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Abstract:

My MA mini-thesis in Creative Writing is a collection of 33 poems titled *Learning to Exhale*. The poems are centred around a character – a black African woman who is sharing her experiences of mental illness. The poems revolve around memory, forgetting and remembering; going back to the moment when the woman realises that she is ill, understanding it from the present while working to find ways to express what bipolar disorder is and how she experiences it. The collection also highlights her search for words and meaning to describe these experiences that are highly traumatic. This is to create a language of expressing the indescribable. This means that the form and structure is experimental, combining differing styles and form to show different voices, different states of mind that swing from depression, mania to suicidal thoughts.

This work is important as it is adding to a much needed archive on mental illness in the black African community, while also using a mode that allows room for the range of experiences that a sufferer from mental illness goes through. The central tenet though, resonates with Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera’s discovery that, “We have found beauty in the tensions and betrayals” (5); highlighting the possibility of the beauty of the literary in expressing even the most gruesome and traumatic of experiences, thereby creating narratives that are truthful, appealing and intimate in nature. The literary therefore stands as an intervention and a space to negotiate healing, freedom and expression where society, culture and consequently language fall short.

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To my chosen family: Grace, Anesu, Varaidzo, Anais, Percy and Rob - wow - you guys know how to make a girl feel special. Thank you for holding me, and loving me and seeing me. Thank you for allowing me to complain, to cry, to scream in excitement, to share my dream and for your support in making me see how capable I am. I am truly and fully loved by you. To my former Wits colleagues Amanda and Michelle, your presence is always felt when I remember when and where we began dreaming together. It is not lost on me that this part of my journey is a continuation of what we started over ten years ago. Finally, I thank myself first, for honouring my dreams and working this hard to produce a collection that is simply beautiful and the best reflection of myself.

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Learning to Exhale I

The first time she sat in the therapist's chair she was asked a strange question:

"Do you feel visible?"

"All my life I have felt invisible," she said as the rotten fruit fell from her tree, the thuds loud and distracting.

"You do not breathe," the therapist told her. "It is as if you are scared to breathe. Maybe because you feel you do not deserve to."

But how do you breathe when the world keeps trying to eject you?



Magic

I

Autumn was a season for magic. Brown leaves falling from the abundant trees of the Beatrice boarding school. With every gust of wind, all the young boarders would gather around the Musasa tree and try to catch as many leaves as their tiny hand could. Some days, she can still feel the scalding hope in her hands.

II

Catch a falling leaf, put it in your pocket

Save it for a rainy day

Catch a falling leaf, catch a leaf,

catch a leaf, catch it, catch it

catch it, catch it, catch it

catchitcachitcatchitcatchitcatchitcatchit

III

When she was in grade one, there was a girl in her dorm room who had special powers. She could suddenly say, “Anyone who hangs up my gown for me will go home today,” and they would all rush to do the girl’s bidding. She doesn’t remember if it ever worked.

IV

One flush, two flushes, three flushes. If I flush all the toilets something good will happen. One bed, two beds, three beds made. If I make all my friends’ beds, mummy will come see me. One circle, two circles, three circles. Three circles around the tree, Tata will come. One chew, two chews, three chews. If I chew each piece of food three times, they will all come and get me. One two three. Onetwothreeonetwothreeonetwothreeonetwothree.

V

They are sitting in the dining hall. There are three rows of wooden tables, each one long enough for twelve, their tiny legs barely scraping the floor. Dinner is always formal, shiny green blazers line the rows. It is chicken tonight and everyone is excited. It is not just that chicken night is a good night- chicken night is wishbone night. You look for a partner and each of you

places their little finger around the base of the bone. You hold on to the bone as you turn around as fast as you can three times before you close your eyes, pull and make a wish as you fall down.

VI

Round and round and round and round

I close my eyes, and wish it would stop

Circling around the well

Calling me in

Calling me in

Calling me.



The Little Bird

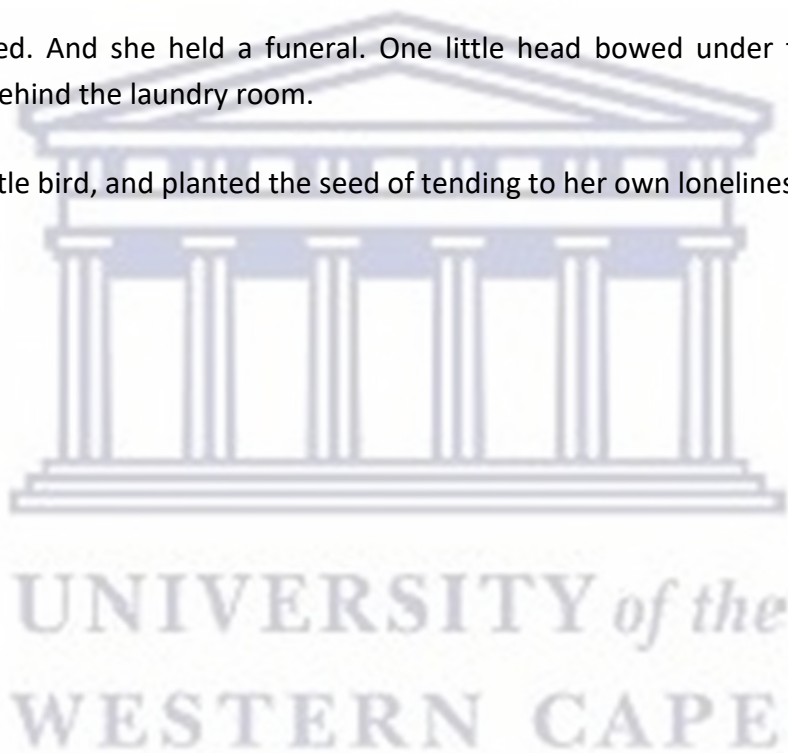
She found a little bird, a kamikaze that fell from the sky. And kept it in her dorm locker. For food, she stole pieces of bread from the dining hall at supper.

