

A Cow's Meat:
an original collection of poems and photographs that
explores the influence of imagery in narrative



A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Creative Writing in the Department of English Studies, University of the Western Cape.

Supervisor: Prof. Jacobus Moolman

Submitted: 06/06/2023

Citation convention used: MLA citation

Abstract

This MACW mini-thesis will examine how photography can inspire narrative in a poem and enhance the impact of its imagery. As I embarked on my journey of writing, I came to the point of needing to augment its effect. So I decided to experiment with photography as the prompt for my writing; exploring how photography can inspire a writer's creativity, and help them to take their work further and deeper. One of the most important and impactful parts of poetry is its use of evocative imagery. A poet employs imagery in her work to add sensory detail and lyrical effect in order to heighten the reader's understanding and experience of the topic at hand. Poets such as Angifi Dladla, Chika Sagawa, Max Ritvo and Dawn Garisch use powerful, sometimes strange, images in their work to provide a literary experience that would have an impact upon the reader. With this in mind, I decided to explore using another form of art, specifically photography, to help me expand my use and understanding of the way imagery functions in poetry. My MACW project was thus ultimately inspired by my need, as a writer, to expand and develop my writing. The original photos and poems in this creative project will furthermore demonstrate the merits and usefulness of an interdisciplinary methodology in creative practice. Through the process of ekphrasis, then, I have sought to build an original collection of new work.

Keywords

Poetry, photography, imagery, ekphrasis, interdisciplinary

Declaration

I, Kirsten Deane, declare that

“A Cow’s Meat: an original collection of poems and photographs that explores the influence of imagery in narrative” is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Signature:



Date:

06/06/2023



This thesis has been submitted to Turnitin and has been approved by the supervisor.

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Acknowledgments

First, I would like to acknowledge my supervisor and mentor, Kobus Moolman who has been by my side throughout this project and previous ones. Thank you for guiding me, teaching me, and believing in me.

I would like to give thanks to my family for allowing me to capture and write about their intimate spaces. Your vulnerability is beautiful and inspiring. This project would not have been possible without it.



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A Cow's Meat:

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influence of imagery in narrative

Kirsten Deane

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Photograph#1: Rest

What Cows Do

It was easy for them to remember
her dishes. They always belonged to a specific day of the week.
Each meal had its own suitcase of pots and wooden spoons
to stir the liquid, lumpy with pieces of meat.
Her children complained about the smell of crushed cow.
Mince curry was on a Tuesday.
The Sunday lunch was finished on Monday.
It was the baked potatoes and steak that the children missed.
Her love came in the meat of a cow.



What We Know

If you are a woman, you will know this sadness.

It turned you into a quiet wind and followed
when you ran and jumped and laughed.

Now it is all you are made of.

Sit, drink your coffee,

think about him,

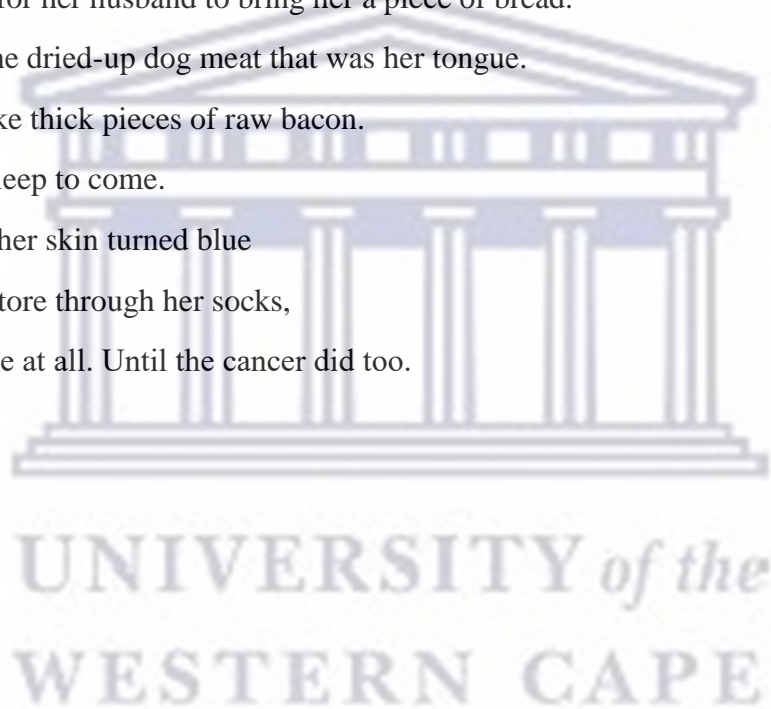
all that he is,

kill it all.



After a Mother Heals

After she had cancer
she began to chew as loud as a cow. In the evenings she would burn
on top of her bed and pray
for one of her children to bring her a cup of tea.
She would scream for the chewing to stop for a moment.
The taste of her gums was iron. Then her screams would take on the sound
of seagulls.
She would pray for her husband to bring her a piece of bread.
She settled for the dried-up dog meat that was her tongue.
She chewed it like thick pieces of raw bacon.
She wailed for sleep to come.
In winter, when her skin turned blue
and her toenails tore through her socks,
sleep didn't come at all. Until the cancer did too.



Hidden

What she hides from her husband:

Her favourite colour and the price of her favourite perfume.

He doesn't know that she doesn't like the bloody taste of his mince curry.

His hands are always in her mouth. He believes she has a small tummy, and he must stretch it out.

What are satisfying thoughts to her husband:

How he whispers into her ear while she sleeps.

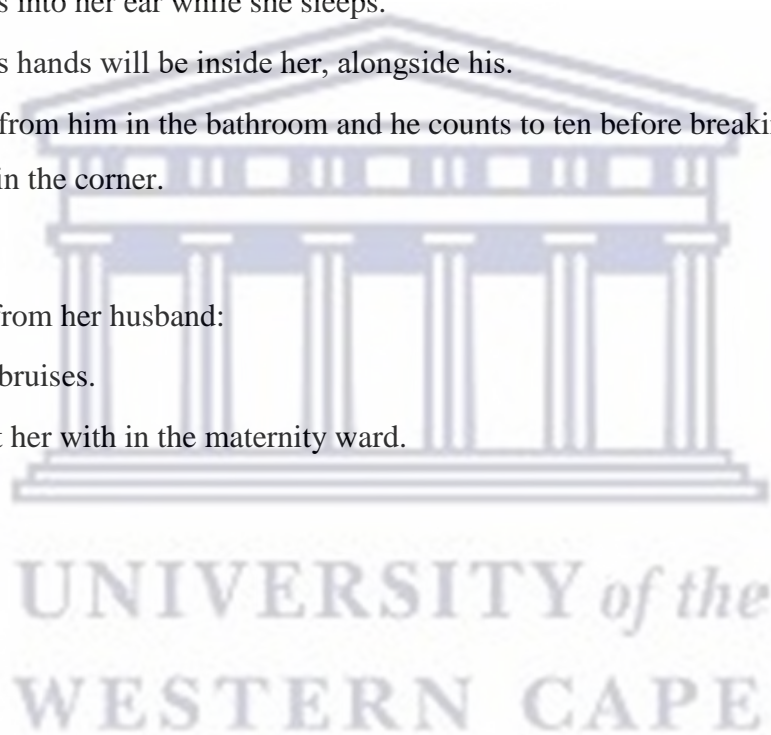
How the doctor's hands will be inside her, alongside his.

When she hides from him in the bathroom and he counts to ten before breaking the wooden door to find her in the corner.

What she hides from her husband:

Her dark purple bruises.

The smell he left her with in the maternity ward.





Photograph #2: Beach Day

Mother's Day

There's something breakable about the branch between your neck and your chest.

Mother

Mother

these words are for you and not about you.

They're about the stomach cramps you got that felt like a dog's paw twisting.

They're about your rusty hands

Mother

Mother

that took on the task of a nest of cockroaches.

How everything you've done crawls together and still
stirs the pot of food.

Mother

you're mother before you're tired and slow and ageing.

Mother

before your tree gets cut down.

The forest outside that you turned into a garden
is made out of your dusty skin and your brittle hair.

Your hair is piled up, and big and grey.

The forest is winter

but there's something cracking inside you instead.

Mother

Mother

Mother is also what they call age.

How Small Things Work

Small things grow breasts and pubic hair.

Their legs land in any direction they choose.

Dogs carry a litter, a more understanding companion.

They crawl between your legs when you sleep.

Strange men grow bark in their watery mouths

and small things that move like wasps.

Run to your mother. Tell her about these things.

Show her your stretching skin.

And the small things that live inside.





