

FOREWORD BY ANDREW SALOMON

SOUTH AFRICAN SHORT STORIES

THE 10 WINNING STORIES
FROM THE SAWRITERS COLLEGE
SHORT STORY COMPETITIONS
2018-2022

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FOREWORD

by Andrew Salomon

The phrase ‘mixed bag’ can be defined as ‘a diverse assortment of things’, and oddly, referring to something as a mixed bag these days has come to have a somewhat negative connotation, as if a collection of things (including stories) has to somehow conform to an expectation of sameness in order to be good. For me, the only real commonality I hope for in a short story collection is that the stories all touch something inside the reader. This sentiment is echoed by Alice Munro saying:

I want my stories to be something about life that causes people to say, not, oh, isn't that the truth, but to feel some kind of reward from the writing, and that doesn't mean that it has to be a happy ending or anything, but just that everything the story tells moves the reader in such a way that you feel you are a different person when you finish.

I am happy to report that every story in this anthology has this power, starting with S. F. Ratcliffe, who has the distinction of featuring twice, first with ‘There's an App for That’ – showing the insidiously gradual hollowing out of the human soul that can accompany the desire for social media

justification – and then with the vigorous and dialogue-driven ‘Tulbagh by Gaslight’.

Amelia Warren’s ‘Hero’s Brush with Mutiny’ takes an incident of petty crime and an ill-fated relationship, kneading them into something unexpected that causes the narrator to act in a way that speaks to the hopefulness inherent in any rebellious gesture.

Anyone who has had to endure the toe-curling experience of office Heritage Day celebrations directed by the HR department will find echoes of such an encounter in Javi Reddy’s ‘Sit Down; You’re Brown’. Humour is used to illustrate the exasperation caused by the politically correct, prescribed identity so entrenched in contemporary South African office culture.

Taki Scordis’ ‘The Moot Mulatto’ gives us a stark glimpse into the perpetual wound caused by being unwanted as a child. The brutal honesty and unflinching sadness of this story pack a poignant punch.

In ‘Misstep’, Stephen Harrison draws the reader into the frantic mind of a narrator stuck in unbearable guilt, who also becomes physically stuck in a situation that unexpectedly offers the true escape he has been looking for.

Gabisile Shabangu brings us something deeply dark and skilfully repulsive in ‘We Ate his Bowels First’, a story that manages to sustain an unwavering ominous and menacing atmosphere through dexterous use of language.

‘A Crumpled R10 Note and a Bloody Hand’ is Vuyiswa Kubalasa’s accomplished exploration of the terrible power of fear to distort reality,

Foreword

managing to sustain a considerable level of tension throughout this memorable story.

The lasting effects of childhood trauma come heart-rendingly to the fore in Matshediso Radebe's 'People Like Us', a touching story that also reveals the solace of having someone there to understand you beyond just a psychological diagnosis.

Jengo Ata's 'Rubicon' is a deeply affecting story constructed around the twisted manner in which the powerful can treat the powerless, especially at a time when inequality and prejudice are entrenched in the law, and how a deep betrayal never stops resonating.

Ali Smith hit the nail on the head when she noted that:

Short stories consume you faster. They're connected to brevity. With the short story, you are up against mortality. I know how tough they are as a form, but they're also a total joy.

The stories in this anthology are a mixed bag indeed – in being a collection of wonderfully diverse stories that are not all hopeful, or sad, or easily labelled. Here are stories that can be placed together in a celebration of their variety, but if there is a common aspect to them, it is that each of them leaves you deeply moved.

Andrew Salomon, June 2022

PREFACE

I am honoured to introduce the third edition of the SA Writers College Short Story Competition anthology, showcasing the winning stories from our national annual short story competition between 2018 and 2022.

For the past fifteen years, our competition has provided a platform for aspiring writers in South Africa. We are passionate about fostering the development of emerging writers by providing an outlet for those who have never been published and those with only a few credits to their names. Every writer deserves a chance to have their work read, and our competition aims to offer just that.

Coco Chanel said, ‘The most courageous act is still to think for yourself. Aloud.’ In some ways, that’s what a writer does. Writing an original story from scratch is difficult; baring your thoughts is scary; having the guts to publish them for public scrutiny can be terrifying. This anthology celebrates the writers who have taken the bold step of entering the competition and sharing their stories with the world. The collection applauds their remarkable skills and bravery.

Preface

With up to 700 entries received each year, our team of judges faced the daunting task of selecting the winners. We thank our esteemed panel, all notable writers in South Africa: Ginny Swart, Alex Smith, Karen Jeynes, Andrew Salomon, Fiona Ingram, Maya Fowler and Helen Brain.

Compiling this anthology is a team effort. We are indebted to journalist Chris Marais for providing the stunning cover photo and to Koos Turenhout for the design. Debbie Waldek was responsible for the mammoth task of editing the entire anthology from cover to cover. Her expert editing, layout and typesetting ensured the anthology was of the highest quality.

To all aspiring writers, we encourage you to keep writing and keep entering. Thank you for being part of the SA Writers College Short Story Competition community.

Warm regards

Nichola Meyer (Principal of SA Writers College)

MUCH ADO ABOUT SOMETHING

(THEME FOR 2018)

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

S. F. Ratcliffe

I know that look. You saw *it* there, on the side of the road, didn't you? Near that intersection? Who had it? I bet it was that guy who says he's a Rasta. His stutter is French, but his breath is Russian Bear when he tries to grab your sexy place.

No? Was it that Congolese kid with his perfect white tracksuit and silver Dolce & Gabbana crucifix? When he grins, his grills are also made out of Jesus.

Oh. OK, the Old Man then? Ja, that makes sense, the way you look.

Hey, take it easy! We're in this together, after all. Now eat your pudding.

Ja, he's a little guy, that Old Man. He doesn't even have to bend down to look in through your car window. He always smiles when he sees your elbow on the door lock. The 'white lock' he calls it. But, of course, everyone does that these days, unless you have one of those larney central-locking jobbies on the steering wheel. You can't be too safe, I scheme.

I think he smiles to show off that gold tooth of his, to catch your eye. Everyone loves gold, right?

And now that the Old Man has your eye, he shows you his, playing hide-and-seek behind cornrows as grey as a rough diamond, as grey as that solitary eye. You can't look away when he speaks to you, because he knows you've seen what he has, and you want it. You just nod as he scampers up the muddy pavement to fetch that selfie stick from among his stash of fake superglue and oversized sunglasses and even crappier selfie sticks.

'I call it The Wand,' he says.

You look in the rear-view mirror, anxious about holding up the traffic, but no one is in a rush. It's an overcast Sunday and the three cars behind you seem as sedate as their drivers, engines barely ticking over against the sludge of apathy that has set in, listless occupants gazing out the windows or looking at their cell phones. A fan belt squeals a weak protest. You realise deep down that this is always how it goes here.

'Don't worry about them,' the Old Man says. 'They'll make time for The Wand.'

You don't ask why he calls it that or why it's so surprisingly expensive. You just empty out your wallet, and the Old Man's right eye, the brown one, flicks across the notes, counting Mandelas, while that rough diamond watches your fingers caress The Wand. Exploring the shape of it. How cold it feels.

'How does it work? Are there instructions?'

'Oh, don't worry about that my friend. The Wand will show you.'

'Um, what?'

‘Here, it has a connector for your phone. It’ll take you to the app store to set it up. Yes?’

‘Ah! Right! You know, I ... never wanted one of these before.’

The Old Man backs away from your window, returning to his midden of plastic curiosities.

‘They all say that.’

And before you can ask what he means, the car behind you revs and hoots, time coils its slackened spring as tight as the furrows between the driver’s Oakleys, a dismembered scowl in your mirror.

Oh ... OK, totally, if you’re not going to have it. Butterscotch is my favourite. Mmm, thanks.

Sure, you feel pretty stupid. You go home and chuck it on the counter with the rest of your shopping. You always give yourself a little treat on a Sunday, maybe a nice meal or new pants or another one of those books on poetry or Buddhism you never get round to finishing.

Hey, don’t look so guilty. No one does.

But there is a reason why it caught your eye, this thing you don’t want. It is scintillating, quite literally. Even though it is just plastic and metal and mostly black, it has a gleam to it, like glitter. As you go about your chores, it always makes its presence known.

And it only glitters when glimpsed.

You pick it up and are surprised by how much it weighs, heavier than you would have thought but still comfortable to hold, even more so once you've clipped your phone on. It balances out nicely as you extend the monopod and take a snap in front of your bookshelf. You check the photo and try four more, adjusting the books to make sure the desired titles are in focus. The results are pretty arb, even with a filter, but you post them anyway.

OMG! Cant believe i bought a #selfiestick!

#chilledSunday #reading #firsttimeselfie

By the time you've had dinner it only has three thumbs and no hearts. One of them is your mom.

You put down your cell, pause the *GoT* episode and look at the two connectors on The Wand. One plugs into the headphone jack and the other into the phone's data port. You think about the Old Man and his grey cataract poached in spent tractor oil as you slide your phone home onto the socket.

Yes, you trust this accessory.

Yes, you want to get the app.

Are you sure?

Does it usually ask that? You hesitate just a moment, but then remember your phone is backed up, secure in the knowledge you can roll back.

Yes, you're sure.

AKARON KABA! TAKE A PHOTO!

The app is only 9 megs. There's not a lot of reviews but they're all glowing, and it's free with the selfie stick.

You GET *Akaron Kaba*.

Feet up, with a glass of wine, you take your first proper selfie with The Wand. It looks amazing. YOU look amazing. You didn't even realise the sun was setting behind you and, sure enough, the rays boast a palette of colour that you'd only expect from an epic movie, a cinematic depth that makes you want to tip forward and into the picture in delightful vertigo.

You are pensive, yet playful, on fleek AF. Everything is in focus. You don't even try for another shot.

Perfect end to a perfect weekend!! #africansunset #nofilter

The next morning you have 152 likes, 53 loves, 17 shares and a Super Like by an unexpected admirer. You swipe right away. By lunch time your photo trends on #sunsetsof africa.

That evening, when you put yourself to bed early with a cough and a Medlemon, you have 44 new friend requests and a rather suggestive PM. It feels pretty good.

In the coming week you post a couple of #foodfies. While they look #scrumptious, you don't have the heart to mention the dishes are insipid. That

crowd-pleaser of a lasagna recipe perfected by your mom is as bland as an Al Gore documentary. Your flat white has less kick than warm milk, even with its #COFVEVE art.

But then you're tapped by a clickbait to write an article and 'Food Selfies: Five Ways to Capture the Best Foodfie' earns you four times what you paid for The Wand and an onslaught of followers and friend requests.

So, yeah! That's fine.

On Thursday morning, your boss calls you into her office and is absolutely delighted to inform you of your promotion, with Social Media Coordinator being added to your portfolio! She's extremely excited by it all and you know you should be, like, happy or something.

And then it's Bland Friday. You feel like shit scraped off a takkie, but it's the weekend. The Wand sits and waits, expectant. You're surprised by how much it waits.

A few celebratory cocktails with colleagues on Friday night, a short hike with some friends on Saturday and clawing through another vanilla Kirstenbosch Gardens show on Sunday with that suggestive Super Like are posted as

TGIF! #weekendcocktails #bestjobeva

and

Table Mountain you beauty! #humbledbynature #bffs

and

Gonna download the album! #date #kirstenboschsummerconcerts
#OldMutuallybeneficial

The following Monday your phone is flat when you get home from work. You rush into the bathroom to cough up a knot of phlegm and you venture a look in the mirror, the first analogue glimpse of yourself in days.

The person who looks back at you isn't you. That person has a bluish shade to their lips like an overboiled egg. That person can fit their index fingers into the black hollows below their eyes. That's not the same person on your phone who was just emailed by a bank wanting to use you for their next YouTube ad, the kind you can't skip even after five seconds 'cause #OldMutuallybeneficial.

You're sent home by your boss the next day and the neighbourhood tortoiseshell climbs onto your bed to purr on your chest. That night she poses for one petfie before leaving for good and #QUEENOFCATS #catsofinstagram is liked by all 4,999 of your friends. Because that's the limit.

The Wand is never far from your bed over the next couple of days and your post, Down 'n out! Can I haz teh chicken soup? #flusucks #illfie, gets over 17K comments from your friends all over the world, including quite a few chicken soup recipes and at least eight vouchers from nearby restaurants. And, of course, a few mean comments too because ... internet.

There's an App for That

- > Hey you, malingering much or just calling a sicko, LOL!
- > Too hot to be sick! #humblebrag #fakenews
- > Dont ya totes hate wen ppl dont whatsapp after a date? #fml

and the inevitable

- > Babe, HR called, inbox me, 'K? xx

You can see the problem, of course. You look fucking great. And with all those comments you feel like a very lonely Influencer as you try to close *Akaron Kaba* and show your friends and followers and HR you're not faking, but the app doesn't have a logout option.

The next morning you're too weak to go to the toilet and you eventually call your mom, lying in your own piss. She uses her key to get in and bursts out crying when she sees you, mumbling stuff like, 'Oh God! My baby, I'm so sorry!'

You open your mouth and your voice cracks like a blister pack. 'It's OK Mom. I really didn't think I was that sick.'

She is already calling the ambulance and smiling through her tears and perceived failure, a hand on your brow like when you were a kid. 'You just looked so ... great! You know?'

