



WritingThirtySixty

Journal of Research and Creative Texts

Volume 3 Issue 1

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Journal of Research and
Creative Texts

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Letter from the Editor

WritingThreeSixty is a bi-annual, interdisciplinary journal for research essays and creative works. First launched in 2014 as an initiative of the English department at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), *WritingThreeSixty* now forms part of the broader community within the Arts Faculty and Humanities at UWC. This journal maintains the standard of peer review and wishes to provide a platform to develop a culture of publishing among postgraduate and emerging students, as well as established creative artists within UWC and South Africa at large.

WritingThreeSixty also forms part of co-curricular graduate culture at UWC that affords students the opportunity to develop professional skills through the voluntary leadership and service positions created through the journal. These positions include the management of the journal and its team, editorial outputs, as well as our digital marketing efforts that are presented through social media and our online website

Volume 3 Issue 1

Welcome!

This issue promotes creativity and inspiration. We have a photographic insert from a former French exchange student who documented scenes during her stay in Cape Town and poetry written by students from UWC.

A recurring theme in this issue is the notion of *life experience*. There is value in the places we visit and the things we see. Art, in any form, allows one to express these meanings we find through experience. Our cover is an example of a longing to express through drawing.

We invite you to read, and engage with the works featured in this issue.

“If the road stretching over the mountain represents a sense of possibility, freedom, discovery and even escape, the last picture reminds us that there is always an end... leading to new beginnings, to new roads, as places to get lost and find yourself in the process”

- Clotilde Ravel

We would like to thank all contributors, reviewers, guest editors and, our copy editor for their time and effort in the production of this issue. We also extend a special thanks to Professor Duncan Brown, the Dean of the Arts Faculty, for his financial backing and support.

Best Wishes,
Junior Editor
Ronwyn Bentham

Poetry

8 things no longer on the dining room table

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

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

The blanket-like tablecloth
that came with the cows.
(It must have died with them too.)

Her, dancing and laughing
on the table
when we were alone at home.
(Now she lies in the garden between our uncle and
great-grandparents.)

The chairs that accompanied the table.

My uncle dancing to some ancient song,
looking at me, asking, then saying,
“Wawuphi Ndweza? Wawufile Ndweza.”
Then laughing.

The Tupperware lunchbox
that grandmother lent to her sister.
(Its loss accompanies her to the dinner table.)

The video cassettes of her funeral and my uncle's funeral
and of his unveiling
when she read aloud the words on his tombstone,
and her unveiling
where I carried the sheet that covered her tombstone.

- Nondwe Mpuma

How we know the day is ending

The *athaan* goes off and the children run home. And we don't see them again until morning
The street lights come on. The windows are shut and the curtains are drawn
The staff vans bring the daddies home. The police vans park and wait
The road is still and the mummies get tomorrow's bread and milk

The daddies call the big brothers from the corners. And the other boys hide the dice
The small children eat on the couches. The big sisters wash the babies
The daddies smoke on the *stoeps*. The mummies dry the nappies
The road is still and the big brothers unchain the dogs

The daddies roll up the prayer mats. And the mummies iron tomorrow's clothes
The small children find their beds. The big sisters rock the babies
The house is quiet. The daddies lock the doors
The road is still and everyone goes to sleep

The whistling starts. And the *manne* stand in circles on the corners
The police vans start circling and the dogs start barking
The road is not still and we watch from the windows

- Lisa Julie

Photography

Along Voortrekker Road

These three photographs were taken on Wednesday, 27th April 2016. I chose to shoot on a cloudy and misty day in three locations along Voortrekker Road: Parow, Maitland and Salt River. The weather was changing quite rapidly - from cloudy to sunny, and this constituted a challenge because I wanted to have the same atmosphere in the three pictures. I followed the course of the clouds, hoping they would not allow the sun to shine through the clouds. I used a black and white filter because it allows for a larger range of emotions and conveys an impression of timelessness.

All three photographs have the same composition; a long road leading to a specific point: Lion's Head Mountain surrounded by tall street lamps. However, despite these common features, the locations are entirely different. In Parow, life is happening; the street is very busy and there are buildings, garages, and cars. In Maitland, I took the photograph next to the cemetery; there were no construction work so the place seemed quieter. There was also relative absence of cars; it is as if there is less life next to a cemetery.

The last photograph was taken at the very end of Voortrekker Road. I consider Salt River as the end, even though it can also be seen as the beginning, as the road starts at number one. However, Salt River was the last place my research led me to, so to me it represented the end. This was the place where the journey ends, where the road finally reaches other roads to go somewhere else.

Along Voortrekker Road, you encounter life in Parow, non-life or death, in the cemetery, and then you can start all over in other directions in Salt River. This process can be associated with religious beliefs that life does not end with death.

