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Writing Sample

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Includes poems from the collection *We Are* and excerpt from *Kedibone*.

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Sabata-mpho MOKAE

Poems and excerpt from a novel-in-progress

I. Taung Skull

There is no skull in taung
just the black smoke atop the plateau
of burning foreskins of young boys
hoping to become men
in the morning I dipped my body
in kolong river but discovered
no skull in taung resting on pebbles

old men shed tears of drunken stupor
in unison and celebration
of their boys who are under an illusion
that their foreskins will grow
into blankets of manhood

now I call myself a man
after all these rituals
yet the offspring from mutilated loins
bare a night face of hunger

no
i am not a man
but merely a foreskin
thrown into the rivers of taung

my hormones are now swelling
in my own skull in torrents of rage
as I trade reason for fists
i see faeces in the faces
of those I once loved and promised
to show them a skull in taung
which was also once
covered by a skin

2. If these hills could scream

if these hills could scream
whose voice would they borrow
that of triumphant hunter?
or a voice of a maimed lion?
these hills
if they could scream
would they scream hooray
in merriment
or would they cry in pain
waiting for redemption?
these hills

stood witness as history unfold
these hills know the truths
and can tell of lies
when skeletons confess
in selected skeletal parts
these hills
only if they could take a stand
and scream truths
into our minds.

3. The distance

how long is the distance
from hope to despair
the distance
from despair to hope
a minute long maybe
or as short as the distance
between the scalp and the skull

the distance
between life and death
can be as short as the distance
between mourning and merriment
and at times
as long as the distance
between the moon and the sun,
the night and the day

the distance is the space between
where a great deal can happen
sometimes the distance
between poverty and wealth
can be as long as a political slogan
shouted from the rooftops
as if deceit and truth
have no distance between
so, how long is the distance
between morality and immorality
perhaps as long as it takes
to convince the world
that HIV does not cause Aids.

4. Moses (Molelekwa) did not die

i am haunted by a ghost
so unassuming and handsome
his fingers romancing the piano
seducing the wind and the trees
no, it is not a ghost
moses did not die
those with beautiful hands

do not die
when they die
works of their hands
do not follow.

From the collection *We Are* (2005; Ed. N. Molebatsi)

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Kedibone

A layer of smog formed just metres above the corrugated iron roofs of matchbox houses in Galeshewe, clothing the township in a dark blue cloud. Anything that could be burned to heat up water, brew the morning tea and make the houses warm was used - from coal to tree branches to dry items from rubbish bins. The smell never mattered.

It was a winter morning in this godforsaken place on the outskirts of Kimberley, the city that found its fame when the world raced to it in search of diamonds in the nineteenth century. It was like any other South African township.

Children rushed to school in their varied clean, ironed uniforms with rucksacks on their backs. Men dressed in overalls of various colours, others in shirts and ties, some in retail uniforms, rushed to catch the municipal buses that seemed never to be in a good mood. Some jumped onto the few minibus taxis that ferried people all day from home to town and back.

Women, in their pure white hospital uniforms, domestics with pinafores in their handbags, waitresses and cashiers attired in various uniforms also wrestled for their space in the queues at the bus stop.

A little further in the suburb of Hadison Park, Larry Pickover walked slowly to the gate to fetch the newspaper tagged to the post box. Since his retirement, this English and history teacher whiled away time reading the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, underlining and circling spelling mistakes and grammatical errors with his red pen.

He would then write long letters to the editor, complaining about the declining standards of journalism and non-adherence to journalistic ethics. After that he would visit his neighbours and converse on what he read.

He read his newspaper sitting under the carport, always in the same position with a cup of Five Roses tea next to him. He did this every day around seven o'clock, except when it rained or was very cold. Had it not been for a change of clothes, passersby would easily have mistaken him for a piece of art.

But back to the Galeshewe Township in the morning; it's usually choc-a-bloc, a rush to get to *baas* who's always ready to get you replaced by another desperate job seeker should you turn up late. Work was scarce and you held on to what you had. Otherwise your children would starve.