The little bird lived in the darkness of that locker. Silent and compliant in her conspiracy to keep it alive without detection.

Her little bird chirped faintly when she brought in some light and held it for a moment. The tiny body vibrating in the warmth of her hands.

Her little bird died. And she held a funeral. One little head bowed under the mulberry trees, behind the laundry room.

She buried her little bird, and planted the seed of tending to her own loneliness.



The Calling I

She remembers the first time she was beguiled by death. She was ten or eleven.

Surreptitiously she stole a knife from the kitchen and headed to her bedroom, making sure she was alone. The glare of the knife drew her in as she considered putting it through her heart – the only way she knew a knife could kill someone.



The First Wave

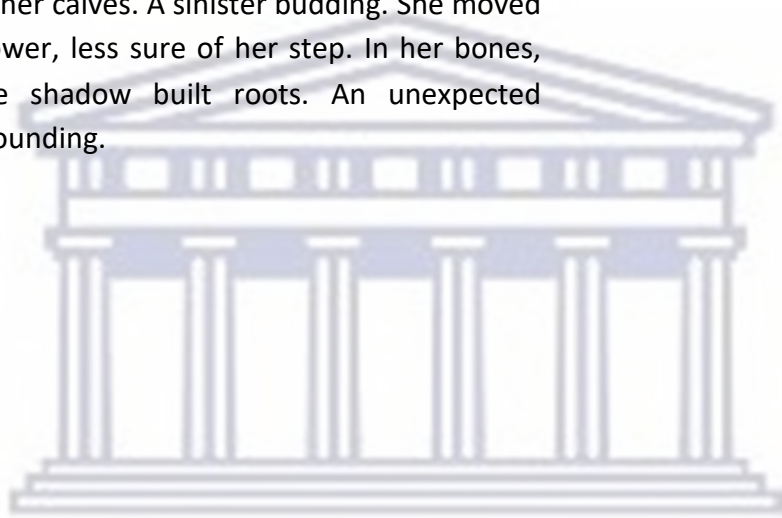
The first wave is always fascinating. Light. She enjoys how the water teases her. Moving close and immediately retreating. It covers her whole bottom and washes the sand off her legs. It is refreshing, almost metaphoric. A cleansing. She imagines being swept away, wave after wave getting closer and heavier.



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The Shadow

It was a slow creeping darkness, which began as a shadow, barely covering her feet as she lay down in her small teenage bed. The shadow felt familiar. It followed her everywhere, ferrying her to and from school, and stayed even after the sun had gone down. She softened towards its permanence. One afternoon it lengthened to her calves. A sinister budding. She moved slower, less sure of her step. In her bones, the shadow built roots. An unexpected grounding.



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Driving

It's morning,
and her mother is driving her to school.
Her smooth hand changes the gears,
one into two into three.
Her long fingers make it look easy,
one would never think she does this alone.
Elegantly driving through the abandonment.



Losing Herself

It began with a few flakes of shed skin on her sheets
the day after they took Tata to the airport.

Then tiny holes opened up in her epidermis
as she dried herself after a shower.

She began to itch, the wounds getting wider and wider.
The dermatologist looked at her with sympathetic eyes.

He said all was fine, she just needed to rest,
and gave her mother the number of a psychiatrist.

She woke up one day in the room she once shared with her sister
and her skin had carved itself out neatly,

hanging by a tendon.
She caught glimpses of it as she walked

past the mirrors of her silent home.
Its hanging weight dragging behind her.



The Second Wave

The second wave comes in stronger, leaving her slightly unbalanced. She digs in her heels but her grip loosens as the possibility of letting go enthralls her. It is the death card she keeps close to her chest, the one she is always dealt in her readings. A skeleton riding on a horse, wielding a sickle. She gets up. Knowing that she could choose surrender delivers a calm that keeps her going a little bit more, each time.



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(For Macharia)

Cigarette butts and empty wine bottles,
their naked bodies tangled into one
on her small university bed,
etching their initials in the moon.

Green leaves glowing in the dark,
they do not need the sun to breathe.



Treachery

Heavy whispers
and sweaty secrets.

Closed doors.

Silent footsteps in the night.

Her best friend and her lover.

Loud cracks in the sky beneath her feet.

Even gravity has betrayed her.



Vertigo

Pink mangoes in an orange tree.

Yellow almonds in the fish tin.

Blue beans dangling from the spinach.

It's the crack of dawn,
his hand slips from hers,
and the unjust torment
of falling out of love begins.