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Photograph #4: Children

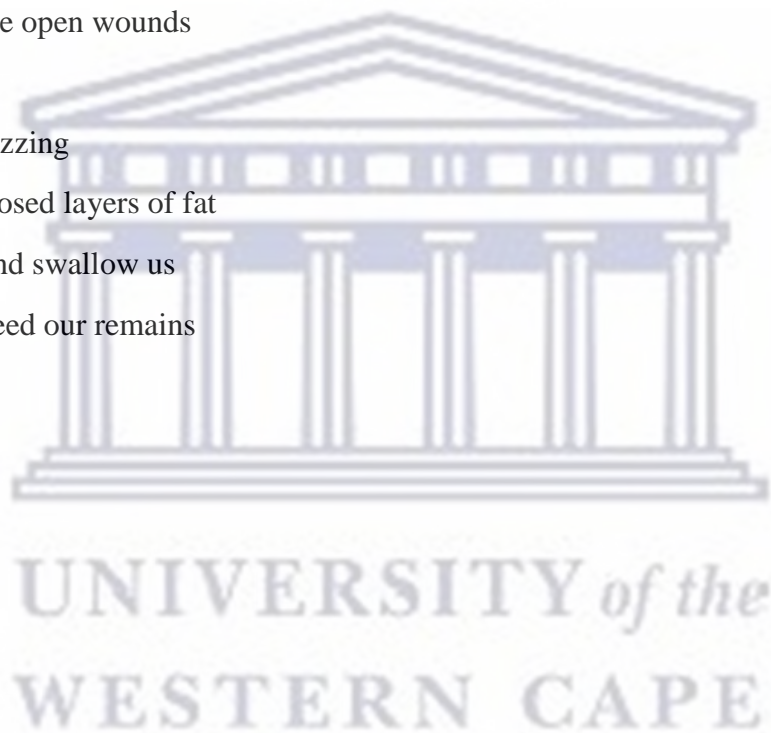
When Mother Cooks

She's delicate with the dead thing. Cuts it open slowly and smears it across the brown board. She's always in the kitchen at six o' clock. She plays with the dead thing between her fingers. She makes sure some of it combines with her own skin. She stares at you. She admires that you're alive. She pulls out the guts and the intestines. Her favourite part is getting rid of its heart and its teeth. Because all things must die. You'll be part of her old skin too one day.



Things in the Dark

Strangers are always following
my sister and mother
they are stalked and thought about
naked and bloody and sore and still
in high demand they're weak
and the strangers know so they love them
they follow me too
the men that have open wounds
to catch the flies
I can hear the buzzing
around their exposed layers of fat
they follow us and swallow us
spit us out and feed our remains
to their sons.





Photograph #5: Friend

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Baby Doll

You couldn't understand who she was.
The black woman with the Barbie smile.
The first time she put you on her back
and wrapped you tightly with a towel,
you got a whiff of her Ingrams and coconut oil scent.

She kept you on her back until you were thirsty. She made you Nesquik
with 4 spoons of chocolate powder and then some milk.
She stirred it 15 times and made you count.
You drank from a glass and she held your hands
firmly as if you were paralyzed.

At bath time she made sure you had pink bubble bath
and your favourite plastic baby doll.
She washed your back as you leaned over
to wash your doll. More soap will make her clean
she said, and covered you in layers of Lux soap
until you were wrinkly and raw.



Photograph #6: Little You

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Porcelain Doll

If you want to
you can always find your mother
in the same place

you

remember

when she was small

enough not too

big enough

to play hide

and seek

there were those two trees

at the bottom

of the driveway

they curved

like two curls

on a porcelain doll

you crawled in there almost

bending your knees

you were

almost identical

to the flowers

half grown

you sat down and didn't bother

about

the mud

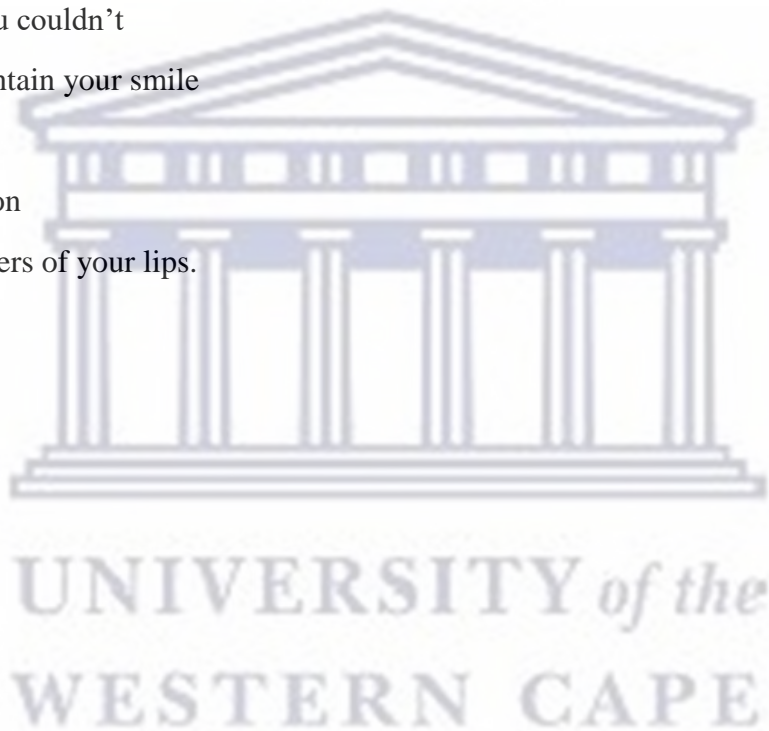
that your mother

would have to scrub

clean

you

smiled
you tried to hide
your teeth like the crushing up
of a secret on a page
mother came down
the driveway
her voice
like the ironing
of a silk dress
you couldn't
contain your smile
like she
was pulling cotton
through the corners of your lips.





Photograph #7: Postpartum



Photo Album

One

My mother looks at my baby photos every few years. When I reach an age of passage I give her the kind of pride that makes her dance to the sound of her knees knocking together and cracking. I try hard to make her knees come to life. When I don't make her proud, her knees just sit below her thighs, imitating the potatoes in the potato rack in the kitchen. When she opens the photo album, she enjoys the parts of me in grade one or two or five or eight. The ones in between are confusing for her. I'm dressed in clothes that match the rest of the school children. But my leg symbolises a robot of some sort. Screws and bolts hook onto my white school socks. My smile symbolizes an uncomfortable girl having to learn about puberty and other things that change.

Two

You're always keeping your tears in. You're a woman. A mother. You cried when you were different ages. When you were a child who didn't get what she wanted. When you were a 20-something year old woman who caused a dent in her father's old-school BMW. You cried. But now you don't want to cry anymore. You look at your daughter. You try to direct your eyes in a way that tell her you accept her. Instead of crying on her behalf. You cry because she is half. And then you feel disgusting. You think you can't accept your own child. You buy her things like lady-products and dresses. Your child doesn't care. Your child knows she's only half. She sees it in the photographs.

Three

It's a leg-brace. The doctor told the mother when the child was six months old, and when her father couldn't afford a camera. But the horrifying pictures aren't the ones that turn her daughter into a character from Star Wars. It's the picture in the plastic bed. Where she was placed after she was wiped clean of the blood and internal liquids that follow a baby out of its mother. Maybe babies are born where frogs are. Where it rains from the ground up. The tadpoles come out as little ripples in the water. The baby is in the incubator where it's safe.

There's something in her mouth or crawling out of her mouth or connected to her mouth. The baby can't breathe. The mother hears the doctor's voice as if he has his phone in her head. It rings desperately. The baby cries. The mother cries. The baby cries until she falls asleep. The mother doesn't sleep until the baby awakes.



The Goeyness

My left hand keeps most of my veins.

Because of this, I know to avoid kitchen tabletops
and other sharp objects. I can't poke a hole in myself and expect
the goeyness not to make a mess.

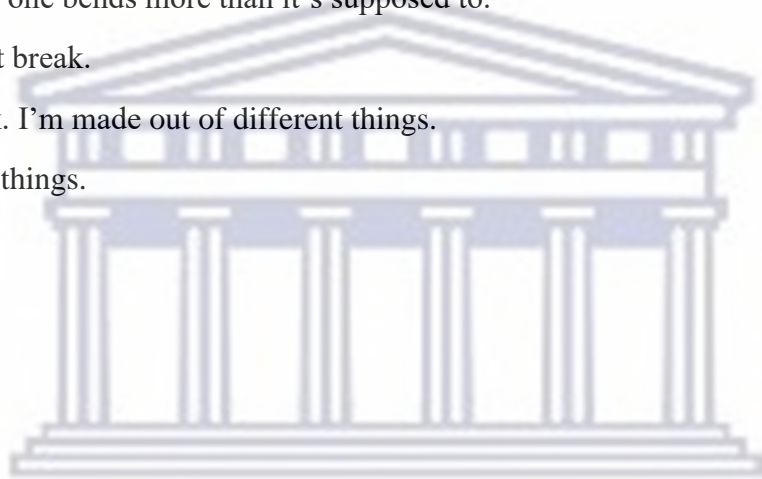
I'm made out of green and yellow blood. Yes,
it could just be the meds,
but I prefer to think of myself as a creature.

