

# **Townships, Shacks and Suburbs: An original collection of poems.**

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**3700068**



**A thesis submitted in 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. Kobus Moolman**

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## **Abstract**

My creative writing full master's thesis, entitled *Townships, Shacks and Suburbs*, is a collection of poems that explores the role played by place in shaping identity. Poems in this collection seek to examine the interplay between identity and place, particularly the influence that environmental settings or contexts have in shaping how individuals define who they are. The theme of place is divided into three environmental contexts, namely the township, the rural context and the urban context. The poet navigates between these three environmental contexts, observing how each influences the way people define who they are and also how they identify with that particular environmental context. This definition of self, which forms part of identity, encompasses the day-to-day life, emotions, struggles, memories and a variety of other aspects that are linked to place and are inherent in identity-formation. The observation of how identity is shaped by place includes the poet and extends to people around him. This collection of poems can be viewed as a man's attempt at finding out who he is, by exploring the history of his life, as well as reflecting on the intricacies of growing up or being exposed to a variety of environmental settings. It can also be viewed as an attempt at learning who people around him are and how their identities are shaped by the place(s) they live in.

## **Keywords**

Poetry, identity, place, township, rural, urban.

## Declaration

I, Musawenkosi Khanyile, declare that “Townships, Shacks and Suburbs: An original collection of poems” 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.

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November 2018



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

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sed'.

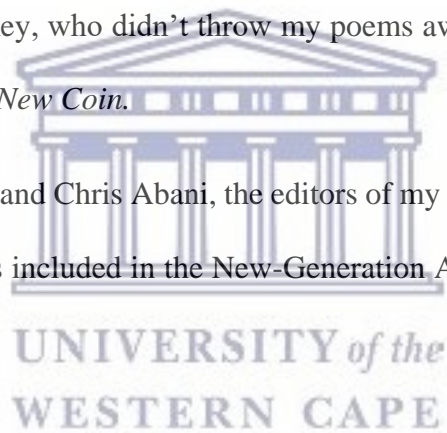
## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Prof Kobus Moolman, for his guidance, kindness and patience.

A few years ago, the universe directed me to Dashen Naicker, a humble talented poet lecturing in the English Department at the University of Zululand at that time. Dashen would see potential in my work and introduce me to the works of amazing poets such as Mxolisi Nyezwa and Kobus Moolman. Years later Kobus would be my supervisor. Strange but beautiful world. Thank you Dashen.

I am grateful to Gary Cummiskey, who didn't throw my poems away when I submitted them for the first time for publication in *New Coin*.

I am grateful to Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani, the editors of my forthcoming chapbook entitled *The Internal Saboteur*, which is included in the New-Generation African Poets Chapbook boxset for 2019.



*Zamo, my brother, where in the universe does hard work ever go unrewarded?*



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# Townships, Shacks and Suburbs



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Part One  
Rural



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## A school visit

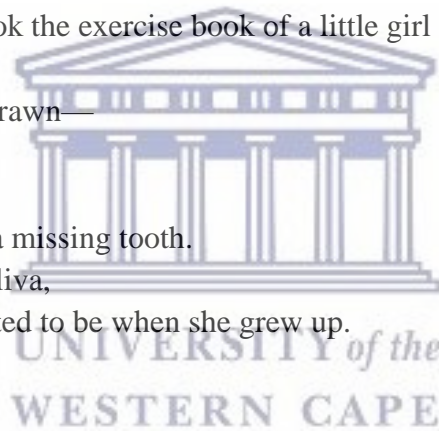
I remember how the drizzle came when I least expected it.  
Even the sun was caught off guard because it didn't move.  
The heat rose from the pores of the soil when the drops fell,  
and children in school uniform ran for shelter.

Later on I was introduced class by class as an important guest.  
I tried to put on the face of someone who has figured out this life thing,  
attempting the walk of those who know where their lives are going.

Every class had a window with a hole in it.  
A broken desk.  
And something wrong with the door.

In the class without a door, I took the exercise book of a little girl  
who smelled of paraffin  
and looked at the tree she had drawn—  
a leafless tree with no bird in it.

She had a beautiful smile with a missing tooth.  
She said *Doctor*, spitting out saliva,  
when I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up.



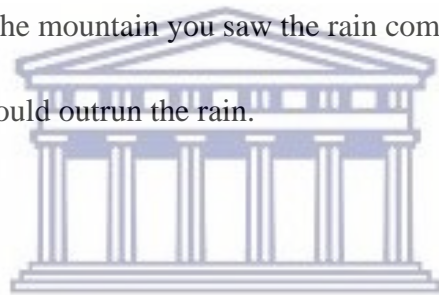
## **Habeni**

You learn to tell the direction of the wind  
on your walks by the side of the gravel road.

And that streams are running taps  
where a cow and a boy might come to drink at the same time.

You also learn that a girl's hips are a good resting place for your hands.  
And that kissing her for a long time by the river leaves you with memories  
that remain long after she is no more—  
shoved against the wall by an angry boyfriend years later,  
to die in a government hospital.

And since her name was Nomvula,  
you remember that one day on the mountain you saw the rain coming  
and outran it.  
But nobody believed that you could outrun the rain.



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## **Ndundulu**

In Ndundulu, my father's birthplace,  
you point your finger far away where your neighbour lives.  
Huts seem so small in the distance although you never feel alone.

When a cow falls in your kraal and the beer is brewed,  
the neighbour takes off his hat as he steps into your yard.  
Word always reaches him.



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## Rural memories

We acquired skills in the hills.  
Drugged the bees with smoke and took away their honey.

We learned to herd cattle through the fog. To locate cows by  
their hoof prints on the ground and milk them with our bare hands.

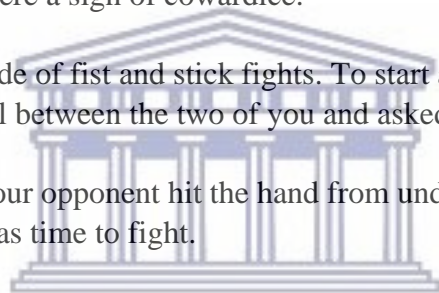
Rivers were our bathing spot.  
Water ran between rocks to our cupped hands.

