakkie full of food, people and the tent. There was hardly any space for the people, or even the tent, but as full as that bakkie was, we were gonna camp, jong."

And then you stayed away forever...and never never never came back again! I thought to myself.

"It's like our tradition every holiday. It was winter so it was raining hectically hard, the windows were all rolled up but do you think we were gonna let any of that cold air into the bakkie? Oh no, Bally Boy! Not your daddy!"

I frowned hard to make him and his voice go away.

"It was so hot in there, when you breathed in it was like old, hot steam in your lungs. Windows misting up and streaks of wet rolling down, we felt our way through to Buffelsjag."

I wiped the wet from my cheeks that was rolling down, pretending I didn't care. The lump in my throat told me another story.

"When we got there, there were hardly any people. Obviously, it was the middle of bleddie winter. We knew it only as Buffelsjag then, but it got another name later, to the Ghost Bungalow we had to go! All the friends, the bakkie, the tent and the food. When we got there the guys started pitching the tent immediately, and the girls started something on the gas stove under the canopy of the bakkie, to give the boys something warm. That little blue flame of the gas stove made warm! You knew you on camp when your nostrils burned from matches and gas smells, but it was so lekker you didn't want to stop smelling. Like when you put petrol in at the station."

I start to feel a little better, 'cos I like to smell petrol when the man stands to pump the petrol in the tank. And it burns. In my nose. But I'm still cross.

So, I don't care what you smelled at the camp...and then you lit the stove and the gas tank blew up! And you were gone forever! I giggled in my head.

"I decided because there was so much rain we should pitch the tent on the hill. I mean there was hardly anybody besides us and two other tents on the lower grounds. Just as we pitched the tent on the hill, the rain came down with a thunder. Cloud burst, I thought. The rest of the tents that were there were stuck in the mud like beach stones stuck in the sand during low-tide in the mornings when your oupa went fishing. But not us! Jou pa is slim."

No you not...you got stuck in the mud with all the other tents, but you don't want to admit it, because you don't want people to see how really stupid you are!

"You! Look at me when I'm talking to you!" he grumbles. "That night everything was going *lekker*. The boys came back with a few crayfish, your mummy and the girls made some lekker curry for the night in the potjie: buttery-garlic krief, gesmoer in masala. Nothing better than krief curry, we didn't even need much...you know it's nice 'cos it taste like the sea, fresh! The drinks were going on for a good few hours already. We felt at peace because there was hardly anybody around. Actually, nobody near the hill that overlooked the rocks and sea, just our tent. Jou pa was weer slim! Don't stare at that dart board! I'm still talking here!"

Mummy gave me a funny look.

"As the night went on, your Uncle Patty got so getrek that we decided we gonna have a little fun. He fell asleep so we packed all the empty bottles around him and started to take pictures. Half sleeping and half trying to open his eyes, your Uncle Patty gave us all

a lekker laugh when he asked if he can have some more 'holy communion'. The laughing got softer and things started to quiet down in the tent. The night was moving on and it was getting late. All of a sudden we hear this jol going on somewhere outside the tent. We thought maybe some other people could come and join the party. We had more than enough curry, we just needed the music. I looked out of the tent, but I saw nothing. I still don't understand, 'cos the music was clear, man. I called your uncle Steve to come listen, and he heard the same. We could hear some kind of music coming from the rocks, floating on the salty air outside the tent, but we didn't see anybody. Ignoring the music, we carried on with our own party. Eventually, all of the girls fell asleep and the boys were still finishing off the last of the bottles. We could barely make out the music at first and it was distant. Now since all the noise of the girls and some of the boys were gone, the music was cleared. Me and Uncle Steve put our heads out of the wet tent flap and into the rain to see where the -hell this music was coming from. Uncle Steve first spotted her, a lady in an old dress walking near the shipwreck along the rocks. She slipped and we couldn't see her. 'Ou Makes!' said your uncle Steve, 'either I'm dronk or that lady just disappeared into the sea!' I got butterflies in my stomach but didn't show it. We didn't want trouble 'cos it wasn't our business. I don't get involved in people's business, but we went out to the rocks just to make sure everything was alright. But nobody was there and no music either. Your Uncle Steve insisted we go back to the bakkie and the tent. As we were about to go into the tent we could hear the music on the rocks again...the butterflies turned into seagulls flapping their wings. We turned around and would never forgot what we saw next. An old man walking along the shipwreck raised his glass to us, smiling, and disappeared into the rain.

"Moenie jou tande vir my skoen maak'ie, your Daddy dont't tell lies to you, little Bally Boy!

"The rest of that night we sat in the tent drinking the rest of the bottles, unsure of what we saw, maar heeltemal bang, not waking anybody, totally sober."

My eyes were still burning from the crying, but I made them wide and the cold made them burn more. A lady and man walking in the rain by the sea don't sound right, I thought. I snickered, snickered the last tears away.

"Uncle Steve and I were obviously the main guys at the camp, so when we suggested that we pack up the tent and move rather to what we now call the Ghost Bungalow, there weren't any arguments."

He thinks he's kwaai, I thought. I bet Uncle Steve can hurt him, then there would be arguments and Uncle Steve would win and you won't be my daddy and we will live happily ever after.

"We heard about the Ghost Bungalow haunting but we thought that it was sieka just stories, it can't be worse than what we actually saw the night. The girls were of course happy that they could have their toilet. But that's besides the point! The problem was that the bungalows were always full, especially when it rained, you know the wintery months of the year. Remember, I told you: Jou pa was slim, but this time... the brains failed me. We had no choice and had to take what we got. So, in the morning Uncle Steve and I decided to discuss the whole move with the gang. As Uncle Steve said: 'Ou Makes... waar gaan ek in 'n tent slap as 'n spook vir my gaan nugte hou! Ons move vandag nog!' So we took the trek to the offices. Luckily for us, your Uncle Charles was still in charge of the offices. Bally, your Uncle Charles is from my side of the family - a cousin of mine that we only got to know later in life. He was a skipper most of his life just like your grandpa, but now he is a captain of a container ship that moves between Cape Town and Brazil. Big man... 'n ou... if you ever wanna travel just let me know. I'll tell Uncle Charles, but you must be his boytjie on the ship, cook, clean and do whatever he wants, n? Jy maak weer jou tande skoen! Your daddy don't lie, ne!"

I wrinkled my nose hard to show Daddy I don't care. But I opened my eyes wider cos I did care. About the story.