So here we are almost a week later, in this together. Ja, your dad's gone to get fresh clothes and your mom's sleeping, I scheme. Those last two posts with your doctor and that chemo kid are trending big time by the way. You know there's a vigil for you both outside? Crazy shit. Just crazy.

You wanna know what I see?

OK, I'll be straight; you look like crap. Actually, you look like if I sneezed I'd punch a hole through you, kinda like rice paper. I can see your spine and the way your lungs push against the weight of your chest, and the blood that moves like mud in the highways of your arteries. Sometimes when you have to sit up to spit out your bits, I can see that lamp there right through you. Ja, sometimes I can.

Hey, I have to know something. Did you go back to the Old Man? Sorry for asking, it's just – sometimes I can see what he's up to, sometimes I can't.

OK, I thought you might. What did you ask him?

Hmm.

Well, no. You can't roll back.

OK hot stuff, time to go. Let's take one parting shot first, for everyone to remember you by.

Ja sure, I know it's not real, but you'll look fabulous and it'll be real enough to them. Over time far more real than this body of yours in an open casket with wax and cotton and make-up restoring those sunken cheeks. Doesn't that sound better? Here, let me help you.

Nah, it's chill; I won't show up in the photo. I never do.

Oh, and if it makes you feel any better, it's not just you.

Some are affected more than others but everyone is being robbed these days.

There's just not much soul left to go around.

S. F. Ratcliffe



S. F. Ratcliffe works in the film and music industries as a sound professional and an occasional movie producer. He writes slipstream fiction with a distinctly South African edge, and his works have been published on *Detour Ahead* and in the literary journal *LINEA*. Ratcliffe has also placed in contests

by Grindstone Literary, Black Spring Press and Fiction Factory, and his novelette ‘Little Wing’ was a finalist in the Omnidawn Fabulist Fiction Chapbook/Novelette Contest.

‘There’s an App for That’ is the first of S. F. Ratcliffe’s two stories featured in this anthology. It was the winning entry in the 2018 SA Writers College Short Story Competition.

HERO'S BRUSH WITH MUTINY

Amelia Warren

She had always known this moment would come. She had assumed it would happen at night – walking down a scab of a street, turning the corner and noticing the scream of glass beneath the passenger's window. She'd imagined herself processing what had happened, the shock and irritation. And then gingerly stepping over the shards and opening the door to inspect what was taken.

The reality of it was different. It was morning, not night-time. The glass on the road looked oddly fitting for the crisp morning air, lying beneath her sunny yellow car like a jagged pool. She moaned, already going over what she had left there – what could have been taken.

Inside, the car was covered in grease. It clung to the steering wheel and betrayed fingerprints on the dashboard. Her radio had been taken, along with some CDs. She had left a pair of high heels on the back seat, she remembered, on a night she and Claude had decided not to go out after all. She opened her cubby to see if anything was left inside. It was empty, aside from – to her surprise – a paintbrush. It was short and thin – the kind you would use for art, not walls, and the wooden base was covered in Sellotape. She pressed the

bristles against her finger and found that they were soft and light. They reminded her of the down you might find on a baby's head. She leant back against the passenger seat, inspecting the brush in the morning light. A halo of brown glowed around the tips as she imagined what it had meant to the person who left it there. It was comforting to think it was an important thing to them, left there like an apology for what had been taken.

She felt the cold air close to her cheek from the broken window and felt the dull weight of what she had lost sift back into her. She felt the grit of the insurance calls and the please-hold tones and the petty expense to come. The banality of the day ahead stretched out before her and pricked at her eyes.

She became aware, now, of her puffed-up face – full of the salt and mucus of last night's fight.

Ironically, the first thing that had drawn her to Claude was his sense of finality. He was the type of person who would be vital in an emergency. His booming voice could organise a frightened crowd; he was one of those people who had perfected the scream of a whistle that could silence hundreds, and he spoke with this earnest clarity that made you want to believe him. When they had gone on their first date, she was struck that when he told her she was beautiful, she felt beautiful. She saw herself through his eyes and believed, in that moment, that it was indeed true – all of the greasy insecurity of adolescence wiped away with one sentence and two intent eyes.

Now, this ability of his is what hurt her the most. When they fought he used this power to crush her, like a giant palm sweeping across her face. He

told her she was mean, selfish, stupid – and she knew he was right about these things. She fought back, but knew he was telling the truth – simply because he always did.

Last night he had introduced a new noun into their standard fight. He had overheard her making a flirtatious comment to a friend from work, and he had become fully convinced that she was having an affair, that she neither loved him nor anyone else, that she was a ‘slut’. That word had sounded curiously wet in his mouth when he had reached the conclusion of his monologue. *Slut*.

It was not the first time she had been called this. When she was still in school, she remembered a boy lobbing the word over to her when she had refused to go to the dance with him. It had hit her like a ball of spit, and she had cried. But even then, it had seemed like such a juvenile term. One which should be reserved for school hallways, bubbling out of acne and inexperience. When Claude had said it, it became something alive, writhing, salivating. Because it became true.

After that she had left – not telling Claude where she was going – to stay with her sister for the night. Driving along the dark and empty streets she had felt calmer, freed from the heavy, grey air she so often soaked up at home. Her sister had been kind, and so she had cried and cried for all the things she had not had the space to previously. Finally, she had woken up – cracked and empty – to her similarly cracked and empty car.

She looked up, towards the street ahead of her, rolling the brush between her thumb and forefinger. If they weren't fighting, at this point she would usually call Claude. He would drive to her and pick her up, place her head on his chest and know what to do. Even now, she thought he would probably still come. He was dependable like that. In fact, her broken window would serve as a kind of reconciliation mechanism. Like her acknowledging that she needed him. This dependency would reassure him. He had always liked her best when she was sad.

She looked down at the brush again. The small tool looked bashful in her hand, the bristles like fluttered eyelashes. For a while she had taken up painting. She wasn't good at it, but had found it calming. The colours were all so bright, so sure of themselves. The smell had given Claude headaches.

She decided not to phone. She still stung from last night and was not ready to give in. She would not go home either – at least not until he apologised. Something had to change.

She organised her next few hours in her mind. She remembered being told by the insurance company that if her car was stolen or harmed by someone unknown, she should first go to the police to get a case number and make an inventory of what was taken or broken. That would be her first stop.

She found police stations daunting. In her mind, they would be full of criminals, victims, and heroes – all shouting out their archetypes as loud as they could. The station would feel full of action and noise and horror, and she

was afraid that she would not be able to push through the burning crowd to make herself heard. In her actual experience, however, this was never the case. People flocked there for a plethora of reasons, but all of them seemed hushed by the brick and bureaucracy that was the reality of the building.

The Claremont station she stepped in front of that Sunday morning was quiet. To get in, she had to navigate over a carpet of shifting blankets. Bodies and heads tightly tucked beneath them in the hopes of shaving one breath of privacy from the grey pavement. This was the safest place for them.

Inside, a long line of tired faces greeted her. A woman with a shaved head, waiting at the desk, looked sharply at her when she opened the gate and then turned back to the policeman, raking the skin on her wrist. She sat down next to someone reading a newspaper, whose head would, almost comically, drop and then rise every few seconds – their body desperately trying to snatch sleep from the rigid wooden bench. In the next room, she could hear a woman crying softly and, at the other side of the desk, a young girl in uniform was asking for an ID photocopy for her driver's licence. The quietness of the room disturbed her. The fact that you could pick out every voice and know who it belonged to.

At home, she hated silence. Her happiest moments with Claude were when he was telling her about something that excited him; his voice would grow rich and strong and his grey eyes would lighten, having lost the shadow of his brows. When he was silent, he was upset, either with her or with

someone else – it often didn't matter really. She would watch him sit, looking at the floor with his forehead bulging over his face, and she would feel tired and anxious but most of all *old*. The throbbing silence reminded her of all the time wasted, that she would soon be too tired and ugly to have a real life ever again. They say that tragedy is what pushes people to realise that they must 'live life to the fullest', but for her it was these moments of absolute boredom. She was paralysed by the silence and saw her squirmy life for what it was. She felt every tick of the quiet seconds pass like sheets of skin being stripped away. The fear of a wasted youth would rock through her body, as Claude stared on at the carpet.

Sometimes she said things just to say them, to have a conversation to help her wade through the stagnant hush. In these moments, she would look around the room and grab anything to have an opinion about. In response to this, he would sneer, pick up her observation and scratch at it until it peeled off like a sticker.

Claude always said he welcomed old age. He wanted to have the years to accompany his wisdom, mostly so that people would have to listen. She was not yet satisfied with what her youth had given her; she wanted more of it – more noise and colour – at least until her ears and eyes sagged or strained.

A car alarm went off outside. It took a few moments before she realised it sounded like hers. The policeman behind the counter frowned and walked towards the door. She followed. On the street corner, a man was frantically searching her car, his legs sticking out onto the pavement. The yellow metal

was baking in the sun and lit up the fringes of his ragged pants. The policeman shouted and began to run towards the car. The man inside didn't pause to look up, but shot through, opening the passenger door and staggering out.

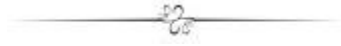
She was too bewildered to feel anything at first, but as he hurtled out of the car she saw his face. His expression was set and his eyes were bulging. But what hit her was how hopeful he seemed. In his widened eyes she saw the bright wish for escape. She saw him outrunning the policeman, making it back home. She saw his face tensed for relief, and she saw that every part of him was racing towards that relief. This expression of hope is what cut her, and what emerged from the cut was a deep gushing of the word 'run'. Inwardly, she was screaming it, yelling for the man to escape, to win, to deserve the hope. She recognised that it was, so clearly, his only option. The only reality he believed in, in that moment. She imagined herself jumping up and down, balling her fists and sweeping them across the air, hoping to move him faster.

The policeman caught him. He had the advantage of wearing real shoes. His arms wrapped around the protruding shoulders of the thief, and he grinned at her as he walked past, proud. The man bowed his head – his eyes staring at the ground. His body was tense but strangely still. He reminded her of the rabbits she used to have as a child, which stiffened when finally caught. In his left hand, he was clutching the paintbrush.

The police officer told her that she should come inside to give a statement. She said she would in a moment.

Hero's Brush with Mutiny

After he had left, she got into her car, still seeing the man's face after he had been caught. The mangled stillness of disbelief, coupled with acceptance. She drove home.



Amelia Warren



At the time of writing ‘Hero’s Brush with Mutiny’, Amelia Warren was a 21-year-old studying a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Cape Town. She has always enjoyed reading – her love of books instilled at a young age by her parents, both authors. Describing her experience, Amelia said, ‘I keep a journal, but aside from

that most of my writing experiences have come from ordinary school assignments. This was one of my first proper attempts – I enjoyed it a lot and I’ll definitely continue writing in the future.’

‘Hero’s Brush with Mutiny’ was runner-up in the SA Writers College Short Story Competition for 2018.

**THERE IS NO ONE
BETTER THAN YOU**
(THEME FOR 2019)

TULBAGH BY GASLIGHT

S. F. Ratcliffe

Honeybadger don't give a shit, I reassured myself before dumping my luggage into the back of her bakkie, fifteen minutes late and one eventful Uber ride behind me.

'Shit Honey, I'm sorry.'

'Naa! No man it's OK, mmm!' Her voice all sing-song, full-frontal hug, safe behind the tortoiseshell of her D & G shades. 'So jaaa, hi! I've moved back to Cape Town full-time. Not going to live in Gauteng my whole life. Me-heh!'

It had been over a year since I'd last seen Honey during a lecture series in Jo'burg, and I couldn't believe I'd forgotten her cadence. The over-modulated *Mmm's* and *Jaaa's* of agreement. The throaty bark of her laugh at the end of a self-deprecating statement.

I glanced across at her while she laid in our route on a Garmin. Her strong hands manipulating the diesel bakkie through the knotted arteries of the CBD, too-narrow streets clogged with the cholesterol of poorly parked cars and tourists with fish-paste smears for legs looking ever upward; a Humvee-shaped infarction materialising mid-sentence at the final push onto

the highway, a yank of the steering wheel and an unemotional middle finger to the driver a matter of reflex.

‘Even though it’s been really good for my career, up that side,’ she finished.

Honey wasn’t her real name, of course. Just one of those Afrikaans phonetic anomalies exploited by her rooinekke friends; a joke, long forgotten, with an indelible punchline.

She could easily have taken up her family’s trade, but a generations-old Afrikaner lineage in viticulture was supplanted by an academic wit that could mash bits of information into tiny pieces and jigsaw the puzzles together in new ways, where they had little baby ideas of their own. It was a beautiful thing to behold. ‘Brain fartlings’ she called them, usually followed by one of those *meh-meh* jackal barks.

I distinctly remember when ‘Badger’ was tacked on by some well-meaning grad students in our faculty after that Randall guy revoiced a certain nature doccie that went viral on YouTube. Like, 90-million-views-and-counting viral. We had a good laugh; let’s just say her outspoken nature was not exactly a secret.

We’d done bemoaning our ailing public and larcenous private education systems by the time we reached the R44, and I knew something was bothering her beyond the ransacking of a generation’s future. She was tilting her head as if listening out for something – a high-frequency complaint from the engine

perhaps, or that persistent, rattling sound from somewhere under the canopy. But I recognised the gesture and let the open road do its thing.

‘So jaaaa! Aah ... I almost got married.’

‘What? Wow! Mazel tov! Hey, what do you mean “almost”?’

She checked the GPS.

‘Hmm! You remember when I was on that TV panel, after I got back from Nkandla? You know, before Nkandla was famous?’