We were shining with Vaseline by the time girls arrived with buckets for water.  
The best romantic gesture was to help them balance the buckets on their heads.

In the hills bravery separated boys from men.  
Scars on the back of the head were a sign of cowardice.

Friendship stood on the other side of fist and stick fights. To start a fight,  
older boys held a handful of soil between the two of you and asked:

*Are you afraid of this one?* If your opponent hit the hand from underneath,  
sending dirt into your face, it was time to fight.



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## **The zinc toilet**

I walk towards the stinking smell.  
Flies break away at my arrival.  
I am careful with my body weight,  
placing my bum almost mid-air:  
the skill mastered after several warnings from the plank  
by means of a creaking sound.



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## **Some build houses to escape from**

When the strong wind comes,  
first, the candle loses its flame,  
brown grass falls from the rooftop like a wig,  
and walls crack.

But instead of a voice shouting:

*Run inside the house!*

(because houses are homes we find refuge in)

everyone runs outside for safety.



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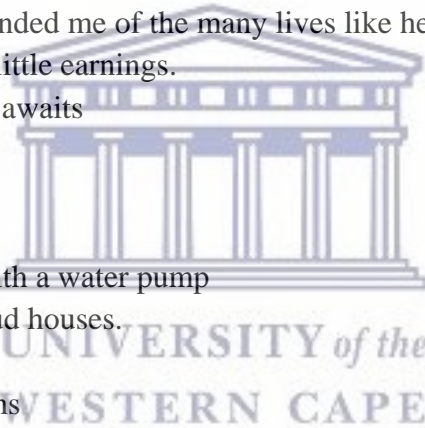
## To Nquthu

In a taxi to Nquthu where love is calling me,  
my shoulder brushes against a woman  
I've never met before,  
making me think how lives converge  
and then diverge  
like rivers.

The taxi hums its way up the hills of Ndundulu,  
passing markets where women make a living selling fruit.  
Their breasts dance up and down whenever a car stops  
because profit relies heavily on whoever arrives first.  
I'm reminded of a tired-looking woman  
who stopped by our taxi to sell us ice-cream before we left Mpangeni.  
Disappointment in her eyes reminded me of the many lives like hers  
that are carried through days by little earnings.  
At the end of each prayer reality awaits  
where daily bread is not given  
but sweated for.

We drive past a girl grappling with a water pump  
and cows eating grass behind mud houses.  
I know houses like these  
that are eaten away by heavy rains  
and have fingerprints left on their walls  
by those who built them.

My leg is sore by the time we reach Nquthu—  
a small town that only has one intersection with traffic lights.  
A boy holding a live chicken by its legs crosses the road.  
I'm now thinking of all the lengths I will go to  
for love.





## **Song in my heart**

My girlfriend and I fight because I haven't yet mastered  
the art of bathing in a dish.  
Water spills all over the floor when I reach for my armpits.

She complains that I complain about this tiny room  
where we hear kettles boil next door  
and neighbours yawn as they wake up.

But I always return to drown our love-making with uKhozi FM.  
It takes me three hours on a taxi to get to her.  
The song in my heart keeps me company.



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## **First day back from the township**

The houses there are arranged like train carriages.  
A thrown stone falls into the neighbour's yard.  
There's a pattern. A straight line.  
Very different from here  
where our homes are disjointed,  
and our roads take the shape of our dreams,  
winding and not promising any destination.  
There I played in the streets.  
Kicked the ball with friends on the tar road.  
Played for hours until the street lights came on.  
Then went and took a shower when I was done.  
I stood and the water fell on my head like raindrops.  
But now I have to kneel over a basin  
and scoop up water with my hands.



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Part Two  
Township



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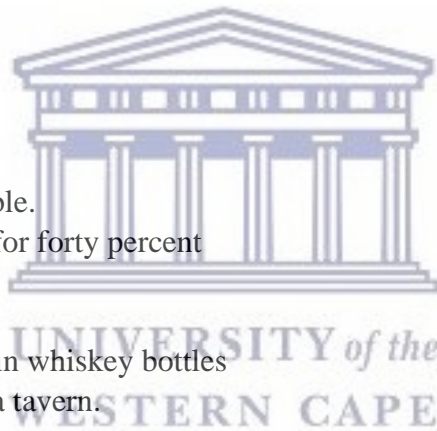
## **Find the truth**

*For Zamo*

You know what it was like:  
I left you the dining room floor  
and graduated to a bed  
after our sister left for varsity.  
You know the roughness of our hands  
and the fierceness of the sun.  
You took the wheelbarrow from me  
when you were strong enough  
to fetch the crates of cold drinks  
for our little family business  
all the way next to the taxi rank  
and a salon where our mother  
played stokvel.

What I want you to know now  
is that there isn't much truth  
in the township.  
It crumbles like bread on the table.  
Even in schools children smile for forty percent  
and success is a Golf GTI  
parked next to a tiny house.  
Brothers measure their success in whiskey bottles  
and brush their big tummies in a tavern.  
Sisters fall in love with front seats  
and wear off in the streets  
like car tyres;  
you know what the township is like.

It's a victory to rise above all this;  
to survive the streets that gush out blood  
and open up into graves,  
and even more to move out of the township  
to places where mornings come with a sea breeze,  
where people do not know the smell of poverty.  
Poverty has filled our nostrils.  
We know the stench of unflushable toilets  
just outside the township,  
shacks alone tell the tale of a man's suffering.  
Do not forget the privilege



of having been close enough,  
a man can only run away from what he knows.  
Find the truth.  
Do not forget our dining room floor  
and don't you dare drive a car  
that's worth more than where you sleep.