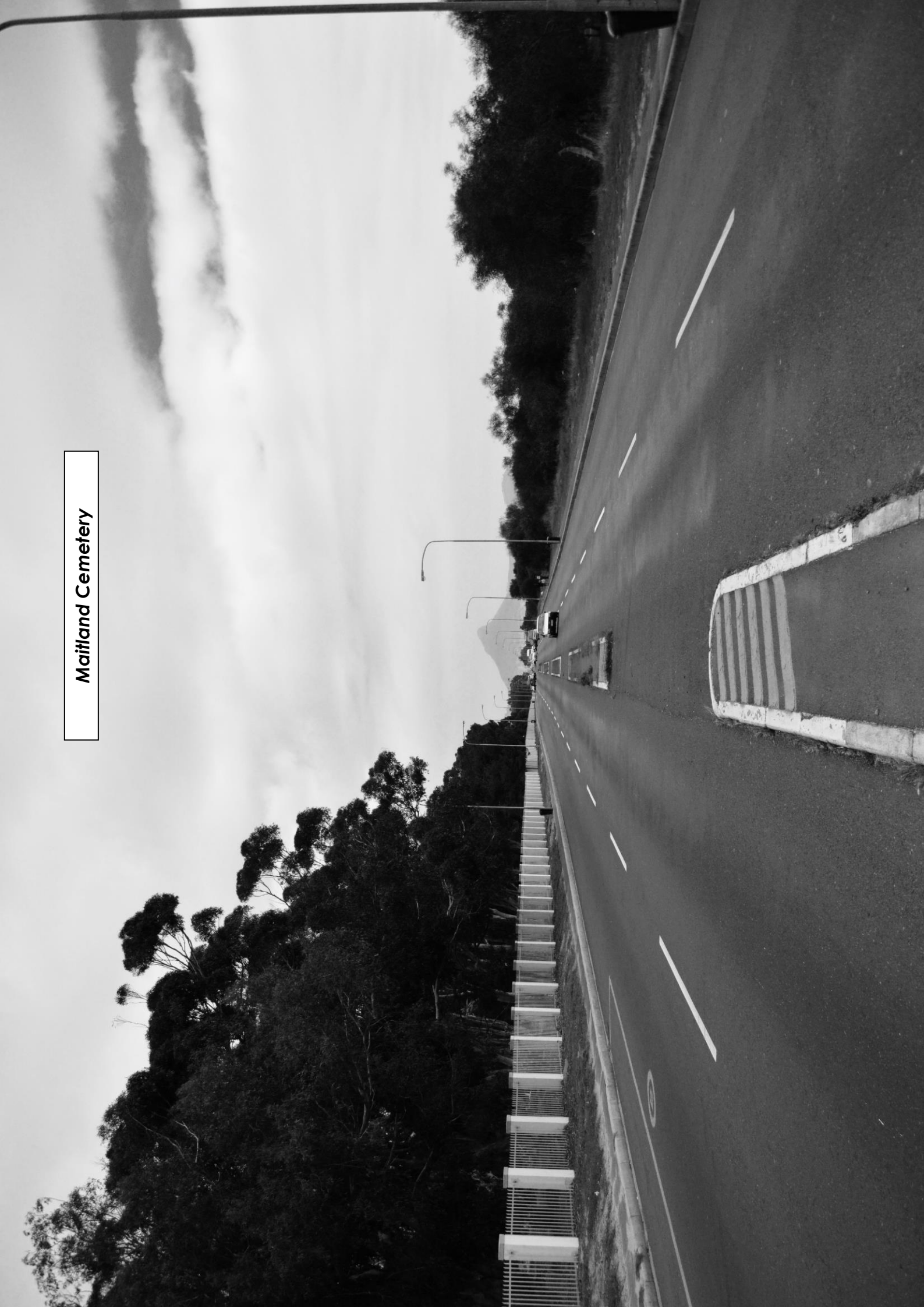
If the road stretching over the mountain represents a sense of possibility, freedom, discovery and even escape, the last photograph reminds us that there is always an end... leading to new beginnings, to new roads, as places to get lost and find yourself in the process.