Two legs though one bends more than it's supposed to.

It cracks, doesn't break.

There's no muck. I'm made out of different things.

I avoid different things.



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The Dust Settles

The process is slow.

My skin turns into a childish sunset
running across the sky in a game of hide and seek.

The process of filling the page is the same as the pain.

It boils from the surface down:

a boy's naughty smile ending
in the middle of his lips.

My head hurts first.

Imitating the sound of a plastic cap screwed back on the bottle.

I hold my hands out to catch the leftover pain.

To show it that I have manners, like my mother taught me to.

The bottle cap seals the air in my head
and merges with my germs to become a mannequin.

One that looks like me
but with less pain.

The pain settles down,
moves into my arms where the ache replaces the bones,
making sounds like my grandmother does,
sniffs and groans, the sound of dishes cracking in the sink.

This age when my arms are tree branches that lean
towards the sand.

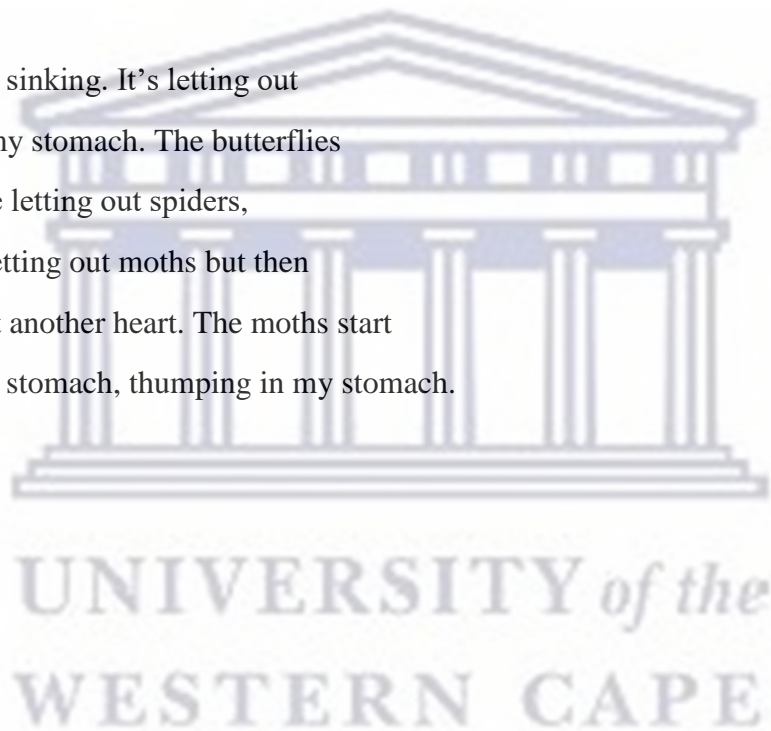
To be swallowed by the sand.

The pains in my arms are suicidal. They spend
their days waiting.

Insect Habitat

My heart is scratching at my chest. I know
because my breasts are sagging
in a way that can only be caused by claws.
My heart has turned into a new-born child.
I open my mouth and there's a wound. Somebody
has cut off my heart's umbilical cord
not knowing that it has feelings.

It's growing and sinking. It's letting out
butterflies into my stomach. The butterflies
are sick. They're letting out spiders,
the spiders are letting out moths but then
the moths let out another heart. The moths start
scratching at my stomach, thumping in my stomach.
I must be sick.



Little Pains

It's quite pathetic, really.

The fact that I'm in pain for the most part. But still

I only concentrate on the little pains –
my nail broke in half tonight.

I decided to paint the skin of my finger.

It burnt, of course

but it was worth it. The burn

was pretty harsh

and ladylike. My other pain

is dressed as a boy, stubborn and angry.

Other days, like today, it's my bowel movements.

I haven't shat in three days.

This makes my mother worry.

I'm sure my skin is tearing from the inside.

My pain has found its way all around my body.

The little pains,

I take them on dates.

They're very polite.

I take them on seconds.

Doctor's Words

My profession is telling people how to live in their bodies.

Only eat this amount of the packet then sleep seven hours.

Now nod your head and tell me what you understand.

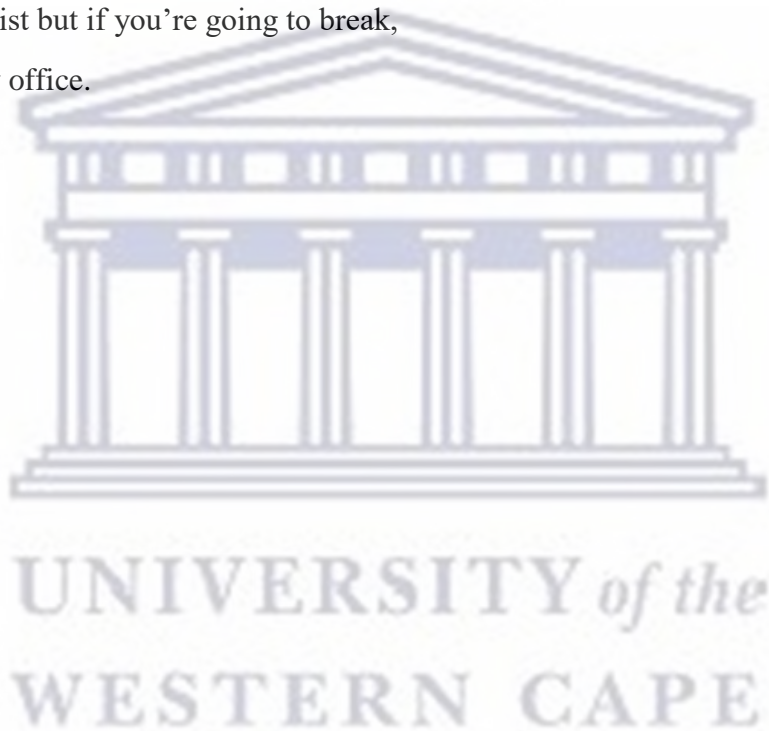
Don't worry about the things you don't.

I can't save my patients but we're good at playing the game.

My qualification doesn't enable me to lie and I don't want to.

But how else do you keep people alive?

I'm not a specialist but if you're going to break,
break here in my office.





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Photograph #8: Privacy

Lessons from Mother

When you were a child, mother would bath you.

As you got older, you began to understand

that mother would still bath you if you asked.

You developed pubic hair. You asked mother

for a razor but you rushed it

and cut and bled and developed an ingrown hair.

Mother said not to press it, not to fiddle with it,

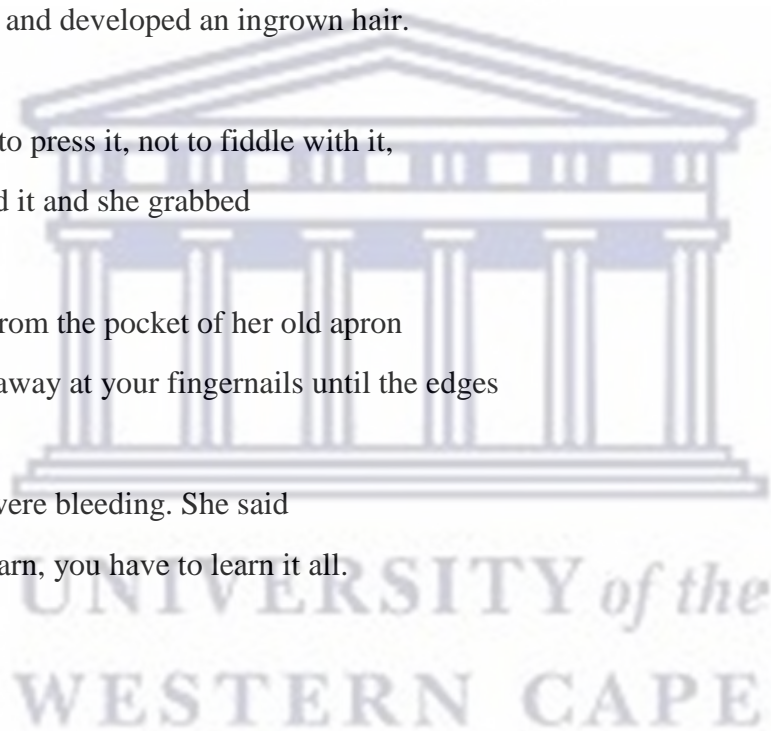
but you squeezed it and she grabbed

the nail clipper from the pocket of her old apron

and she clipped away at your fingernails until the edges

of your fingers were bleeding. She said

if you want to learn, you have to learn it all.