"Okay, back to the bungalows. The gang was okay with packing up and making the move. In fact, I think I heard your mother thank Jesus under her breath...dry humour sometimes jong, that woman. So off we went to your Uncle Charles to check if he couldn't smokkel us a good bungalow for the weekend. Haai, when we came there Charles was full of his stukkende stories again. Now, you know your Uncle Steve. A temper shorter than a baby midget, he got that look in his eye, that look that said: 'Wag, hier kom 'n bowl.' Uncle Charles put on the usual sad face and started complaining about how difficult this job was getting when you had to worry about lastige family always wanting more favours. 'Wag, ou Makes,' said Uncle Steve, 'Watch this.' From underneath his jacket, Uncle Steve pulled out a bottle of brandy and said: 'Yus Charlie, sal die nie nou lekker in 'n bungalow smaakie?' Suddenly, Uncle Charles didn't have that sad face anymore. 'Okay, okay, okay... but its only 'cos you family.' Smile smile, Uncle Charles skinked 'n dop and downed the neck in a few seconds. Uncle Steve

turned to me and winked. 'As jy nie n vuur kan maakie, Ou Makes, maak ma vyf,' he said.

I just quickly laughed, I didn't want to 'cos of the hiding. So I bit my lip to stop. I was still cross, I think, I didn't know anymore. The story made me want to laugh.

"Now just to tell you a little about the Ghost Bungalow, we heard many stories about this place. Some from family, some from friends, others from strange people who stayed in this bungalow. We had our own adventures in that place, stories that would make even the drunkest man sober. Many nights actually, we couldn't get drunk. Some guys had to stay awake in order to make sure that nothing happened while the others were sleeping. Just think, how can a place that you stay in seem alive man? How can things like doors and tables, lights and pots do things to hurt a person? Ooh Jissus, Bally boy."

He don't deserve to call me that. The ghost didn't do his job because you still alright. You can stay in the Ghost Bungalow and it can hurt you and I can live happily ever after. Mummy sees my face, so I make it right again.

"I wouldn't ever take you or your brother there. Look at how big your eyes are now already just sitting here listening. No ways, it's too much for little ones to handle. Not even I wanted to go there. Had it not been for your uncles and aunties that forced me to go, I wouldn't have gone. But as we had no choice in that moment, we huddled around your Uncle Charles. 'Ou Makes, there is something funny about this bungalow. People have complained about getting hurt and things happening in this bungalow. I will give it to you, ma Jirre tog promise me if anything funny happens you will get out.' Your Uncle Charles was always such a drama queen. Just give him a dop to keep him happy en alles is reg. Uncle Steve grabbed the keys out of his hand and went to sit upright in the bakkie's front seat. 'Gee gas ou Makes,' he shouted at me. So we all piled up in the bakkie again and took the trip to the bungalow.

"The first thing we noticed when we got there, was a funny potjie which was tied to a rope which hung from a wooden beam just above the window. The potjie stood on its own pedestal. The rope was very long and the potjie just stood there on the stoep of the bungalow. Thinking maybe that the previous people had left it here, we just ignored it. Once everything inside the place was comfortable, we enjoyed our day making food, relaxing and preparing for the night's party. *Ma* ooh, what a mistake we made to think that the bungalow was alright.

"After ten o'clock the guys were on a *lekker* buzz again and decided to play dominoes. Now the girls were getting tired so they slept in one room and we would play cards in the other room. There were only two rooms across from each other, with a long corridor between it that separated the doors of the two rooms. Just as we were getting lost in the game, your Uncle Steve noticed something. *'Kyk daar, ou Makes!'* I saw the door was closing slowly. I thought maybe it was the wind, so while your Uncle Steve kept the door open to watch that the girls are safe, I closed all the windows. Sure enough, after all the windows was closed, the door closed by itself again. Uncle Steve ran for the door again, but now we knew something wasn't right.

"I thought maybe putting something in front of the door would stop it from opening and closing, but not even that worked. I put our bags in front of the door, but it still closed. When Uncle Steve got to the door, our bags would be neatly pushed one way in the corridor. But that wasn't even the scariest part. After a while, everybody was asleep and it was just me and your Uncle Steve. But now, your Uncle Steve was falling asleep too.

"I had no choice, I had to watch over the girls and the boys. Sitting alone with a bottle, I saw the girls's door started closing again. I jumped up and grabbed the door! Going in a little I checked if the girls were still okay. They were fine. But while holding the girls's door open, I saw that the room your Uncle Steve was sleeping in also began to close. My heart sat in my throat. I ran for that door, but the girls' door also began to close, but now even quicker! This funny wooden crack-crack-cracking sound was always coming from the closing doors' hinges. It's that sound that you hear when two pieces of wood that's swollen from the rain rub against each other. I couldn't keep up with all this. I shouted for your Uncle Steve to wake up. Right before his door slammed, he woke up and made a grab for it. 'Nog altyd ou Makes? Huh uh! Ons move! Charlie was reg!'

"We woke all the girls and got them to pack everything up without any explaining. Oh, of course they complained! But since when do I allow such nonsense? You know mos, Bally Boy."

I couldn't help but smile a little 'cos Uncle Steve also smiled. Ja, I know mos after that hiding.

"As we were packing, Uncle Steve called me to the window to show me something. We didn't wanna scare all the girls, so we kept it to ourselves. While we were packing, something had knocked the potjie that was standing on the stoep off the little pedestal it

had been standing on. But the thing was swinging back and forth from the rope that it was tied to. Now, if you remember, Bally, I told you that rope was long, that wasn't possible! Me and Uncle Steve looked out onto the rainy stoep, then back at each other and then we hauled the ladies on to get in the bakkie.

"We moved to the front door and locked up behind us, deciding we were never going to come back to this place again. As we closed the door we heard the crack-crack-crack-crack of a heavy wooden door closing. A huge, loud bang came from inside the house. Two doors slammed against their frames. The girls looked back with huge eyes as we ran toward the bakkie. As we pulled away, we all took one last look back at that mad place. Next to the potjie, swinging from its long rope, a man with sad eyes and a grey smile made cheers to us...his empty glass high in the air..."

Daddy smiled and put his lips to the glass. Uncle Steve smiled. I smiled. But I didn't know why. I sat and waited quietly in the corner for the next story.