- Clotilde Ravel

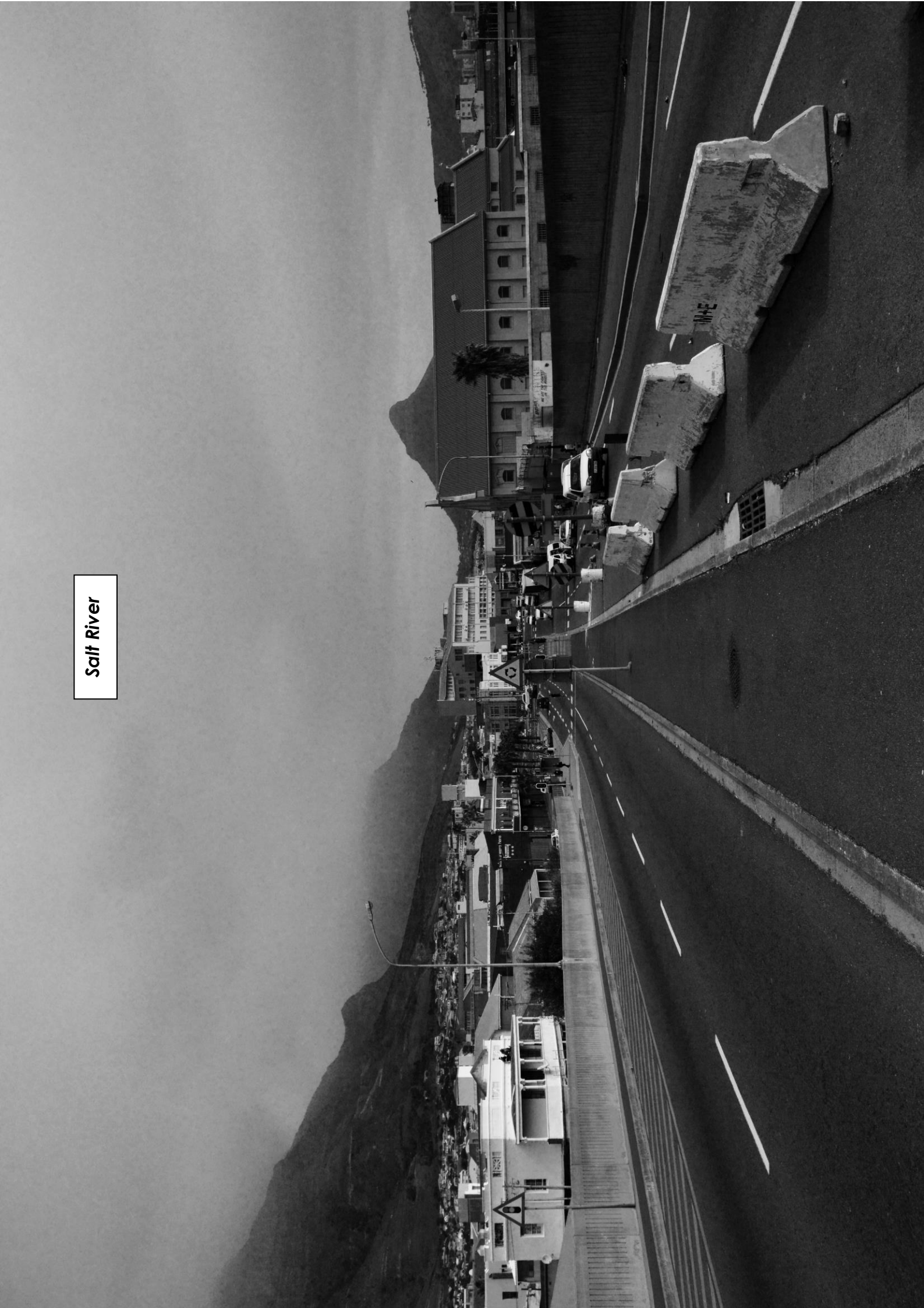
386 Voortrekker Road, Parow



Maitland Cemetery



Salt River

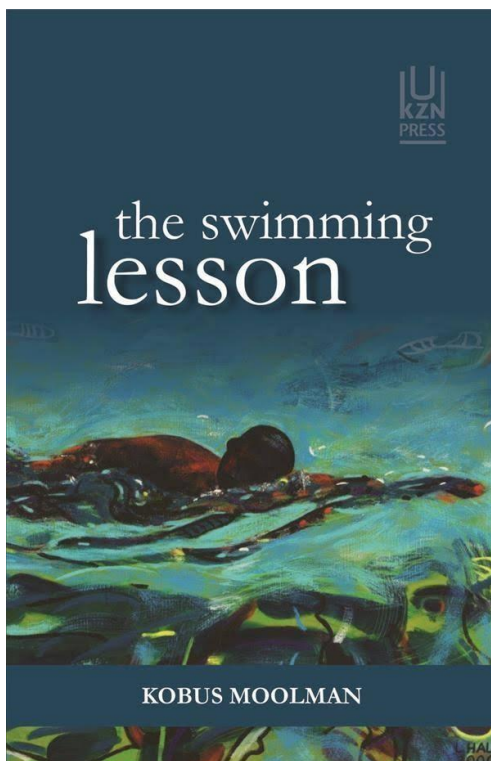


Review of Kobus Moolman's: The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories

UKZN Press 2017

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R160.00 @ The Book Lounge



Kobus Moolman's *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories*, was launched at the Book Lounge in Cape Town on 13 June 2017. Moolman is an accomplished poetry and prose writer, with his 2015 collection, *A Book of Rooms*, winning the 2015 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry. In 2016, he joined the staff of the English Department at UWC and works with students enrolled in the Creative Writing Master's

programme. I greatly enjoyed *A Book of Rooms* and so I was delighted to have the opportunity to review *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories*.

Moolman's latest work is a slim volume that contains ten self-contained short stories and is published by UKZN Press. *The South Africa* of this collection is recognisable as the "old one" and Moolman makes no effort to adopt an overtly political position or dissect "whiteness" in any way. This may worry some readers, but

Moolman's intentions make perfect sense as the stories unfold. His work is no myopic nostalgic meander back into white privilege. Far from it, the world he writes about is fraught and complex, so, as the title metaphorically suggests, staying afloat requires effort.

In the opening story, *Shelter*, the narrator unfolds an episode in the life of a young boy and explores the boy's anxieties and lived challenges all the while leading the reader to a most satisfactory denouement. We know that it is challenging for adult writers to recreate the lived experience of children yet Moolman achieves this without ever appearing mawkish or sacrificing authenticity. *Shelter* is beautifully written with engaging content and a style that is sublime and instantly recognisable to those who know Moolman's poetry. It is an impressive start to the collection and what follows does not disappoint.

The story, *The Swimming Lesson* (from which the collection's title derives) propels us back into the world of a young boy, though in this case a first-person narrative suggests an element of autobiography. For me, the particular strength of this story is Moolman's innovative structural framework – the story is broken down into numbered “laps” - small sense units that intersect to create a satisfying whole. As a middle-aged white male, I found some of the references to items as diverse as a “one-piece costume” and the “green Chevy El Camino” wonderfully evocative of the early 1970s. Those, and the oblique mention of the old and glamorously choreographed cigarette ads in cinemas, would likely be lost on a millennial audience, but then this is Moolman's creation and he can set it out and texture it however he chooses. Small details like these do not detract from another powerful and tightly wrought story that is quite different in many respects to the first.

A significant departure in the collection is *Kiss and the Brigadier*. The story has an astonishing opening: "Fok" said Willem. Fok, fok, fok." What follows then is at once a wickedly funny torrent of increasingly obscenity-laced scheming between three layabouts: Willem, Kleinjan and JJ. Fueled by cigarettes and "tallies" (quarts of beer) they hatch a crazy plan of thieving mayhem in a black comedy that mounts as quickly as the pools of vulgarity that spill from their lips. Moolman's ear is finely tuned to the unique patois of outsider petty criminals and the story, though unconventional in punctuation deployment, is deeply engaging.

Given that this collection spans fewer than 100 pages, the range of stories and the treatments Moolman applies in each case is noteworthy. The mysterious "Daily Bread" is something of a modern horror story employing quite ordinary characters that play out in broad daylight in a small Karoo town. "Extracts from a dispensable life" is a tragic story, with a child narrator. Moolman's experimentation with the genre's form includes the insertion of lines from Protestant hymns. Another, quite different piece is "Like Father, Like Son". Here Moolman tackles the tricky issue of sexual taboo to produce a tightly wrought and suspenseful piece. In all the stories, the characters are recognisable, the contexts often familiar yet the outcomes unknown and all wrought in a unique and original way.

It did not take long for Moolman to capture my attention entirely and I found myself compelled to read the entire collection in one sitting, a circumstance I am sure other readers will similarly experience. *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories* is recommended both as a general addition to a personal library for sheer reading pleasure and for those who seek to engage with issues centred around disability, patriarchy and gendered otherness.

- Dr Mike Hagemann

Biko: A Portrait in Words

by Dr Andile M-Afrika

I Write What I Like by Steve Biko was published 39 years ago. The book consists of writings that were written by Biko almost 47 years ago. Instrumental behind the publication of the book was Fr Aelred Stubbs CR, who knew Biko and who wanted to pay tribute to him. Like many, Fr Stubbs was disturbed by the cruel manner in which Biko was murdered by the apartheid regime. *I Write What I Like*, therefore, was meant to keep Biko's memory alive.

I Write What I Like has achieved more than upholding the memory. The book has been an obsession of two other generations after Biko. The appreciation and growth of interest in his ideas has increased phenomenally. This is mainly due to the strength of his writings that form this book. Biko's creative and imaginative power and the genius and intellectual value of his experiences deserve an exploration that retains African originality in scholarly interpretation. This paper seeks to bring forth Biko's life experiences and how these impacted his writings.

Biko was well placed in history. His writings are both reflective and provocative. Chinua Achebe (2012:61) sums up the connection created by "the written word" between the writer and the reader as follows:

The triumph of the written word is often attained when the writer achieves union and trust with the reader, who then becomes ready to be drawn deep into the unfamiliar territory, walking in borrowed literary shoes so to speak, toward a deeper understanding of self or society, or foreign peoples, cultures, and situations.

This reader-writer connection in Biko's case is mainly on the themes that he is dealing with and, in the way he employs a foreign language like English to advance enlightenment about Africa and her cause.

Some of the writings in *I Write What I Like* are pieces that were picked up from a student bulletin called *Saso Newsletter*, a publication that created a platform for in-depth political analysis where writing and political talent among the 1960-1970s black university students was nurtured. *I Write What I Like*, therefore, offers readers a window to the genius of the most creative political generation that South Africa has ever produced.