Fathers and Sons

They're like nothing else,
not like dogs but lions
who hunt in the same hunting ground.

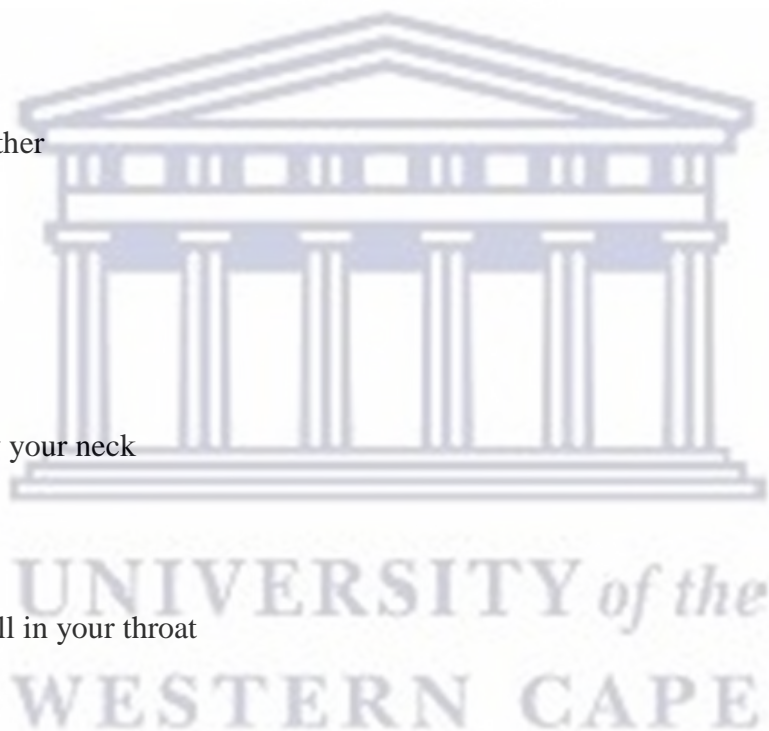
They hunch down
like a boneless baby
and eye the buck.

They take turns
one for you, another
for your sister.

Bursting forth
fast and flawless
they grab you by your neck

teeth first
and then claws all in your throat
then they wait

for you to cry
helping you up
once you have bled enough.





Photograph #8: Looking Glass

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What Happens Next Door

You wonder if the quiet neighbour
with bleached hair who always smiles at you
knows that your father threw maggot-infested meat
into the gutter.

He says fathers are the head of the pack
and so he must hunt and then get rid
of the bad meat at the back of the fridge.

But he cries when the horse's blood
stains his hands and he worries
what his mother would think
about what's buried in the back yard: the ashes
of your dog and what he was taught as a child.

Does the neighbour wonder
who the monster is drying out the meat of cows?
She can smell the liver and her smile
turns into stretched bubble gum.
Who is the monster hunting the meat?

Growing Up

Your mother said

growing up means you have to do things for others,
but on your own and never ask for help.

You always have to keep up with the price of bread and milk,
nappies for your sister and the increases in petrol.

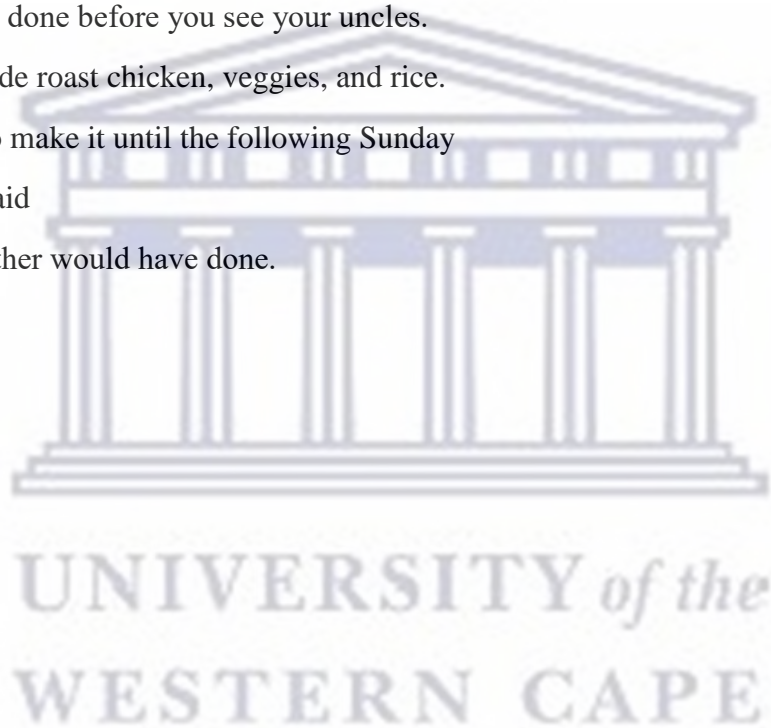
Your mother bought you a hairdryer for Christmas.

She said it's time you started doing your own hair on a Sunday,
to make sure it's done before you see your uncles.

Your mother made roast chicken, veggies, and rice.

She continued to make it until the following Sunday
because father said

it's what his mother would have done.





Photograph #9: Coming Clean



The Other Grandchildren

The smell of old people reminds you of pots that haven't been cleaned properly, and of cancer.

You gag when you see grandma in the kitchen with the pieces of chicken skin stuck to the pan.

She makes you a toasted cheese sandwich in that pan.

You tell yourself the story that at night she crawls into the kitchen and eats the burnt leftovers.

You remember her picking up puppies by the skin of their necks when you were 10.

When you're 24 she tells you that's how they're supposed to be picked up.

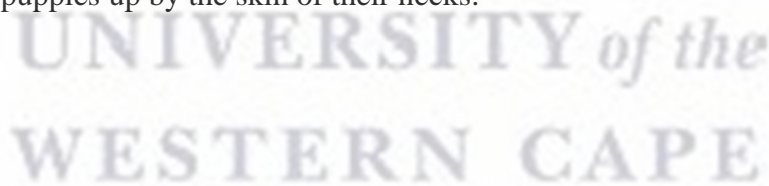
It was the skin that hung underneath her eyes that made you fear her the most.

She came to your birthday parties where she would wipe up the crumbs and lay out the Cokes.

Don't eat the food she offers, she only wants to make you fat, you believed.

She hated you because you weren't as soft as her other grandchildren.

You also picked puppies up by the skin of their necks.



From Above

At night when they are all sleeping	something is leaking
They're snoring, the family of five, they're talking	in their sleep
The father is crying about his father, the burnt corpse	daddy, daddy
The mother doesn't move, she turns into a corpse	with maggots
The children eat on her the way they chew on their own secrets	about love
They wonder about sex and who might be growing a baby	inside them
The rats in the roof listen and spy on who has the most	meat to give.



Ode to the Flies

10 years plus twelve:

The tongues of the flies make a carpet under the fridge.

The spoons and the tea bags wait out on the kitchen counter.

20 years plus four:

The compound eyes of the flies sit in the hinges of the cutlery drawers.

Her husband arrives from work around five.

12 years plus eleven plus one:

The thoraxes of the flies sleep on top of the lightbulbs.

His wife sets out two cups, each painted with a Bible verse.

11 years plus thirteen:

The flies' heads sleep behind the curtain.

"Would you like a cup of tea, bokkie?" her husband asks with a look that doesn't reach very far across his face.

8 years plus sixteen:

The flies' antennae float down onto the kitchen counters.

Yes, please, his wife says without looking at him.

19 years plus five:

The flies get comfortable on the three-man couch.

Her husband puts the kettle on, that boils with the sound of cooking skin. He decides to smoke a cigarette.

3 years plus twenty-one:

The kitchen is empty.

The flies fly out from behind the toaster and settle on the spoons that hold the residue of old milk.

14 years plus seven:

The flies suck up the ignored drops of milk.

Her husband retires to the couch with another cigarette in his mouth. She falls asleep in the bed she shares with him.

24 years:

The flies' larvae sinks into the kitchen counters and spoons,
the same ones his wife will use to stir his coffee tomorrow morning.