Chad Brevis completed a Masters dissertation titled *Taboo Topics in Fiction: The Case of Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita* and also published an academic book with the same title through an international publishing house in Germany. The focus of his studies is 20th century literature, taboo topics in fiction, totalitarian censorship law, sociolinguistics and ethics and morality in literature. Chad is currently on a doctoral scholarship in the Netherlands to complete his PhD.

A Special Baby

Joshua Willows (UWC)

Saldanha Bay is a Christian land. Michelle Carsten was a small-town woman who went to church every Sunday and read her Bible every night, as well as prayed over the souls that stewed in sin. Nothing out of the ordinary, one would think. She was a woman well known in the Christian community, but she had a different way of thinking.

"I asked her to help out at Thursday's ladies meetings, but she rolled her eyes and said that her cat has therapy on Thursday mornings," Miss Draper said to her husband one afternoon, slaving over her stove wearing an apron with a face of a dog on it.

"She hasn't been the same since her divorce. But she said she will contact me if she has an opening in her calendar."

Then one Sunday morning, a time for praise and worship in the house of the Lord, Michelle was told by Graeme – one of the elders in the church, who happened to live just a few houses away in her complex – that a woman had recently moved to town and had no place to go.

"Lord, if I quickly turn around, walk away and act as if I didn't hear him…" she had time to think before Graeme proceeded.

"She has no place to go, and you know I would have her stay at my place, but I have a new baby and all. Would you be able to open up your house?" Graeme smiled and looked at her hopelessly and added, "her boyfriend broke up with her and they recently just moved here. She has no family. She will have no place to live from Wednesday."

On the drive back to her house, Michelle sat in her car, mulling over the inconvenience.

"Lord, why do these things to me? Am I being punished for an intolerable act?" she prayed.

Wednesday had arrived and Michelle had spent all day preparing the guest room and wondering what this woman must look like. Did she have transportation? She hadn't bothered to ask questions, since Graeme said that he would take care of everything. Maybe best to hide the expensive jewellery she had received from her husband on their tenth anniversary. She hid all her antique plates on the

mantelpiece above her fire. Last, but not least, she could not forget her precious Mish-Mish, a Scottish fold cat with grey fur-like a rainy cloud and eyes like blazing fire.

"Oh! My pumpkin pie! Mummy needs you to stay in the room. I don't want you to be disturbed by whatever comes through the door." Mish-Mish just meowed as Michelle picked her up and suffocated her in a hug.

"Mummy needs you to be on your best behaviour. Lord only knows what this woman is."

She dusted the table and prepared the food. It would be a salad, because anything else would be too much work and so much money.

It was five o' clock, and no one had arrived. She sat on her couch and continuously looked at her watch. Five thirty, no one. Her eyes were about to close tightly for a quick nap on the sofa. Ding dong!! The front door bell rang.

Mish-Mish purred at Michelle's feet as she stopped in front of the door: "Okay, Mish-Mish, just be nice. Let's get this over and done with."

She slowly turned the doorknob. She saw blonde, yes. She saw black plastic bags. Too late to turn back now. She opened the door.

The woman in front of her had black rings under her eyes. Her hair looked as if she had just stepped out of a rainstorm. Her clothes, especially her jeans, were ripped. Closely, she looked into her eyes and saw that there was a subtle, yet distinct colour difference. Her left eye was blue as the middle of the Caribbean ocean, but her right eye was distinctly darker, as if the bluest water had crossed over a pile of seaweed.

"I bet she has dirt under her fingernails. I feel uncomfortable just looking at her," Michelle thought. The woman wasn't wearing shoes and her feet were filthy. "Thank God I didn't use the good sheets."

"Good afternoon. You must be..."

"Lindy," the woman interrupted. She didn't smile. They stood for a moment just staring into each other's eyes.

"Come in," Michelle finally asked, hoping she didn't sound as reluctant as she felt. Lindy walked past her and Michelle looked at her from top to bottom. Lindy turned around rubbing her belly.

"You have a nice house," Lindy said giving a faint smile. "Husband?"

“No,” Michelle said, frowning at such an inappropriate question from someone you'd just met. Michelle couldn’t help but stare as Lindy rubbed her belly.

“Is something wrong? Do you feel sick?” Michelle asked.

“I am pregnant.” Lindy said.

“Oh.” Michelle said. “How far along are you?”

“Eight months.”

“Oh, you don’t look very pregnant.”

“It is quite a special baby. My boyfriend doesn’t like the idea of a child,” she said.

“Oh, how, uhm, lovely. Is it a boy or girl?” Michelle asked.

“I don’t know. It is special. I will be surprised and so will my boyfriend. He is just not used to it. He loves me. I know it. He says it all the time,” Lindy said.

“Well, I will show you where you will be sleeping. I am sure you and… and the baby will need some rest.”

Michelle led her to the guest room. Mish-Mish followed them to the guest room, bell tinkling.

“It’s not much but it was all I could do at last minute.”

“It is alright. Can I be alone?” She gently pushed Michelle out of the room and nudged Mish-Mish with her foot before closing the door. Mish-Mish meowed her way down the corridor. Michelle turned around, walked up the stairs to her own room, and picked up the phone to call Graeme.

“Graeme! She absolutely cannot stay here! What did this woman tell you about herself! She claims to be…I cannot even begin to think of it. Oh My God! She kicked Mish-Mish!” Tears welled in her eyes. “No one kicks my little Mish-Mish! She cannot stay here, temporarily or permanently! God puts the fear in me regarding the mere thought of her staying here for very much longer!”

“Michelle,” Graeme interrupted, “I cannot deal with this right now. The baby is crying. Got to go. Bye, see you on Sunday morning!”

“Graeme!? Hello?”

Michelle was just finishing the tuna salad for that night’s meal. She reluctantly put out a third bowl next to Mish-Mish’s pumpkin-coloured “World’s Best Kitty” bowl.

“Mish-Mish? Should we give that woman your bowl and give you a nice bowl? No, she isn’t the world’s best kitty, you are. Yes, you are!” she stood petting Mish-Mish under her chin.

Michelle put the salad into the bowl, placed it on a tray and made her way to the guest room. Mish-Mish followed her.

“Uhm, hello?” She knocked. “Dinner is ready.”

No answer. Michelle stood there for a moment.

“I am placing it on the floor. It is ready for you here.” She walked away.

At three o’ clock in the morning, Michelle got up to use the bathroom. Thirsty, she headed downstairs and into the kitchen to drink a glass of water. She would never drink water from the bathroom. Making her way back up the staircase, she heard a sound coming from the end of the corridor. She stood there for a while trying to make out what it could have been. She could hear faint laughs.