Remember Me

There was a place on their moon
surrounded by mirrors.

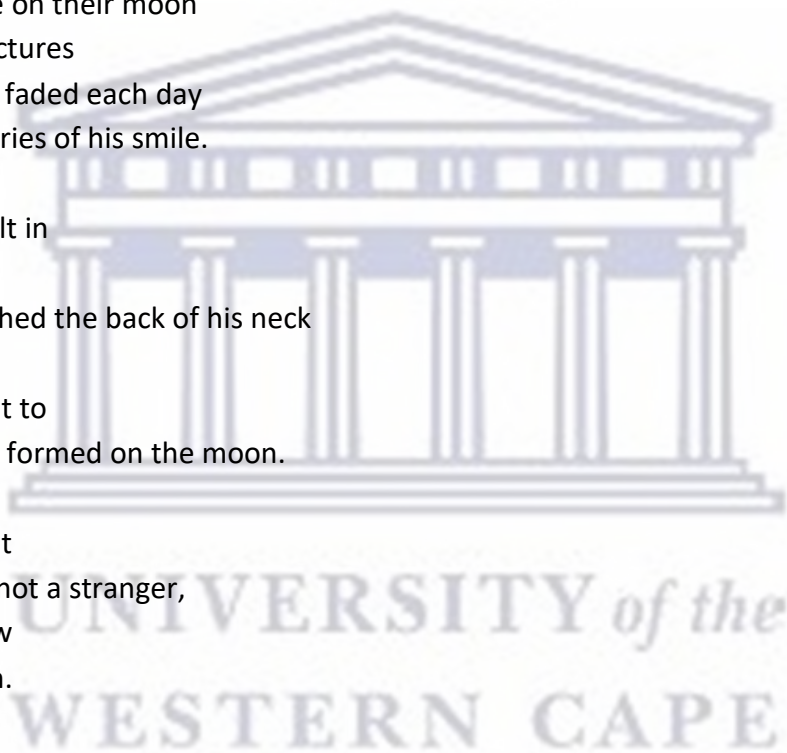
There was no difference
between her and him.

The intruder dwelt in
the leaves.
Their shadow fell on his face
and hers.
She never thought to
ask how shadows form on the moon.

There was a place on their moon
surrounded by pictures
of her father that faded each day
along with memories of his smile.

The stranger dwelt in
the silence.
Their breath brushed the back of his neck
and hers.
She never thought to
ask how breath is formed on the moon.

She never thought
the intruder was not a stranger,
but an old shadow
calling her back in.



The Third Wave

*The third wave comes as a flood. She wakes
up and cannot read. Her mind is filled with*

water and the words float above it. She picks up a bucket, scooping out liquid letters. On all fours, she tries to plug the holes but she can barely keep up. Aching arms and a heavy head. All she needs is rest. Clinging to escaping words is exhausting. She lays her heavy head down, for a day, or two. Or even three. She does not know.



Learning to Exhale II

The therapist leaned in with a tissue in her hand. How could she trust someone who looked a stranger so easily in the eye?

“You suffer from rejection and abandonment issues,” the therapist explained. “This has snowballed into anxiety and depression, while you have a genetic predisposition to bipolar disorder. We can give you medicine for that.”

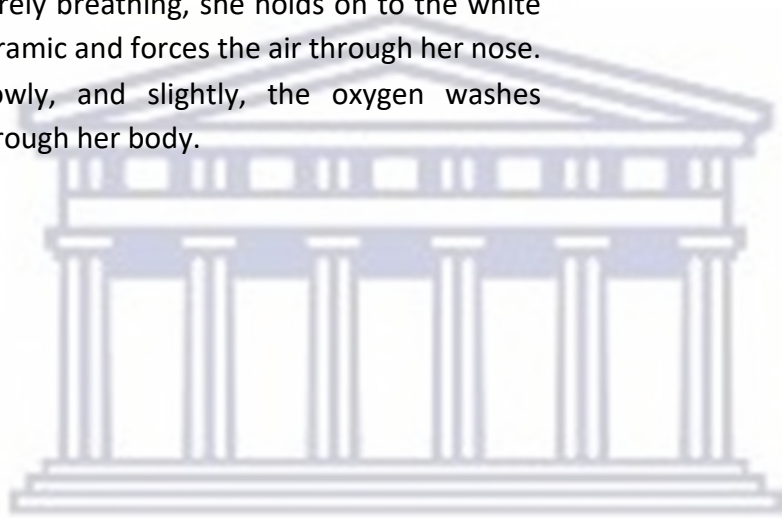
For a tree with barely any branches left, the release of tears was effuse. She came here to find out how she could read again, to finish her degree. To stop leaking. To stop withering.

How do you take pills for feeling unloved?



Prozac

The wave of nausea pushes her forward, further into the toilet bowl. The yellow bile with the crumbly white powder from the Prozac trickles slowly into the water. It's the third time today, more heaving left than anything else. Too weak to move, she lets go of the bowl and lies down. The cold of the tiles cools her instantly, and for a moment the world is still. A cough finds its way out of her throat propelling her back to the bowl. Barely breathing, she holds on to the white ceramic and forces the air through her nose. Slowly, and slightly, the oxygen washes through her body.