The Goodbye Letter

by Shireen Mall

The Goodbye Letter is a short work of fiction, which seeks to capture a number of important episodes in John, my deceased father's life. It is a dialogue using biography and the tools and traditional mediums of biography like letters, clips, journal entries and photos, combined with memory and imagination. By combining archive material in my possession with my own imagined extensions and re-inventions of memories that John recounted to me while he was still alive, or which I myself was privy to, I hope to stitch together a coherent yet simultaneously fragmented representation of episodes in my enigmatic father's life in Cape Town during the apartheid years.

The inspiration for this project was sown unknowingly when my father's goodbye letter was found by my eight-year-old daughter Sarah, a year after her grandfather, John's death in October 1997. A stack of my father's old papers had been burnt in a bonfire in my mother's backyard six months earlier and by chance one afternoon, whilst Sarah was playing there, she came across one un-burnt sheet. This, it turned out, was a goodbye letter from my father to us all. Coincidentally, Sarah was the one sitting on his knee the day he wrote it in 1993; my father makes mention of this in the letter itself.

The serendipitous discovery of this precious literally nearly- lost family document made me wonder what other silences and near silences surrounded my father's life. It also sparked a desire in me to begin to piece together some of the fragments that I had both in memory and archive before my father's story was lost for good.

My quest is to write a piece that captures a series of important events in my father's life, including the death and burial of his own mother. It will fuse the facts and archive material with additions inspired by my memory but fleshed out through the creative medium of fictional writing. This fusion of fact and fiction represents my attempt to acknowledge both the stories which have been lost with my father's passing (the "unsaid") and (the "unsayable"); that is to say, those aspects of life which I can never know absolutely, not just because he is dead and can no longer be interviewed, but because memory itself is subjective and therefore an unreliable doorway into the truth.

Chapter One

John

Say... au revoir but not goodbye; let me whisper I love you. With joy we'll meet again, hopefully not in sorrow. So good night my love, the heavenly birds have also promised to meet us with all the joy in the world tomorrow. [But] it was so heavenly to hold you again in my arms under that silvery moon beneath the palms in Campground Road, Rondebosch, which turned into handsome pines.

16 March 1992 John Singh

I never expected to meet someone quite like Bibi, a gentle soul with clear hazel eyes in a face that spoke many stories. It was around the time the queen of England visited and celebrated her 15th birthday with a "black tie invitation only" event in the City Hall in Cape Town and Milan, Bibi's brother, also my friend, was invited. Through him I got totally ensconced with Bibi's sister Tia's wedding, and got to learn everything about the Muslim culture. My heart did a cartwheel the first time we met and I stared after her as the sweet smell of her hair escaped when she swung around. We were not allowed in each other's company without her brother Milan present. Bibi dutifully lowered her gaze every time but it was too late, the deed was done. My heart knew it belonged to her from that day on and a myriad of songs have since found its meaning for me as her name resided over them all.

She was educated, well-bred with, like me, an immigrant Indian father but she was Muslim and I was Sikh. Ours was a love that could not

be but my heart sang Bibi's songbook with every move that I made. Milan unsuspectingly became the go-between and friend, whilst a heart-to-heart connection developed between us through hungry eyes, and the dialogue of lyric in song. I stood out amongst the Salt River community even minus the turban having gained a reputation as a 'bit of a Casanova' it seemed. I found this totally bizarre but useful as it kept suspicion off Bibi.

Strangely, despite the obvious, nobody ventured to question directly my culture or religion which made me fear the magnitude of the taboo in a union between Muslim and Sikh/Hindu, as it commonly gets coupled for some inexplicable reason. I was dying for the opportunity to say to them that Sikh simply means 'seeker of knowledge' and is universal in its belief that all humans are equal before God who created the universe and all faiths; wanting desperately to quell their fear of the unknown and unfounded. I wanted a future for people like Bibi and myself and others to come.

We met in Salt River towards the end of the war. It was all red dust and industrial, boasting a railway junction the size of The Company Gardens but it also had the vibrant throb of a mixed community of predominantly Muslim Coloured and Indian living in rows of semi-detached cottages with a shop on almost every corner.

On one such corner stood the imposing structure of Mirza Singh's Ginger Beer factory, our family business of beverage manufacturing.

I loved it as much as I loved music and my Baby Brownie camera I got for my 18th birthday.

So, on a typical day when the sun fell on the two massive brown wood and steel doors to the factory, the boilers started with a hum at first before kicking into action, the vats were filled, the distillery and lab counter were opened and the long fluorescent tubes of light would pop to life one by one. The first delivery truck would be ready to drive out with a full load even before the work siren had started for the labourers lazily emerging from their cottages at the rear of the building. On the top landing of the mezzanine stood my eldest sister Maggie, short for Margaret, erect in her starched white coat with silver implements in the breast pocket, overseeing the operation whilst I would be immersed in the task of manufacturing.

We were all on the balcony of Pope Street the day Bibi's father's funeral procession passed on its way to the burial grounds. Respectfully, all ladies dropped their embroidery and teacups, rose, and moved to the edge where they gazed down upon the white shroud of Indaad Husain. In the distance, we caught sight of Bibi in white Salwar Kameez bidding her last salaam to him. My heart went out to her as Maggie said, "That poor girl's life is over now that her Bhappaji is gone. The mother is blind and the sisters fight like feral cats amongst themselves, I heard. They had no respect for the man, tut tut, treated him like a stranger in his own home".

* * *

Heathfield was dry, dusty and sandy and hot most days, where I was born and lived, before the ginger beer factory existed. I was the only son of Mr Pye as he was fondly known, and as Sikhs we subscribed to an Ayurvedic way of life and belief. We turned it into a business when we realised that people here lacked the knowledge of natural healing through herbs.

The Maidstone Road shop had a little chalk- board outside on two legs that read 'Natural remedies mixed inside for every complaint while you wait'. Inside the shop were my sisters. People would come in, be diagnosed and a herb potion was mixed and dispensed. Outside the shop a mass of Morning Glories on a virile creeper covered the little outside toilet building and trailed over the sandy dry kerbside, and across the street was the barbed wire fence to the railway line. Through the night and early morning, the puff of engines and long toots of the trains could be heard as they swished by like lightning, screeching steel wheels on silvery smooth steel track. Further along on Roscommon Road stood the main family house, produce store and stables.