The Inside

There are dead ants in the toilet and dried-up blood
when he lifts up the seat. A boy growing up is a fragile thing,
and he watches his mother from a distance through her leak of cleanliness
and her blind eye.

He opens the dustbin to get a closer look, just out of curiosity
about the porn that his father watches.
Don't mention these things.

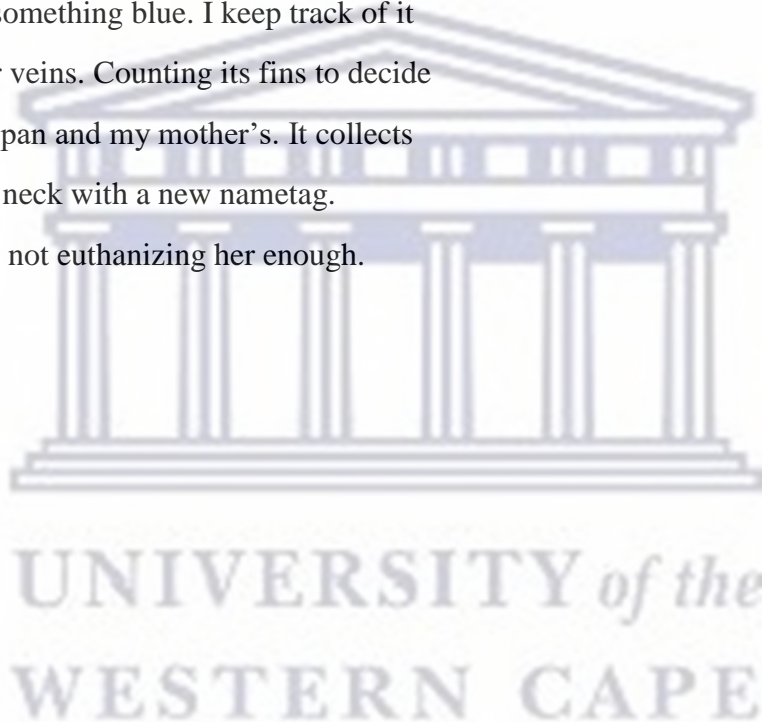
There is a tampon, red and fluffy. He swallows his spit.
He tastes the dried-up spit on the inside of his cheeks.
He can smell the blood.

He smells it willingly, desperately.
Taking a deep breath, he swallows the taste.
He can smell his mother
and she tastes like blood.

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Cancer Survivor Around my Mother's Neck

My mother grows the teeth of my dead dog
before she leaves for her monthly check-up. Where I sit
in the waiting room to listen. For the old white man
to switch on the hair machine. To turn my mother
into a younger hound. A tired dog with dying legs
to match her purple tongue and wintery nipples.
My mother can't leave to die faster. The white man
injects her with something blue. I keep track of it
swimming in her veins. Counting its fins to decide
between its life span and my mother's. It collects
itself around her neck with a new nametag.
As if the room is not euthanizing her enough.



How to Love Your Grandmother

Grandmother's house is full of children on Sundays.

Children who all share a skin tone.

Visiting grandmother's house means

there will always be rice floating in the soapy dishwashing water.

You must pretend not to notice what she lacks.

She will pretend not to notice the food you leave behind on your plate.

Listen when she talks but be careful.

She spits out peanuts when she talks.

You can look away, laugh under your breath like a cat
planning to eat the meat defrosting in grandmother's kitchen.

Just be fast, duck and dive the way you've practiced with your brother and sister.

Let grandmother kiss you but quickly turn to the right.

Let her lips covered in chicken fat land on your cheek.

You must let grandmother love you.

Look into her bedroom drawers

where she keeps all her old nail clippings,

she believes they are family heirlooms.

Ignore these things

then grandmother will love you.

Tradition

The mosque has a call to prayer before the Christians wake up.

I make daddy coffee before I release my bladder.

I put the kettle on the stove and try to avoid the rusty edges.

I must hold the edges together in order to pour all the water out. Daddy likes a full cup of coffee.

I can hear my stomach aching. It's a dog drowning in a pool.

I quickly eat the last rotten banana. Daddy needs his bacon and eggs.

He's awake. I can smell his burning tobacco.

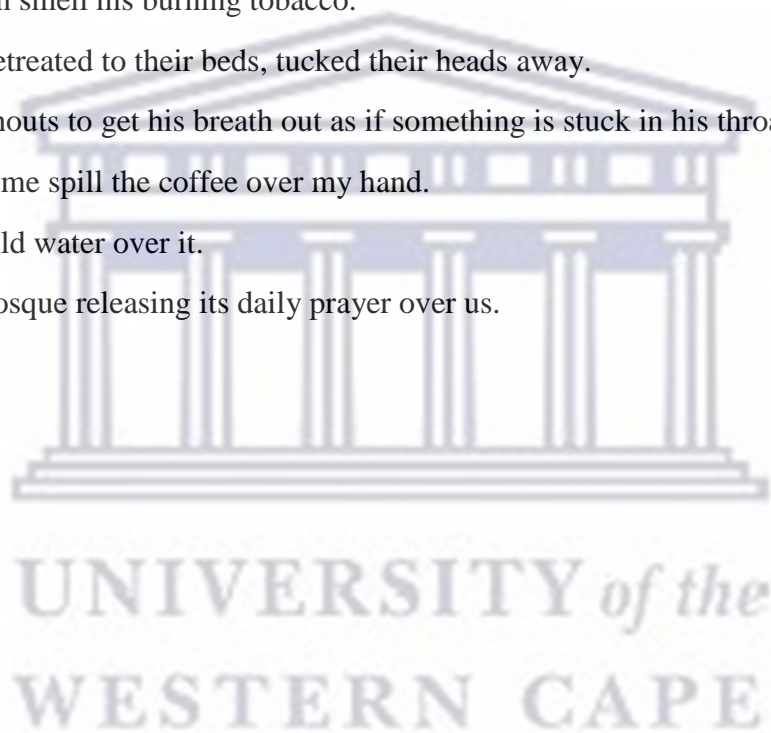
The dogs have retreated to their beds, tucked their heads away.

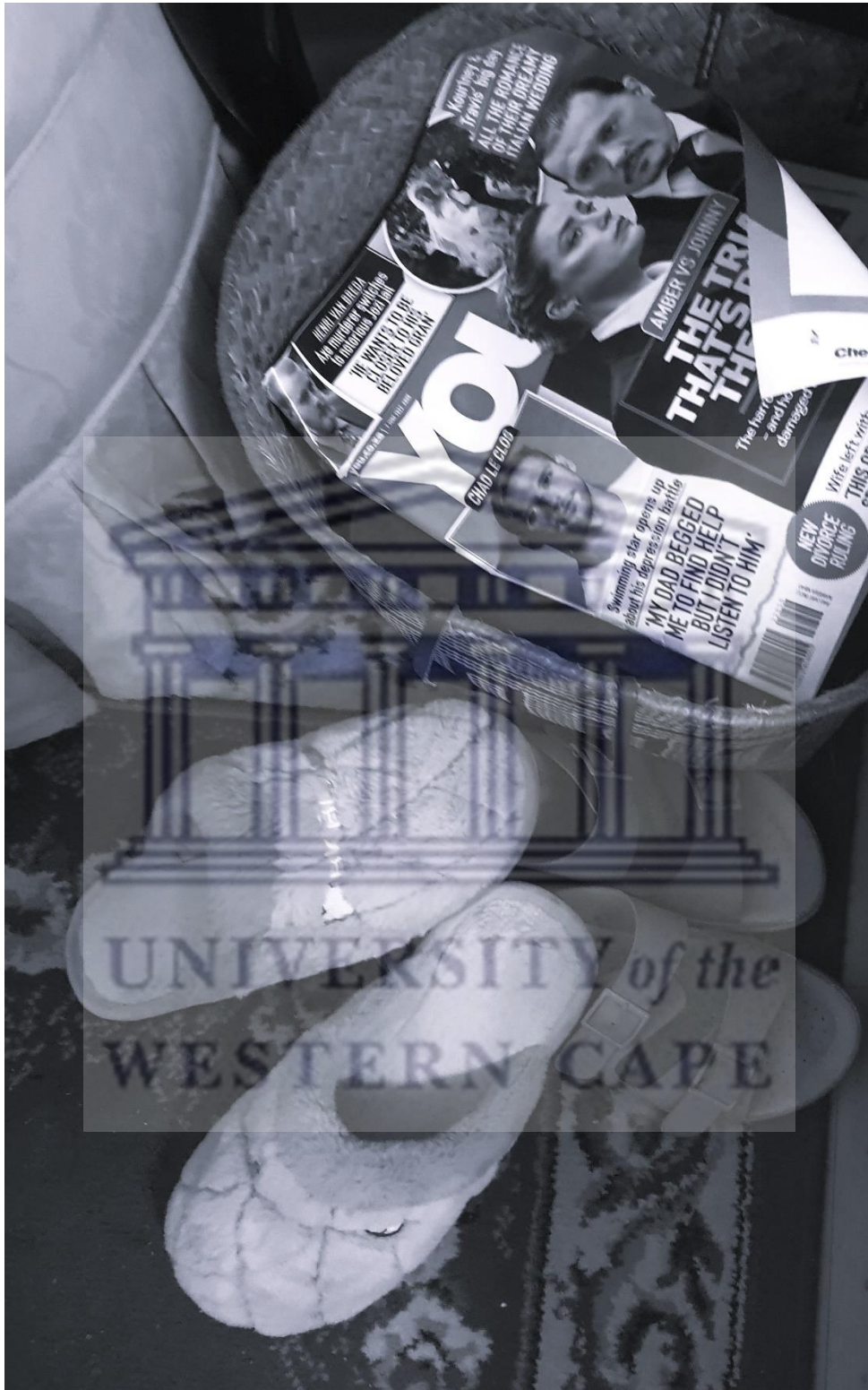
Daddy yawns, shouts to get his breath out as if something is stuck in his throat.