‘Um, yeah ... that thing about psychologists working with traditional healers, right? Community engagement stuff in rural areas, exchange of – ’

‘Jaaa! Well, this guy watches the show and starts writing to me.’

‘Huh! OK?’

‘He got my details from Maties and starts sending me these letters. He says ... nice things.’

I glance at Honey and notice the top of her ear has gone red, her hands steady at ten and two.

‘But wasn’t that years ago?’

‘Net so! His letter is so funny and he’s just lus for a pen pal, like, old-school vibes. He’s not on Facebook en al daarie kak.’

Honey reached for the air con.

‘It’s really fun and light. We switch to email, and we start talking about personal stuff. And also ... you know ...’

‘Nice stuff?’

‘Mmmm! Meh-heh. But ag ja, this is before I went to Jo’burg and you know how small a doos Cape Town is. I’m showing a friend one of my letters and she says, “*wag nou*”.’ Honey made her voice a kugel squeak, the words a small-calibre barrage bouncing off the windscreen.

‘This-china-sounds-like-Claudette’s-guy-she-showed-me-a-letter-aaas well. Do you think it could be the same oke? Hey?’

Honey did not like drama. ‘It was so swak.’

I shifted in my seat. I didn’t want to interrupt but felt like I needed to commiserate somehow, be supportive.

‘Jeez, Emotional Affair 101, right? And everyone knows the Kevin Bacon rule in Cape Town is, like, one degree.’

Windmeul Cellar sprang up on our left, a haven of dark leaves amongst the squat fynbos and thirsty brown brush. Honey pulled the wheel hard.

‘Fok! I have to buy wine still!’

I’d remembered what Honey liked on her sandwiches and passed her some foil-clad padkos before asking, ‘What happened then?’

She flicked the air con off; the thermostat had died years ago and it was an unconscious tick.

‘I told him to fuck off; he was in a relationship.’

‘Great!’

She chewed, nodded.

‘Ja, and then a year later he starts emailing me again. A year, hey! This time it’s even more ... nice. He tells me how his girlfriend is totally co-

dependent, that he wants to leave her but, you know, he's really loyal. Even though she's like a sister.' Collective eye roll. 'I told him to get lost.'

'Nice!'

Air con on.

'Then, around Christmas last year, he emails me *again* and now I'm in Jo'burg. I'm thinking, jinne fok, I don't have time for this doos, meh-heh. He asks me to give him a chance. No funny business. He and Claudette aren't together anymore and he just wants to write, like before. What's the harm?'

'... OK?'

'And you know, it's really lekker. We write and we laugh and it's easy. Next thing, he comes up to Jo'burg to see me. He says he's in finance. He says flights aren't a problem.'

I don't know if Honey had a sense of this, but I started to feel as if the car was gaining speed, racing towards an inevitable pole or wall or person. I realised I was pressing the non-existent brake pedal in the passenger seat and relaxed my leg.

'Then it got pretty hectic. We had dinner that night and he told me Claudette threatened to kill herself if he left her. They'd been together for five years and he just wanted to move on. He felt trapped.'

Air con off.

‘But when we started writing it was like I was his soulmate, he said. The next day he told me I was *The One*.’ Honey dropped her pitch to intone ‘The One’ in her Verimark voice.

‘The next day?’

‘For real! But listen, we’d been writing for years and I thought about what we already had. And maybe this Claudette was like he said, hanging onto something that was done. Klaar. He called her weak.’

‘Weak tea more like.’

‘Ja well, I know that now.’ Honey’s shoulders wilted towards the steering wheel. ‘But hey, haven’t you ever lost your ... sense? For someone?’

I couldn’t argue with that.

By the time we’d turned off the R44 towards Tulbagh, I was intimate with the dream he’d sold. They would put aside some time each month, just a quick flight to and fro. And even though he wasn’t the marrying type, he could see their union ‘in the Karoo under God and a starry sky’. Because she was strong and independent; The One. And then maybe she’d move down to Cape Town, since he was a financier after all. When the time was right.

‘Ag, it’s easy to look back and be all shitty with yourself, but everyone loved him. Not just my friends hey, even Ma and Pa thought he was a “cool dude”.’

We both laughed.

AC on. She turned it to full while adding, 'Not that I ever met his family.'

So many alarm bells.

'Why not?'

'He said I'd embarrass him, because everyone knows he's big on public displays of affection. That's just how he is. And I'm not.'

'Embarrassed? That's ... weird.'

'Ja! But this is the same oke who asked why I didn't want to sleep with him on the second date. Serious! He said if I was seeing someone else, I must just tell him and not waste our time.'

I paused. I wasn't imagining it this time; we really were going fast. Honey leaned back in the driver's seat and we slowed. I watched a group of kids in bright, striped T's, offset by brown skin, disgorge from an old, eggshell-blue Toyota Corolla on the side of the road, carrying plastic canteens, heading towards a small concrete reservoir that shimmered in the heat. The youngest boys waved as we drove past. I waved back.

'Honey, that all sounds super dodgy. Foxy smells his own hole, right?'

She sighed, 'Ja, I get it. Thing is, I ... fell in love! Me! That never happens hey. Fok.'

Turned out even though she was The One, he seemed quite content with seeing her on a monthly basis or so, on weekends that worked best for him no doubt, being in finance.

‘I mean, if I’m The One, what the hell were we doing after a year like that? Why not more? I asked him hey, a week before my birthday. He said I was getting all needy and co-dependent.’

I choked on my padkos.

‘And how’s this? I asked my friend about Claudette and she’s a fokken international banker chick! I mean, if she couldn’t ...’ Honey bit her bottom lip.

‘And there it is; three years of writing, a year-long distance, and then he dumps me on email. Jirre.’

I squeezed her shoulder, feeling pretty useless and not a little ashamed of my gender.

I looked hard at Honey then as we entered Tulbagh. It hit me all at once, what he did to her, what he does to women, how they’re all *just women*.

The unsolicited contact, years of effort in fraying and splitting apart their roots and fibres, pressing them into a mould to collect the parts that he likes, letting their nectar coat the sharp bits and fill the holes inside him. And then afterwards, each of them conveniently reinvented in his own mind, ‘round the braai or at the bar: *Ag shame, hey, that chick went all psycho on me. I thought she was cool but, man, just a clingy mess. They’re all the same, hey okes? Ag ja, my conscience is clear, thanks boeta. Na it’s OK, let me get this round. I’m in finance, hey.*

An actual vampire.

I wondered if Honey knew what he was. With all her astounding intellect, all her years of travel and learning at the University or in KZN with those sangomas, with all her fierce independence – did she truly know it wasn't her fault?

We got out of the bakkie at my B&B and leaned against the canopy with our arms linked, looking across the town from the vantage of Museum Street, to the tune of cicadas and the metallic ping of the bonnet in the heat.

Tulbagh is left-wing objectionable, but I'd seen worse. At least the 'onderdorp' wasn't an abstract notion, with its own shops and high street. In yet another museum to colonialism, there was a glimmer of honesty in that.

'I'm sorry Honey, that's a shitty story. Hey, I'm keen to talk more about it if you are. Call me when you're back in town, OK?'

'Hey jaaa! Let's have a nice Saronsberg Rosé, mmm?'

Thanking her for the lift, I opened the canopy to grab my scant luggage and was instantly assaulted by the smell of burnt things. Of cedar and charcoal, afval and fynbos and old socks, reminiscent of the heavy herbal scent those Rastas offered up from their woven mats outside Cape Town Metrorail.

The hessian sack had spilled its secret. The little wicker doll was tightly bound with a strip of torn cloth, the muted pattern of a formal men's shirt barely recognisable. The doll's bristle of hair impaled the dismembered circles of heads cut from photographs, the same smiling face, posing each time. He was good at posing.

Tulbagh by Gaslight

Honey reached past me and put the effigy back into the sack. She closed the canopy and grinned. Her glasses were off for the first time that morning, as if it was OK to see her eyes now, and they were too bright.

‘Honeybadger don’t give a shit. Meh-heh.’



S. F. Ratcliffe

This is the second story by S. F. Ratcliffe included in this anthology. ‘Tulbagh by Gaslight’ was the winner of the 2019 SA Writers College Short Story Competition.

SIT DOWN; YOU'RE BROWN

Javi Reddy

Whenever I was on the cusp of greatness, my uncle, who could drink more vodka than he could properly articulate himself, would utter his one true sentence.

‘Sit down; you’re brown!’

He wasn’t just a master of ensuring his glass never ran dry – he was also well equipped to make sure that both my posterior and my confidence managed to find their way back to earth, should I dare to dream.

I guess there are better colours to wear in South Africa than brown. White. Yes, privileged, well-taken-care-of white. With a hint of denial and dissociation from the past. Or black. BEE black – top of the list of opportunity and streaks ahead of any other specimen hoping to land the right job.

I had always had grounds to question my self-destructing uncle. How could I trust a man who refrained from pouring any orange juice or soda into his vodka? How dare he breathe so heavily on me, with the belief that a clear drink brought him a clear argument?

Looking back, the dipsomaniac may have had a point. Growing into my Indianness or, rather, possessing a general inability to shun it, meant that I

was soon walloped with the horrid realisation that brown (excuse the ghastly pun) was a shitty colour. Indians are good at running their family businesses or striking up a good bargain, right? Or they're supposedly the numbers kings – dominating engineering or accounting positions in companies, right? Well, I didn't get that fucking manual. I was probably outside trying to get my uncle to keep his clothes on, when they were dishing out the modus operandi booklets on how to be a solid Indian.

In the end, I boasted no business skills, except the skill of making it my business to keep my head down and avoid any reason to feel that I mattered. To sit down at an average job in an average company. I especially refrained from following all the hyped-up ridiculousness that flows through this country in an attempt to celebrate its diversity. Because diversity means mixing. And I don't know how to mix.

Sometimes you cannot avoid the coming together and you're cemented into certain occasions. Occasions like this fucking day. Every year, I sit here wondering if I have gained more insight into my culture. If I can actually contribute to this 'occasion' in a fulfilling way. That's Heritage Day, ladies and gents. One of the many over-the-top public holidays celebrated by South Africans annually. A corner is a lovely place to hide today, here at work, especially if you're not entirely sure why you're dressed the way you are. Or what you're supposed to say. I look to the middle of our canteen, and centre stage, we have the Xhosa ladies in their bright traditional dresses, the Zulu

clan in their leopard-pattern clothing and the Boers in khaki outfits. They're all so ... ready.

I am the only Indian participating in Heritage Day. Which means I am the only one in a kurta top. In a company of over 4,000 employees, not one other brown brother stood up for the challenge. God, even the Chileans outnumber me. The three of them came over in some exchange program. The tall one's wearing a football kit. I love football. Why can't the rest of India agree that it should be favoured over cricket? At least then I could wear an Indian football kit. Inconsiderate lot. Instead, I've got this kurta's silk collar around me, like a noose.

What will I share today? Last year, I got away with bringing everyone the famous Indian treats that are sweetmeats (and possibly sped up that fat guy in HR's type 2 diabetes). The year before, I by-hearted an extract from Wikipedia about Diwali, the Festival of Lights. A day when people complain about fireworks (which somehow doesn't affect pets as badly on Guy Fawkes Day). You would think that would piss me off but, alas, you are sorely wrong. While the people of our Mzansi shores all seem to have a sense of pride about standing up for their respective groups in this melting pot of multicultural, I have no urge to complain about those putting down my people on Diwali. Because I am nothing on that day. Nothing except the cheating employee who gets an extra chance to miss work by taking off a day of religious leave. I get all the other Christian holidays as well. Thank you, Jesus and Krishna – maybe you guys can coexist. I won't tell anyone, I promise. Imagine a world full of tolerance? Ja, neither can I.

Technically, Heritage Day is on Monday, but we must celebrate early this Friday so that everyone can display their cultures proudly in a work environment, in front of people who do not even know each other's full names. Yeah, I get Diwali to stay away from the office, but the others can hardly grumble. There are enough days to make up for it.

1 May – celebrate equality amongst working conditions by not going to work.

9 August – you may not have a uterus, but you can still take advantage of the fairer sex's achievements by not going to work.

26 December – this is now called Day of Goodwill because Boxing Day was brought to this lovely land by the Poms. Either way, you're not going to work on that day.

And of course, Heritage Day, the bane of my existence.

Could our company be any more nauseating? Oh yes, here we go. Fredrick is up first. He's the fat guy from HR who shits sunbeams when he gets to talk about his German heritage. To me, he'll always be another guy from Boksburg. There's no bond uber-strong enough to make me see him any differently. He normally sports that baggy jeans and 90s takkies combo (yes, you know the one), but today he's come to us in his knee-high socks, short leather trousers with braces and an alpine hat. The fucker didn't even bring any beer. He doesn't speak German – not fluently anyway. He has been to the fatherland often, however, thanks to the skewing of inherited wealth in this

country. He doesn't even know that Bayern Munich are playing Borussia Dortmund this weekend. I cannot take this tub of lard seriously. He rambles on. There's an hour of this to get through. I look upwards towards the heavens. I know I don't call often. But I need You to get me through this. Whoever You are and whatever form or shape You may take, rescue me. Fredrick is told to end his speech by our head of HR. Thank you, Lord. Tomorrow I'll ask for world peace. And the day after that, for Fredrick's release from captivity.