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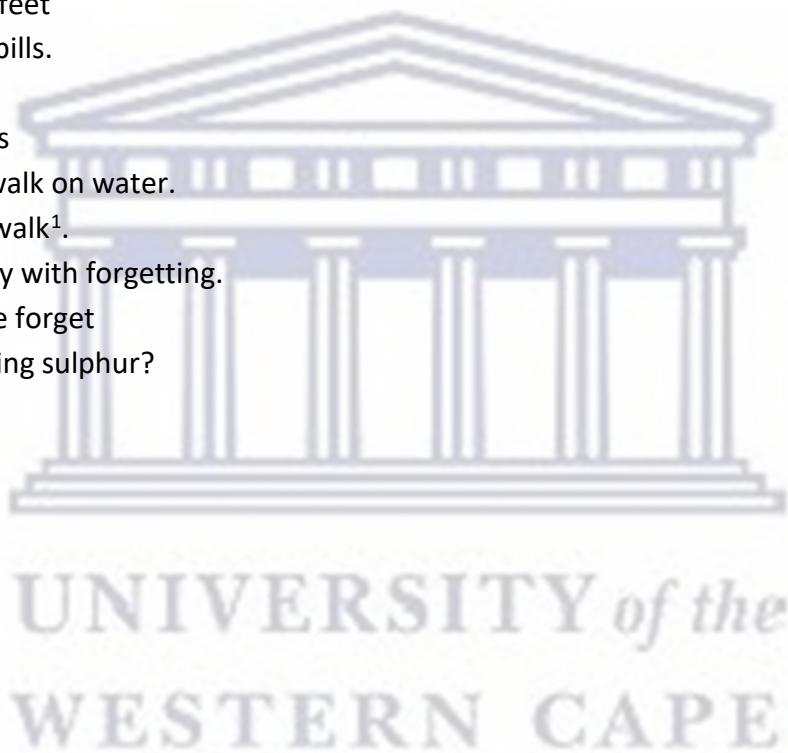
The 3rd Floor

(After Margaret Atwood's "A Visit")

Gone are the days
when she could taste
the dark concrete of the walls
and the floating urine.

Gone are the porous whispers
and the hands of ghosts,
the ringing of bells,
the screaming of feet
and lining up for pills.

Gone are the days
when she could walk on water.
When she could walk¹.
Her feet are heavy with forgetting.
But how does one forget
the smell of burning sulphur?



Insomnia

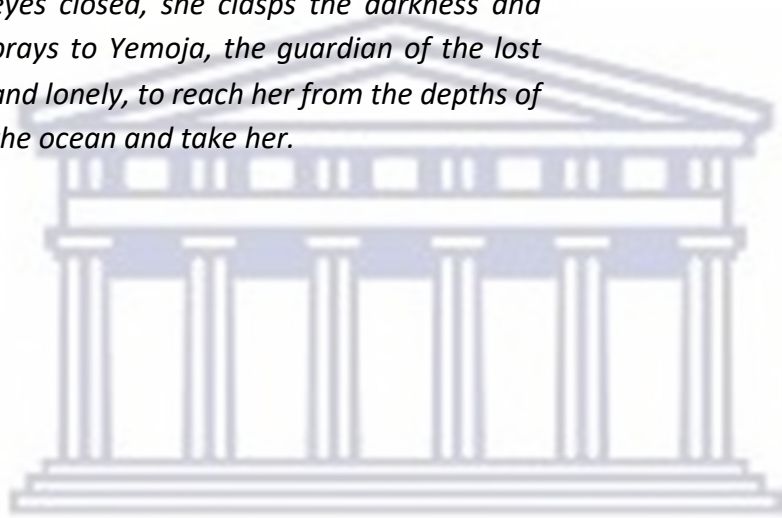
¹ Lines adapted from Margaret Atwood's "A visit" from *Morning in the Burned House* (1995)

Muddy wings
and bloodshot eyes.
“Dopaquel?” she asks
the chirpy pharmacist.
The mist around him
suddenly feels
unbearably still.
She cannot tell if it’s
pity or fear.
He hands her the medicine
and the roots of her tree
reach slowly into the ground
once again.



The Fourth Wave

The fourth wave carries her away. Floating on a sea raging around her. Yet she feels still. The water, devoted, binds her in welcome. She has surrendered and lets the wave move her where it wants. A prodigal daughter. Just like the fish, the coral and the water, she is one with them. Here she belongs. To the forgotten, to the invisible. To the dangerous and the dismissed. Her eyes closed, she clasps the darkness and prays to Yemoja, the guardian of the lost and lonely, to reach her from the depths of the ocean and take her.



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It became tradition that in every therapy session she cried. The ropes loosening and getting longer each time.

“Where does it hurt? What is coming up for you?” the therapist asked her.

But the knots were too tight.

“Breathe. Please, remember to breathe.”

She took a deep breath in, but it got stuck, the ground releasing her roots.

How do you exhale when you are crashing?



“The doctors say something is wrong with me,”
she struggles to say,
frantically reaching into her navel
in search of something whole.
They are in the living room
surrounding her,
an intervention.
The rage in her brother’s eyes
is mirrored by
her mother’s,
the umbilical cord long gone.