“Mish-Mish! Someone must be with her!” she whispered to her purring cat.

She walked slowly towards the noise, accompanied by Mish-Mish. She peered beyond, to the end of the corridor. There was a light coming from the last room.

“I hope she hasn’t let her boyfriend in, Mish-Mish!” Michelle whispered.

Michelle had placed her ear on the door to listen carefully to what was going on in the guest room. The laughter had stopped. Michelle looked down at Mish-Mish.

“They must be asleep, Sweetie,” she said.

Moments passed and just as Michelle decided to turn around she heard something fall and break on the other side of the door. Michelle picked up Mish-Mish and ran to her room. Michelle sat Mish-Mish down on the bed next to her and dialled Graeme on the phone.

“Hello?” Graeme sounded disorientated. Michelle imagined him wiping the drool off of his face.

“Graeme! There is someone with her. I find it inappropriate and I need you down here to help me out,” she demanded.

“What?” Graeme asked.

“Now! Something is wrong!” she continued. She put the phone down and waited for Graeme to arrive.

Holding Mish-Mish, Michelle anxiously watched the front gate through her bedroom window. She saw Graeme approaching the house and put Mish-Mish on the bed.

"Stay here, Sweetie. Mommy does not want you to see whatever happens." She hugged Mish-Mish and left the cat in the room, going to the front door to open it.

"Graeme! She isn't normal. I hear laughing," Michelle said, "come!"

"Calm down Michelle. I am sure it is not all that…"

"Come!" she interrupted. "The voices were loud and…and I heard something break. Come!"

They both approached the room and the door appeared to be tightly closed. The voices were no longer there. They both entered together, peering around the door. Graeme walked around Michelle and saw Lindy, standing in the middle of the room with a smile on her face.

"You don't know who I am," Lindy said in a gravelly voice.

"Who are you?" asked Graeme in a forceful voice. Lindy continued to laugh.

"You don't know who I am. You don't know who I am." It became an intense cry of laughter. Then, suddenly, Lindy seemed to snap out of it and cried for help.

"Lindy, I need you to listen to me. When did this happen?" Graeme asked firmly.

"Graeme just please be careful," Michelle said.

"I will be fine."

"No, not you. The carpet, be careful she doesn't get anything on it."

Lindy screamed, holding her breast. "It… it…" She was fighting with whatever was inside her.

"It was when I was having sex with my boyfriend," she said. She bowed her head. For a moment there was no sound coming from her, not even a breath. Lindy slowly lifted her head up and started to laugh again. Graeme quickly moved over to Lindy and placed his hand on her heart.

"Leave this spirit! Leave and never return!" Graeme screamed aloud, then started prophetic speech in tongues. Lindy looked intently at Graeme. She shed a tear as they stared into each other's eyes, and then, falling to the floor, began to have a seizure.

"Michelle, call the ambulance!" Graeme called out, although he felt sure of what was happening. But Michelle had already run out of the bedroom, clutching Mish-Mish to her, and dialled for the police.

Michelle had been sitting outside for what seemed like hours. Mish-Mish was squirming, desperately trying to find a release from her squeeze. Finally, the police arrived.

"They're in there," she pointed to the door. Graeme had told Michelle that Lindy had died.

After giving her statement of the night's events, Michelle had heard Graeme telling the police that it was a possession. The police officer had laughed it off.

Two police officers were talking in a corner.

"The girl is dead. The coroner will have to take the body to the morgue and get an autopsy done to establish the cause of death."

"Are you buying any of this possession shit?"

"Not a fucking chance. The story will probably be all over the *Weslander* on Friday morning."

"Yep. Once we get a cause of death, we will have to carry out the investigation, but this seems like something that is out of our hands at the moment. Let's go, there's nothing more we can do here tonight."

Two days later and it was cold and wet. Michelle was walking around the Spar, doing her daily shopping. She spotted the *Weslander* at the cubicle near the teller entrance. She picked it up and put it her trolley. At the teller, the cashier, ringing up the newspaper, turned to the cashier next to her.

"Ag shame, did you see about the pop who died? She was screwed up or something."

"Ja,a pastor says it was a possession. Can you believe it? It makes me scared."

"Ag, no man! That's rubbish!" the other cashier responded.

Michelle cleared her throat, and the woman finished the transaction in silence. As she left the store, Michelle slipped the *Weslander* out of the packet and looked at the front page. "Pastoor: 'Hartaanval Duiwel se Werk'", and below, a short article: "According to reports, Lindy Swart had serious heart problems and suffered from severe schizophrenia. She had been in and out of prison." The coroner had done

the autopsy on Thursday morning and found that Lindy had irregular heartbeats and had died after a blood clot caused a vein to burst. Michelle finished reading the article, then sat for a long time just thinking. Finally, she started the car and, as she was pulling away, she threw the *Weslander* out of the window. You can't believe everything you read, she thought, as she watched the pages whip away in the wind.

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The Visitor

Amber Crook (SU)

I woke up face down on the plush carpet of my Cape Town apartment. The noises from the traffic and the city below resounded in my aching head – people on their way to work, students on their way to class; people who took their responsibilities seriously in life. Those were the two things that I simply did not have the stomach to confront on a daily basis: responsibility and life in general. And like most students, my *life* consisted mostly of *not* attending classes and the occasional (or rather not so occasional) existential crisis. Over the years, things between my father and me had only gotten worse with regards to my degree and taking over his company. Thus, life and responsibility became something that I dreaded and the only thing that would help me freeze time became the one thing I leaned on most: cocaine.

"Dale, what have you done?" I heard my mother's voice resound through the room. "Your father and I don't know what to do with you anymore. You're skipping class, you're failing your exams, and now you're taking drugs!"

Her voice startled me in the silence; she never came to visit. And although I wanted to tell her that I'd been dabbling in a little recreational cocaine for almost a year and a half, I was glued to the floor and could not manage to utter a word. She began to cry, fumbling with her phone, presumably to call my father. I tried to take a deep breath, but was overwhelmed by the smell of fresh blood dripping from my nose.

"Oh come on, damn it! Answer your phone…" she sobbed. I knew he wouldn't answer, my father. He was away on business as usual and was most likely in a meeting. He could never talk for too long while in a meeting no matter how serious the situation was and, to be honest, I wasn't sure he'd care enough to make an exception this time.