Thandekile goes next. She's beautiful in a way I cannot quite describe. And that's the problem. I fail to instantly recognise her radiance because we are brought up to be taught that 'white is right'. That there are certain features that make a woman beautiful. The fair skin, the fine nose – all carved out by Western sculptors and chiselled into our brains that this is the desired form of the goddesses. But I look at her, and curly hair and wider hips are not as unattractive as we are made to believe. Thandekile (or TK as she is affectionately known amongst her peers) is Zimbabwean. She takes us through what it means now that Uncle Bob is finally out, and while her homeland rejoices, she is far more subdued, as she knows corruption in politics is like the Lernaean Hydra. You cut one head off, and another grows back. Who's going to ruin her country next?

Given my love for colours as a kid, thanks to my art class filled with glorious minutes of pastels smudged on my fingers, you would think I'd have a general interest in the Rainbow Nation. And embrace days like this. I feel no connection to SA. Or India. But a strange itch seems to take over as I sit in

this canteen. The thing is, no one is better than you. No one has a better crayon or pastel in their hand than you do. We have to colour in the grey areas on our own. If brown is my only pastel, then I will find a way. Perhaps that is what bonds us as South Africans. We bitch, we moan, but we endure.

I zone out and become concerned about whether I should have bought that copy of Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* from the second-hand bookshop on Oxford Road last week. It probably won't be there the next time I visit. And this will haunt me for some time. Worry today, but worry less, for tomorrow brings us new hells. There's always something else. Load-shedding. State capture. A new hashtag to follow or an online racist to unfollow. We find new things to get under our skin, irrespective of the colour of our skin. No one is better. No one.

Suddenly, it's my turn and they're all looking at me like I'm Deepak Chopra, Sachin Tendulkar and that guy from *The Big Bang Theory* all rolled into one.

Why must I move into the centre? Can I not remain corner stage, a periphery figure merely adding to the background as I listen in on the main showmen (and beautiful woman)? I trudge towards the middle. Their eyes are all heavy on me. My heart begins to pound like an African drum. That's the closest form of association I have with this day. I am ... I am fucked.

A tune goes through my head. 'There's a brown boy in the ring ... tra la la la la ... Brown boy in the ring ... tra la la la la ... He looks like his head's up his bum ... bum bum!'

Here I am. The final act of this tragicomedy. The fool and his soliloquy. I open my mouth but no words come. I look around. They're just as tired as I am. I smile.

'I'm not going to bore you with any arduous tales. The day has taken its toll. Instead, I will merely utter two words.' They lean in.

'SWEET MEATS!' I open the white box in my hand, filled with guilty pleasures that are laced with sugar and food colourants. Here's your Rainbow Nation, right in this box. Every damn colour you can think of. They all cheer.

I've done it for another year at least. They greedily tuck in. I leave the box on the counter and return to corner stage. TK comes over with a piece of barfi made from condensed milk in her hand.

'You know, technically "Sweetmeats" is one word.'

The goddess winks and leaves.

This fucking day.

Javi Reddy



Javi Reddy's creative-writing career has seen him fortunate enough to have been published across the globe. In 2019, as well as writing 'Sit Down; You're Brown', he went on to win the Grand Prize in the Eyelands International Short Story Competition for 'Marvin Baxter's Background Music'. His short story '9 Suspects' and poem 'Smoking During

the Apocalypse' were published in international anthologies in 2020 and 2021, respectively. More recently, his short story 'The Chair' has been awarded Best Story in the WriteFluence 2021 competition. His debut novel, *12 Yards Out* (Austin Macauley), was released in 2019.

Javi's dream is to have his work published and recognised on every continent – South America now being the only region outstanding on his list. Until then, he lives in Johannesburg, South Africa, trying to mind his own business, read a few books and write a few stories.

'Sit Down; You're Brown' was awarded runner-up in the 2019 SA Writers College Short Story Competition.

YOU'RE UP TO YOUR NECK IN IT

(THEME FOR 2020)

THE MOOT MULATTO

Taki Scordis

‘**W**ena, unuka njengomntu omhlophe.¹

I didn’t reply. Even if I could speak Xhosa, I wouldn’t have replied because he was right – I was a white man. Not my skin or my sex, but my smell. It lingered, burnt into my epidermis like a runic cattle brand. No one had ever said that to my face so bluntly, with such ease, but they had thought it. Oh yes, they had thought it – they were always thinking it. It shadowed my walk and loitered around my vague pomposity. I knew what the taxi driver had said without ever having learnt how to click my tongue against my gums and white teeth. I’d heard those words take on various incarnations my whole life. Knew them intimately, could sense them swirl and shift and change into thoughts when I entered a room with my well-to-do parents.

Who’s the blackie?

Can’t be, can it?

The wife must be barren.

Maybe the mister hasn’t got a shovel for diggin’.

¹ You, you smell like a white person.

Huh? You mean his dick –

Shut up, man. Here they come.

Then the smiles would appear, stretched into glowing pumpkin lanterns, and those thoughts, more ancient than Khufu, would hang back like exhaled smoke, drifting and ribboning and encircling.

My real dad had worked for my white dad at one point. He would sit at the back of the bakkie with yellow eyes, hungover, freshly cut grass staining the old rubber on his feet. My real mom worked as a maid in Northcliff, ironing polo shirts, washing floors, looking after toddlers, changing shit-stained Huggies and vomit-covered bibs. They gave me up after I was born. Real dad had an addiction back then, and they couldn't feed me because I wouldn't suck on real mom's tits. The opportunity to pass up free food was a big no-no. White dad drew up a form, and real dad took it. One condition, though: I must visit my real parents once a year.

I got out on the side of the road and saw the electric cables, hundreds of them, running from street pole to street pole, all snaking back into the township like thin caesarean scars. They were blemishes against the blue sky, reminding me where the world had cut me from. Tyres, no longer good for anything, sat atop corrugated metal roofs, waiting for their photo op with tourists.

I was supposed to message home – let them know I was safe, but not now. Even an old phone was worth something here, among hell's manna,

among the rotten meat and hot fruit shaded under colourful umbrellas. Hordes of people doing nothing, letting their eyes do all the work. Carnal whistles escorted me deeper inside. I knew the way, like a zebra foal finding its harem in the herd. Boys and girls kicked rubbish, actual rubbish, not the kind the middle class would throw away. If it had any kind of primitive use, it was someone's property.

Real mom was home, scrubbing last night's supper from a pot, burnt black by fire and steel wool and hard labour. She saw me, wiped the sweat from her top lip, and carried on scrubbing.

'Hello, Mama.'

She replied with a greeting only the deaf could understand. 'Your sister is sick again. Did you bring anything?'

I gave her R500 from white dad. The money always felt like a bribe, folded and loose, Mandela looking on. Real mom didn't count it. There was no need. Not because it was a gift, but because it was always the same amount. She tucked it inside her bra with slippery hands. I was sure no one else would know of its existence. My older sister needed money, but she was always sick. Seizures. Fits. Convulsions. Witchcraft was the prevailing theory, so hospitals were avoided, doctors snubbed, medicine grown here and there.

'Where is she?'

Real mom ignored the question, got back to work. Said: 'You didn't bring a bag.'

'I have to study later, so I can't stay long.'

‘You’re up to your neck in it?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Your visits are getting shorter.’

I opened my mouth and closed it.

Real mom carried on scrubbing.

‘Can I help with anything?’

Real mom didn’t notice the flies hopping off her skin. They didn’t bug her as much as life did. She finished with the pot and wiped her hands on her skirt. Her skin looked limp in the oily sun, attached loosely to the bone. She was not lean or young or spritely. She was just here. Always here, in the moment, forever in the present, chewed up and rubbed level with the dirt.

‘Come inside.’

A collection of Ricoffy tins decorate the small room. Some harbouring plants, others filled with crumpled tinfoil and plastic bags. A kerosene lamp, paintbrush, water bottle, newspaper, and loose stationery rest on a steel table in the middle of the room. A small dog, dead except for its rattle wheeze, sleeps underneath. Real mom keeps him for the rats. He is nameless – a *gonzo* breed. I sit on a plastic chair with my back to a bed, made more of blankets than wood.

‘Are you hungry?’

I am, but decline food. ‘What is wrong with Kuhle?’

Real mom overturns an empty bucket and takes a seat next to me. ‘The same. Always the same.’

Kuhle is six years older than me, born with a congenital brain defect. It made her shit in school, literally. That's why she never finished, and probably why she will never marry. My real parents would be looking after her until the day she died. They wouldn't be passing the buck this time. Let them grow their African dogwood and September bells; let them throw the bones and stones and wood and wool. Let them conjure up the dark *majicks*. Let them. Theirs was the curse.

'Maybe you should take her to Charlotte Maxeke.'

Real mom sucks her teeth. The room is hot and sticky. The stench of paraffin sits low in the air, irritating my eyes.

'You should stay for supper. Your father will be home then. He will want to see you.'

'Will he?'

'Yes.'

'I need to get back home.'

'To study?'

'Yes.'

'What are you studying for?'

The words leave her mouth with thin barbs attached. They only scratch at the surface. My scar tissue is leathered and hard, more scute than flesh. 'A biology exam. An important one. It's the last exam for the year.'

'What then?'

What then? She knows. She just likes me repeating it to her. ‘I dunno.’ I catch my reflection in her pupils for the briefest second and it annoys me. She has no right to it. It doesn’t belong to her. I should tell her that I’ll be flying out to Italy to spend Christmas in Rome, but this would mean nothing to her. An astronaut may as well be bragging to a prisoner about going into space.

‘Wits next year, Mama.’

Real mom smiles. ‘Still going to become a doctor?’

The smile is for her, not me. It’s the same smile every time we discuss this. As though this is a shared effort, a joint sacrifice. She is under the impression that I owe some kind of black tax for sharing her belly and blood, that twelve years of medical school will be nothing but pittance to a much larger, mythical debt.

‘Anaesthesiologist,’ I reply.

Her eyes dim as she blinks slowly at this. The last remnants of her humanity succumb to Bovinae for just a moment.

‘Yes, a doctor,’ I add. She does not ask me what an anaesthesiologist is or why this particular field of medicine interests me. It doesn’t cross her mind. This is unimportant; this is just the small print.

‘One day, you’ll help your sister.’

‘You can help her now. You don’t need to wait for me. There are doctors now.’

‘They are not smart like you.’

‘They’re smarter because I’m not a doctor yet.’

‘Please now, let’s talk about something else. You’re upsetting me.’

I am not fooled. Her distress has nothing to do with Kuhle getting the right kind of help. No. I could have told her that I wanted to be a prostitute, after school, and that smile would make its way to the surface of her face like a bloated corpse in a river. One of her delusional fantasies was that I would get a job, any job, and look after my sister. You see, Kuhle and I were born as burdens, and we must rid the weight we have placed on our parents’ backs. It is not enough that they gave me up when I was three weeks old; it is not enough that I have never needed anything from them; it is not enough that they couldn’t so much as gift me a name. I must still drain the pus from their infected wounds and be thankful that they let me.

‘I have something for you, Mama. But it is not just for you. It is for Baba as well, and Kuhle too.’

Before she can ask what it is, I have removed the rectangular plastic and put it in her hands. ‘This is my credit card. It is for emergencies. I want you to go now and draw out R15,000 from the ATM. That is my daily limit.’

I stand up and find a pencil on the table. I scribble my PIN number on the corner of the newspaper, tear it off and hand it to her. ‘When I get home I will tell them that the card was stolen. They will call the bank and the card will be cancelled.’

‘What is this for?’

‘I told you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because this is what you want.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I’ll be turning eighteen soon. I will be an adult then. I will have no obligations to see you or Baba or Kuhle, no matter how much you or anyone else wants me to. That will be my right and I will exercise it.’

She looks at the credit card, studies the PIN. ‘I don’t want this.’

‘You have never been a mother to me, but you are still a mother. And now, you must do what mothers do. You gave me life and nothing else. I will give you this and nothing else, because I have nothing else for you.’

I imagine her fighting for me. I imagine her telling me that she made a mistake, a horrible, selfish mistake, and if she could do it again, she would hold me and never let go. That she is sorry; that she will change; that she has always loved me. I imagine her saying anything that will remove the pebble from my throat.

Instead, my words settle and lie still, fading before disappearing completely. She is wiping tears that do not exist. Her head is slumped. She cannot look at me and yet she gets up from the bucket. She moves past me and hooks a cheap handbag over her shoulder. She says nothing as she leaves because she no longer needs to pretend.

Neither do I.

Taki Scordis



Taki Scordis has won the SAWC Short Story Competition once and been shortlisted three times. He has written four novels, has an MA in Creative Writing and is currently completing his PhD in English Studies. He works in the English department at UNISA. He offers the following sage advice:

There is nothing remarkable about winning a competition if you have not experienced the desolate feelings of constant rejection attached to writing. There is no shame in the struggle, the fear, the dismissal of hard labour. These are your badges. Keep them. Wear them with pride. Steinbeck once wrote: ‘What good is the warmth of summer, without the cold of winter to give it sweetness.’ I can think of no better description for a career in the arts. However, and it should be said, I have lost this competition multiple times and I can tell you, prospective writer, that winning, like losing, makes no difference. Not the least, in anything that really matters.

Taki’s story ‘The Moot Mulatto’ was the winner of the 2020 SA Writers College Short Story Competition.

MISSTEP

Stephen Harrison

Me-time. To clear my head. That's what this is. Pure me-time. Time for Jake to reboot. Refresh. Rebreathe. No unwelcome, weekly visitors. Hopefully no ghosts. Just a few days, that's all. A bit of a respite from everything. Not too much to ask. Nope, I don't think so.