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## Mother

You used to say what we have  
is because of you.  
I did not understand.  
Because you never worked  
anywhere else but in the house.  
You only buttered bread, never bought it.  
But now that you live away from us,  
I see what you meant.  
The house here is falling apart.  
Even the kitchen door handle broke.  
Dad put in five nails on the side  
to keep it locked at night.  
I throw a used teabag through the broken window  
by the kitchen sink  
where the air comes smashing  
against the curtain on windy days.  
None of this has moved dad yet.  
He still walks in with his dirty sandals  
all the way to his bedroom.  
I place a bucket there when it rains.  
Holes in roofs beckon one another  
like shacks do outside the township.  
There used to be a single hole there,  
now there are three,  
so I push the bed to the far right  
for the drops to miss it,  
and place another bucket in the middle of the room.  
There's more than the falling apart  
going on here.  
Even the curtains miss your touch.  
Their dullness whispers this to me.



## **The sound of the rain**

The sound of the rain wakes me up in the middle of the night.  
Or is it the sound coming from your room,  
your bed squeaking and the raindrops hitting against the basin?  
You have moved your bed, it's now misaligned with the headboard.  
The mop rests next to where you've been busy drying up after the rain.  
In this house the rain doesn't quit on the rooftop.  
It lands on the bed, and then after someone's labour, finds the basin.  
You are here tonight, so it is your turn to move your bed.  
My turn is when you are away on a job that has still not rescued us from leaking roofs,  
even though your long-service certificates are fading inside the wall unit.



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## **Known holes**

My elbows sticking out of a school jersey.

Moisture inside my worn-out Toughees.

Toes peeping out of grey socks.

Cold air coming in through a window.

My last-option underwear.

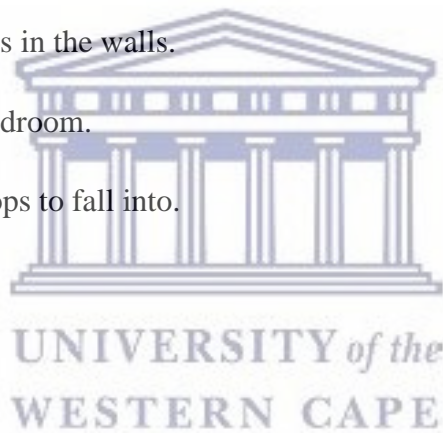
My patched-up trousers.

The towel that shied away from the washing-line.

Tiny rooms with crawling things in the walls.

A leaking roof in my father's bedroom.

A bucket on standby for raindrops to fall into.





## **The outside toilet**

The toilet is a walk away from our four-room house.  
At night, I walk glancing in all directions,  
mindful of things that crawl in the dark.  
I hold the weight of the door with my thigh until it can stand on its own,  
and inspect all the holes in the wall first  
before placing my bum on the toilet seat.



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## **His torn towel**

*(First crush)*

There's not much of it left now.  
His hands push through to the other side  
when he grabs it.  
He has mastered the art of folding it together  
until the holes fill in themselves.  
He can't forget the day he came to the washing-line  
at the exact same time as the beautiful girl next door  
who hung two towels opposite him  
(one for her face and another for her body),  
and looked at his with a wicked smile on her face.  
He no longer hangs his towel on the washing-line outside  
for fear of what her eyes will say.



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### **First girl visit: high school**

The day before she visits, I turn over the mattress,  
run my hand all over to see if there are no spikes on this side.  
The plan is to keep the curtains drawn in the kitchen tomorrow  
to hide the huge hole in the window.  
Nothing can be done about the coffee table with a broken side  
which my younger brother calls a “convertible”  
because of the top that comes off when he flips it over the couch every night  
to make room to sleep.  
Anyway, a man who hides everything is suspicious,  
so I will let her see what cannot be hidden.  
Tomorrow there’ll be a smell of lavender on these tiles.



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## **Nseleni**

What a coincidence that my township is divided into wards,  
that our homes stand one beside the other like hospital beds,  
that so many of us die here,  
that the goal is to make it out alive.



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## Nyanga Township

*Nyanga: healer*

I could not figure out why I was in such a hurry to leave.

I was raised by the township  
that didn't look anything like you.

On the internet they say there is no other place in the country  
where people kill each other like this.

You hold the name healer as a disguise.

*Nyanga: moon*

I heard no one stands long enough to look at the moon here.

At night everyone is in a hurry to get behind a locked door.

At night someone holds death in their hands.

*Nyanga: month*

If we divide the number of murders by twelve  
and give each month its equal share  
how many coffins does each one get?



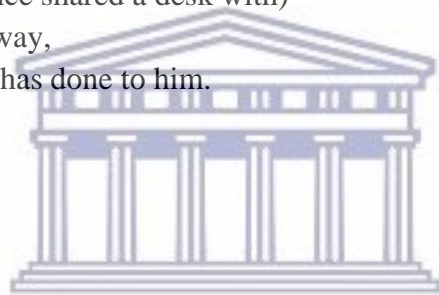
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## **Look what the township did to us**

My neighbour, stabbed in the neck with a knife,  
died wearing his white All-Stars,  
his body covered with a blanket outside the bar.

The girl with a beautiful round face, my first crush,  
who thought her beauty would see her out of the township,  
now avoids my eyes at the decaying supermarket  
that always runs out of plastic bags.

On a Thursday afternoon at the taxi rank,  
I hear a familiar voice calling out a cheat  
in a circle of men bent over dice.  
When he looks up (this guy I once shared a desk with)  
I immediately throw my eyes away,  
afraid to see what the township has done to him.



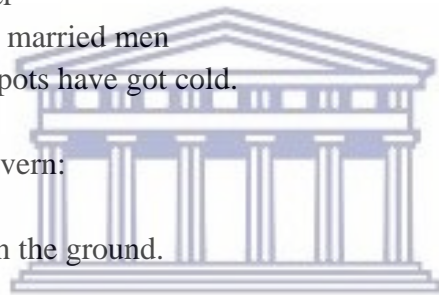
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## **This tavern**

In this tavern there are men with potbellies  
who dish out advice they never use;  
who bend too close while speaking gibberish,  
smelling like broken homes.  
They always attempt to speak wisdom drunk  
with lips burned by years of bad habits.  
You listen to them because respect dictates so  
and buy them a cigarette to get them off your back.