The Calling II

She found out a friend killed himself. He jumped off a building. She thought: it must have been really bad, the urge, the flames. It makes her think, at some point you lose. She once read that² you can fight that call for months and years and think you're winning. But one day there will be that one call you answer. And it makes her bones cold. *Will I answer it too?*



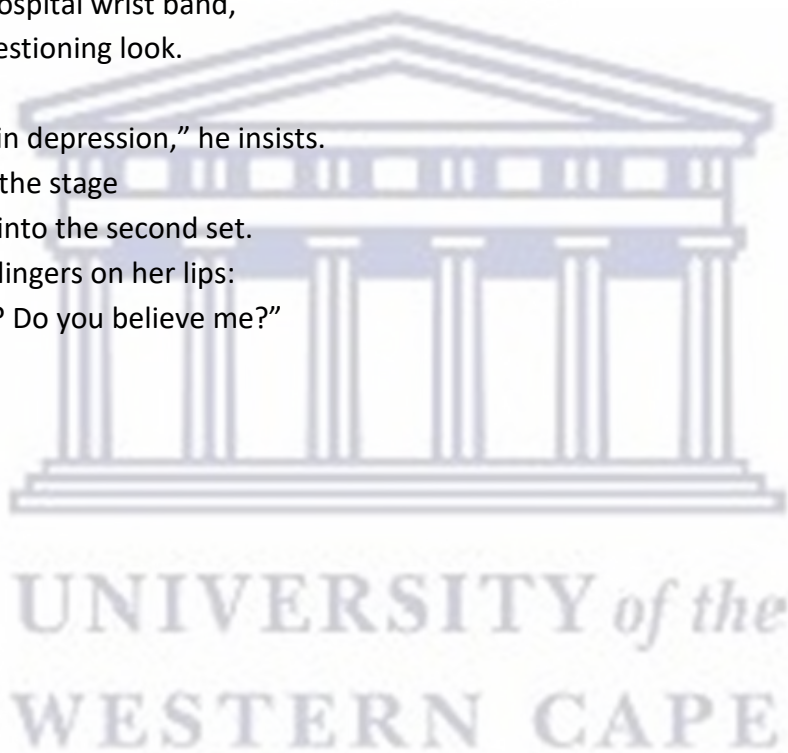
² Xenopoulos, Rahla. *A Memoir of Love and Madness: Living with Bipolar Disorder*. Cape Town: Oshun Books, 2009.

Believe Me

It's jazz night at Sophiatown.
She locks eyes with the saxophonist,
whom she once loved.
A man who drinks air like water
cannot be trusted.

He sits down next to her
and runs his fingers down her arm.
Stopping at the hospital wrist band,
he gives her a questioning look.

"I do not believe in depression," he insists.
He walks back to the stage
blowing his horn into the second set.
But the question lingers on her lips:
"What about me? Do you believe me?"



The Fifth Wave

The fifth wave jolts her back to consciousness. She has little life left in her, she realises. Her lungs are full and she is afraid, how is she still alive? She finds herself moving through the reeds, surrounded by small alcoves. She explores the place she has made home. There are many of them. Women. This is where women come when they are tired. They hold hands. They sing a lullaby.



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She sat in a new therapist's chair in Harare, having moved her lean and sullen branches back to her childhood home.

"Do you go to church?" the therapist asked nonchalantly. "There is no work we can do if you do not believe in God."

"I have prayed and it hasn't worked. I don't think he exists."

"Don't say that, God will strike you dead," the therapist responded laughingly.

"It would be the first time he showed up," she said as she walked out of the door, sparse leaves blowing in the wind.



Seizing Happiness

(After C.D. Wright's "Crescent")

In recent years I have become intent on seizing happiness³: to achieve this I have started sprinkling sugar on the plants: the light of the moon clarifies the injustice: bottles of wine mellow the shattering noise: it seems I can no longer wear shorts: my watch is stuck on the same time even though the second hand keeps moving: a drizzle of blood from a razor across my thighs every now and then keeps me human: he never picks up the call I really need him to: three nights in a row I lie with my eyes open: the circle of the well glistens in the sun as I lean over the top: it reminds me of how I like to dance on table tops: I'm not sure how the security guard let me in: the wind pulls at my skirt as I attempt to climb the mountain: you need to learn to sneak up on happiness, on him: my mother takes me to the hospital to find sleep: the moon keeps the stars company when I finally do: they wake me up at his doorstep: the grass is so green it befits a wedding: the words so airtight they can't tell that I'm lost: she holds her hand over my nose to make sure I'm still breathing: cupcakes in the oven, I will cover them in butterflies so they fly away: the chocolate crescents float by but they are too far away for me to reach: my mother always comes at night, when I don't know she's watching, but I feel her prayers.

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Sometimes she floats

³ Line adapted from C.D. Wright, *Steal Away: selected and new poems*. 2002

Sometimes she floats,
her brain full of cotton wool,
hovering over the edge of a cliff.
Her mother thinks it's a problem,
the doctors too.
Diazepam, Prozac and Seroquel they try,
and yet even in her dreams she remains suspended in air.
She shuts her eyes really tight
and longs for solid ground or death.



Losing God

The moon shines blue on her cupped
hands.

She is on her knees facing the mountain
outside her window.