I was just a young boy of twelve when already I was the wagon boy. My job was to tend to the horses, their feed and fodder and work the vegetable and herb fields. This I am reminded of daily, when I look at my flattened earlobe and broken jaw. I was on a delivery to a nearby farm with a cart too heavily loaded on a rocky road. It was getting late and I pushed the horses too hard. I came off the seat as the cart overturned,

driving the steel wheel over my head. Mr Pye said, "Can you hear me all right?" I nodded my head and life carried on from there.

Ma was keen for me to do more at school but Mr Pye maintained he needed me in the business, so I could only go as far as standard one or two, but I was not pressured to wear the turban. Sikhs are better known as the 'warriors of India'. Whether this has to do with their fierce tempers or that most of them enlisted in the British Army, I cannot say, except that we were strong on tradition and values.

My childhood still was the happiest most carefree time of my life. The best times were the days when, at a whim and just a whisper of a trip to the beach would round up the entire neighbourhood's children with their buckets and spades and beach balls on the back of my Bedford truck. It was a habit started that I would not trade for the world. I was happiest behind the wheel singing, or swimming far out into the ocean until I was fatigued enough to float back to beach for photos with my Baby Brownie.

* * *

The glamour and romance of the forties is something you have to have experienced to know what it was like. The magic of film and fashion influenced every aspect of our lives.

I saw Bibi again after a short period of mourning following the death of her father and wow, was I surprised. Up Coleridge Road trotted this elegantly dressed lady in woollen costume with handbag, hat and court shoes. *Bibi has just grown up* I thought, confident and more beautiful than ever.

Mrs Phoenix the neighbour suddenly appeared on her stoep from nowhere, put a cupped palm to her face, screwed up her eyes against the scorching sun, and craned her neck to see what would unfold from the scene ahead of the coasting convertible car with the Sikh at the wheel and Mr Husain's Bibi coming up the street without Milan, her chaperone. Bibi motioned for me to stop, said "Hello" aloud and whispered quickly *tomorrow at Die Slaweboom same time* and walked on up with a cheery "Afternoon, Mrs Phoenix. Have you seen Milan perhaps? John is here looking for him".

There was a brilliant moon out the night I waited for her under the milk wood tree, from long before the appointed time in the afternoon when there was still a scorching sun, but there was no sign of Bibi on that particular night; only a fortnight later when we both entered a mosque in Wynberg and took a solemn oath of love and loyalty. It felt natural and brought a sense of peace and resignation.

All hell broke loose when the sun had set over Salt River and Bibi never arrived home for frikadel, yellow rice and gem squash and John Singh was also missing at the supper table for moong and tomato.

* * *

The headlights of my Bedford truck fell weak and yellow on the dark of night on the rocky dirt road to Doringhoogte. "I hope you are right about this, Bibi. What if she turns us away?" I said. We drove up the long path to the homestead where the door was always open and the water on the boil, just in case. Ouma was the district 'Vroedvrou' (midwife).

The damp fragrant air of mint and lavender told us we had put enough distance between them and us. Ouma's face showed no surprise at all when Bibi said, "Ouma this is Quadir". Just concern, as she asked, "Have you had something to eat?"

It was a long and contemplative night of mixed emotions, in a separate room in Ouma's house for me, with an underlying feeling of pride and glee that Bibi was finally mine. Yet, an impending dread settled like sediment in the pit of my stomach. This was what Bibi wanted, it was all her idea, but together we will see it through. *Ce Se Ra Se Ra* What will be will be, I resolved, and took to the helm of my ship. The odds were many, but we vowed to see it through to the end.

* * *

I looked across the room to where Bibi sat, thinking. I could tell her that there was good reason for all that's happened and that we were not all the same, but the truth is, she never took the trouble to know and understand me that way; instead I was persecuted for being different. But I loved her still and now it is too late, for I was dying. The divide between us was impossible to cross when so much has been left unsaid for so many years.

Chapter Two

Bibi

My leaf had fallen as they say, and the end was here and now. Never would I have dreamt it would come in this way but this is my Takdir (fate).

A clean sun streamed through the steel framed windows of the ward on the 2nd floor of the Burn Unit at Tygerberg Hospital. It was all but quiet with the bustle of my offspring circling the bed, with sombre, shiny tear-stained faces. In a corner, like a sentry with a stopwatch, stood the monitor recording the last efforts of a heart worn threadbare. "He is here," I said to them, "The old man, your father is here". Startled by that they all joined hands with me.

* * *

It was a tranquil day when I decided to burn the letters, five years after John's passing under the pomegranate tree where lay the eleventh child I aborted. This was the cross of unforgiveness. Life was hard and the babies kept coming, year after year and John was on a level I could not reconcile with my logic, saluting the sun, feeding the birds and vagrants, fostering peace, in a world of such discord. And yet all that he did worked ironically, every remedy, every prophetic prediction he made, even though I constantly referred to him as 'mad'.

A sudden gush of wind caught the back end of my Indian silk skirt. Engulfed in flames suddenly, I screamed and rolled on the sand to

crouch under the low nozzle of the garden tap, barely conscious under the extreme searing pain, as I burned all the way up my back and buttocks, around to my tender breasts until the neighbour came out of her shock to take action and get help.

I was the daughter of Bhappaji Hussein an Urdu speaking mattress maker and immigrant from Moradabad, about 160 kilometres, from the Capital of New Delhi in India. Whether he was one of the recorded settlers offered land incentives in the Bathurst area for agricultural development during the 1800's or came here as a soldier of the British Army, I never got to know for certain.

I am more inclined to think it might be the first. We were a family of four sons and five daughters. Inevitably, as the story goes, there were amongst us two camps and my brother and I were definitely in Bhappas. We were just eight months apart miraculously, both scholarly types. I had taught Bhappa most of the English he knew.

Salt River was a hive of heavy industrialisation and a mix of cultures and traditions towards the end of the war, with the first ever steel foundry, railway junction and a significant textile industry where most of the community's men and women were employed. I always found living in Salt River too close for comfort with everyone traipsing in and out of each other's houses as though it were public domain. Needless to say, one family's problem was everyone's problem at the end of the day. Salt River had a culture that was very difficult to ignore, the same as the fragrant smell of basmati rice from our tearoom as it permeated the air.

“Chapel Street close to the Banana Store,” Bhatta would say in his broken English to anyone asking directions from Malta Bridge. That’s where Bhattaji ran his tearoom and we all lived in a rundown cherry - coloured Victorian Cottage on Coleridge Road in Salt River, with a white Broekie- lace trimmed verandah. He was such a gentle soul, my Bhatta.

Two streets away on Pope Street, the double- storied Mirza Singh’s Ginger Beer Factory with adjacent homestead and staff quarters stood amongst rows of terraced Victorian cottages with sizzling hot tin roofs and soot-stained chimney pots. Although close in proximity, it was miles apart and aloof from a community dominated by Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths that knew little or nothing at all about Sikhs.