This tavern shelters lives that amount to nothing.  
School dropouts find solace here,  
asking you to add R5 so they can buy quarts.  
Girls spread their legs for a cider  
and squash themselves between married men  
who arrive home long after the pots have got cold.

There's a stale smell in every tavern:  
Alcohol breath. Alcohol piss.  
Empty bottles sleep sideways on the ground.



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## Our friend

Our friend runs to hide when he sees her approaching,  
almost knocking over the Hennessey he just bought.  
She gathers her breath before she greets  
and asks:

*Where is Thami? Have you guys seen him?*

Our loyalty answers:

*No. Not today.*

The frustration is clear on her face:

*Eish ok. Please tell him I came looking for him here at the tavern.*

*He's not answering my calls.*

*It's about his son. He has nothing to eat.*



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## Routines

The bed stands on bricks. The bed moans without sex.  
The fridge hums throughout the night. The fridge no longer  
lights up when its door opens. The son steals food  
when snores fill up the house.  
The son sleeps in the sitting room. The old wedding photo  
hangs on the wrinkled wall. Cardboard stands in windows where  
glass used to be. Torn towels swing on the washing line.  
The mother fetches the bucket from outside near the decaying toilet.  
The youngest sister pees inside the bucket at night.  
The older sister empties it in the morning.  
The mother prepares lunchboxes.  
The father rises and goes to work.



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## **Improvisations**

A brick to keep the door ajar.

An old cloth underneath the door to block out the cold.

Plastic hissing on the window fending off raindrops.

A car tyre on the roof to keep lightning at bay.

An old TV in the lounge needing to be tapped back to life.

The bed balancing on bricks.

Toothbrushes inside an old ice-cream container.

School socks drying behind the fridge.

Everything having to be reused before disposed.

Everything.



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## **Forks and knives**

I don't know of any household  
that uses forks and knives  
in the township.

Every piece of food finds its way to our mouths by spoon.

Our stomachs are beggars.

Details do not matter  
when we respond to their pleas.



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## Tuesday morning

The woman crosses the street pushing a wheelbarrow,  
heading towards the clinic.  
In the wheelbarrow lies a boy with a grey blanket up to his neck,  
his right arm dangling over the side.  
The taxi coughs out dark smoke on a speed hump,  
the driver removes his elbow from the window,  
people stare,  
the woman next to me stops chewing her sweetcorn.  
We look for trails of blood on the street and find none.  
Those close enough must see where tears are falling to the ground  
from the woman's eyes.



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## Part Three

### Urban



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## On a plane to Cape Town

On a plane to Cape Town sitting by the window,  
he sees clouds blanketing mountains.

Down there the roads are small  
like pathways between tiles on the floor,  
like lines on the trimmed head of a black boy.

UCT finally opened its doors and said to him:  
*Come on in.*

Perhaps the boy in him who ran the yards of township schools,  
and collected degrees from a rural university,  
needed validation from UCT,

the brightest light beckoning black moths,  
to burn them out.



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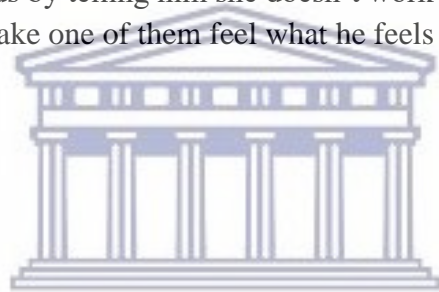
## UCT

It is not about his blackness  
that he is mistaken for a patient while standing outside the staff entrance  
on his second week on a new job at UCT.

The white woman who asks him if he has an appointment with a psychologist  
was on leave the previous week when he assumed his duties—  
that's what it's about. Her meeting him for the first time  
and not knowing who he is.

So when he arrives in Hout Bay later that day  
with the urge to look for a six-pack of Hunters Gold  
and finds in the liquor store a white girl promoting some product he doesn't even care to look at  
and asks her where he can find a six-pack of Hunters Gold,  
to which she blushing responds by telling him she doesn't work there,  
it's not because he wanted to make one of them feel what he feels almost every day,  
just for being black.

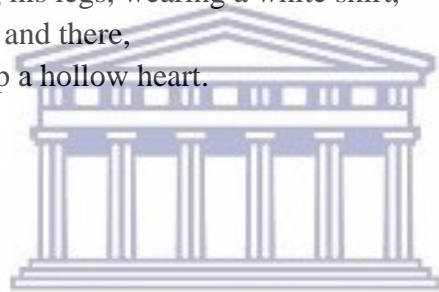
It's not an act of vengeance.



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## Mowbray

After 21 days of moving from one guesthouse to another,  
he is finally handed the keys to his flat:  
a two-bedroom apartment in Station Road smelling of paint.  
After moving his bags inside and gathering his breath,  
he finally looks around the empty space:  
Rooms stripped of furniture. Empty rooms  
like himself. Like people who come to talk to him,  
patients who sit next to him and tell him how empty they feel.  
How many times has he wondered what emptiness looks like?  
For two nights he sleeps in the flat without curtains  
and feels exposed in the morning when darkness can no longer hide him.  
Unlike darkness, he hides everything relentlessly,  
especially when he sits crossing his legs, wearing a white shirt,  
giving an occasional *mmm* here and there,  
pretending to know what fills up a hollow heart.



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## Emptiness

He worries too much, that's his problem.

Worries about silly things.

Even about his English that runs out like airtime while he speaks.

He's ashamed of everything,

including the master's degree that he obtained from a rural university  
which sits at the bottom of the list.

Now he's at a top university where they needed the colour of his skin  
to push their agenda of transformation.

But he likes it here. It's the opposite of where he's been.

He likes the office they gave him as well, which comes with a view of the mountain  
and the highway. The highway is always busy.