I'd had it up to here with being stuck alone in the house. Just with my work and thoughts and memories and photos and ghosts to keep me company – and the weekly, unwelcome visit to check on me, or rather, keep me in check. It was becoming too difficult to distinguish night from day, nightmares from daymares. Empty rooms to remind me. Lipstick and eyeliner in the bathroom to laugh at me. Babygrows and blankies to taunt me.

My own brain was a giant leech sucking the lifeblood from me. That's how it felt. My mind was bloating while the rest of me was desiccating. If I'd left it much longer, my brain would have exploded and the rest of me would have been biltong.

My choices were: getting away or going to a shrink – but health insurance doesn't pay for shrinks, even for people like me. Go figure. At least you understand why I had to come here. Okay, maybe expecting you to understand is a bit much – then at least just accept. Lord, give us the grace to understand, or if not to understand, then at least to damn well accept. Fair? I think so. Although I'm admittedly not the best one to judge what's fair and what's not.

How did I find this place? Google 'isolated coastal camping south africa' and go to page 18 of the results. Voila ...

Gobudget Camp Site – enjoy your own company on the banks of the Olifants River, West Coast. Rustic ablution.

Zero reviews. Last updated 3 April 2007. Telephone number not working. Please dial again carefully or consult the directory for assistance. Perfect!

Slapped a few clothes in a bag, raided the kitchen for some tins and other supplies, unburied the old two-person tent from the garage junk, kissed Sarah's photo, made a quick turn in the nursery, filled the tank with petrol, set GPS coordinates on Google Maps, headed off on the N7, turned onto some godforsaken, long-since-maintained dirt track, broke down a couple of rusted farm gates whose padlocks remained intact, and finally bumped to a halt on a patch of veld overlooking a bend in the Olifants River.

It's all that it was cracked up to be on the website – except for the availability of ablutions, that is. Apart from the Cape cobra that briefly protests at my arrival, complete isolation. No cell phone reception. Looks like it last saw human activity some years back. Ahhh ... could not have asked for a better place to spend a few days before the next check-in.

I'm going down to the river for a skinny-dip. The embodiment of freedom. Unconstrained, unmitigated, unsupervised, naked freedom. Can't wait. Haven't even put up the tent yet. That can wait. No one's keeping time.

The path is so overgrown; I hope I'm not going to encounter more slithery friends. Brrr. Okay, I'm through. Well bless my holey socks, this place is spectacular. I'm looking across an unspoilt expanse of white beach to the river at the foot of towering cliffs, pastel pink in the late afternoon light. Gurgling water suggestive of rapids. Hopefully also a plunge pool!

I'm stripping down, hanging my shirt, trousers, undies, belt, socks on an old termite-eaten pole at the edge of the embankment. Probably once supported a 'No Dogs or Alcohol' notice. Whatever the sign once said, there's no one to enforce it now. Even if there was a squad of law enforcers around, my body's so white from lack of sun exposure that I'll probably be invisible once I hit the sand anyway. Ha ha.

Now I'm jumping down to the soft sand. Squelch. Hmm ... deceptively spongy. Who'd have guessed? From the top of the embankment, it looked like terra firma. Kind of cool, I'd say.

Reminds me of when I was a kid. I liked nothing more than squishing around with clay and mud. I'm starting to make my way towards the river. I can imagine my younger self behind me, trying to follow in my footsteps which are becoming deeper and deeper with every step. Younger me would say something like, 'Look Jakey, your leg holes are filling with water.'

I know this is corny, but I actually miss 'me' the kid. Life was so much simpler for me then. Oh dear, oh dear. Pathetic me.

Weird thing is, I'm struggling to get my one foot out of the sand to move forward now. Now the other one is also getting a bit bogged down. Bloody hell, I'm sinking. This is ridiculous. So much for my swim. When I get my wretched legs free, I'll give up on the swim idea and make my way back to set up camp. It's actually a bit late for a swim anyway, and, to tell you the truth, I'm a little hungry now. Somehow, I forgot to eat today. Happens sometimes when my mind goes down a rabbit hole.

But, I'm not putting this on ... freeing myself from this sand, mud, clay, whatever, is easier said than done. And this for a guy who has been working his ass off at the gym over the past few months doing standing calf raises, leg presses and barbell squats. Every time I try to pump my legs, I sink even further. Fuck, I'm up to my thighs now. This is actually not funny.

I can't flippin' believe it. I've hardly been an hour at my much-needed escape from the shackles of house arrest and here I am, trapped in this muck.

I mean, it's absurd. I didn't even know you got quicksand in South Africa. I thought that's something you only found in the Amazon or something.

Every time I move my legs an inch, it feels like a vacuum is created, pulling the mud in behind them to close the space. There go my balls and dick into the muck. Fuck, that's cold. Help. Help. Heeeeellp! What am I doing? Am I crazy? I know there's no one for miles around. I'm wasting my breath and my energy. Think now, Jake, think. You're up to your navel now. Shit.

Okay, Sarah once showed me a YouTube video about a quicksand challenge. What was it? What happened there? Oh ja, two idiots deliberately sank themselves in a patch of the stuff and then raced each other to get out. If I remember well, one was lucky to get out by himself, but the other had to be freed with special equipment. I need a bit of luck here, it seems.

Jeez, this feels more like concrete than mud. My left calf is cramping. Flip, that's painful. I need out. I need out right now. Okay, Jake, take deep breaths. Pace them. In, hold, out; in, hold, out; in, hold out. Shit, it's cold. I'm shivering. Doesn't help that the sun is going down behind the cliffs. This is crazy. Think, Jake, think. Push up with your feet; push, Jake, PUSH.

I'm exhausted. Pushing up only makes me sink further. How did that guy on YouTube get out? Let me think. Come Jake, you can do it. Oh yes, I remember now. He said just float on your back. Make a bigger surface area for yourself so you don't sink; then work your legs out.

Hmm ... easier said than done when the muck is up to your sternum. But wait, I swear that YouTube video said you can't actually sink below your waist in quicksand. Body density or something. You'd float up like a cork if you were pushed down further, they said. Laws of physics. WHY'S THAT NOT HAPPENING TO ME?

Shit Jake, you're up ... you're up to ... you're up to your neck in it. Struggling. Struggling. Struggling to breathe. Breathe shallow, Jake. Pant. Less vacuum created for mud to fill. Bright flashes. Can't feel the bottom half of my body. Darkness. Do I have legs or am I a jellyfish? Do something, Jake; anything.

Zigzags of light.

im running through a field of wheat golden in the setting sun tickling my palms across the tips of the grain towards ma and pa sitting on the stoep faces crinkled in laughter sis shouting come find me jake come find me tripping falling denny dimple denny first love sweet sixteen passing love notes disapproving glare of mister umpleby giggles her soft lips on mine running together to the barn rolling in the hay unbuttoning each others shirts face being licked no fido no down jake if ive told you once ive told you a thousand times not to let that dog of yours lick your face its disgustingDISGUSTINGdisgusting im gonna puke three shots too many head pounding for fucks sake stop laughing leon its not even funny its too bright

Missstep

anyway its a kaleidoscope of colours so soon sarah so soon thats wonderful but are you sure shouldnt we confirm with a doctor no im really happy foryouforus i really am yellow white red orange purple crimson flowers she looks gorgeous walking down the aisle yesidoidoido to bothofyou the bigday is finally here nine months is sooolong whatswrong doctor whatdoyoumeanhesnotnormal it will be okay sarah we WILL GET THROUGH THIS we will findaway i cant go on like this ambulance sirens are wailing is that really necessary i have a headache shes not dying justpsyCHOTIC yes deskclerk iwillpayheresmycreditcard when canisee her again why cant he juststop crying cant he see hismothersnot here i have to sleep i cant go on like this SHUTTHEFUCKUPJOHNATHAN no officer everythingsookayofficer thanksforcomingofficer no officer hes sleeping officer doyouhave a warrant officer this ISMYHOUSEOFFICER i MAKETHERULESOFFICER okay officer hes throughthere officer hes justsleepingofficer he mustve fallen outofhiscot officer arecuffsreallynecessary officer its a kaleidoscsopeofcolours officer redlightsbluelights walkie-talkies get forensics out here can i see mybaby onelasttimeofficer ithinki needalawyer officer

yes

thank you

I can pay bail of fifty thousand rands

yes

thank you your worship

I will give in my passport

no

I do not own a firearm your worship

yes

thank you your worship

whats that your worship

stay at home pending trial your worship

only go out to buy groceries or to the clinic your worship

yes your worship I promise you your worship

yes thank you your worship an officer will visit me every week your
worship

I understand your worship

thank you your worship

i am sorry im so sorry

imsorry imsorry sarah imsorrysarah im sorry johnathan im sorry
johnathan yourdadissorry johnathan about what hedidtoyou imsorryjake i
so wanted a boy to go fishing with togocampingwith imsorry
johnathansarah jakelookwhatyoudid sorryjakesorrysarahsorryjohnathan
pleaseforgiveme

It's warmer now. It's so nice to be floating. What's my head doing on
the beach down there? Ha ha ha, real strange.

Missstep

The light is so bright. I need sunglasses. You shouldn't look directly at the sun. That's what Donald Trump did and everyone laughed at him. I have to squint.

Now two dark figures are coming out of the sun towards me. Arms outstretched. That's weird. Seriously weird. You're not gonna believe this, Jakey Jake. That's Ma and Pa. Stranger and stranger. I thought they died in a car crash five years ago. I thought they died. I thought. And who's that behind them? No. Can't be. Johnathan is that you?

hi ma and pa how you doing

hey johnno where you been all this time

you got big my boy

Stephen Harrison



Stephen Harrison describes himself as ‘a restless soul, and a daydreamer’. He infuses his writing with his memories and experiences from a wide and varied career, having spent time in government, NGOs, academia, public health and paramedical. Currently, he practises as an attorney in Cape Town.

Stephen is able to combine his passion for writing and walking in his blog, *Suburban Stroller*, where he tells tales of his adventures while strolling through the suburbs of Cape Town.

Of his writing journey, Stephen says: ‘I have been inspired by the creative journey with other aspiring writers in the Kenilworth Writers Circle. “Misstep” is my third consecutive entry to the annual SA Writers College Short Story Competition. Third time lucky, I guess!’

Stephen was awarded runner-up in the 2020 SA Writers College Short Story Competition for his story ‘Misstep’.

YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE

(THEME FOR 2021)

WE ATE HIS BOWELS FIRST

Gabisile Shabangu

We ate his bowels first. Snarling and gnashing at the still-warm entrails. Slathering and weeping as we licked blood from the soft ridges where his life used to be. Salt and iron. It was a birthing: reminiscent of how we came and how we would leave. The sinew and muscle we swallowed in deep, guttural sighs sowed themselves down our throats and back into our flesh, inside. Blood for blood. We had lost so much when we writhed on the ground expelling dead matter from our wombs, blood dancing in stinging rivulets down our thighs. Salt and iron as we screamed. It had to happen like this.

We did not move in the dark this time. We did not conceal ourselves in the crevice of unknowing. We appeared like sunrays over the mountain, after the coolness of dawn. A promise. And like the sun, we touched everything, devouring it in our path to make up for what had been lost as we arrived. We ate his bowels first. Hooking our fingers to look between the muscle: searching through tendons and veins for his absolution. Something to round out the blood, make the flesh worth tasting, even though we ate it regardless. Your guts for ours, no matter how putrid yours might be. We ate his bowels first.

Before, when we bore our vocation in the dark, we ate with our eyes closed. Shame and foreboding had tied themselves into neat bows at the base of our lungs. We did not breathe for fear someone would find us out, send us back to the bedlam from which we had come. But, when we saw her running down the campus street, toga clutched desperately between her hands, Afro crushed by the indent of a pillow, we found ourselves reaching to catch up behind her. She looked like us. We could not reach her from the shadows. So we stepped forward into the flickering street lights of the small town. She looked like us. Then looked at us. We knew we had arrived before she even welcomed us.

We flexed inside her only with her permission. In the growling darkness of her soul we warmed ourselves. She let us establish a home on the border of her memory and the violation she acknowledged only before she slept. That subtle violence that retched her out into the street lights, hair and body crushed from the outside in. From here we fed. Nourishing ourselves on the shame and foreboding that had settled like weeds between her lungs and gut. As she breathed, we gorged ourselves, becoming fuller and more flexible. We moved in silence. Growing. Until she bled. It was not a letting we could remember, although it was familiar. Her body pulsed and removed itself from itself. Leaking slowly in dancing rivulets. We stilled our feeding, made curious by the sudden change in the rhythm of her pain. It was an undulation she could bear.

As we turned inward, ready to eat yet more, she whispered gently, ‘This is my offering. You can nourish yourself on my blood if you replace it.’ We understood the solemn agreement that had been made between us. Blood for blood. And so she gave us eyes.

We grew together. She fragmented herself and reattached the parts that worked to make space for us. Before, we slipped between hosts. Asking quietly, in dreams, if we could enter. Never settling, always displaced. It is why we could not abandon the darkness we had made our home: it engulfed us when we became estranged from the bodies that kept us briefly rooted. As we floated, we fought chaos, and the amalgam of grief that gave us whispered form tore our bodies open. Each day was a coming together and falling apart.