Galeshewe also had the same history as any other township in South Africa: set up as a labour reserve on the outskirts of the city and the industrial zone, it was a village for exclusive habitation by Africans under the administration of the Department of Native Affairs. It also lacked the basic amenities. In some parts of the township, or the location as some called it, on a particular day of the week, a tractor pulling a yellow tank would come and men in blue overalls would empty toilet buckets. Cops in a yellow pick-up, dubbed by the locals 'mellow yellow' or a *kwela* van, meaning 'jump in,' patrolled the streets day and night.

Morning conversations at the bus stop often began with what people had heard on the current affairs programme on Radio Tswana, a government radio station staffed mainly by former teachers and set up to serve the Setswana-speaking communities in South Africa. Enlightened ones in the queue would buy copies of the local newspaper, the Diamond Fields Advertiser, before arriving at work. They often read the paper during tea-time or before they started duty. These were often the clerks, *bo-mabalane*, those who worked with pens and paper. Others would not care about the news, the municipal bus boycotts or the imminent visit to the city of Kimberley by the State President.

They wanted to get to work, do what they were ordered to do, go back home and get paid at the end of the fortnight or month-end, whatever the case may be. They were simply part of a wheel that kept turning. That's all they were – good citizens. They wanted no trouble. They wanted their children to have a roof over their heads, eat, be clothed, go to school and maybe one day be released from the bondage of poverty.

Among these was Matlholaadibona Mosadiwatlala, a dairy worker in his thirties who dropped out of high school when his father died while working at the De Beers Consolidated Mines. He had to leave school to take care of his mother and niece, whose mother also died shortly after labour.

At first he tried going to night school to keep his dream of becoming a teacher alive, but later gave up. Since then, he would never go to bed sober. His mother gave up trying to talk sense into him. She eventually prayed for him to leave the bottle alone. He never did. She also never ceased praying for him. He was her only son, her only child who was still living at home apart from the granddaughter whose father she didn't know.

Then one day when he came home from work, Matlholaadibona told his mother that Diego Da Silva, a Portuguese restaurateur in town to whom he delivered milk every morning, needed an extra pair hands in busy times such as Easter and Christmas seasons. He thought his niece, Kedibone, could take up the offer and earn some money during school holidays. This was not something they would even think about.

Kedibone was seventeen when she started working at Da Silva's Food Corner. Being an orphan, she hardly had any small change to purchase hair relaxant like all girls her age. Her grandmother told her that she had to take the offer so that she could be able to purchase

hair relaxant, roll-on deodorant and proper sanitary towels, and be like other girls in the township.

“That piece of cloth you use when you are on your days is harsh and will eventually hurt you,” her grandmother, MmaMosadiwatlala, would say.

“Your mother died at a very young age, my child. We don’t know who your father is or was. Maybe he lives in this neighbourhood and he sees you every time you go to school or when we send you to the shops. Anyway, I must shut up about that irresponsible son of the devil. God will answer for you one day,” the old woman said, shrugging her shoulders. Kedibone had to learn that she was on her own. Having no mother and not sure who her father was, she also had no siblings. All that she knew was that she had an uncle and a grandmother whose days on earth were also numbered and that sooner or later she had to find her way in life.

Her grandmother’s old age pension was barely enough to keep the wolf at bay for a month. While working at the restaurant during school holidays, she was able to augment her granny’s meagre pension.

She earned enough to buy sanitary towels to last until the next holiday season when she would be back at the restaurant. She could even buy hair relaxant and moisturiser, roll-on deodorant and an odd pair of jeans and a blouse from Sales House or Bee Gees and began to look like other girls in Galeshewe Township. Boys even started paying attention to her. But she rejected their advances.

It was nearing the end of the Christmas season and Kedibone had been working at Da Silva’s Food Corner on and off since Good Friday when she came home later than usual one night. She proceeded straight to her grandmother’s dim-lit bedroom and handed her a stack of ten rand notes. Without a word she turned around and went to the children’s bedroom, which had become hers since all the other grandchildren had left because they were already grown up and were either working out of town, were married or living on their own. The old woman could sense that something was wrong.

“Kedi, are you crying? What is wrong? And since you are only getting paid next week, where do you get this money from?”
Kedibone sobbed and said nothing.

In the middle of the night, the old woman could hear the sound of the movement of water. It was as if somebody was taking a bath. She woke up and went to the children’s bedroom only to find the stark-naked Kedibone standing in a washing basin.