He wonders where people go, where suffering cannot find them.

He's been battling with emptiness lately—  
emptiness that awaits him in the flat that only has a bed and a barstool.

These days only thoughts keep him company. There's no one to talk to.

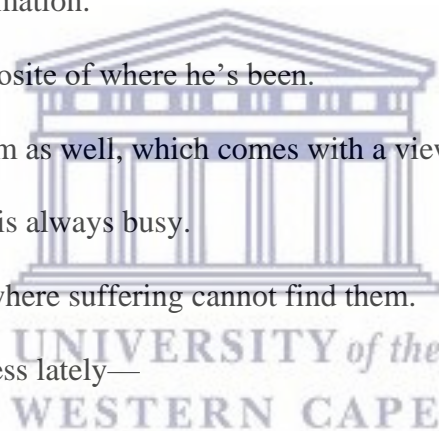
On his birthday his phone never rang

and he came close to calling his ex-girlfriend who had told him that he would end up alone,  
but he stopped because he didn't know which word would come out first  
between *bitch* and *witch*.

He doesn't want to fight anymore.

He wants peace. Only wants to fill up his heart—

to find someone willing to jump in where his heart keeps its mouth open.



## **Bantry Bay**

He does not know what comes over him while standing on the balcony  
of his room at the guesthouse—

does not know for example why he cries so suddenly  
while looking at the sea.

Why all this sentimentality about what's not his?

The sea is not his.

The balcony is not his.

All that he has is himself.

When does he cry about that?



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## Camps Bay

We drove up the road in a rented Fiesta,  
leaving Camps Bay behind us.  
I had found a backroom where the rich live, and couldn't sleep alone.  
You asked me to pull up at the side of the road  
so I could take pictures of you with the mountain in the background,  
even though you, unlike me, grew up in this city.  
I said *Imagine being stunned by the beauty of a lover like this,  
twenty years later.*  
You smiled and said *Don't be a poet now,*  
pulling me close enough to feel your nipples pressing against my chest,  
even though you, unlike me, were somebody's fiancé.



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## **To the bus stop**

It is drizzling. And I am walking next to a woman who drew our future with her finger on my chest last night. She is holding a small umbrella beneath which only she can fit. She has been calling me to join her, willing to sacrifice half of herself to the wetness. I refuse. Just before we come to the mall, a white Audi A3 lowers its speed to match ours. A young man in the passenger seat, holding a dumpy, calls for her attention. He is asking to talk to her. Asking for her number. Complimenting her legs. I stare at him to reassure him that I exist. He keeps trying to talk to her unaffected by my cold eyes. I keep my words inside me. I tell myself it will soon be over. He gives up. The car speeds off and disappears around the corner. I point ahead to the bus stop and tell my woman our bus has arrived.



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## Termination

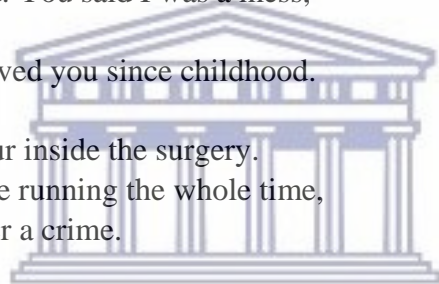
Something was made when we made love—  
something we were not ready for.

So you called, panicking, telling me about the pregnancy test,  
asking that we meet.  
I rose from the bed and put on my jacket,  
my heart almost coming out of my mouth.

It would take only two days after this to find myself waiting for you:  
Patterson Street, Newcastle, in broad daylight.  
Two women, one pregnant, crossed the street as if to remind me:  
*God sees everything.*

Before this we were on the road. You said I was a mess,  
but you would marry me.  
And I remembered that I had loved you since childhood.

You would be more than an hour inside the surgery.  
And I would keep the car engine running the whole time,  
like a man ready to take off after a crime.



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## **A walk in the suburbs**

There's not even a single piece of paper on the road.  
Only crushed leaves here and there.  
I raise my hand at the cars driving past;  
smiles blink across faces behind windscreens.  
There aren't even the joyful screams of children  
to accompany me along the pavement.  
Dogs come barking to the fence  
and quickly return to their business.  
The township is not as silent  
as this even in its sleep.  
The township snores heavily:  
a house song howling in the distance,  
drunken voices filling up the night.



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## **The immaculate toilet**

It smells like lavender here.  
The floor is immaculate. The walls white.  
I take a pee, push the button in the middle  
and watch the yellow liquid disappear.  
In the mirror I stare back at myself.  
No rush. No smell to escape from.  
I could eat in here.



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## Outside KFC

He cannot escape the cracking voice  
of a boy with a thin arm stretched out to him  
outside KFC,  
who eyes the brown packet in his hand  
and begs:  
*Please, bhuti, please.*



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## All the places

All the places he goes to  
remind him of where he comes from.  
Like now, seated at a long shiny table in a hotel  
with colleagues who overlook his township English  
and laugh kindly at his jokes,  
he cannot look at the sparkling fork and knife in front of him  
without thinking of holidays spent at his father's birthplace  
gathered around a huge bowl of maas with his cousins,  
digging in with his bare hands.



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## When you finally make it to the boardroom

Speak of growing up in the township as if it was an achievement.

Say that it was because you made it out alive.

Tell them you come from a place that chewed you up and spat you out when it thought it was done with you.

Correct those who ask you: *“What was it like growing up in the township?”*

Say the appropriate question is: *“How did you survive the township?”*

Tell them the township swallowed many of your peers.

Close your eyes for a second,

count the names of those you knew who got stabbed or arrested, steady yourself when you come to the total.

Wall in the tears. Keep tears to yourself.

Talk about a mother who prayed for you on your way to school, looking at you through a broken window.

Talk about a father who taught you how to balance your bed on bricks.