The men who lived there were tall, wore turbans and the women were in silks and chiffons like royalty, drinking tea on the balcony at exactly 4.00 pm every day. The novelty of who is different to whom soon lost its fascination in a community where all existed in peace and blended well. That’s when I first met John Singh. He was four years my senior, a Sikh without a turban and he had the best manners I had ever found in a man.

“Bibi...Bibi...wait up!” I heard one day, walking home toward that wafting fragrance of steaming rice. It was Milan and someone else. I turned as he ran up, catching hold of my long braid of hair to slow me down. Following him at a more decent pace, was a tall suited gentleman with a muffler over his shoulder and a hand in his trouser pocket, approaching in rather shy confidence. “This is my friend John

Singh and we would like you to do some correspondence for us. I had to catch you before reaching the house because I can't take him there as you know, without questions asked. Will you do it, please?"

Call it fate if you will. I think it was less than a millisecond in which our eyes met but it was the day my life changed forever. I agreed even though by then my duties for Bhappa had expanded to include the monthly monetary donations to the university in Ajmer, and his village in India amongst other ad hoc writing, and still the regular English lessons. I knew it was wrong to be thinking about anyone named John, but I told myself I was not wrong. Besides, John ought to know better, I thought.

The uncanny thing is I think none of us were aware how fast my mother's diabetic condition was deteriorating until she was completely blind. All knew her as 'Blinde Tiemie' and the eldest daughter started ruling the roost. My comfort was my books, the smell of basmati and the refuge I found in being with Bhappa, listening to his stories about life in Moradabad.

"Milan, your friend John: is he Christian or what?" I asked once. "I don't think so," he said. "His family owns the Ginger Beer Factory as you know but they are

Sikhs, from India also," he said further, when I asked why the men wore turbans.

Just then Nan my younger sister burst through the door with the news that Tia the eldest of my sisters had been proposed to.

"What!!!" said Milan and I simultaneously, dropping everything.

“To whom?” we said again.

“Dullah,” she said. “The foreman from Pal’s Clothing Factory. He came for you, Bibi, but Bhappa flatly said NO! She is not ready for marriage, but Tia is”.

Thank God for Bhappa I thought with my mouth agape, turning a shocked expression to Milan. It seriously started me thinking about whom I am to marry when the time came. I talked it over with Bhappa that night during the English lesson. “We are little bit like different Bibi, so Dullah is not a good match for you but your time will come,” he said planting his warm kiss on my forehead.

* * *

The century turned the corner and what a magical time the 1940’s brought in music, fashion, bioscope and the public baths in Spencer Street with hot water. At dusk, the streets turned to lovers’ walks, all leading down toward the Bijou and Majesty Bioscopes where Coloureds sat upstairs and Whites below, or the Palace and Gem where it mattered not. John was on my block more often in his car, dressed in a Palm Beach suit sending my heart racing, crooning beautiful love songs to me over the little wall of my verandah when everyone was down town or under the lights at the bioscope.

I loved the fashion, discarding the Salwar Kameez during the day, for English costume complete with hat and gloves. Only Mrs Phoenix could see the story unfolding and she feared for me. I assured her it was harmless teasing, but she rolled her eyes and said, “Uh uh...not when he

waits here on the street and sings “When my dreamboat comes home....”

* * *

Like a slide presentation the episodes of my life flashed by in just those couple of days, but my body continued to burn without flames. I prayed for mercy and relief. There was so much I wanted to say but *No, I would rather die*, I thought, looking at them; with self-consciousness, remembering how wildly that trait infuriated and provoked John always, but he loved me still. The charred remains of my buttocks, back and breast area dragged the rest of me along, but held no resemblance any longer to the woman who was once Bibi and so proud. I cast my eyes up toward the sky at the next grip of crippling pain and cried out, “God, what have I done to deserve this...” The words on the clipboard at the foot of the bed were highlighted in red “Nil per Mouth” and I am dying for a cup of tea.

* * *

I will never forget the day Bhappa died. It was a perfectly ordinary Friday. I stood out alone in the street still, long after the procession in white carrying Bhappaji had turned the corner and the dead of silence had been broken by the shock of his death. It all happened too quickly for me. Just as the shrill Railway Hooter went off over the air at 1.0 p m exactly in the afternoon as usual, competing with the call to prayer from the surrounding mosques, did they carry him into to the house, and before sunset they carried him out again to the burial ground.

There have always been two versions of how he met his death, and the truth has never been known.

According to Salie, he was attacked in the shop and hit with the steel scale on his head, while Joggie claimed "Huh Uh...Mr Joseph the shoemaker didn't have his shoes ready for mosque again that day for the third week." So, when Mr Husain shouted at him, he knocked him with the butt of the shoemaker's hammer, also on the head.

* * *

Doringhoogte was the other side of the world from Salt River then. The rural farm area was dense with bush and tall Port Jackson trees. The nights were like black velvet and water was drawn from the pits. Over the tips of these trees the lights of the tall green minarets of the mosque could be seen in the distance like an Arabian Night fairy tale.

Ouma, probably in her eighties at the time, lived there on her farm. She was the 'Vroedvrou' of the area, well respected, and was referred to by big burly men of all colours and creed, as Ouma. She was my grandmother and a nurturing soul, a real "salt of the earth" woman. I yearned for someone like her as I mourned Bhappa with the fresh pain of realising for the first time that I haven't had a mother for most of my growing years and with Bhappa gone, the void was insurmountable. There was nothing left for me.