“Why are you bathing at night, my child? What’s wrong? Say something. Please. I am your grandmother. You can trust me.”
It was as if the grandmother had told her to cry more. Tears flowed down her cheeks as if sluice gates had been opened. She cried loudly, clenched her fists and moved her hands as if she was crying for revenge. Her grandmother went closer, handed her a gown to cover her body and hugged her to calm her down.

“Tell me, my child. What happened?”

Kedibone took her wet facecloth, wiped her face and began relating the ordeal.

“He raped me, grandma. He raped me.”

“Oh, my God! Who did such a terrible thing, my child? Who did that?”

“It’s Emmanuel, Diego’s son.”

“The one who often drops you here in a red car after work?” the old woman asked.

“Yes, grandma. He raped me.”

Kedibone started to relate the ordeal to her grandmother.

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Although she was surprised, Kedibone suspected nothing when Emmanuel asked her to remain behind when all other workers were taken home.

“I’d like you to help me count the money,” he said.

She agreed.

“Maybe he’s beginning to trust me,” she thought.

He switched off the lights in the eating area, the kiosk, the kitchen and the garage. Only the small office where his father usually sat remained lit.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you home. It’s just that today my father left early, leaving this task for me. I’m too tired. I need another set of eyes,” Emmanuel said.

She believed him. Anyway, it would not be for the first time that he would be driving into Galeshewe Township. He often dropped off workers at bus stops nearer to their homes.

He closed all the doors.

They started counting the money; separating the coins from the notes, putting each denomination in separate plastic bags and before writing down the amounts on a notepad.

“Here,” he handed over a stack of ten rand notes to her.

“What is it for?” Kedibone asked.

“Just take it. I am thanking you.”

“You are thanking me for what?”

“Just take the money, Kedi. That’s all I can say. Stop asking so many questions,” he said, leaving her standing there in pleasant surprise.

“I’ll take you home when I come back from the bathroom.”

Kedibone was still in front of the table, counting the ten rand notes that he gave to her when Emmanuel grabbed her from behind.

“What are you doing?” she asked, pushing his hand away.

“I know you like me,” he said.

“Yes, I like you. But not in that way. Please don’t do that.”

Emmanuel kept quiet. He pushed her towards the wall.

“Emmanuel, please.”

“We’re just having fun, Kedi.”

“What fun? I don’t like this.”

He placed his forefinger on her lips and his other hand went down to her left upper leg.

“What are you doing?”

She could not believe it when his hand went underneath her skirt, moved his hand up and down her thigh, eventually pulling down her panties.

“Emmanuel, are you crazy?”

“Just keep quiet, Kedi. Keep quiet,” he said, jaws clenched, voice firm and low.

She froze. She had never been touched that way before.

She tried to push him away but the amateur rugby player remained where was, moving only as and when he wished.

His index finger went underneath her panties, snaking through to her vagina.

“Emmanuel, stop it. I’m begging you. Please stop it.”

He pulled out his finger from her vagina, pushing her legs apart with his.

Tears swelled her eyes.

“What are you doing? Please let me go,” she begged, her voice weakening.

He pushed her down to the floor. She tried to fight him off but it was all in vain. He pushed her legs apart again.

He shoved his finger into her vagina.

“Emmanuel, please don’t do that. I am begging you,” her voice was so weak, almost whispering.

“I’m begging you. Please let me go.”

He unzipped his trousers with one hand and held her down to the floor with another.

Kedibone called her late mother - “*ljoo mma, wee.*”

He put his hand on her mouth.

She could not scream. She could not move. She no longer resisted. She closed her eyes and allowed everything to take place.

He pushed his erect penis around, looking for the entrance to her vagina. She felt it moving around, and went in it with haste.

She cried silently. No sound. Just tears.

Not even her breathing made a sound, just his bellowing when he came.

Once he had done what he wanted to do, he stood up, zipped his trousers, dipped a hand in his pocket, took out another stack of ten rand notes and gave it to her. She pushed his hand away. He threw it at her and went to the toilet. She counted the notes. It was two hundred rand. She put it in her bra, wiped her thighs with a handkerchief and went to the toilet.

She had been in the toilet for not longer than a minute when he called her.