The cat watches me spill the coffee over my hand.

It burns. I run cold water over it.

I can hear the mosque releasing its daily prayer over us.





Photograph #10: Bedside

Chores

1

The wife stayed on the other side of the mountain.
In her yellow kitchen she stayed to watch the clock
for when her husband would be on his way home with the meat
that she will have to cook for him. When he appears,
she will turn the stove on and butter the bread.

2

The daughter stayed on the other side of the mountain.
In her pink room that made her look
smaller. She brushed her hair 100 times, as the women did
in every fairy-tale. She had to remember
her father loved her hair the most of all her things.
He would run his hands through it as the kettle boiled.

3

They asked him about his day, whether the animals fought back.
He told them how he watched the goat breathe
its last breath and how he caught the foam from its mouth.
They told him how strong he was, how tired his hands must be.
They must set the mountain alight and lay him to rest on the flames.

The Look of a Mother's Love

Your mother tells you that you're a growing child,
she does this while she feeds you broccoli and black tea.
You stick your tongue between your teeth to suck out the chocolate.
You spread it all over your mouth like an antiseptic ointment.

The fork, skew from mining into under-cooked meat,
now scoops up green and orange mush.
You pull a face similar to your father when your mother
asks him to buy bread on his way home from the office.

Your mother stands over the glass dishes that collect oil in the bottom.
You keep searching between your teeth.
Your mother walks over and tells you to take another bite,
this time she makes sure the fork reaches the back of your throat.

The mush sits on your tongue like a street dog that's been run over.
You clench your fists.
You stick your fist down the back of your mother's throat,
the way father does.

Relatives

Coloured sons and fathers and uncles and cousins
surely all having penises can't make them this alike.

But my cousins have turned into my uncles,
my uncles into my father.

I'm talking about their mouths.

My breasts, and probably your breasts too,

have been spoken about

at family braais on Sunday afternoons
when the church smell sits on our clothes.

Their eyes grow uglier and bigger and more typical the older I get
and the older you get.

Thighs and ass and breasts.

What's the use of this face anyway?

Look how beautiful you're getting!

Your uncle will gulp down his Castle Lager
or his Johnny Walker if it's special.

You'll taste your vomit in your mouth.

What these men give us

is stomach acid and mashed potato.

How small these men are

how small they make us.

Organs

My mother grew up in Saltriver, one of the many vital organs of Cape Town.
Right down the road from the flour factory whose goods my grandmother used
to bake donuts for the church.
Grandmother was a quiet woman.

My father grew up in Strandfontein, perhaps the liver of this city.
With his six siblings, all eating out of the same pot. They argued a lot about the fun things.
Which one of them was ma's favourite and who had the best hair.

My grandmother, from my father's side,
was loud and bought chicken breasts and half-loaves of bread
from the house-shop next door.

I have my mother's curly hair. Her curls fall out when she worries about my father.
My hair is soft, and baby-like. I shaved it all off once,
which made my father angry.

My father has a penis. I saw it once by mistake.
He had passed out drunk on the toilet.

My mother said to leave him there.

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

INTRODUCTION

Writers are always looking for new ways of expressing themselves, of unique ways to tell a story (Schuster 2006). For me, as a writer, this has always been through the use of original and distinctive imagery. I am drawn to writing that uses images, metaphors, and figurative language in order to depict the essence of the story – the story behind the story on the surface. When I began thinking about what to do for my MA mini-thesis, I wondered deeply about what constitutes a large part of my writing voice and what exactly about that voice makes my writing powerful. A large part of my voice is my use of imagery, and another is my narrative voice that tells the story. My process for creating images to tell the story is usually done internally – I think of what story the poem wants to share and then I think of images to represent key moments in the story. I wondered about other ways to create imagery – whether I always had to create them internally or whether in fact I could find them around me.

I was drawn to photography as an inspiration for this project. I have always been intrigued by the medium of photography and I wanted to understand in what ways it could be related to my poetry, whether it helped create stories in the poetry, and how it inspired unique imagery.

I will argue here in this essay that photographs create stories for the poem, and furthermore, examine how photographs can capture simple moments, while the poem exposes many more.

In this project, the photographs refrain from including the faces of the individuals captured. Once my proposal for this project was accepted, I had to think about the ethics behind including photographs that revealed the identities of the individuals photographed. To avoid the project having to face ethical clearance challenges, I decided instead to capture fragments of individuals and their lives, such as their hands, their belongings, and their faces hidden behind surgical masks. This worked well as it enhanced the overall creativity of the project.

CHAPTER 1: PHOTOGRAPHS AND STORIES

During our everyday lives, there are key moments that define that day, week, month or even year. We often live past these moments because life is always moving ahead so rapidly. Photography has always been a way to stop time and capture key moments. When I started this project, I spent time looking at old photo albums that my mother kept from my childhood. These photo albums are one of my mother's most loved possessions. She said they forced her to "remember times that have passed". My mother phrased it quite simply, while author Susan Sontag elaborated more critically on this idea in her book *On Photography*: "Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood" (174).

It was clear that there were stories in each of my childhood photographs. When we went through them together, my mother could tell me exactly what we were doing on that day and how she felt. The photographs held memories that could prompt words out of my mother. I decided to do what my mother had done – I started capturing the everyday, mundane moments that held stories. These stories would be forgotten if they were not photographed. Many poets write about ordinary moments that form part of the everyday lives of human beings. The poem 'Dog at a Shebeen' in the collection *Lament For Kofifi Macu* by Angifi Dladla is a very good example of this:

Not a tongue out, not an ear up;
just lying, head on splayed paws.
Not a lick, not a wag, not a swot;
just there, though not in chains.

He is used to the ways of drunkards;
used to extras – hobos slinking bonewards.
Only when a spray of their urine gains
him, does he whimper and inch backwards.
There is something of a sting
about that cry, that inching;

something haunting, wringing
about his rheumy eyes. (42)

In this poem, it is evident that Dladla has chosen the dog as the prompt. I refrain from referring to the dog as the subject because once I read this poem and reached the end of it, it was clear that the dog was merely a looking glass into the lives of those that spent moments at the shebeen. Throughout the poem, Dladla describes the behaviour of people that the dog encounters: “He is used to the ways of drunkards; /used to extras – hobos slinking bonewards” (lines 5-6). The dog’s experience is our looking glass, we learn more about who is at the shebeen, the hobos, and how they behave at the shebeen, “slinking bonewards”. This poem is an apt example of how one moment, one subject that is a part of everyday life, can expose us to many more aspects.

I wanted to write about the moments that took place not only in my everyday life but also in the lives of others. I began to photograph these moments:



In this photograph, my mother was starting to prepare dinner. This is not only a part of her daily routine but the rest of the household’s as well; we wait and walk past her while she prepares the meat, we smell it, crave it, it consumes us. I wanted to know what this key moment meant, and what story it was telling. The photograph existed, which meant that the moment happened and as Susan Sontag describes it, “a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof

that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (175). My process of looking at these photographs and finding a story within them is succinctly summed up by Sontag. I knew, of course, that a story would come out that might not be a direct description of what was happening in the photograph, but it would nevertheless tell me what was happening in that moment that had a type of relation to the photograph. My poem 'When Mother Cooks' came out of this photograph:

She stares at you. She admires that you're alive. She pulls out the guts and the intestines. Her favourite part is getting rid of its heart and its teeth. Because all things must die. You'll be part of her old skin too one day.