Anger welled up inside me. I despised having parents who totally disregarded the idea that their child might have issues or may be struggling to live up to their fierce expectations. My father was the perfect example of the kind of person who expected too much and left no room for error. He was guarded, he was absent, and he was unkind. I just couldn't bear it anymore, the pressure and the angst. I could feel myself slipping away as the room became distorted and blurred. And in that

moment I wasn't sure what's worse – the fact that this time I was almost certain I'd fall asleep and never wake up again, or that the idea of never waking again made me feel a wave of relief.

A week later, after numerous visits to psychologists and guidance counsellors, I was whisked away to a shithole hours away from Cape Town. My parents had decided that instead of being sent to a clinic to recover from my apparent overdose, I needed some timeout, away from the city and from any sort of illegality – anything to keep me from being the hot gossip and scandal within their high-status social circle, I suppose. It was a fucking joke. And what better place to abandon me than an apple farm in the middle of god-knows-where to spend some time with my conservative oupa and his housekeeper, Xolani.

I walked into the small bedroom with a heavy heart and a knot in the pit of my stomach – the room reeked of despondency. That, and a typical sort of musty old-person smell. This has to be a joke, I thought. Like, surely my parents are going to pitch up here in the morning and tell me that this was just some kind of twenty-four hour skit to rattle my cage.

I crinkled my nose, trying hard not to breathe too much as I took in my surroundings. The space I was forced to inhabit for three weeks was tiny, and the decor looked like something out of an eighteenth century novel. It was already bad enough that I had to be out in the middle of nowhere during July and one of the coldest winters this godforsaken country had ever experienced. But then, on top of it all, to find out that this place had no reception or even basic amenities like an electric blanket, made things even worse for me.

I placed my duffle bag down on the tiny single bed and it creaked.

"For fuck sakes," I muttered under my breath. I couldn't remember the house being this barren when I was younger. Mind you, my mother had mentioned in the car ride over that my oupa wasn't really the best homemaker, hence Xolani. It had been four years since my ouma had died in this very house. Creepy thought, but I tried not to dwell on it for too long. Instead I shuffled through the room towards a small window that looked out over a grassy pasture. The sun had disappeared behind the mountains and I could see the red apples glowing like little light bulbs in the orchard nearby. The farm reminded me of when I was little and we used to come out here to visit my grandfather for the Easter holidays. I used to love it here...but now I could barely remember what it was like to feel young and carefree,

running along the gravel road chomping on apples that had fallen too early from the trees. Life here compared to back home in the city was just too different for me now and it made me feel uneasy. It almost felt like I couldn't breathe here, as though something heavy was pressing on my chest – anxiety, I thought.

"Dale, are you hungry?" my oupa asked. His voice had startled me and I jumped. "Sorry about that. I need to go to a church meeting now and I won't be home until much later. Xolani can make you some food."

"No," I replied. "I'm not hungry right now, it's like 5pm."

"No, *thank you*," he said politely. There was a pause and then he spoke again. "Dale I know this might be asking too much, but would you like to join me this Sunday for church? I realise that your father hasn't done a very good job of being there for you in guiding you through life so far as a young man… so, I would like to help you. I feel church could be good for you. It might give you some perspective and, uh, direction."

"Fuck, no," I replied curtly, without thought. *Direction?* Please.

"Dale, I—"

"Can you close the door? Shot."

Oupa slowly left my bedroom, defeated. I felt no shame. And even though I was hungry, I just couldn't bear the thought of having to sit and small talk with Xolani in the kitchen about her family and her bizarre beliefs. I remember once she told me that her eldest son was struck by lightning and so the family could not mourn or bury him with a proper ceremony because his death was palpably the wishes of the spirits. What a load of kak.

Who knew what my oupa had told her about me; she probably thought I was a hazard and had blessed this tiny room before I'd arrived. I mean, it would explain the peculiar smell. Nevertheless, my oupa and Xolani let me be on that first night. I suppose they were just giving me time to settle, the calm before the storm. Xolani did pass by to wish me goodnight though, kindly reminding me that if I needed anything in the night and were to come knocking on her door, she would not be able to answer – some superstition of hers. And as I lay awake that night, shivering from the cold, it began to dawn on me that this time I really had hit rock bottom. Things were different this time from all the other times I'd fucked up because this time my parents had removed me from the situation instead of just pacifying the trouble

with money. Thinking about it too much made me feel anxious again and I longed for just a tiny little bit of Charlie to ease my broken soul.

It must have been just after two in the morning, as I was drifting off to sleep, that the air seemed to settle and, strangely, not a sound could be heard throughout the entire house. I could not hear the wind in the trees outside or the rain against my window, not even the house embracing all its creaks and croaks. It was as though everything in that moment had switched off long enough for me to fall into a deep sleep with that same pressure on my chest. It felt like I was a candle in the process of being snuffed out and I hadn't been asleep long before I heard footsteps headed straight for my room, loud and firm on the wooden floor, and then the door swung open. Cold air, bright light and the smell of leather and apples flooded in like a tidal wave.

There was nobody in the doorway.

I squinted in the bright light and felt for my duvet to cover my face; it was not there. Instead, it was draped across the window sill to my right – half inside the warm room and half outside in the cold rain as though somebody had tried to take it with them on their way out. Bleary-eyed, I stared at the open window and could feel someone's gaze from beyond it as an icy breeze moved in, cold air engulfing me to the point of asphyxiation. I couldn't see beyond its frame.

"Dale."

I jumped, balling my fists up at the black silhouette that now stood in the doorway.

"Are you okay?" Xolani asked. "I heard you weeping."

She switched on my light and shuddered, staring at me as though I were a complete stranger in the household. I stared back, unable to find the words to ask her how my duvet had ended up halfway out of the window. My body felt like it was in shock – partially because it was cold and partially because of the company by the window that had left my hairs upright.

"Xolani, what's going—"

"Don't speak, boy."

I blinked.

For a moment she stood there eyeing the window. The flesh looked like it was about to melt off her face, but then she took a deep breath and motioned for me to go with her.

"You have brought something dark here, an evil spirit," she said under her breath, cautious not to wake my oupa, as she hurriedly locked my bedroom behind her and pulled me down the passage towards her own bedroom. I was taken aback by her comment. I couldn't remember packing any evil spirits or bad juju into my suitcase.

"Xolani, what are you talking about?" I asked her. "There's no such thing as evil spirits."

She shook her head in disgust.

"You are just like your father," she sneered. "You think I don't know about men like you and the ways in which you cheat others in life and in business. Your money – it's dirty. You are both tainted, you are both the same. Maybe that's why you and your father clash so often."