“Come on, Kedibone. Let’s go. It’s getting late. I want to sleep.”

“Voetsek,” she screamed. *Go away.*

She came holding a roll of toilet paper in her hand and followed him to the Ford Cortina that was parked behind the restaurant.

The trip that usually took fifteen minutes felt much longer that night. Kedibone could hear all the sounds the car made when it pulled off from the intersections, when it picked up speed and when it slowed down. She could hear when it was in first, second, third and last gear. It was as if the whole trip took place inside her skull.

All that time she wished she could give the car wings, let it fly and drop her at her grandmother’s matchbox house. But the driver carried on forever. All she wanted was to get out the car.

At last they arrived. He tried to force a smile.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Goodnight.”

She said nothing, got out of the car, banged the door and headed straight to the back door of grandmother’s house, which was always kept unlocked until everybody was in.

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Kedibone thought she was dreaming when her grandmother took out a handkerchief to wipe a tear.

“Slaap, my kind,” she said. *Sleep, my child.*

“We will figure out what to do when we wake up in the morning.”

Kedibone’s eyes were wide open throughout the night. The whole thing was playing itself again and again in her mind like bioscope, and every time it would seem more real than the last time.

She could even sense his smell, hear his hurried breathing. She could hear herself begging him to stop. She could remember the first thrust, and how violent it was and how disgusted, dirtied, violated, betrayed and powerless she felt.

Kedibone was so wide awake she could even hear the voices of people leaving the township for work at ungodly hours.

She also heard when Tebatso, their backroom boarder, took his girlfriend to her home very early, before her grandmother woke up.

She eventually fell asleep on top of the blankets. She was woken up by her grandmother with a cup of coffee.

“My kind, you’ll catch flu. Why are you not wearing anything?” MmaMosadiwatlala asked. She put coffee on the dressing table and moved closer to Kedibone.

“All shall be well. I am very sorry you have to go through this. It shall pass, my child. That dog shall have his day. My mother can hear me from the grave.”

Tears started flowing again.

“I’m sorry, grandma. I don’t know what to say or do. I’m really sorry. Maybe I could have left when everybody left,” Kedibone said, covering herself with a *donkey*, a cheap grey-and-white blanket.

“No, it is not your fault. I can see that boy has hurt you. His father will know me tomorrow, *ek sê vir jou*.”

Kedibone stood up and looked out through the window. It was still dark outside. The moon and the stars shone very bright. Up in the sky she saw *mphatthalatsane*, the bright morning star that outshone all other stars and was always the last to disappear to give way to the sun. She remembered the folktales her grandmother used to narrate to her about *mphatthalatsane*.

Those were the days of innocence. Now Emmanuel had violently taken that innocence away. She didn’t give it to him. He took away it without asking. He took it away because he could. He took it because he had the money to get him out of trouble. It’s a rotten world this one. “Grandma you can go back to sleep. This coffee must be cold already. I’ll make another one and bring to you.”

Matlholaadibona was woken from slumber by Kedibone and his mother’s conversation in the middle of the night.

“Goodness! I had a long and tiring day at the dairy. *Mma*, it’s almost four o’clock and you and your granddaughter are holding a conference. I’m supposed to be awake at half past five. Can’t you give me some peace?”

“Askies, *my kind*. I wasn’t aware that our voices were that high to wake you up,” the old woman said to her son.

“But now that you’re already up, maybe as Kedibone’s uncle and the only man in this house, you better come here because something very bad happened to your niece.”

Matlholaadibona made his way to children’s bedroom, finding the two women seated on the bed.

“Your niece arrived from work last night and never slept. She’s been crying the whole night,” she said.

“Molato ke eng?” he asked. *What’s the matter?*

“There is a big problem, my son.”

Turning his head towards Kedibone, he asked “Have you started seeing boys? I have warned you about being out in the township streets at night.”

The old woman interjected.

“Matlholaadibona, wait. This poor girl was kept against her will at work after others were sent home and then the son of the restaurant owner raped her.”

Tears started streaming down Kedibone’s face. Her grandmother hugged her.

“Mma, what are you saying? My blood is boiling already! Ek gaan daai hond doodmaak,” Matlholaadibona screamed. *I’m going to kill that dog.*

“Wait, my child. Fighting fire with fire will not help us. You don’t want to end in jail. And even if we take that boy to the police he’ll get away with it because his father has money for the lawyers. Poor people like us are at simply at God’s mercy, my child,” she said.