You only live once when you are made of shadows. With her, we could live a thousand times in a single breath. Our sorrow solidified, became tangible, something we could kiss. Our presence made her bloom. Every morning we stared back at one another through shadowy eyes: eyes that held so much disillusionment, in a face that had only orbited the sun twenty-one times. As we grew within her and she morphed to accommodate us, her eyes darkened, and we curled our lips every time we greeted each other in the bathroom mirror. She looked at us, and we stared back.

On the outside, she played at life in a manner that made us gleam for its deceit. Her body still held the same shape. But there was violence on her lips

and at the back of her throat. We tasted it in her blood. The discreet violence that unsheathed itself into her while she slept in an acquaintance's dorm left opaque scars that she could not see. We traced our fingers across them every day. No one would anticipate the fury behind her grin. Her rage contracted. Every month came the letting, and she repeated the terms of our bond.

'Slowly, child,' we cooed, 'you will soon lick your revenge clean off its bones.'

'But I'm hungry,' she said. We know.

It surprised us that she did not shrink in the way we were accustomed to. She was deliberate in what she wanted. We basked in her certainty. She gave us life and eyes, and now she would give us intentional bloodshed. She sharpened our resolve. Our hunger increased with her determination, and she allowed us to feed until we caught up with her. The next letting, she changed the terms of our agreement.

'It is time to replace what you have taken,' she said. We stung with delight.

We were not familiar with hunting so unconcealed. She coaxed us from our shyness, nudging us forward into the street lights and back over the tarmac where we met. Her rage and grief bolstered us: they seared white-hot marks on the inside of her veins, warming us.

‘Where are we going?’ we sighed. She answered simply by dragging steadily on a Marlboro Gold as she navigated the pavement. We swallowed air and tobacco and the last remnants of our disquiet. We had never been so bold.

She stalked into the bar. We held our breath as she snaked through the crowd and haze. *Who was it?* we wondered. *Which one had done it?* But as we moved, we saw and saw and saw. It could have been them all. Her blood swelled thick and warm as the memory of what drove her hunger swirled in ugly wisps behind her eyes. We were overstimulated: the recollection of our own writhing and running brought forward by the flashing teeth leering behind half-filled glasses. *Which one had done it?* we wondered, to ourselves and to her. We felt ourselves fragmenting. We had never hunted this unconcealed. We promised blood for blood, but what of our own letting? She hesitated in the panic. Briefly, we became unmoored. And then she saw him. The hunger returned seven-fold, and we knew we would feast. It had to happen this way.

He had no suspicions when she took his hand and led him out of the bar. The entire night she danced a deceit while she swallowed bile. We watched him from behind as they walked: saw the teeth glistening and the swell of his appetite. We were hungry too. She led him slowly, making him take in the shape of her body, the fullness of her Afro and the steadiness of her backbone. We saw right through the skin on his face. He wanted to crush that backbone into the base of his mattress: start what he could not finish

when she woke up, before we found her running in the streets, toga clutched desperately between her hands, tears stinging cold shame into her cheeks.

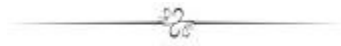
He had no suspicions as they walked past the mini shopping mall, then left past the bottle store that sold wine and beer at ten per cent less. Then straight up past the Italian restaurant with an open gutter running next to it, which she had fallen into once on the way home from a friend's birthday party in town. Still straight on past the neatly packed guest houses in which neatly packed guests slept, and still straight on past the shared lawn of the all-women's residences, one of which she used to live in. He had no suspicions as she led him through the entrance of the park that was closed after sunset, but still accessible in the dark. We watched from behind, saw straight through the fucking skin on his face, at how he wanted to crush her backbone into his mattress while she slept. Our hunger burned welts into the roof of her palate.

He had no suspicions. And so, when she turned, wrapped her hands around his shoulders and stared measuredly through the skin on his face, he did not blink when her teeth parted and sank into his throat. We tasted his surprise. It warmed our teeth and tickled our lips. She tore through his scream, and we swallowed that too. Blood for blood. His flesh did not part willingly; it clung to his bones with an impressive obstinance. So we bit down into the memory of the dishevelled toga, the almost-crushed backbone, and draped her jaw in the armour of that fury. She would make his skin part the same way he had hers. He looked at us and we looked back. We ripped and tugged at his gurgling cry until he drooped in our arms. His knees buckled and he folded

into her mouth. We fell with him. Blood and tears streamed down her chest, her heaving breath beat life against the gargled moan thrumming in his.

‘It had to happen like this,’ we panted. He twitched slightly. His arms sagged around her sides and his head hung heavily in the crook of her neck. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and deposited him on the ground. We heard him splutter for his mother. He shuddered meekly, still not blinking. We felt a warm stinging on our cheeks.

‘It had to happen like this,’ she said simply. We ate his bowels first.



Gabisile Shabangu



Gabisile Shabangu is a budding South African speculative fiction storyteller. She has an Honours degree in English Literature and, at the time of writing, was completing the Literary Short and Flash Fiction Course with the South African Writers College.

Gabisile's story 'We Ate his Bowels First' won the SA Writers College Short Story Competition in 2021.

A CRUMPLED R10 NOTE AND A BLOODY HAND

Vuyiswa Kubalasa

Back straight, chest out, face angled forward. Her eyes listened attentively like the vivid gaze of a bald eagle.

She clutched the car's door handle tighter, crushing the crisp R10 note out of existence. Her right hand was hidden in the side pocket of her jacket as she held onto the sharp scissors, ready to attack.

Her posture screamed, *Brave, strong, fierce black woman! A force to be reckoned with.* Her core cried the cry of an unbeliever. *Help me! Help me! I am but a subsiding force.*

It was too late now. How could she have known? She gnashed her teeth, angry at her eyes' deceit.

After deliberating about which was the safest taxi to commute in, she had set her eyes on the common, white Toyota Avanza with dark windows. The windows were a shade darker than she had thought, but she perceived what she thought was a female figure seated in the front passenger seat nearest the windscreen.

She stretched out her arm and pointed in relief, a gesture that brought the taxi to a halt in front of her.

‘Mxheke?’ she opened the door and asked the driver. With an approving nod from the driver, she entered.

‘Molweni,’ she greeted the other commuters as she settled into a comfortable position.

A deep masculine tone filled her ears as they responded to her greeting in unison. That should have been the first indication of her unforeseeable fate. A man was seated on her right-hand side. She turned around quickly to glance at the passengers in the back seat. There were two men, one looking ahead, and the other’s attention was focused down on something. Four men, two women.

She searched the back pocket of her trousers for her taxi fare. That is when that magic mirror – that mirror on the left door – shattered, and its shards pierced her heart with terror as she saw the image of a man with dreadlocks seated in the front passenger seat. Her eyes had sinned, and she wished she could pluck them out, for it was better to enter a man cave blind than with two deceitful eyes.

Never climb into a taxi with only men in it! The ancient voice of Makhulu echoed painfully in her right ear like the sting of Simon Peter’s sword, and she felt the profound ache that Malchus might have felt.

Back straight, chest out, face angled forward. Her eyes watched perceptively like the ominous stare of an owl.

The man next to her appeared to be an ordinary citizen, a working-class man travelling back home from work. The bag on his lap confirmed it, and the ring on his finger screamed ‘newly-wed’. Decent? *No, a frustrated man overwhelmed by the new role of a husband, with adultery and lust knocking at his door.*

She dared to take another look at the back, but from the glance she’d taken earlier she could tell the man who looked straight ahead was older, a grandfather perhaps, a man with responsibilities who could not wait to get home to a plate of pap and steak, and hot water in a basin. Respectable? *No, tired of his mundane life and wanting to do something inhumane for a change, for his sanity was driving him insane.*

The other man next to him was youthful, she reckoned. The reason he was looking down was probably because he was occupied with his phone. Childish? *No, a young man at the cusp of carnal experimentation.*

She peered at the driver. He looked too young to own a driver’s license, but he drove like an expert – laid back, not concentrating much on the driving; it was all so spontaneous. Smart? *No, a manipulative mastermind of heinous schemes.*

She cautiously glanced at the left door mirror, and her dearest Medusa in the front seat was indeed a man. She felt her stomach turn to stone. He was looking straight ahead. He looked stressed out or angry; she could not tell, but he had a stern expression. Their eyes met in the mirror, and she quickly looked away to her right and peered out of the rear door window. Five men, one woman; you do the maths.

The small ones who came from aftercare, still dressed in school uniforms, tottered with their bags weighing down their tiny bodies. Some walked alone with snot dripping from their noses; some walked with angry parents as they thought of the laborious task of washing dirt and sweat from their children's white shirts. The older rebels with their dishevelled uniforms sauntered with their hands intertwined in youthful sin; some strolled in packs, touching their big bellies, with lollipops in their mouths. The smoke that came from the *tshisa nyama*² and the flies that buzzed around the delicious meat. The noise of the taxis as the drivers exchanged coins, and the taxis that drove by with women in them, a mockery to her current circumstance. The tiny children that played in the squalid water that oozed from the malfunctioning drains, to which municipality officials turned a blind eye. The ear-splitting barks of the filthy, emaciated dogs as they chased passing cars. The unruly and loud, drunken customers from the schools of pubs that surrounded the area. It all looked so safe and peaceful; all that she worked hard to escape from looked so inviting, even through the darkness of the window, through the muteness of the taxi and through the sorrow in her throat.

I am falling deeper, deeper, deeper ...

Her focus shifted to the soothing music that came from the driver's radio; the lack of conversation in the car made the lyrics ever so present.

² A place that braais and sells meat. Literally translates as 'grill the meat' (Zulu) or 'burn the meat' (Xhosa).

I am falling deeper, deeper, deeper ...

The heat in the car was overarching, and her polo neck increased her suffocation. The car smelt like fear, and the smell engulfed her.

‘Rough day at work?’

It took her a fearful second to notice that the words that stabbed the conspiring silence were addressed to her. The question came from the man seated next to her. She nodded, maintaining her posture. She hoped he would not speak any further.

Silence.

I am falling deeper, deeper, deeper ...

She turned to face the window, wishing for the serenity of the outside world to fall upon her once more. Nothing. She closed her eyes. *My trust I put in you, Lord.*

Silence.

I am falling deeper, deeper, deeper ...

Somewhere between the heat, her heart pounding, the soothing music and closing her eyes, the taxi took a wrong turn.

Clunk! The driver locked all the doors from his main switch as he drove away from Mxheke. She felt the eyes of the man next to her strip her dignity to nakedness. She had soberly and consciously fallen into the lion’s den and could feel their hungry roars luring her deeper. But she was dressed decently

– long-sleeved polo neck, long, untight pants – appropriately covered from head to toe; they had no excuse to be aroused. Five men, one woman.

It was expectedly unexpected. She was ready to attack if anything happened, but she was unready for anything happening. She had let her guard down, and her defence slowly crumbled to ashes. *Why have You forsaken me?*

She gripped the door handle and the scissors in her pocket tighter. It was pointless, but it gave her some sense of control. She painfully swallowed her tears.

I am falling deeper, deeper, deeper ...

The engine came to a sudden halt in a deserted area. There was sand everywhere and heaps of trash scattered around.

‘You don’t talk much hey ... but let’s see the real you!’ Her fellow citizen, the one next to her, thrust his muscular arms onto her skinny arms and pushed her backwards, hitting her head with a thud against the window.

In his tight grip, she managed to loosen her right arm and stabbed the scissors in the air between their faces, pointing the sharp end towards him.

The audience roared with laughter; their laughter diminished the sharp object into mere plastic and shattered the last straw of fight she had in her. *Forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

I am falling deeper, deeper, deeper ...

‘Dude, don’t forget to share,’ said the driver as he lit a cigarette.

‘You can start, anytime from now.’ The young man who was at the back seat positioned his phone to capture the horror and the oldest man cackled.

‘Where in Mxheke are you going?’

Their insults deafened her ears; the poisonous lust dripping from his face blinded her; fear and panic brewed inside her, and she could feel pain oozing from her hand as she stabbed into his face. She stabbed and stabbed and stabbed.

It is done.

The pain was excruciating; her heart was heaving, her eyes were teary, and she could feel someone nudge her on the shoulder.

She faced the man next to her.

‘The driver is asking where you are going,’ the man said.

‘Where in Mxheke are you going?’ the driver reiterated, looking at her in the rear-view mirror.

‘Next to the butchery,’ she managed to answer.

Silence.

‘Are you okay?’ the man next to her asked with a concerned expression.

She nodded at him as she released her grip on the door handle. She looked down at her hand and saw the crumpled R10 note; it was beyond repair, and giving it to the driver would be an insult. Shivering, she reached for another one from her pocket and paid the driver. Her painful right hand remained in her pocket.

The taxi came to a halt next to the butchery.

‘Thank you,’ she uttered as she opened the door to exit. A thank you that carried so much weight and meaning. A genuine thank you that hid no pretence, no scorn or indignity. *Thank you for not hurting me.*

She wiped the film of sweat on her forehead and suddenly paused as her gaze was transfixed on the taxi, [CA 084-073], as it vanished into the distance. On the back window, in a thick, white font she read *YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE*, and deeper, in the dark lens of that window, she saw the young man’s face and a smile crept from his lips, and she wondered if somehow, somehow, they had existed in the figment of her fearful wandering.

She cautiously took out her throbbing hand. It was covered in blood from the multiple cuts the scissors had made in her spasm of psychosis.