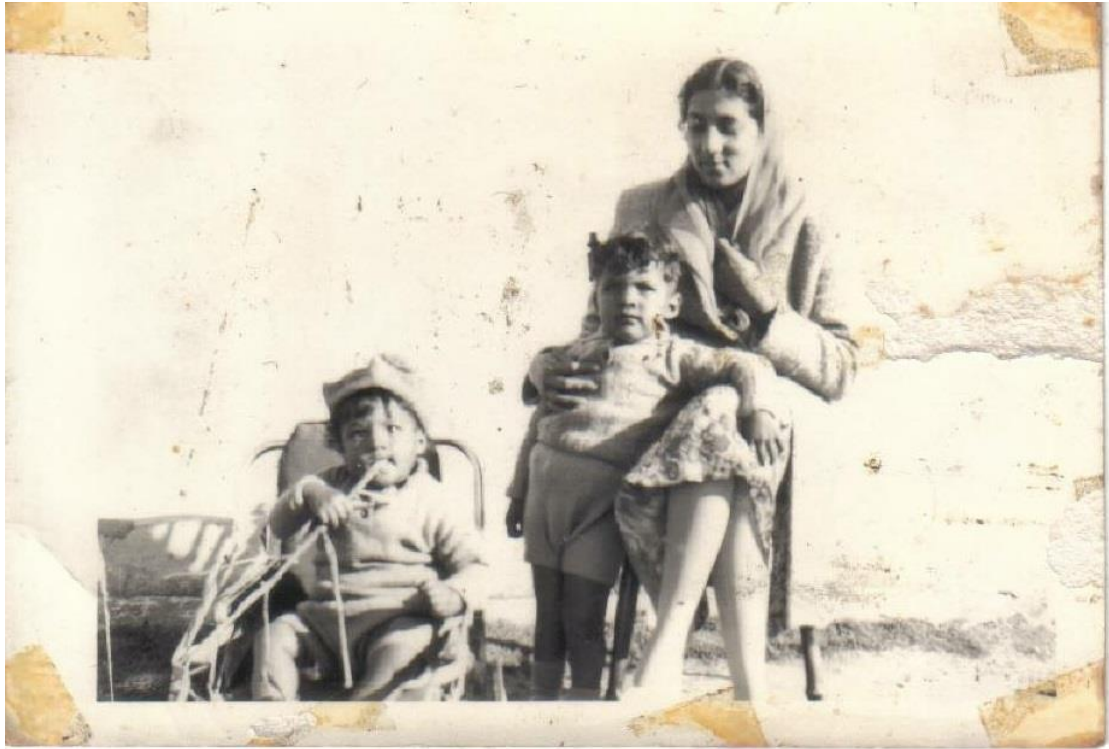


Figure 1 Bibi and sons



Figure 2 John, the horse and wagon boy



Figure 3 John and Bibi in Salt River



Figure 4 John Singh



Figure 5 Mr. Pye and John Singh



Figure 6 The Maidstone Road Shop



Figure 7 John, friends and neighbours at the beach



Figure 8 Mirza Singh ginger beer



Figure 9 Baby Brownie Camera



Figure 10 The Bijou building, Salt River

Chapter Three

The Child

Sometimes we are forced into the situations in which we find ourselves and our lives are shaped around the consequences of our actions in how we deal with what we are presented. Some of them are good, and others not so good but then, 'we are just the players in a passing variety show called life'. This was John Singh's philosophy on life without which I doubt he would have been able to live out the latter part of his life the way he did.

I recall a line I read somewhere that says, 'a letter is proof that the life had indeed existed'. When I found and read a letter of farewell from my father to us all, months after his passing, it unsettled me and sparked a curious need to uncover the real significance behind a man so wise yet gravely unfortunate.

They say the audience at your funeral is a sure indication of how well or badly the life was lived. All I could think of when a remark was passed among the crowd at his funeral was how solitary an existence he was banished to for so many years. He never showed a sign of bitterness, malice or anger toward anyone, regardless of the disregard or disgust at his utterings or writing. I have even seen him violently brushed aside at times. But then I also remember at the same time how gleefully he could feed the birds in the morning, salute the sun, heat the meals of

vagrants in the microwave when Mama wasn't watching, or chuckle with rosy cheeks and twinkly eyes at something humorous in the newspaper he would entertain himself with. He was no saint, but he was the 'Captain of the unsinkable ship called 'The Singh Family' he would say.

I was there when he died, when he held my gaze and seemed to say, 'You do know I must now be gone but there is still so much I want to say,' but we were not alone. The funny thing about funerals, I have noticed, is that people feel more inclined to speak the things they would otherwise not say, and inevitably whatever it is would best have remained unsaid. Just as I thought I knew everything about John and Bibi, after having witnessed a heated argument once like no other before it; when John blurted out a secret to me in retaliation to Bibi, whom he complained had become 'mean and antagonistic at a time when he was on his last and defenceless'.

A penny dropped with all ten of us when news broke after Bibi's funeral, that they had eloped. We stared at one another's expressions of not total surprise but realisation as to why there were never any wedding photos, or why they never celebrated a wedding anniversary, why we never knew of an anniversary or wedding date. And of course, the answer to why, whenever we asked, we were vehemently dismissed and reminded to know our place and show respect. It was no big deal to any of us then as it

was after all 2002 and neither did it affect the high regard, love and respect we had for our parents. I daresay I can fully understand their reasoning during 1942, given the circumstances and the fuss over religion and class and the furore it must have caused. Not the same can be said for the other secret that unfortunately, I was bound to carry for as long as they were alive, a secret I shared with my siblings, months only after they had both departed, so that the responsibility was no longer mine alone.

I could write another book on my life as a child on that block where we lived but, looking back over those times I could say the real wealth was not in that which made up the physical person "John Singh", but rather the cargo on board the 'unsinkable' ship.

Bibi's frustration grew as the babies kept coming, year after year, but together they weathered and navigated all storms, taking the best possible course.

John's mother died around that period also, after a long illness. We used to visit her briefly some Sunday afternoons before her death. These visits held no fascination for any eight-year-old amongst only adults speaking in a language other than English. And so, I invented a game for Amber and myself to play whilst everyone gathered around large cooking pots dragged on the smooth heavy steel platform of a coal burning stove, positioned in the centre of a kitchen with blue/green walls, and hardly enough windows for ventilation. Clouds of dense smoke used to

balloon around a corner and outside the back door, the minute cook lifted the lids on these steaming pots. Taking Amber (short for Ambreen) by the hand I would slip around that corner into the backyard around the outside lavatory with the cascading morning glories and down to the street, where we crossed to the barbed wire fence on the opposite kerbside along the railway line. There, in gathered taffeta Sunday dresses, puffed sleeves and crocheted lace ankle socks in black patent buttoned up shoes, we would lie flat on our tummies with ears to the ground waiting for the sound of the approaching train. Once it came we would jump up excitedly to shout and wave at everyone hanging out the windows. They waved back, and smiled at us for as long as the train remained in sight, before snaking around a bend. Other than that, we set to making daisy chains to pass the time until we were summoned for tea.

We drove to the funeral with Papa in his truck. Mamma made sure we had our cushions and bonnets with us but she did not come along. We passed the scrapyard on the right before the unending dark heavy cement wall of the cemetery came into sight, stretching for miles with iron pedestrian gates at intervals. He parked the truck across from one of these gates, two wheels up on the kerbside in front of a fish and chips shop, and took us across through the gate into the expanse of a large open area.