"Uh, sorry but who the fuck do you think you are?" I roared, not caring about whether my oupa woke up or not. "I am nothing like my father! I haven't cheated anyone and I'm not tainted. Stop pretending like you know me. Does my oupa know that you're into all this bad juju crap? Pretty sure he'd fire your ass in minutes."

"You are a stupid boy," she said. "You should have listened to him, accepted his invitation to church, he was only trying to help you. You should be ashamed. His faith in the Christian religion could have shielded you from this evil and now I fear it may be too late."

I was about to object, but Xolani ushered me into her room and closed her bedroom door, then sat me down on her bed – each leg had been raised by a single brick.

"You will sleep here tonight," she said, while making a bed for herself on the floor. "It is all I can do to help you right now and I am sure it won't come for me if I sleep down here. I will say my prayers though to be sure and I will try to cleanse you."

I'd had enough of her superstitions. I was sure that there was some logical explanation for why my duvet had ended up halfway out the window. Perhaps I'd been sleepwalking. Perhaps my cocaine withdrawals were becoming too much for me to handle. Or perhaps this was all just a strange dream. Even though I was still fuming, I decided not to argue with Xolani any longer. Her bedroom was warm and

her duvet was dry – it smelled strongly of Dove soap and Vicks – so I quickly forgot all of the commotion and slowly drifted in and out of asleep once again.

Xolani stayed up for hours, though, burning herbs and whispering prayers well into the night. I'm pretty sure that I heard somebody knock on the door a few times too, but it was futile – Xolani refused to open it.

The days passed without further incident. Xolani's ritual must have worked. She didn't mention anything about that curious night to my oupa and neither did I. Primarily because I didn't want to have to relive it all through explanation, and also because the whole thing was just so weird to begin with. To be honest, I also didn't really want to talk to him much after the awkward invitation he'd given me to church. I felt like I was definitely *not* the type to go after all I'd done. I was ashamed of how chaotic I had allowed my life to become and embarrassed about the way I had treated my oupa. I could see how disappointed my oupa was in me whenever we locked eyes. I didn't want to be like my father.

It was only on my last night once the sun had set that I began to feel that strange uneasy feeling again. I was back in that bedroom; it had been blessed and my bed was now propped up on bricks thanks to Xolani. I lay awake for most of the night thinking about what I would do when I returned home. I was starting to realise that my father's business wasn't the kind I wanted to work towards and take over. I wanted to confront him about our money. I then began to think of my oupa and how I wanted to make him proud of me. I mulled over how many opportunities I had been given to apologise to him for the way I treated him.

I felt the hairs on my body stand on end. Somebody was watching me from beyond that black window and I had failed to notice the silence that had fallen over the house once again. The air was still and soundless. The silence was so unearthly and uncomfortable that it made me feel sick. I wanted to leave the constricted space with its eery atmosphere, but where would I go? Xolani would not open her door, she had warned me a few days before. I wished that I could run for my oupa as I did when I was younger, but now I had pushed him so far away. My heart filled with regret.

Then I felt a sharp pain in my back, as though somebody was shoving a broomstick into my spine and my body became paralysed. The pain in my back was excruciating and I tried to yelp out in agony but I couldn't move, my skin became ice

cold and the duvet was ripped off of me like a band aid. I couldn't breathe. The pillow was smothering me. I tried to fight back, to kick, to scream, but not a muscle in my body moved. If I called for Xolani, would she come? If my oupa found me, would he console me? My lungs began to burn. I couldn't bring myself to pray.

For a moment, the pressure eased around my mouth and I fought to swallow my pride – I needed my oupa's help. I needed to scream for him, I *wanted* his help and his guidance. I felt humiliated but I put my arrogance away and I screamed as loud as I could…but my voice was drowned by the silence, the lack of air made me gasp. I was too late.

Dying was effortless, just as I'd always dreamed, but I will never know if my oupa heard me that night or if he came. And I will never get the chance again to right my wrongs.

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Fikile, Duduzile

Holly Charlton (SU)

First, the smell of soil. Earthy and pungent.

Then, a prickling sensation in her arms and legs.

Eunice tried to move, but found she couldn't. The bed had its own heavy gravity beneath her.

The smell was stronger; the air was thick with it. She was awake and listening to the thrumming of her own blood.

She willed her eyes to open.

The room was as bare and shadowy as she had left it that evening, but something was different. A new shadow crouched at the foot of her bed, watching her eyes.

With a gust of hot air, like a loamy belch from the depths of the earth, her blanket lifted and someone scuttled inside.

Carefully and gingerly it crept, from her feet, to her belly, to her chest.

Touching her night dress with small, wet fingers as it crawled.

The tokoloshe sat with its fleshy dampness weighing on Eunice's contracting chest.

She was frozen, locked in horror, until the first light of dawn, when the smell of soil and the heat of its heavy body left her and she could finally breathe, dizzy and sick with terror.

She sat on the edge of her bed, its four bricks proven powerless.

The room was as bare and shadowy as she had left it that evening.

The door remained shut, but someone had entered.

Earlier that evening, before the visitor had come, clouds had begun to gather and boil in the skies above, threatening to fall at any moment and ruin the white linen that Eunice had spent hours starching into stiff, lemon-scented folds. She had gathered the last sheet from the washing line as a glacial blast of wind had blown down from the mountains, carrying the wet sting of nearly-frozen rains. Eunice made it inside with the washing basket just before the torrent had unleashed itself, and folded everything into its rightful place with an efficiency borne from years of repetition.

Shivering and aching with deep, arthritic throbs, she had ambled to her single room at the back of the house, breathing a deep sigh of relief as the door clicked and shut out the thunderous cold outside. Cluttered odds and ends that spoke of a fear of waste and empty spaces cast strange shadows against the stone walls, yet each corner was neat and every trinket had its place. The familiar smells of smoke and cooking meat had calmed and warmed her. She had sunken deeply into her grandmother's moth-eaten quilt that her mother had had before her. Listening to the persistent drumming of the rain, she had closed her eyes, wrapping herself up tightly on the wooden bed, which creaked on its stilts of brick. She had thought of how Eric and her children used to lie beside her when it rained like this, years ago when he was well and strong and she was home. She remembered how they would wrap themselves up in this very blanket and stay warm together against the threatening elements that lay beyond the walls of their small hut. He would tell her stories and whisper songs in her ear until they all fell into a deep sleep, the rain a constant rhythm in that outside world. It was at this point that she had drifted away and that the patient visitor had entered.