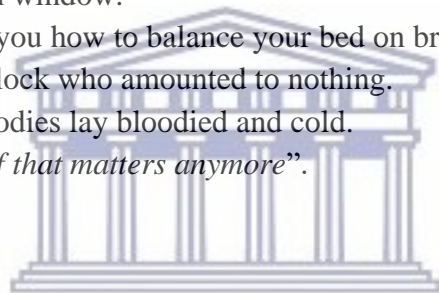
Think of those from the same block who amounted to nothing.

Think of street corners where bodies lay bloodied and cold.

Be the first one to say: *“None of that matters anymore”*.

Gobble down a glass of water.

Move on to another topic.



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**Self-reflexive essay**

**In Search of Identity**



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## **In Search of Identity**

### **Introduction**

The poet in this collection is an observer who navigates different environmental settings, exploring how people's identities are shaped by the places they live in. This observation includes the poet himself, giving the collection a somewhat autobiographical element. The poet extends this observation to people around him as well, looking at how, like him, their identities are influenced by where they come from.

I have always believed that place plays a huge role in shaping a person's identity. Growing up in the township, I always felt that there were experiences exclusive to people living in the townships that influenced the way they viewed themselves in relation to the world. My visits to the rural area in my father's birthplace during school holidays exposed me to experiences that were unfamiliar to me coming from the township. This led to the generalization that even the urban context came with its own unique experiences that only people living there were exposed to. These observations about the unique dynamics of each environmental context culminated into questions about the role played by these unique experiences in shaping how people view themselves, and how this viewing of self could not be separated from the place in which it occurred. This collection of poems is the product of questions about the link between place and identity. It is preoccupied with exploring how everyday experiences mould our identity, and how this identity is influenced by place.

It is important to clarify at the outset what identity means in the context of this collection. Mphoto Mogoboya outlines the elusiveness of the concept of identity by referring to it as "a broad concept to outline and, as such, complex to explore because it has many nuances of meaning" (1).

The stance taken by this collection on the concept of identity is consistent with Kirstan Puttic's view of identity as "the way in which an individual or group defines who they are within a given context" (1). The context within which this description of self occurs in this collection is place. Perhaps before one can attempt to explore identity through poetry, one must first embrace poetry as an apt tool for this. Dashen Naicker posits that "a poem is a space in which expression is charted, and identity constructed" (2). This idea that identity can be constructed in poetry resonates very strongly in this collection, which constructs the identities of people occupying different environmental contexts through poems.

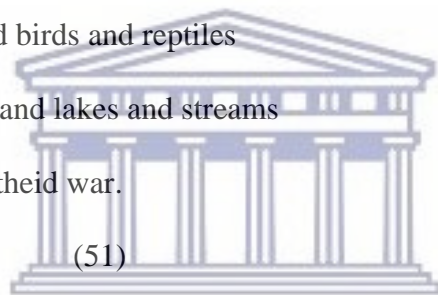
The exploration of identity through poetry is commonplace in South Africa, a country that has had to form a new identity itself following the demise of Apartheid. One could argue that it would seem natural that poets confronted with a changing identity of a country would then turn to poems as spaces in which their identities could be preserved and, if necessary, remoulded. Kelwyn Sole notes that "if there is one theme that seems to unite many poets of different persuasions at present, it is that of the individual in search of his or her putative identity" (147). This is certainly true of this collection as well. This collection is a search for a young man's identity. It is also an exploration of other people's identities, extending the search beyond the "I" to the "We"; because identity is shared, just as much as place is.

### **Place**

It is a delicate task to explore the concept of place in a country that is infamous for its political history of allocating people to certain places according to the colour of their skin. When dealing with the concept of place, this political history becomes inescapable. The township, for example, which is one of the environmental contexts explored in this collection, is the remnant of the

Apartheid doctrine that was used to identify ‘non-white’ living spaces (Jurgens, Donaldson, Rule, and Bahr 256). It is no surprise then that South African literature has mostly explored the concept of place through the lens of this political history, as epitomized by the opening lines of a poem by Vonani Bila entitled “Autobiography” (influenced by a poem with the same title by Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet):

I was born in 1952  
Where Mudzwiriti River swelled over roads and boulders  
But nothing green grew in Gazankulu Bantustan  
Even plants and trees and shrubs  
Even the animals and birds and reptiles  
Even the mountains and lakes and streams  
Felt the pain of apartheid war.



(51)

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Even though my initial intention was to explore identities that have been constructed post the Apartheid era, there is something that has not changed much about this country that kept luring me back to the dynamics of its dark past. Mogoboya observes aptly that “African literature deals with a quest for identity on the basis of history, language, and culture” (77). Although this collection is not immune to history, it does set itself aside by seeking identity with a special focus on the influences of place. I made a conscious effort to write about place in a way that I had never seen written about before. I wanted to write about spaces that are commonly overlooked, where the day-to-day experiences of ordinary citizens occur. There is a scarcity of contemporary poetry in this country that is representative of the everyday life of people living in the townships and rural

areas. This propelled me to write about spaces that rarely make poetry books. I wrote, for example, about Nseleni, the township I grew up; about Ndundulu, the rural place where my father grew up; about Habeni, the rural place where my family relocated to. I wrote about townships and rural areas that I have been to which are some of the many spaces that are overlooked and under-represented in South African literature.

I hold the view that it is important for people to see themselves in the literature that they read. This needs to be emphasized in the wake of an ongoing debate about South African poetry being highly selective and unrepresentative of certain particular spaces. The issue of representativeness has been articulated by several poets who feel that South African poetry tends to overlook certain groups of people, especially those who are poor and less educated. Sole writes that published poetry in South Africa is dominated by better-educated and middle-class individuals whose poems “tend to be inflected with unconscious expressions and perceptions of privilege and class” (147). In a country where most people live in poverty or just above the poverty line, how is poetry that is preoccupied with privilege and class relevant to them? Mxolisi Nyezwa engages beautifully with the question of poetry’s relevance to ordinary citizens in his poem entitled “In every house”:

in every house where there lives a hurt child  
in every house where there is no future  
and men hang their misery on the wall  
in devastation  
at every turn they ask me  
*“what do your poems speak to us?”*

(29)

Do poets perhaps have an unconscious belief that poetry cannot coexist with poverty? Naicker expresses his concern about the survival of poetry in a society plagued by poverty and violence. He feels that “it is frighteningly easy to dismiss poetry in a country of hunger, of open hands at stop streets, and closed fists in bedrooms” (69). I believe that if poor people could see themselves in poetry, they would embrace it, and so there would not be any doubt about the survival of poetry. I also subscribe to Nyezwa’s sentiment that “poetry that is not restless, that doesn’t reflect the streets and the urban poor, poetry that has no time for rural settlements and the youth, must be strung of air and must suffocate” (25). Poetry must be for everyone and must be everywhere. In other words, it must move across all the three environmental contexts covered in this collection, *Townships, Shacks and Suburbs*.