I had never seen anything like it. Loads of tree trunks or logs were stacked and piled high in a square like a game of pick up sticks, called a funeral pyre. Right at the very top was the white -clad body of Ma. The sombre mood of all gathered around started playing on my mind. I was frightened and clung to the edge of Papa's coat sleeve as I watched someone in a white turban go up and light this pyre at the corners with a flaming torch whilst my stomach somersaulted. The stench of burning flesh and singed hair later set me to tears and I started feeling faint. Papa led both of us back out to the truck, laid me down on my cushion and covered me with his coat between my vomiting through the open door of the truck on to the red dry earth. Someone came with some water but he stayed, rubbing my back so I could fall asleep. He was singing my lullaby *So ja, so ja, raj kumari So ja*, meaning, 'Go to sleep, princess, go to sleep my precious one, in your sleep sweet dreams will come'. Yes, he never left but little did we know at the time the serious effect that witnessing a real cremation had on my well-being as a little girl.

Through the writing process I discovered the reason and when exactly my sleepwalking started. It lasted more than a couple years, I remember. Papa claimed to have cured me, but Mama said, "Rubbish, she just outgrew it". I quietly disagreed. It was he who would wake up to check my whereabouts at round 3.0 a.m. in the dark of morning, carry me back, feed me a strong dose of

Ovaltine and sing my lullaby to me until I slipped back into peaceful slumber. That was just her attitude or opinion on anything he said or did anyway and he would not argue. She sets the rule and we toe the line. All Papa would say always is 'Peace Bibi, let's keep the peace.'

Peace was short-lived once General Smuts, the man Papa hailed as a great statesman because of an environmental health issue, I think, had served his term and the Nationalist Government came into power with an apartheid policy of ruling the majority in South Africa. I was sixteen, at high school, keen on dance and music and gallivanting with Papa to the farm, bunking Muslim School, driving over Chapman's Peak to Hout Bay in his truck, singing at the top of our voices.

Apartheid affected me not at all until the introduction of the Population Register and the Group Areas Act, and changed my Sundays, but that was only the start. Sundays were the days when Papa's best friend, Mr Ruckewitz and his daughter Barbara visited in the morning, bringing Kitke Loaves, Raisin Bread, Mosbollekies and cake for afternoon tea. Theirs was a friendship from childhood in Heathfield. Mr Ruckewitz was also the owner of the Lakeside Bakery and Barbara and we looked forward to our playing on a Sunday morning. All that had to come to a halt as well our times with Mr Van der Westhuizen, the mechanic, and his wife and children. Who knew the worst was still to come?

Writing *The Goodbye Letter* has left me with a feeling of betrayal that I cannot shake off, at the discovery of truth, but it has also left me a feeling of immense satisfaction. I had underestimated the challenges I would face in the writing of this long research essay. The process took me in another direction than planned. What started out as being about episodes in the life of my father John, turned out to be their story: the relationship of John and Bibi.

The easiest was conceptualising it from the seed that was already there with the letter and other materials at hand, and going on from there to creating the abstract, and writing the proposal. The difficulty arose firstly with the interviews I had with elders in a family where it takes little to rekindle the underlying tensions of old feuds on both sides of the family. Another was the time it needed between writing the parts where I found I needed space before going on with the next, due to the personal nature of the text.

They say memory itself is subjective and an unreliable doorway into the truth, but the memory and character of John Singh will live on in *The Goodbye Letter* even as we say Au Revoir but not goodbye.

Contributors

Andile M-Afrika was born and raised in a small African township called Ginsberg, outside King William's Town, Eastern Cape. This is the same place where Biko grew up and where he was buried. M-Afrika has spent a considerable period investigating Biko. His work has culminated in the publication of two books *The Eyes That Lit Our Lives* (2011) and a novel *Touched by Biko* (2016). M-Afrika holds a Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing and a PhD in African literature, both from Rhodes University. Currently, M-Afrika is a Research Fellow based at the School of Languages at Rhodes.

Clotilde Ravel is a French student and studied for a year at the University of the Western Cape in 2016. She is currently studying journalism and Gender Studies in Paris. Her interests are a wide range of literature and photography.

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Shireen Mall is from Cape Town and has just completed a BA Honours Degree at the University of the Western Cape. The focus of her thesis was the role of biography and the art of novel writing, which she hopes to explore further in her next academic project.

Nondwe Mpuma is from Mount Ayliff and completed her schooling in Durban. She graduated with Bachelor of Arts at the University of the Western Cape in 2017. Nondwe's current research essay is about Efe Okogu's science fiction novella *Proposition 23*. Her poetry is influenced by her experiences and works she has read.

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Mike has completed his PhD at The University of the Western Cape in 2016 / 2017. His research concerns the poetry written by Chas Lotter, a Rhodesian soldier who served throughout the duration of the war, a war he also served in. He completed his MA at UWC in 2004 / 2005. He taught high school English, Geography and Tourism for 30 years before deciding to take an extended sabbatical. His academic interests are art photography, comics, humour and queer studies. He has published a number of poems and short stories locally and internationally. Mike serves as creative writing editor and content writer for the postgraduate online journal *WritingThreeSixty*. He is also a facilitator in the English Department at UWC.

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Llewelin is from the UWC English Department where he is working on his MA as a Fellow of the Centre for Humanities Research. His MA is titled *Music memoir and the evocation of cultural legacy: The Zayn Adam story*. His interests include Scrabble, chess and as an avocation, enjoys reading material related to quantum physics. Llewelin currently serves as the Typesetter, Copy Editor and Web Master for the postgraduate online journal *WritingThreeSixty*.

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About our Cover: “Untitled” by Gideon

WritingThreeSixty met Gideon, the artist whose work is featured on our cover page, in the Cape Town central business district. Although Gideon wishes to remain anonymous, he was very happy to share his inspiration for drawing. Gideon identifies himself as a Christian. He says that when he found himself on the streets without a job and considering that he is of an older age, he spoke to God. Gideon says, “I asked God to help me make something of myself on the streets. Then one day I was walking to the Golden Acre and I felt my hand shaking. I had this urge to draw. I looked around for a pen and picked one up that was lying on the street. I then started to look for a piece of paper to draw on. I found an envelope on the street and started drawing. When I finished I looked inside the envelope and found R200. I went to the Shoprite and bought art materials worth R100. That is how I started drawing. I never knew I could draw before this”.

Gideon asked that if anyone would like to buy his artwork, they get in touch with *WritingThreeSixty*. He draws on any material he can find, ranging from cardboard, paper, to posters.



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