It came slithering with a careful silence. In between the crack of light between the wooden door and the cold concrete floor.

It came again the following night, and the night after that. Eunice's brain buzzed with a constant static. She was erratic with sleeplessness and anxiety. Trembling by the kitchen sink one morning, she washed the dishes like an automaton, mechanically packing and scrubbing. Her duties on the farm were simple, she was to be an invisible presence conjuring up tea trays, clean tables and spotless counters, yet over the last few days her façade of unobtrusive efficiency had begun to slip. She anticipated an embarrassing remonstration, but couldn't help it. She felt a curse rotting her from the inside out.

As she struggled through her domestic chores that morning, Eunice became vaguely aware of the daughter of the Madam standing behind her, making a cup of black, sweet tea. The Nkosazana animatedly greeted her and she nervously adjusted her doek with a soapy hand. She always felt embarrassed in that wide, colonial kitchen of the Midlands plantation on which she worked and lived. Her rough, labourer's hands and fading maid's uniform seemed coarser than usual when she

worked in that smoothly tiled palace of porcelain and richly sanded wood, especially when she was joined by a family member.

The girl lingered in the kitchen, aware that something was wrong with the black lady who was normally so calm and neat. Staring adamantly at the woman before her, she tried to figure out what was off. Like a game of eye-spy, she traced her subject, looking at the freckled face and down-cast eyes, then the trembling lips and slumped shoulders. The lady was sad. Normally she hummed strange rhythms when she washed. Her voice had a hypnotic droning quality that lulled the girl into a waking sleep. And her smell, the girl knew that too. It was a rare blend of strong, cheap soap and peppermint *Vicks* lathered into her chest. Even the lovely smell was gone, replaced by some stale replica. It was as though someone had put a straw into the lady's chest and sucked and sucked until it was all hollowed out.

"Ma?!" She shouted from the kitchen. Her mum must come and see, she would know.

Eunice's heart began to beat. She could hear the Madam labouring down the stairs, coming nearer, and felt her skin tighten and itch.

These people must not know about her visitor. How would they understand?

The Madam had noticed that her usually efficient domestic worker had become lazy. Her daughter's concern about the woman only clarified her certainty that she hadn't imagined unwashed plates, misplaced clothes and dusty corners. Clearly, a meeting was in order. The girl was shooed outside the kitchen so that her mother could do business and Eunice was made to answer questions about her health and work ethic. She said what she could; that she had a bad head, and that she was worried about her children, or perhaps that her arthritic ankles ached more this winter than before. The Madam was satisfied with her promise to work to her previous standard. She left, leaving her lingering daughter, who poked her head around the kitchen door to stare at the black lady with narrowed eyes.

Eunice regarded the small Nkosazana. She knew the child was curious about the truth behind the unsatisfactory answers she had given the Madam. Eunice could see the questions brimming on the brink of overflowing. The curiosity of a child is truly like a flood - she knew this from her own two daughters.

Perhaps it was the unexpected similarity between this white child and her own lost babies that prompted her to face the girl, or maybe it was a yearning for the

relief of a secret unburdened. Either way, Eunice felt a closing of distance between herself and the child as each stared with a rare blatancy into the other's eyes.

The girl spoke first, adding her reedy voice to the ticking of the clock that echoed in the hollow kitchen.

"Eunice, please tell me. Ek belowe, I won't tell Ma."

"Nkosazana, do you not know it is danger to speak of past evils," said Eunice, testing her.

"I'm not in danger. Maybe you are."

Eunice swallowed thickly, "I have a tokoloshe on my back. It came three nights ago, under my door... like, skabenga, stealing my breath and body. It put cold wind on my legs, like the storm outside, it lifted my blanket and climbed on my chest. A small thing, like a hairy child. I couldn't move! I wanted to shut door, but so heavy, ay, heavy on me and smelling, smelling of soil. It came back again and again and will be there tonight, I know it... Angazi! Why me?"

The girl blinked slowly, her head reeling with her nanny's fearsome words. A Demon! She had heard of them at church. Every now and then, the Reverend would get particularly red-faced and emphatic, wildly gesticulating about the Evil One and his Legions of Hell. It was during those sermons that she sat a little straighter in her perpendicular pew, her ears straining to catch every word and her imagination painting wild, abstract creatures of horror in her mind. She felt a sick fascination with the prospect of having a mysterious evil in the very bowels of her home. It was a nauseating shock.

The two sat in silence, Eunice leaning against the kitchen sink and the girl sitting on the wooden counter top. The clock ticked between them.

"What will you do? Dis verskriklik."

Eunice considered the question. The girl was right. She needed to do something. She needed someone with the knowledge of the ancient earth and its mysterious currents to restore her to the ancestors.

"Sangoma, inyanga. I must call him from the village to chase the tokoloshe away."

"Kan jy nie net bid nie?" The girl chewed her lip and thought of her mother's red nails clenched in fury and her red lips twisting at the scandal of a witch-doctor in their Christian home. She knew what a sangoma was. She had grown up drinking in the schoolyard-rumours and horror stories of other farmer's daughters.

Unimaginable tales were told: of sacrificed animals, blood pumping from their necks, or the bones of children being ground into muti, and the lightning bird- a spirit that lured young maidens into temptation and death. All the stories, she knew them all.

Eunice shook her head at the suggestion of prayer. "Ay, that's not muti for a tokoloshe, Nkosazana."

At the sound of Eunice's despondent sigh, the girl was struck by an idea. The solution would be Church after all.

Three days passed from that meeting in the kitchen and in that time, a local herd boy had run to his village and back to call on the sangoma's services. Nkosi Elliott was to arrive at the farm on Sunday morning at exactly 9am, and leave no later than 12pm. Eunice would make payment with one of her female goats, which Nkosi Elliott would lead away on a string, hopefully taking her tokoloshe with him.

At 6am on Sunday morning, Elliott strode from his village, staff in hand, carrying with him his bones, herbs and certain mutis, which he touched with muttered blessings along the dusty track. An hour or so later, at a farm about 12km away, Eunice brought morning tea to her family and tried to avoid the troublesome girl, who found every opportunity to be near hear, shooting conspiring glances her way and trying to catch her eye. She seemed to drip with their secret. Finally, after what seemed like an age, the baas and his wife rushed to the car, trailed by their beribboned daughter. They all had that exacting air of perfumed and combed perfection, buttoned up and laced into their "Sunday best," and sped off down the avenue of oak trees in a flurry of dust while Eunice watched wide-eyed from the kitchen window. It was 8:30am and the Nkosi would be here to see her, only her, in mere minutes. She boiled tea in the kitchen and tidied her room in a paroxysm of pent-up emotions.