Here, what was clearly happening in the photograph and described as such is the woman cutting up meat, but what came out of this direct description was how the woman thinks of her children, and how the cutting of the meat reveals this. What was interesting about the writing that came out of the photograph was that it wasn't just a description of what was happening in this image or how the woman's duties related to those around her, but it was the fact that it looked into the behaviour of the woman (the 'she') and how this related to her relationship with her child (the 'you'). The poem also drew upon the imagery of meat to tell the story. The action that the woman is performing is a reflection of her relationship with her child. This is a connection that we would not automatically make when seeing somebody partake in such an everyday activity, but between the photograph and the writing, this unseen story came out. In this way, the photograph provided a doorway into the story and the poem mapped it out.

We are so used to seeing ordinary things around us that it can be difficult for us to notice the beauty and the significant parts within them, such as our family members taking a nap after an exhausting day of work. I wanted to be reminded of the complexity of everyday life and how that looks. Photography has a way of capturing the complexities and dynamics of a simple moment, and reminding us that one moment is never just that, but rather a collection of so many different things that make up that moment, or the person or thing photographed. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag begins her meditation on photography with a simple yet all-encompassing line: "To collect photographs is to collect the world" (1). In her book, Sontag elaborates on the power of photographs, but in this opening line, she has summarised what the photographs in my project did in order to inspire the writing that followed. By taking a

photograph of one specific moment, and then reflecting quietly upon it, I came to a deeper understanding of what that moment represented and what the subject in the photograph was experiencing internally.



The photograph above was taken of a woman lying down to rest; a simple enough description I thought, as I was opening up my camera to take the photograph. I then followed the same process that I did for this whole project. I spent a few seconds looking at the photograph, absorbing it, then stepping into the writing process. The poem, 'What Cows Do', came out of the final step of the process. As I read over the poem, it became clear that the photograph was not only capturing a woman exhausted, but it captured the effects of what her expected duties in the household had on her. The photograph's intention was to capture the world that exists in a woman's exhaustion, what goes on in that world and what that means. The poem focusses on one of a woman's expected duties: to feed her family. The photograph was taken of my mother, as many of the photographs were. They captured her world, which is in turn a reflection of the world of many women just like her: married, coloured, and a mother. In my mother's life, she is always feeding her family and looking after them. The poem, 'What Cows Do', draws upon the energy it takes to constantly make meals and feed one's family, and thereby allows the reader to not only step into the photograph, but into the life of the woman in the photograph. In *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Roland Barthes comments:

I observed that a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look. The Operator is the Photographer. The Spectator is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs- in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives . . . And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any eidolon emitted by the object, which I should like to call the spectrum of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to "spectacle" and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead. (9)

In my project, I used Barthes' three practices in a different yet similar manner: to do, I took the photograph; to undergo, I observed the photograph and soaked it in; to look, I wrote in order to really see what the photograph wanted to say. To really understand the photographs, Barthes' theory proved not only effective, but proved that the relationship between photography and poetry can be productive when the two mediums are put into practice together.

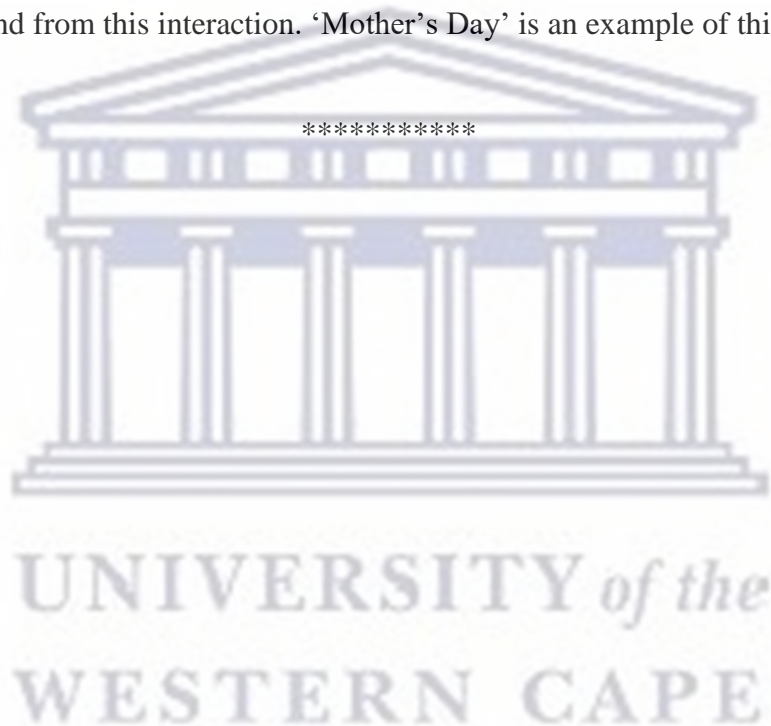


The poem 'Mother's Day' emerged out of the photograph above. The photograph, which was taken of my mother at the beach, works as a reminder for me of how my mother interacted with nature, specifically the ocean. Sontag elaborates on this particular use of photography, "which now provides most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present" (174).

As I looked at this image, and noticed how my mother was protecting herself from the sun and resting in the sand, I was reminded (unconsciously) of my mother's age and health. I say

unconsciously because when I first saw the photograph, my mother's health was not a thought that was prominent. But as I took Barthes' third step (to look), and I began writing, the poem revealed the deeper story of my mother's age and how that affects the way she interacts with the world around her; providing evidence of Barthes' theory and my adaption of it in order to suit the writing process. An example is the first line in that poem: "There's something breakable about the branch between your neck and your chest". As well as line 13: "you're mother before you're tired, and slow, and aging".

Photographers are often drawn to landscapes and the natural world, as am I. However, I am also deeply interested in documenting how human beings exist in the natural world, and what we can understand from this interaction. 'Mother's Day' is an example of this.



CHAPTER 2: PHOTOGRAPHY, POETRY, AND UNIQUE IMAGERY

The poetry of Max Ritvo has been a significant part of my writing, as I have looked to his work for guidance and inspiration in attempting to create distinctive imagery. In his two collections *Four Reincarnations* (2016) and *The Final Voicemails* (2018), Ritvo uses expressive language in order to describe his experience of illness and facing death at a young age.

In his poetry, Ritvo presents the reader with sometimes obscure but nevertheless appealing imagery in order to get his experience across in the most effective way. In his poem 'Cachexia', Ritvo refers to his body but his body as being something else: "but it sheds, / can't get past a simple sit, / stay, turn over. House-trained, but not entirely" (2018, 28). Ritvo describes his body as being a dog. By doing this the reader is given a different perspective and understanding of the body, but the reader also understands the body as another living being. Inspired and taught by Ritvo through his work, I have developed a habit of trying to do the same thing in my poetry: create unique imagery that will give the reader a fresh perspective of the subject at hand. In my poem 'Mother's Day' I create an image for the reader in order for them to uniquely understand the fragility of a mother's body: "There's something breakable about the branch between your neck and your chest." Imagery holds tremendous power in a poem, as it forces the reader to mentally visualize the poem and therefore to be inside and experience it. It is for this reason, that I have a continuous interest in inventing unique imagery in my poetry and continue to be inspired by Ritvo's work.

Ekphrasis is described as the process of describing a work of visual art and using that as a literary device. I decided to use the process of Ekphrasis in my creative project in order to find new and unique descriptions of the human experience. 'After a Mother Heals', for example, was prompted by Photograph#1 Rest. The line, "on top of her bed and pray" uses a simple and quick description of the woman in the photo being literally on top of her bed. Ekphrasis proved to be useful here as it added to the setting in the poem, enabling the reader to visualize the poem more.

As I have shown, photographs have the ability to expose unique images from everyday life, and poems can do this too. When the lens is focused on a specific moment, the viewer of the image is drawn to that specific moment as the photograph makes it all that the viewer can see.

Poetry does a very similar thing. As we write about moments, people or things, the reader is given a way to step into the moment, and the piece of life described and explored in the poem is made available for the reader to experience. My process of finding out which photographs had a story to tell, is described accurately by Roland Barthes:

I felt for certain photographs. For of this attraction, at least, I was certain. What to call it? Fascination? No, this photograph which I pick out and which I love has nothing in common with the shiny point which sways before your eyes and makes your head swim; what it produces in me is the very opposite of hebetude; something more like an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labor too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken. (18)

‘The unspeakable which wants to be spoken,’ is a phrase that can easily be attributed to the craft of writing, as we write about things that happen but are sometimes not remembered, or ignored for various reasons. For me, this creative writing project did exactly that. As most of my writing does, the pieces in this project exposed the ugly and the ignored, gave it a voice and opportunity. The photographs helped me uncover the ignored and the forgotten because they caused moments to stand still, and when that happened I was given no choice but to face everything that was taking place in that moment. Photograph #8 Privacy did this.