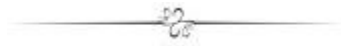
As she stared at her bleeding hand, she saw visions of scarlet on her palm: the perpetrators laughed at her in disdain; the victims cried in vain for her to save them; the innocent men hid their faces from her in shame; and she ... she feared to be the next victim.

For three decades she had lived with fear. Inside that taxi, fear had raped her of her faith; fear had caused her death, yet her death did not save the victims, it did not pay the debt of lost lives that the perpetrators owed, and it did not give hope to the innocent man with bloodstained blemishes. Her spirit was willing, but her flesh was weak, and it bowed down to fear.

She waited a few seconds for the cars to disappear before she hastily crossed the two-way road with pain aching from her hand and sorrow stuck in her throat.

If her Saviour, whose death could save, pay the debt, and bring everlasting hope, were to arrive at this hour, what was she holding as proof of her faithful Christian life? A crumpled R10 note and a scarred, bloody hand.

Back slumped, chest in, face angled downward. Her eyes wept bitterly like the sorrowful gaze of Simon Peter as the cock crowed.



Vuyiswa Kubalasa



In 2021, Vuyiswa Kubalasa was in her final year of studying towards a BSc in Mathematics and Applied Mathematics. She has found that words match her zeal for numbers. Reading and writing have always fascinated her. For her, the fascination is in the power that stories have to draw her into their world, leaving her completely oblivious to her surroundings. Her

interest in writing developed through her love of reading. She offers a big thank you of gratitude to her high school English teachers for helping to hone her writing skills.

Vuyiswa was runner-up in the 2021 SA Writers College Short Story Competition for ‘A Crumpled R10 Note and a Bloody Hand’.

**A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE
IS A DANGEROUS
THING**

(THEME FOR 2022)

PEOPLE LIKE US

Matshediso Radebe

July. Whenever I see a truck in the rear-view mirror, I fantasise about opening the car door. I know it would crush me and I'd become nothing but a memory in an instant. I also know that the road is wet and slippery and that can make driving tricky; that's how I almost got us killed last year when I was driving back from Eric's parents' thirtieth-anniversary party while he was passed out on the passenger seat, drooling, with bottles of Hansa rattling at his feet.

With the rain burbling on the car roof like cooking oil and competing with the Billy Joel song, I trace two droplets down the window, watching one get bigger and faster while the other falls behind. Eric's jacket almost swallows and disfigures me, making me look limbless; it's warm and smells of him, like English Blazer and cannabis.

While drum-beating the steering wheel in time to the radio, between drags on his cigarette, Eric tells me how proud he is, as if checking into a treatment centre is such a fucking achievement. You sit in the back seat, spitting the occasional, mindless 'yeah, true, totally' like you're ad-libbing a trap song, probably swiping away on Tinder. Ever since Ma's funeral last

month you've kept a revolving door of guys, and I'm worried about you. When I recommended therapy, you paused and then said, 'Sorry, but you lose a say in your sister's life when you have meltdowns over the calories in PB & J sandwiches.' You apologised the next day, but still ...

At the reception, I'm signed in by a blondie with skin as smooth as crinkled white paper. Though she smells like cheap spirits and has dead curls where her bangs should be, with that jawline and those collar bones I'd still put her on my Pinterest vision board. She flashes a yellowish smile before giving me papers to fill out. Before you guys leave, Eric kisses my forehead and reminds me that he's proud, while you stand by the door, tapping your wrist because you're late for something.

* * *

December. In varsity, Eric and I used to skip parties to stay in and watch pirated K-dramas and eat instant noodles on the peeling leather couch his father gave him. He'd stockpile twenty-four-pack, sugar-free Red Bulls for me, study the scattered tattoos on my arms like they were one of his cartography assignments, ask about their backstories while tracing the underlying scar tissue with the scratchy tip of his finger.

'I got them to cover up my mother's cigarette burns,' I once said.

He said they reminded him of cute bumper stickers of pins, ducklings, stars, hearts.

When we slept, his body would shadow me and make me feel small in the same way the lemon tree in our backyard did – the tree you used to say looked like an emaciated girl with yellow pins in her Afro, the one we used to retreat to on cruel summer days. Remember?

After graduation, Eric and I both scored decent-paying internships. Me at a nice accounting firm and Eric at his uncle's mining firm, collecting samples and making coffee. Neither of us wanted to move back home so we invested in an apartment cinched into western Cape Town. The toilet got blocked every second week, the ceiling leaked when it rained, and the walls were an ugly teal colour we promised to repaint but never got around to. Regularly, we'd get stoned on the balcony and he'd read my short stories and call me brilliant.

'I'd buy your anthology if you ever had the balls to publish one,' he'd say.

The geyser only keeps water hot for about an hour, so we shower together often. Some Saturdays we play dominoes and watch K-dramas. The house has two bedrooms, but most times we fall asleep on his bed and wake up holding hands like otters, breaths synced into a single cadence. I only sleep in my bed when he brings girls over. The walls are paper thin, the girls are always loud, and Eric always forgets to buy me earplugs.

You think Eric and I are in love but afraid to admit it, which is to be expected because all your lovers started out as friends and you think ‘queerplatonic’ is a friendship between two gays. I introduced the two of you three weeks after we moved in, a week after my twenty-second birthday. You called our place cute; ‘It’s giving off ... minimalist chic,’ you said.

You were in town for a photography gig and thought it would be good to stop by and meet the topic of our tri-yearly conversations. You wore maroon lipstick and a black miniskirt. I wore a yellow crop top and blue jeans. Eric said we looked like sororal twins, like alternative versions of the same person from different dimensions in a sci-fi about time travel.

We settled into his couch, talking and laughing while rotating bottles of Smirnoff until the light outside died and we were too sloshed to walk. We played a stupid game where we tried to tell each other apart by feeling each other’s faces in the dark. Eric felt nesh, with the occasional prickliness of a beard in its infancy. His lips felt supple and pink, like a tulip. You felt like Ma – canine jaw, bumpy skin, semi-chapped lips. Eric brought up how crazy it was that just yesterday we could all fall asleep and trust that there’d be an adult to carry us from the couch to the bed, but now we were the adults.

‘Did Ma ever carry us to bed?’ I asked.

‘Of course,’ you said. ‘How else would she have known we needed to go on all those diets?’ We laughed.

But that feels like a millennium ago. Now we’re at a wedding reception, watching you walk down the aisle in Ma’s white beaded dress – the one you’ve

altered to have a more plunging V-neckline and cinched waist. That daisy wreath makes you look angelic. The slit revealing the red dragon tattoo, veiling the scar courtesy of Ma's flat iron, makes you feel avant-garde. I never got the full story about why that happened. All I know is you screamed and begged Pa to take you to the hospital because you thought you were going to die, but he said something about social workers and forgiveness. Ma gave me your tunics and skirts and you spent your remaining high school weeks in baggy, grey slacks. Pa nursed you, apologised whenever he changed the dressing and you winced, put honey on the wound and assured us it would all be funny one day. He let you trace the soft, aged knife scar underlying the yin and yang tattoo below his ribcage.

'This isn't the first time your ma has gone a bit overboard,' he chuckled, as if trying to turn it into a light-hearted joke. 'When you turn eighteen, I'll take you to Tbose myself. Best tattoo artist I know.'

You guys don't talk anymore, but he asks about you all the time. When I told him about the wedding, he said he understood why you wouldn't want him there, considering the fact that you didn't even go to Ma's funeral. He asked me to visit him at Christmas.

'We don't even have to eat, dear,' he'd said in a voice as lived-in as a sweater.

You barely visited me while I was at the treatment centre, and Eric came with an excuse each time, each more unbelievable than the last. 'She's sick', 'She's helping a charity', and – my personal favourite – 'She's at church'. I got

to thinking about Pa and how he must feel knowing his two daughters just cut him off. Now I call him every day. Call it guilt; call it filial duty.

You're marrying a guy named Jon. Jon has a round belly, skinny limbs, a yacht, and 'good intentions', as you put it when I tried to talk you out of this a week ago, after I was discharged. You met Jon at a bar and really hit it off debating Laura Mulvey's male-gaze theory. Somewhere between coffee dates and late-night video calls, it struck you that he acts like he was 'written by a woman' and you knew he was the one. He changes accents depending on who he's talking to, and calls himself 'a man of culture' because he knows three amapiano songs and can speak semi-fluent Setswana. Eric hates him.

* * *

November. Eric and Sylvia are out on a date. They've been dating for three months and she doesn't live here, but she still keeps some of her clothes and toiletries here for sleepovers. I like Sylvia because she's a quiet lover and doesn't act weird about us bumping into each other in the kitchen the next morning. Once, I told her I was asexual and she said 'Oh, cool' and proceeded to write the grocery list.

'Regular or Diet Coke?' she'd asked, biting the butt of the pen. Playing with the loose thread of my turquoise sweater under the table, I realised that this was the first time someone had asked me if I even wanted regular Coke in a long time.

‘Yeah, regular’s good,’ I’d said casually, hoping she couldn’t tell how much that meant to me. Loved ones hear ‘anorexic ... restrictive’ and suddenly you don’t have a say in your food consumption.

You rest your arms against the cool steel rail, overlooking the traffic below our balcony. You’re in a yellow bodycon dress that highlights your svelte figure – the kind of figure that attracts model scouts in malls. Your skin is polished mahogany; light catches your shoulders, forehead and cheekbones. You’re beautiful. I tell you about maybe visiting Pa sometime soon, how great Eric and Sylvia are, and how I know it won’t last because Sylvia has a whole Pinterest mood board with wedding dresses and Eric hates the idea of marriage.

You laugh and mention that Jon has an opening in a friend’s accounting firm.

‘Send me your CV,’ you say.

I got fired from my last firm, the one I interned at after graduation. I was passing out in print rooms and missing important deadlines, and the bags under my eyes looked sickly and unnatural. I looked like I was battling a life-long heroin addiction. It wasn’t long before the big white man with a round belly and expensive cologne called me into his office and offered me an ultimatum: drug rehab centre or getting fired. Somehow, leaving as a ‘heroin addict’ felt less humiliating than explaining that I was living on apples and sugar-free Red Bulls. When I got home and told Eric, he wasn’t so much

surprised as he was pissed off and sad. He promised to move out if I didn't get help and booked me into a treatment centre the following week.

'Why isn't it out here?' you nod at the opuntia on the windowsill. The house-warming gift. It's the ugliest thing I own. Whenever I look at it, I imagine you walking past budding lilies and orchids, seeing a hostile, parched, defensive ball of needles huddled in a corner and thinking, *Yes ... perfect for her*. It's the subtext that bothers me.

'That window's fine,' I say. 'Plus, I read an article saying not to move them around too much.'

'An article? You read one article?' You cough an obscure giggle, settling into the white chair across from mine. 'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing when it comes to you. Just a thumbnail's worth of info and you can concoct an entire human out of it.'

What a stupid analogy.

I offer you carrot cake while we watch the sun tuck itself behind the horizon, but you reject it. Cigarette gritted between your teeth, you grab the matchbox on the glass table between us, and strike so hard there's a fierce sizzle.

'Do you think Ma would be proud of us?' I take a sip of my green tea.

Crushing your half-finished cigarette, you work your way through a new one: like Ma always said ... something about finishing a whole cigarette being unladylike.

‘Unfortunately, yes.’

An orchestra of road-raged honks and blaring sirens soundtracks our brief pause. We laugh.

Matshediso Radebe



At the time of writing, Matshediso Radebe was a 21-year-old student in her second year of Communications studies. She has loved storytelling for as long as she can remember, and she has her primary school English teachers to thank for the confidence that has carried her writing over the

past decade or so. Troubled characters with relatable relationships and compelling dynamics drive her storytelling.

Matshediso won the 2022 SA Writers College Short Story Competition with her entry, 'People Like Us'.

RUBICON

Jengo Ata

These blisters on my hands are time capsules. I study them when I'm not being watched, just to see how long it's been since I had to grow up. I drop my pick to the ground, and I gaze into my palms. All these years, yet the memories of him still won't scab over.

He drank the type of tea that could deep-fry untrained lips. He spoke soberly when drunk, and drunkenly when sober. He always put extra salt in his meals, even if the meal was a heap of salt.

You knew him by that wizened gaze of his, and lines like whiskers branching from the outer corners of his eyes; a smile like the jigsaw puzzle of a crescent moon, but with missing pieces; the gravel in his guffaw; his sunken cheeks, already sucked in by the frazzle of old age; a leaning tower of a man.

He was like my grandfather, on account of being too old to be my father. I never knew mine, but I knew him. I knew Baba Masaga. He took me in when I was little, onto his small patch of land. Baba Masaga taught me how to survive, how to brew beer, then barter it for scraps of food. He even taught me to laugh, peppering our mealtimes with levity so that our meals were always light. He was unlike any of the old folks in the neighbourhood, who

were all swollen with bitter will to fling at carefree youth. Not Baba Masaga. One morning, however, he was unlike himself.

I was only seven then – a scrawny kid who couldn't tell my left hand from my right unless under a beam of light. Not bright, but full of ideas. I was who I had always been on that cold morning. Not Baba Masaga.

We boarded a bus without any travel passes that morning. If you grew up where I grew up, there was no greater sin than travelling without a pass on your person. Applications for passes weren't approved right away anyway, but we had less chance of getting caught on the bus than on foot. No guarantees, but we had to leave. All I knew was that our tiny abode was a cause for arbitration.