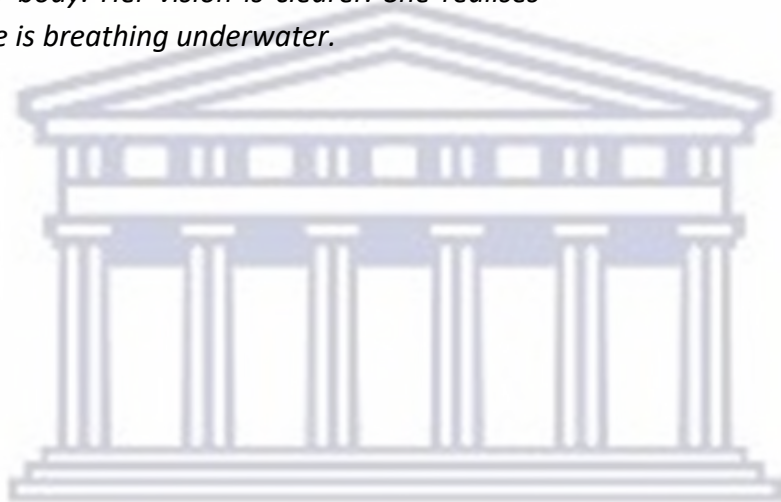
She's trying to remember how to pray
but the rope is already taut.

Nothing new here, just old shoes and
nowhere to go.



The Sixth Wave

The sixth wave comes with a new ebb and flow. The water surrounding her changes between turquoise, blue and white. A woman floats towards her with a blinding light, with the scent of lavender dancing around her. Surrounding her are white flowers, pearls, sea shells and silver fish. She feels a new energy move through her body. Her vision is clearer. She realises she is breathing underwater.



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Learning to Exhale V

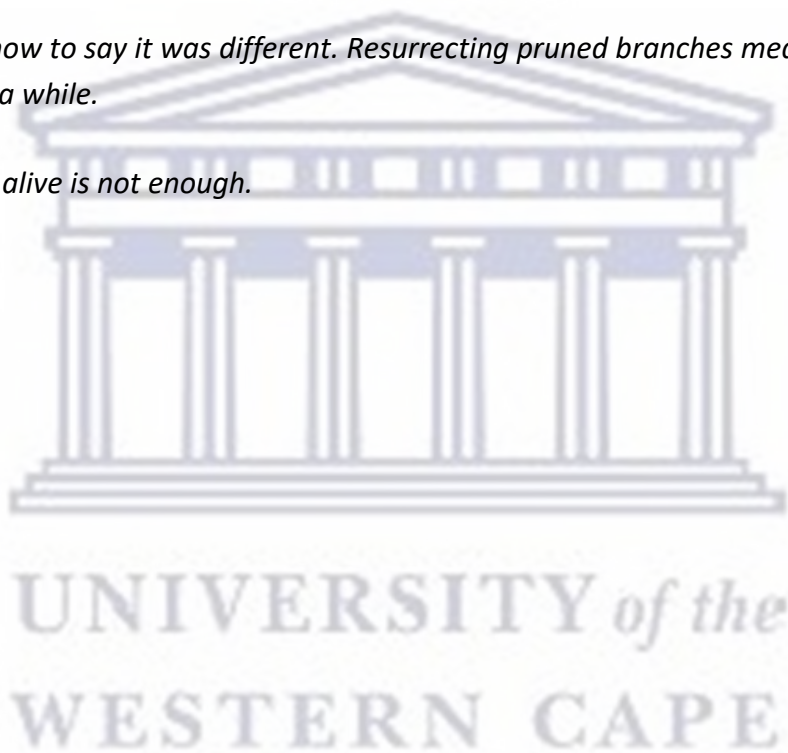
“You have done well,” the therapist said. Another new one, now that she had moved back to Johannesburg.

“I don’t know what that means,” she responded, her thick branches leaning over, heavy with fruit.

“Well, you are back at work, taking care of yourself and steady on the medication.”

She didn’t know how to say it was different. Resurrecting pruned branches means that you do not feel them for a while.

Sometimes being alive is not enough.



How do you live in the world?

She begins to string words together again, with little ambition.

Black women get murdered at the post office.

She learns to laugh again, guardedly.

Black women are murdered in their homes.

Beat by beat, her feet remember their dance.

Black queer womxn are burnt alive.

Her breathing eases her back into presence.

Black trans women are killed in the streets.

She doesn't know how to live in the world.