The Japanese poet, Chika Sagawa, makes use of bold, sometimes contradictory images to describe moments and experiences. By doing this, Sagawa's poetry creates an imprint in the reader's mind; the images described cannot be read without immediately being internalized. What enables this is also the fact that Sagawa uses objects and moments in her descriptions that every reader is most likely to have experienced. This means that the images are easy for the reader to relate to. Sagawa demonstrates this successfully in her volume, *The Collected Poems of Chika Sagawa*:

Pale blue dusk scales the window.

A lamp dangles from the sky like the neck of a woman.

Murky dark air permeates the room---spreads out a single blanket .

The books, ink, and rust knife seem to be gradually stealing the

Life out of me.

While everything sneered,

Night was already in my hands. (6)

I kept Sagawa's influence on my work and her approach while writing the poems in my collection. This can be seen in the poem, 'When Mother Cooks': "She's delicate with the dead thing. Cuts it open slowly and smears it across the brown board." In this line, I decided to use the description of a breadboard because it is a household item that most readers would have had at one point or another. I intensified the description by adding the image of something that is dead being smeared across the board. This means that the reader would have an easy image to visualize while being at the same time more graphic, thus making it more affective.

My poem, 'Lessons from Mother', was a result of a photograph of an intimate and private setting. It was a moment hidden away, kept private for only certain people to see, as the things we keep in our bathrooms normally are. The poem unpacked this, it ripped it open and explored one of the deeper intimacies in this setting: how our mothers taught us to take care of our bodies. The photograph proved to be a way into a deeper intimacy, a hidden story. Another poet who does this is South African writer, Dawn Garisch. In her collection, *Disturbance*, Garisch's poem, 'Agnus Dei' uses descriptions of the moments the story took place in and this

creates a strong piece of writing as the reader can visualize the moment. These descriptions open up a scene in the poem and by doing this, the poem is read as made out of more than one thing: what is spoken about, but also, how the topic spoken about, exists in and relates to its environment:

On the counter, the folds of a white dishcloth
create the simple contours of a lamb's face,
its small body lying curled and swaddled,
sleeping as though the world has conquered
its hate, as though a lamb might lower its guard,
lie down and sleep, knowing it's safe. (10)

In his collection, *Talk to Me Always: Poetry, Prose, and Photography*, fashion photographer and writer, Alexi Lubomirski, achieved something particularly effective. He used photography as a way to capture things that were not a significant part of his life, but then wrote poetry that showed how the things that do not form a big part of his life are actually related to the things that do.



In his collection, Lubomirski accompanies the photographs with poems and short prose. His poem, "Coming of Age Preview" accompanied the photograph above:

I see the preview for your coming-of-age story,
and I am filled with love, dread, and hope.
For as I climbed and fell through my adolescence,
now, so must you.

You are but eight and she only ten,
and I feel myself torn
between wanting to protect your heart
and envying the beautiful pain of young love yet to come.

Will she outgrow you when she reaches teen-hood
and spurn you in favour of older boys?
Will you then catch up in later years
and win back the eye of that young, Italian summer love?

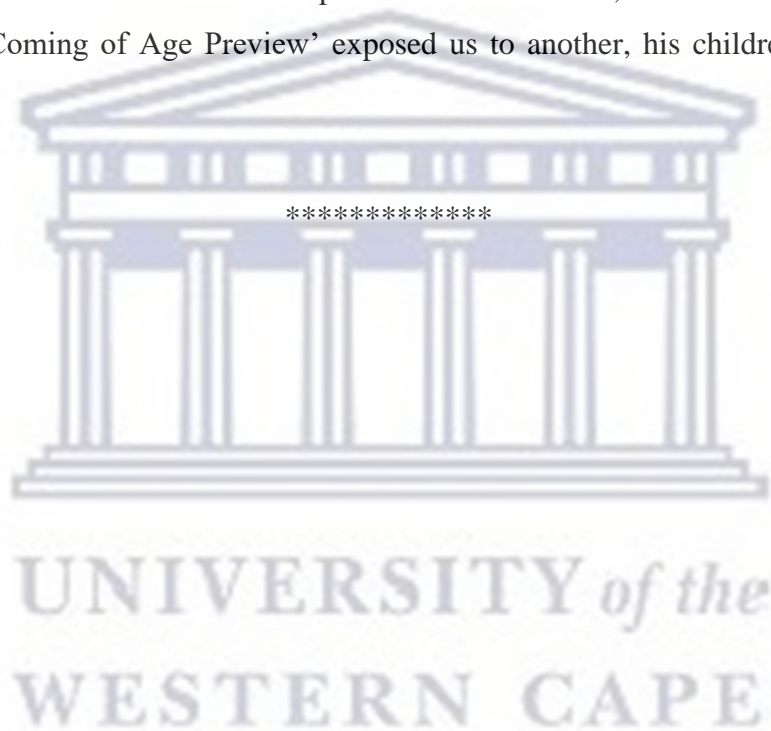
The sweet innocence
that I see in the eyes of you both,
carries neither hidden motive nor wicked games.
Just pure unsullied joy of being together.

I can only love you
and be here when you need,
praying that you are not wounded too greatly
in the many skirmishes of love that lie before you.

So enjoy this moment!
Bathe in the naive love,
where tomorrow does not exist

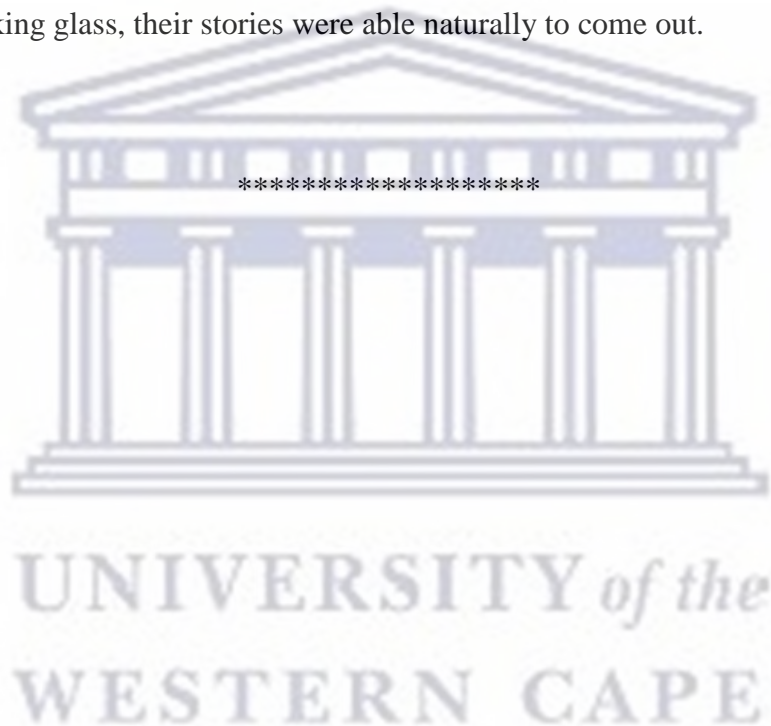
and yesterday is all but forgotten. (176)

Some may argue that a photograph captures a moment for what it is, unfiltered, raw, and clear. I would like to argue that the photograph is, at certain times, a door handle, a way to step into one story. But when you pair the photograph with writing, then you step into another room, another moment. In this piece, Lubomirski writes about the coming-of-age of his children, but what is interesting about this poem is that it was prompted by a close-up photograph of a flower. This poem and its relation to the photograph is a perfect example of how the things that might not be a big part of our lives can expose us to stories that do form a big part of our lives. The photograph in Lubomirski's collection captured one form of life, the flower (the door handle) but the poem 'Coming of Age Preview' exposed us to another, his children (stepping into another room).



CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, the two mediums I used showed me that they could work together to tell stories, to really explore the world and all its moments, to create writing that is powerful, and that matters. Prior to starting this project, I always felt that I had a connection to photography but as I began to explore this connection with the help of writing, I was shown that my connection to photography existed because of my connection to writing. Throughout this project, photography has proven to be a medium that has an intimate relationship with poetry. When the two mediums were used together, the question of “what story wants and needs to be told” was answered. As the writing drew from the photographs, and the photographs worked as a looking glass, their stories were able naturally to come out.



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