Elliott rounded the corner of the avenue of oak trees and drank in the sight of the expansive, colonial farmhouse before him. He muttered to the ancestors, speaking with the rhythmic tap-tap of his staff against the broad road before him. Elliott wondered at the sickness that lurked beneath the innocence of that wintery morning and searched with his spirit to find Eunice, this woman who had called for him and who he had felt compelled to make this journey for.

A solemn knock struck twice at the back door.

While Eunice was welcoming the sangoma into her room, the girl sat in church, wedged between her mother and father in the stifling heat of crowded aisles and fidgety churchgoers. She ignored the dirge-like rhythm of the reverend's sermon and bowed her head, thinking of her nanny and the fear in her eyes. The girl squeezed her eyes shut and clasped her sweaty fingers together, praying with a childlike fervour to God that He would deliver her nanny from demons and forgive her for telling Eunice to bring the sangoma that Sunday.

While the service slowly ate through the day and the girl prayed, Eunice sat opposite Elliott on his grass-woven mat that he had unrolled on the concrete floor of her room.

"uAnti, you have not slept these past nights, have you?" Elliott spoke suddenly as he lit two misshaped candles on either side of the mat. "You have become an old woman before your time."

"Yebo, Nkosi Elliott, you know, all I ask myself each morning is when rest will come."

The Nkosi nodded with a deep wisdom as he shredded the sage and imphepho herbs in the oblong bowel before him. He struck a match and lit the mixture, causing a powerful smoke to billow upwards and fill the room with its fragrance. Eunice coughed and her eyes watered, but she did not complain, the smoke would alert the ancestors to the ritual and, mercy granted, they would have favour on her.

As the smoke grew thicker and Elliott began to hum and mutter, preparing his various elements, Eunice felt herself drifting in and out of awareness as though her soul sat on the matt beside her, watching the ritual unfold. The Nkosi spoke as though he were a sleep talker lost in the world beyond consciousness. Time passed strangely and each minute trickled by like golden drops of honey. The Bones were thrown onto the mat, casting surreal shapes in the flickering candlelight of warped animal bones, wooden pieces and porcelain trinkets.

"You are far from your family and your ancestors…" whispered Elliot in a toneless voice that was not quite his own. "You float in a world that is not yours, you drift outside of the sacred ring your ancestors drew around you at your birth, you must come back to the centre, Eunice."

Eunice felt silent tears snake down her cheeks.

"Yebo, Nkosi, I am far from home."

As the smoke began to subside, the ashes of the burning sage and imphepho were mixed into a paste with water from Elliott's village. The Nkosi then gently sliced a small incision into Eunice's chest and rubbed the muti inside. The essence of his ritual would be contained within her and the tokoloshe would no longer creep under her door. The pair regarded one another as the ritual came to a close. Both were tired and exhilarated and Eunice felt a deep sense of abiding peace. The Bones were collected, the candles blown out and the remaining paste spread at the door of Eunice's room for extra protection. After Eunice made her payment and gave thanks, she watched the Nkosi until he had disappeared from sight down the long avenue of oak trees, swinging his staff and trailing the goat behind him on a string.

Elliott was just passing the farm boundary when a large family car eased around the corner ahead. He stood aside and waited for it to pass and could just make out the sight of a very blonde girl in the backseat, who stared directly into his eyes through the clouds of dust around her window, and then waved a hesitant hand in greeting. Elliott returned her greeting, confused but pleased, and lifted his staff towards her. In a moment they were gone, speeding up the hill, the mother turning back in the passenger seat to stare incredulously at her daughter.

After Elliot left, Eunice took her goats to the grassy hillside. She stood still and heavy on the solid ground, absently watching a black goat, speckled with white, as he grazed intently in the rustling grasses. The land was stark and grey with winter, but there was still life in the sweet, earthy smell of the Rooi Gras and the hungrily grazing herd moving over it. The grazers felt safe under the powerful gaze of their guardian, a tall black figure who stood against the steadily darkening horizon, watching them with a tired regalness, her staff still in her hand. She sank into deep thoughts, her soul quietened by the chirps of birds and sighing of the grasses surrounding her. Lost memories floated to the surface of her consciousness for the first time in years.

The land she was born on some forty years ago. She could see it now, cool earth packed hard on the floor of her mother's hut, lazy cattle chewing cud under the trees and the sound of her father laughing over his beer. That village of so long ago… She can see it now, vividly before her. It was where she was once married to a man named Eric, whom she loved and cleaned and toiled alongside, tired and happy in the sun. She grimaced as she remembered, for the thousandth time, leaving that place when he died, shaking and yellowed in a children's cot in the darkness of their

hut. His body had been stiff and wrinkled when she buried him and she remembered the feeling of small hands buried in her skirts, her two children, silent and bewildered on that eerie day of death.

"Fikile," she whispered. Her first- born.

"Duduzile." Her second.

She hadn't said their names aloud in so long, they sounded and felt like forbidden incantations. She thought of the morning she had moved them to the house of a benevolent sister and saw herself pouring amasi over their mealie meal porridge, helping to stir in the heaps of sugar, an extra lump each.

Eunice was broken out of her reverie by the family's return as car doors slammed and the Madam's brash voice rose above the dying engine. The girl came around the house and up the grassy hillside to approach her, hesitantly.

She saw the shape of Eunice's solitary figure and paced towards her, sinking down behind the silent woman and clearing her throat to speak, increasingly aware that she was entering something of a sacred moment.

"Eunice? I prayed for you, Eunice."

Eunice smiled and closed her eyes. She let the rays of sun slide over her cheeks and turned her head back to feel their warmth.

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Many spirits haunt this collection. They have come from all over South Africa, winding their way through stories, into the pages of this book. These tales of the supernatural weave together multiple voices and localities: In the Eastern Cape, the ghost of the Headman terrorizes Xhosa initiates. In the Afrikaner hinterland, a small girl makes an unusual friend. A young woman from the Bo-Kaap is unexpectedly drawn into the mysterious healing ceremonies of her female family members. Troubled by a tokoloshe, a lonely widow seeks to be restored to her ancestors. Step into our world, reader. Meet our constant companions.

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