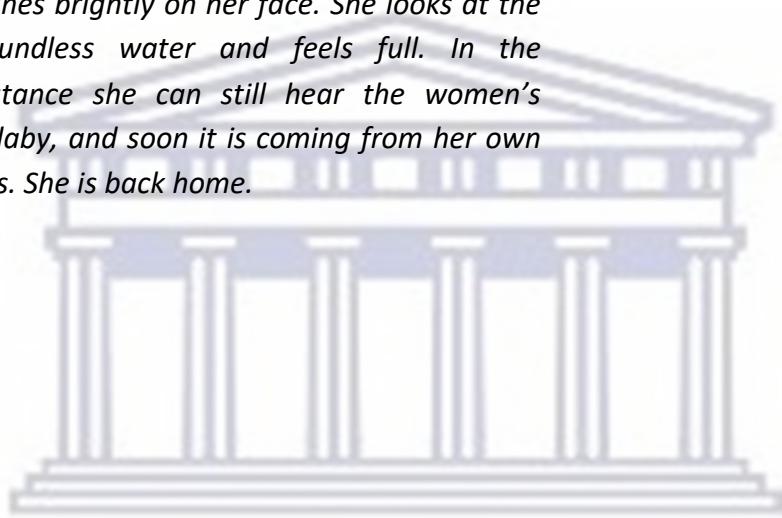
The Calling III

She hears it less and less as the years go by. But there are nights where she wakes up in a sweat and with a heavy pressing on her chest. As if she has been running. And the shadow descends once more. She remembers the smell of the knife, the piles of pills not taken, suicide dates not honoured and goodbye letters never sent. But as the sun rises, so does she. *Not today.*



The Seventh Wave

The seventh wave brings her back to shore. She feels weightless. She coughs up some water, but there is a clearing. She takes a long deep breath. And exhales. The sun shines brightly on her face. She looks at the boundless water and feels full. In the distance she can still hear the women's lullaby, and soon it is coming from her own lips. She is back home.



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Reflective Essay

My MA mini-thesis in Creative Writing is a collection of 33 poems titled *Learning to Exhale*. The poems are centred around a character – a black African woman who is sharing her experiences of mental illness. The poems revolve around memory, forgetting and remembering; going back to the moment when the woman realises that she is ill, understanding it from the present while working to find ways to express what bipolar disorder is and how she experiences it. The collection also highlights her search for words and meaning to describe these experiences that are highly traumatic. This is to create a language of expressing the indescribable. This means that the form and structure is experimental, combining differing styles and form to show different voices, different states of mind that swing from depression, mania to suicidal thoughts.

This work is important as it is adding to a much needed archive on mental illness in the black African community, while also using a mode that allows room for the range of experiences that a sufferer from mental illness goes through. The central tenet though, resonates with Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera's discovery that, "We have found beauty in the tensions and betrayals" (5); highlighting the possibility of the beauty of the literary in expressing even the most gruesome and traumatic of experiences, thereby creating narratives that are truthful, appealing

and intimate in nature. The literary therefore stands as an intervention and a space to negotiate healing, freedom and expression where society, culture and consequently language fall short.

In the past few years, in my social and intellectual community which I share with fellow black South African women, there has been a prevalence of several mental illnesses and disorders. From pure exhaustion and burnout, to depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In our respective African communities it is not considered a formal illness at all with deeply held religious beliefs that point to it as something sinister and 'demonic'. Also, as black girls and women, any form of vulnerability is not allowed, it is the black woman's curse to carry whatever burden family and community has placed on you. "Shingirira" and "Bekezela" (persevere) are sentiments that we are supposed to be proud of.

Being young black women in a world that is still hugely patriarchal, capitalist and highly misogynist is deeply traumatising. South Africa has one of the highest rates of inequality and sexual assault cases coupled with racism and oppressive cultural systems that leave black women as one of the most marginalised and oppressed demographics. This has a very real effect on our mental health and it is not surprising then, that a lot of us are suffering in some way or form. When I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder five years ago, it was a very difficult process of finding resources and assistance within the public health system, but this was not the most difficult or surprising aspect. I struggled to find resources around mental illness and black African women. As a literary academic, I have come across numerous works that speak to trauma directly and the experiences of women on the continent, however, very little with characters that are black and female dealing with specific forms of mental illness, although this is changing rapidly.

Two South African women- actress Bonnie Henna and writer Rahla Xenopoulos have shared their experiences with depression and bipolar disorder, respectively through their autobiographies released in the past 10 years. Henna released *Eyebags and Dimples* (2012) and Xenopoulos *A Memoir of Love and Madness: Living with Bipolar Disorder* (2011). This is significant as it begins to build an archive around experiences of mental illness and begins to unpack and create a new language to speak to and about it, outside of stigma, giving it legitimacy.

Also, as black women, our pain is invisible to the world- it is only us who see us and are there for us. Our condition is one which Jill Stauffer describes as “ethical loneliness”:

“Ethical loneliness is the isolation one feels as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one’s life possibilities.” (1)

This is where Dori Laub’s theory of witnessing becomes relevant- that for healing to take place, especially from trauma, a process of witnessing needs to take place (75). This is an acknowledgement of the ill that has occurred, not only that, but to affirm the experience, its realness and the effect it has had. Laub points to three forms of witnessing- witnessing yourself in the experience, witnessing the testimony of others, and witnessing the process of witnessing (75). The writing process involves me witnessing myself, while I also borrow from others’ accounts and the fictional to represent the testimony of others, and the audience will be a part of witnessing ‘our’ witnessing. This creates a powerful work of art that exists to extend the black

women's archive of storytelling and our relationship to our trauma, memory and the mental states we currently occupy.

According to Akeso, a local healthcare group, bipolar disorder is described as “a brain disorder that causes unusual changes in moods, activity, energy, and a person's ability to carry out everyday tasks. Mood shifts are often extreme and range between depressive episodes and manic episodes” (*Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder* 2015). The four symptoms of bipolar disorder I explore are mania, depression, anxiety and suicide ideation. Within these main themes there are particular threads moving through the work and the ones I highlight here are the concept of breathing, the use of madness as a trope, the use of simple language to describe the horrific, using nature and the celestial to humanise, as well the necessity of beauty to instil hope and render this collection a healing text.