This collection, then, brings together two concepts, namely place and identity, with an attempt to explore the influence of place on identity. The concept of place has been divided into three environmental contexts, namely the rural context, the township, and the urban context. These environmental contexts make up the three chapters of this collection. There are several South African poets who have written extensively about each of these environmental contexts explored in this collection. When one thinks of the township, for example, a contemporary poet like Mxolisi Nyezwa comes to mind; when one thinks of the rural context, the likes of Vonani Bila and Thabo Jijana come to mind. One can also include Mzi Mahola into the latter group, whom Sole notes that “his poetry gives space to themes surrounding growing up in a rural community in the Eastern Cape” (148). It is therefore indisputable that South African poetry does examine place. The difference with this collection is that it makes a conscious effort to explore the dynamics of different environmental contexts simultaneously. When embarking on the creative journey of putting together this collection, I was not aware of any contemporary South African poetry



collection that had observed the rural, the township and the urban contexts simultaneously, exploring how each influence the way people identify themselves, as well as the intricacies of their everyday lives.

Puttic defines identity as a “fluid, manifold construct which is both social and personal” (1). This idea of identity as fluid is taken into consideration in this collection, calling for poetry to move freely between these environmental contexts. As people move from one environmental context to the other, it is natural to assume that their identities will be shaped by this movement. In a country with a political history of deliberately isolating Black people from economic hubs, the migration of people from rural areas and townships to cities in search of jobs is one of the themes that has dominated South African literature from J.J.R. Jolobe’s epic poem, “The Making of a Servant” (circa 1930s) to Peter Abrahams’ novel *Mine Boy* (1946) and onwards.

Thus, environmental contexts are not explored discreetly or in complete isolation from one another because movement makes them permeable, resulting in a speaker’s ability to reflect on one environmental context while occupying the other. In the poem entitled “First day back from the township”, for example, which falls under the chapter named “Rural”, the speaker reflects about his experiences while visiting the township. This reflection occurs in the rural context, where the speaker must “kneel over a basin and scoop up water with [his] hands”. The similar reflection is observed in the poem entitled “All the places”, where the speaker now inhabiting the urban context, reflects back on his experience of the rural context. He is confronted by the contrast of sitting around a long shiny table in a hotel with his colleagues and the background of once gathering around the huge bowl of maas with his cousins and digging in with his bare hands while visiting his father’s birthplace. The other environmental context that is brought up in this poem is

the township where the speaker grew up; he is worried about fitting in the urban space where he finds himself with colleagues who overlook his township English.

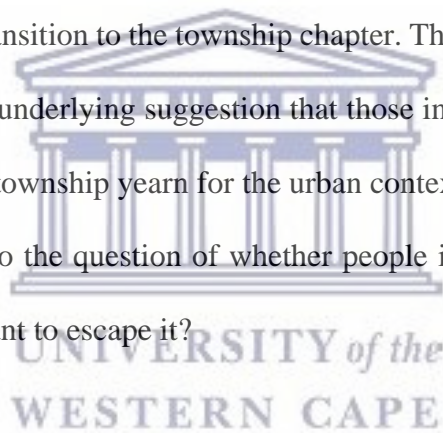
There is a sense here that the background is inescapable— a sense that no matter where the speaker goes the township is with him, it lives in him. If places influence our identities, and identities form part of who we are, can we ever escape the places we have been into? Can we ever escape ourselves? These are some of the crucial questions raised by this collection.

## **Rural**

Mohan Gopaul argues that “South African rural societies remain some of the most impoverished societies in the world, and access to employment, education, land, housing, health services and other essential resources still divide them from their urban neighbours” (1). The poverty that people living in the rural areas are confronted with dominates the poetry written about the rural context. The lack of basic services such as running water and electricity is observable in such poems. One sees this in “The Room of Rural Teaching”, a poem written by Kobus Moolman, from his collection *A Book of Rooms*, when the speaker mentions the youngest daughter who “walks every day with her squeaking wheelbarrow and her plastic drum to fetch water for him from the Ngwenya river” (30). In the poem entitled “Habeni”, included in my collection, “streams are running taps where a cow and a boy might come to drink at the same time”.

Noticeably there is brokenness running through many of the poems occupying this chapter. Windows and doors are broken. Walls are cracking. Houses are “eaten away by heavy rains”. All this relates to the poverty, because brokenness and poverty are inseparable. But there is also a sense of hope in this chapter, as one sees in the “A school visit” poem, that in the face of all this brokenness there is aspiration. The child in the poem dreams of becoming a doctor. This

is important because it shows that people can hold dreams bigger than the places they live in. I made a conscious effort to write poems about hope and love to challenge the stereotypical idea that rural life is all about struggling. Even though in “Song in my heart”, lovers fight over bathing in a dish when one of them spills water all over the floor, their love is strong enough to see one partner taking a three-hour journey on a taxi to visit the other. I strategically put the poem “First day back from the township” at the end of the chapter to allow a smooth transition to the next chapter dedicated to the township. In this poem, the speaker yearns for the township, an environmental context which appears better and more developed. This yearning comes after they had visited the township and seen how much better it was from where they live. I felt that this yearning was the best way to transition to the township chapter. This yearning runs through all the chapters. There seems to be an underlying suggestion that those in the rural context yearn for the township, and that those in the township yearn for the urban context. And so I ask, what does this particular yearning contribute to the question of whether people identify with their places? Can you call a place home if you want to escape it?