They'd come to our house the day before: two men of imprecise features, but exactly the army type. The red-orange hue of the sunset behind them did nothing to dull the severity of their silhouettes, or the firmness in their tones. I peeped from behind the door of our hut. Baba Masaga wouldn't let me near the men, so I couldn't make out the words in the exchange. At dawn, Baba Masaga and I set off for the bus stop. Our destination was the army barracks.

It was only six minutes away. Six minutes, yet the mounting anxiety sank its talons into reality, slowing time down, fostering silence. The only signs of life on the bus were the engine sounds. We careened along the uneven, dusty road for about a minute or so, before gradually coming to a stop. As the bus let out a hiss, I heard a loud rapping on the door. I looked outside

my window and saw an olive-green truck. There was no mistaking its presence, or the fear in the eyes of its captives. When the bus door flung open, it let in a chilly gust, humid with horror.

A soldier with the face of a schoolboy stepped onto the bus. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder where a satchel of books would have been. He marched with a menacing authority while scanning our heads. Were it not for his age, the disdain he carried in his eyes would have been his most glaring quality. He stopped next to a woman seated a few rows ahead of me. She clutched her handbag and shrank in her seat.

‘Pass?’ the young soldier asked the woman, who unzipped her handbag in haste, fishing out a card for the soldier to inspect.

After the soldier pored over the card, he gave it back to her, and resumed his slow march. He demanded a pass from an elderly man wearing an equally ancient suit. Just as the elderly man stammered out an explanation, he found himself yanked from his seat, and the young soldier shoved the man towards the exit, booting his backside for good measure. Two more souls met their journey’s end in hostile fashion, before the young soldier set his sights on me.

‘You there,’ he said, charging towards my seat, ‘where’s your pass?’

Words became a jumble in my mouth, crashing into each other, resisting momentum, and digging their heels into my tongue, as if its tip was the edge of a cliff.

‘Young man,’ Baba Masaga addressed the soldier, ‘er, you see –’

‘I don’t recall asking you anything, old man,’ the soldier snapped, scowling at Baba Masaga, before looking back at me. ‘Your pass ... show me your pass.’

Again, I tried to speak, but the words clung to the roof of my mouth like a viscous purée.

‘It’s the tonsils,’ Baba Masaga chimed in once more. ‘He can’t even speak properly now. I’m taking him to the clinic.’

Baba Masaga’s quick thinking put me at ease. The clinic was just up ahead, near the turn leading to the barracks.

‘The clinic?’ said the young soldier. He looked at Baba Masaga. ‘I didn’t realise. Only problem here is, I don’t believe you.’

My nerves grew taut again. The young soldier lowered his frame and injected his voice with a grave tone.

‘Show me your pass, old man, or the both of you are coming with me.’

The back of the olive-green truck was the last place we wanted to be. We knew its final destination: life in a labour camp, where only corpses left. There was no reasoning with the young soldier. His cold, calculating eyes made it clear. No escaping them, as he readied himself to pluck the two of us from our seats.

‘Hey,’ called out another soldier, drawing the young one’s attention to the bus door. ‘Truck’s full; let’s go.’

The young soldier glared back at us, my heart racing at his intensity. After a moment, he walked out of the bus before it jerked forward, seconds later.

‘There,’ said Baba Masaga, patting my head, ‘you’re all safe now.’

His wan smile couldn’t conceal the burden on his face. He looked away from me; the soldier had flustered him more than I suspected.

We got off at the turn leading to the barracks. I walked alongside Baba Masaga, minding my speed so as not to exhaust him. The road was a slope after all.

‘Tried to take my land away,’ he murmured as if to himself. ‘It’s all I have – my birthright.’

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked him.

He looked at me while walking and said, ‘You must hold on to what matters to you, no matter what.’

I nodded.

We walked past wilted, sparse greenery and rows of tenement housing on either side of the road, with some of the old structures newly occupied by militia. Five minutes later, we reached the entrance of the barracks. A guard appeared from the sentry post, in time for Baba Masaga’s salutation.

The guard nodded in acknowledgement. ‘Alright, state your business.’

‘Name’s Albert Masaga, here to parlay with the commander over a land issue.’

Baba Masaga used his full name; this was serious.

‘Where from?’

‘Ward Nine. The commander is expecting me. I have my ID here, if –’

‘No need. Stretch out your arms, both of you.’

After he frisked us, the guard stepped back while inspecting us, and he sucked through his teeth. He pointed behind him.

‘It’s that building over there. Off you go, chop-chop.’

We walked into the barracks, and up ahead, beyond the boundary fence, I saw the labour camp. There was an olive-green truck within the camp offloading fresh detainees. Near the truck were other detainees already at work, burrowing into the ground with their picks. Armed soldiers monitored them with casual indifference. Baba Masaga and I walked past a field and a mess hall. Next to the mess hall was a timber structure which we approached. Even though I was nauseous with dread, there was no turning back. Baba Masaga knocked on the door, and a raspy voice invited us in.

The door creaked open, and the two of us walked into a room full of soldiers – two drops of blood in a tank of sharks. A burly man with a moustache sat behind a plain desk. He must have been the commander; the air about him suggested a propensity to bark out commands. His chair held up the weight of his frame and authority, creaking when he gestured for us to sit on the stools across from his desk.

‘Mr Masaga, right?’ asked the commander in a raspy voice.

‘That’s right.’

The commander rested his arms on the table and spoke: ‘I’m just a man, Mr Masaga. A fair man stuck in a world that’s anything but. A world which reunites you with a long-lost glove, shortly after you lose the hand it fits. You understand this, don’t you?’

‘Maybe.’

The commander leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin. 'Have you thought about our proposal?'

'I have.'

'Did you come to a decision?'

'I did.'

'Excellent.'

The commander looked at me and smiled.

'You must be Willard.'

'Y – yes, sir,' I replied. How did he know my name?

'I'm told you're quite the hard worker at home.'

'I clean the house, the yard too. I even clean Baba Masaga's beer clay pots to remove any leftovers.'

'Oh?' said the commander, putting on a cheeky smile. 'Do you actually remove the beer, or do you just drink it up?'

'Is there a difference?'

The commander laughed with his men as he looked across the room. 'I like this kid.'

Shortly after, the commander peeked at the table surface before saying to Baba Masaga, 'He'll do.'

'I don't understand,' I said, before looking at Baba Masaga. 'What does he mean?'

Baba Masaga paused. He wouldn't look at me. 'Just –' he paused again, letting out a heavy sigh, his head hung low. 'Just do whatever they say, and you won't get hurt.'

‘Pleasure doing business,’ the commander said to Baba Masaga, who rose from his seat. ‘You get to keep your land while keeping us happy. Excellent.’

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. I didn’t know enough about the hearts of men. If I had known the full extent of their darkness, I would have run away under the cover of night. Run to where only crows could reach me and pick my flesh apart if they desired a taste of despair.

‘What? No. Please don’t leave me here.’

I swivelled my body to follow Baba Masaga, but a hand from behind fell onto my shoulder, pinning me to the stool.

‘You’ll be fine,’ said Baba Masaga, still not looking at me. He trudged on towards the exit with his head hung low. I cried out to him:

‘I’ll be a good boy. I – I won’t be naughty anymore. I’m scared, Baba Masaga, please don’t leave me.’

My vision blurred, my cheeks were wet, my nose ran. I cried out even louder.

‘Please.’

Anguish bled into my voice, threatening to choke me, but I couldn’t help myself. Baba Masaga stopped at the exit, placing his hand on the door frame. Slowly, he began turning back, but then he stopped.

‘What did I do?’ I cried out to him, and I saw his frame shake.

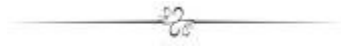
He might have sobbed; I couldn’t tell. The soldiers yelling at me to hush drowned out all noises, apart from my wailing.

Rubicon

‘Please, no!’

The door creaked shut.

His back was the last I saw of Baba Masaga.



Jengo Ata



This is Jengo Ata's first foray into the world of short story writing at a competitive level. His father used to teach English Literature in high school. Jengo graduated with a Bachelor of Science in 2020.

Jengo's story, 'Rubicon', was runner-up in the SA Writers College Short Story Competition for 2022.

WHAT THE JUDGES THOUGHT

Each year, the judges of the South African Writers College Short Story Competition provide their feedback and reasons for choosing the winning stories. Their comments for the first- and second-place entries between 2018 and 2022 have been summarised below.

2018

The winning stories for 2018 – with the theme ‘Much ado about something’ – were original, thought-provoking and beautifully written.

‘There’s an App for That’ provides us with a whole new take on the idea of dealing with the devil. It is highly original, very well written and an attention grabber – a compelling story, told with razor-sharp wit and bleak humour, that keeps the reader’s attention right to the end. Very relatable and current, it highlights the hold and influence of social media on our daily lives – a hold ominously portrayed as both soulless and vampire-like in this story.

The author's use of the double-edged *akaron kaba* – for the Peruvian Kayapo people meaning both 'to take a photo' and 'to steal a soul' – is a clever twist and a delight.

The runner-up, 'Hero's Brush with Mutiny', successfully portrays the drudgery and frustration of dealing with the aftermath of crime, while also telling us a lot about the narrator's relationship with Claude. Her disappointment and regret, how she wishes that things were different and acknowledges that things need to change, leaves us willing her to stay away and never return to Claude and the grey air that surrounds him. Overall, good use of language and phrasing, with a beautifully realised lead character. A thought-provoking story.

2019

The 2019 competition and its theme, 'There is no one better than you', gave winning stories that were charismatic, with strong narratives and clever prose that made for compelling reading.

The great dialogue and chirpy cadences of Honey's voice, and the littering of her story with uniquely South African slang, make her an attractive and compelling character in 'Tulbagh by Gaslight'. Excellent descriptions, characterisation and dialogue take the reader on that road trip and the informal, chatty catch-up between two friends. Certain scenes – such as the unemotional middle finger – are not only recognisable and familiar, but

also humorous. The story builds – as she drives faster and faster – to a surprise ending.

‘Sit Down; You’re Brown’ is a hilarious take on the antics of Heritage Day, told in a wonderfully non-PC way through the eyes of a disillusioned character who does not fit the expectations placed on him by race and culture. The story is honest, portraying the very contemporary South African drive for inclusiveness and the mixed results that this can bring. Engaging and charming. Funny and sharp. A lovely, engaging narrator who feels authentic and fresh.

2020

The winning stories for 2020 were original, honest and bold. Each was a thoughtful interpretation of the theme ‘You’re up to your neck in it’.

‘The Moot Mulatto’ is no fairy tale. It is a harsh and desolate story, brutally honest in its telling, without sugar coating. The two main characters are hardened by life and convincingly drawn. Neither is particularly likeable – the mother seeks to benefit from the relationship and absolve herself of her responsibilities, while the child wants only to divest themselves of their unfortunate blood-tie and be freed from an onerous annual duty. A loveless tale, it is nevertheless deeply moving and evocative.

The descriptions of place in ‘Misstep’ are vivid and real. A double drama masterfully unfolds in the story: the drama of the quicksand and the drama of the loss, trauma and guilt experienced by the character as his life is replayed.

A brilliantly raw and well-told window into the man's mind. Visceral and believable, it takes the reader on an emotional – even gut-wrenching – journey that is poignant, thought-provoking and unexpected.

2021

In 2021, the theme was 'You only live once'. Both winning tales were dark, menacing and ominous but brilliantly conceived and well written.

An original story that sustains an unflinchingly ominous atmosphere through the narrator's menacing language, 'We Ate his Bowels First' is one for horror fans. The wonderful title and fantastic first line immediately capture the reader's imagination. A gripping take on the victim-turns-victor theme, this story is written with a strong and beautiful command of the craft. The author's idea is clever and stunningly delivered, and her unwillingness to reveal benign and mundane details makes for an intricate and compelling read. Overall, a worthy winner.

'A Crumpled R10 Note and a Bloody Hand' highlights the brutal, and all-too-common, harsh reality for many women in South Africa today. A story that needs to be told. It is an accomplished insight into the terrible power of fear and how it can distort reality. The author skilfully maintains a considerable level of tension throughout, drawing the reader in so that they are right there beside the main character, feeling her rising fear and choking panic. This is a powerful and memorable story with a strong and relatable

heroine. A great piece of storytelling with a masterful ending. A well-deserved runner-up.

2022

The first- and second-place stories were honest, fresh and creative, each a unique interpretation of the theme ‘A little knowledge is a dangerous thing’.

‘People Like Us’ is a special story, masterfully exploring the subjects of addiction, mental health, abuse and sexuality, and leaving the reader wanting to learn more about the two sisters and their lives. The author’s use of narrative voice and the switches from first to second person – not an easy skill to master, but done with purpose – hold the reader’s interest. Vivid imagery and elegant turns of phrase, like ‘An orchestra of road-raged honks and blaring sirens soundtracks our brief pause’, and the writer’s inside-out knowledge of her characters make this story stand out. This is a writer who trusts her reader, and it shows.

In ‘Rubicon’, we can see the potential of a writer with a lot of talent. Our introduction to Baba Masaga – someone who adds salt even to well-salted food – shows great characterisation. The narration was engaging, the word choices excellent and the story moved without hurdles to an unexpected ending. In many ways, the abrupt ending – the life-changing betrayal of the young boy – feels like it could be just the beginning of a longer, more complex story. Perhaps the backstory to something, or someone, altogether more

What the Judges Thought

fantastical (a Marvel villain, or hero, or ...). It's a story that could develop in interesting directions if it had a longer word count.