“Mma, are you saying that the bastard must now rape my niece and I must just let it go? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Don’t raise your voice, Matlholaadibona. We don’t have to wake up the neighbours. What I’m saying is that we need to make them pay. Right now my daughter’s daughter’ is hurt. She is deflowered in a way no girl must be deflowered. The dignity of my household has been brought down. My husband must be turning in his grave. But I’m saying that we can’t act out of emotions because it won’t help us in the end.”

Matlholaadibona had a habit of stroking his beard when thinking hard.

“I hear you, *mma*. Now what are you saying? What must we do now?” he asked.

“Try to leave the house and pass by those people’s shop. I know that the Portuguese man opens his shops early. Tell him that we know what happened last night and we are going to the police. Explain to him that according to our customs, adults report children to their parents first for their misdemeanours before they pass them on to the people of the law,” MmaMosadiwatlala said.

“But, where does the payment come in, *mma*? You just said we can’t take them to the police,” he said.

“I don’t think they want to be embarrassed. I think they’ll want to shut us up with money. That’s why I’m saying we’ll pass there to let them know that we are going to the police.”

“I get the picture. But if I got my way, I’d beat that boy until he forgets the name of the person who gave birth to him!”

By seven o’clock Kedibone’s grandmother was already dressed up and ready to go to town.

“That Portuguese man will pay. My grandchild has never been with a man before. It is not right that she must be deflowered so violently. That Portuguese man must pay. He has the money,” the old woman said to herself.

She had the habit of saying her thoughts out loud and letting out the steam when she was not aware that someone might be listening.

“Grandma, what are you saying? Is that why you did not want me to go to the police last night, that you should get money from them?” she was almost crying when she asked.

“My child, you must understand that even if we go to the police, that dog will not go to prison. You are only going to embarrass yourself by telling the whole Galeshewe Township what that monster did to you. They are going to know everything, *ek sê vir jou*,” the grandmother said.

“Grandma, are you saying that making them pay is the only thing that can make them feel some pain? What about me? This is not easy for me.”

“Kedi, I understand. But life is hard, *my kind*. You also know that I cannot even afford to buy sanitary towels for you. At least during school holidays you spend your days there and have a meal. What will you eat here all the school holidays if you are not going there?”

She stared at Kedibone, who in turn said nothing.

“My child, this world does many bad things to girls and women. Almost every woman that you know has a lot of bad and painful things done to her by a man. They did not run to the police. This is a burden all women must bear. If you take this Portuguese boy to the police,

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you will take almost every man there and eventually nobody will marry you. Listen to me, *my kind*, in this world women carry deep scars in their hearts. This is just the beginning. You are still going to see the worst in this world.”

The old woman’s words, however twisted Kedibone thought of them, were beginning to sink in.

“This is just the beginning. You are still going to see the worst in this world.”

These words kept on repeating themselves in Kedibone’s head.

She started thinking about what might happen if she went to the police. She thought of losing the holiday piece-job and the embarrassment to the whole family if the whole township was to know all the details of what happened last night.

Her grandmother’s words kept hammering at the inside of her skull. But her resolve to see the bastard pay dearly conflicted with what the old woman said to be the reality of a woman’s life.

The poor girl fought with the cold and harsh realities of her life. She thought about what happened to the girls that were rumoured to have been raped. She thought of the women her grandmother spoke about.

“Almost every woman that you know has been violated by a man,” the words continued to beg for her acceptance.

“I cannot let that dog get away with raping me just because his family is rich,” she said to herself.

She sat there and said nothing. What spoke the loudest were the tears that fell on the tablecloth as she listened to her grandmother even though she could hardly hear a word of what she was saying.

The old woman, for the first time in her life, could not figure out the message in her granddaughter’s silence, or even in her eyes.

The pair was quiet. The walls said nothing either. Only a falling pin might have cut short the silence.

Eventually Kedibone stood up and went to her to her bedroom. After an hour when she emerged from the bedroom she was wearing bright red slacks and white tunic, with her hair combed and had lipstick on.

“Let’s go, grandma.”