### **Township**

Nyezwa’s call for poetry to be representative of the lives of ordinary citizens and not overlook the streets, the urban poor and rural settlements, is justified in his poetry, which depicts the ordinary day-to-day life shaped by the township. Nyezwa grew up in New Brighton, a township located in Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape Province. His poetry paints a picture of a man who identifies with the township but is aware of its ills. Violence and other social ills are part of the challenges faced by people living in the township. One could argue that violence is to the township what

poverty is to the rural context. Although, of course, this would not be to suggest that poverty does not exist in the township, because it clearly does.

There is a recurrent theme of township violence in South African literature. In his latest collection of poems, entitled *Malikhanye*, Nyezwa writes that the “the township lays its violent streets before us” (62). He writes extensively about the gruesomeness of the township streets. In his poem the “Sleepless world”, “the street refuses to calm down” and it “has many murders” (25). In my collection, I wrote about Nyanga, the township in the Western Cape that is infamous for being the murder capital of the country. I had heard a lot about Nyanga before moving to Cape Town, and was curious about what it looked like, about whether it bore any resemblance to the township I grew up in. In one of my trips to Cape Town, I decided to drive to Nyanga to indulge my curiosity. I was struck by how close the township is to the airport; it is literally in the airport’s backyard, a five-minute drive away. Cape Town, I soon realized, is a city of dualities, where poverty and wealth, blackness and whiteness, violence and peace, are in one’s face, clearer than in any other place in the country. My writing process of this poem included making references to the Zulu meanings of the word “Nyanga”. In IsiZulu, (i)nyanga is a traditional healer. I was fascinated by the irony that the very same township called Nyanga, with a name associated to healing, would be notorious for murder, the ultimate opposite of healing. I referred to this in the poem, suggesting that the township holds its name as a disguise. After completing this poem, I also realized that it was the first time in my writing career that I had ever borrowed meaning from my home language in the process of writing a poem. There was, for the first time, the coming together of IsiZulu and English.

There is a preoccupation with violence that runs through many of the poems in this chapter. But there is also a theme of poverty. In these poems, towels are torn; roofs are leaking; beds have

spikes, and windows have holes. It is important to note that the township is symbolic of economic exclusion. People living in townships know the painful history of being denied economic freedom. This past, this dark history, always catches up with us. When reflecting on the poems that I wrote about the township, I was touched by the darkness running through all of them. I could not write a happy poem. I could not find anything happy to write about. How do people see themselves living in a place plagued by violence and poverty? How does a place like this shape a person's identity? Douglas Kaze notes that "without economic 'attachment', or with economic deprivation, it becomes rather difficult to hold on to place" (3). Do people find any attachment to the township? Perhaps my failure to find anything positive to write about the township is suggestive of the fact that I do not identify with the place, even though I have lived most of my life there. In these poems there is a sense that the township is a place that one survives—a sense that it is a place to escape.

## Urban

But where do people escape to? The city, of course. The urban life pulls them like moths to a light. There are job opportunities in the urban context, which explains the influx of people from rural areas and townships. I started off this chapter with a poem where the speaker is on a plane to Cape Town to start a new job at the University of Cape Town (UCT). I felt that this was a good way to begin a chapter about the urban context, since urban life is synonymous with a quest for opportunities and success. Again, one is confronted by the inescapable political history of exclusion in this chapter. Gabeba Baderoon writes about Cape Town in her latest collection, *The History of Intimacy*, as the city that was declared white when her parents married:

The city was declared white  
in the year he and my mother married

and they were removed  
to a place you cannot trace from here

(44).

There is a poem in my collection written about UCT, the oldest university in the country that has always been a home for whiteness. The university is currently negotiating itself into transformation. There is a sense that Black students and academics currently do not feel at home there, so it was important for me to write about these racial dynamics. The interesting thing about the ongoing dialogue of transformation at UCT is that it was only initiated more than two decades into democracy. This makes it easy to assume that there is resistance. It was interesting to note this conflict between place and identity; the idea that some identities are not welcomed by some spaces, as Douglas Kaze argues: “the city has a life, a rhythm of its own from which the poor are excluded”

(3).

Nick Mulgrew is one of the poets who has heeded Nyezwa’s call and written about the “urban poor”. One sees this in his poem entitled “Barrier”:

this morning I saw a man  
rattling about in my garbage  
and I took umbrage at him  
and I felt odd about it  
he was probably looking for food.

(20)

I wrote a poem like this one, in which a boy asks for food. This poem, entitled “Outside KFC”, depicts the everyday life of those who cannot keep up with the rhythm of the city; those who end up begging for food. It seems that poverty is inescapable. One finds it in the urban context as well, perhaps at its most brutal here since it shares the space with wealth. And it is this wealth that inevitably magnifies it.

## **Conclusion**

In seeking identity through poetry by navigating different environmental contexts, I was struck by how similar different places are. Themes of poverty and love and yearning were observable throughout all these environmental contexts. Even though there was a sense that these themes did not manifest in the same way, there was undeniable evidence that they were present in all these environmental contexts. And so one of the burning questions propelling this collection was what happens when people hailing from different contexts meet at the same table? Do their different backgrounds stand between them, or are they able to find common ground? I have found that these environmental contexts are more similar than different. The differences lie more in the observable, the physical, the infrastructures: buildings and highways. But they all embody the same experiences of human life. And it is these experiences that shape us, that build our identities. This is the greatest discovery that writing this collection has led me to. The quest for identity cannot be limited to place. There is something about human nature that cannot be divided by place. People will love no matter where they are. They will yearn for something better no matter where they are. They will feel empty no matter where they are. They will find greatness in themselves no matter where they are. The viewing of self can rise above the place in which that self occurs. Identity can escape place.



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