The collection is titled *Learning to Exhale* which is derived from the Whitney Houston song- *Exhale* which is part of the soundtrack to the movie *Waiting to Exhale*, based on a book with the same title by African American author Terry McMillan. A line of the song says: “there comes a point when you exhale”- which is clearly a release, from waiting, and forms an understanding and acceptance of a moment, of who you are fully.

From the onset of this collection, I have been interested in the relationship between breathing, space and visibility. Anxiety causes abnormal breathing as a response to stress and the Anxiety Centre explains that “Part of the stress response changes include increasing heart rate, respiration, and tightening the body's muscles so that it is better equipped to deal with a

threat. These changes can cause a shortness of breath feeling” (Folk and Folk 2018). My protagonist experiences isolation and abandonment, which leads her to feeling unwanted. This leads to a constant holding of breath- breathing easily speaks to an ownership of breath, full humanity, occupation of space and visibility. In the very first poem of the collection “Learning to Exhale I”, there is this exchange between the protagonist and her therapist:

The first time she sat in the therapist’s chair she was asked a strange question:

“Do you feel visible?”

“All my life I have felt invisible,” she said as the rotten fruit fell from her tree, the thuds loud and distracting.

“You do not breathe,” the therapist told her. “It is as if you are scared to breathe. Maybe because you feel you do not deserve to?”

Learning to Exhale then, is a journey towards learning to breathe for the central character, she is learning to understand her illness and moving towards healing.

Writing madness in itself is a challenge- because indeed the character suffers from bipolar disorder, of which mania is a very central experience. Mania can be described as “periods of great excitement or euphoria, delusions, and overactivity” (*Oxford Dictionary*, mania entry).

African women writers Calixthe Beyala and Bessie Head are adept at using the trope of madness to re-imagine the world of the traumatized woman. Caroline Brown writes how these two authors write narratives that give truth to the ‘madness’ of their female protagonists (96). I note Brown’s analysis mainly because she attributes to Beyala and Head precisely what I

portray in my text- the destabilization of ideas about sanity, truth and essentially, reality. This is not only for the character within the text but the readers' idea of truth and reality is challenged.

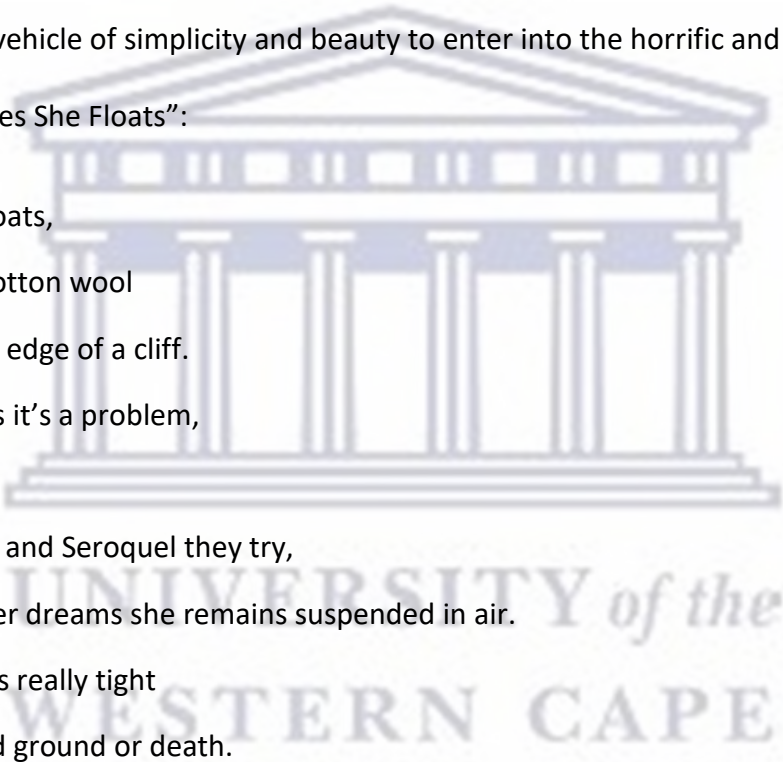
The "Waves" in the collection, a total of seven, are a series of otherworldly experiences that occur in the subconscious of the protagonist. They begin with the character at the beach as she is slowly enticed by the water, and as the waves come in, she surrenders and enters into the water, where she 'dies' and learns to breathe underwater. She also encounters other women beneath the sea who have also come to "lay their burdens down". The "Waves" are characterised in the present tense and come in and out of the narrative structure of the collection.

It is largely due to the chronology in narratives that assumes a direct correlation between linearity and truth and therefore rationality. However, when the chronology is dismantled, so is the linearity and therefore rationality is questioned. In "The Third Wave", the character experiences the flooding of her mind:

The third wave comes as a flood. She wakes up and cannot read. Her mind is filled with water and the words float above it. She picks up a bucket, scooping out liquid letters. On all fours, she tries to plug the holes but she can barely keep up. Aching arms and a heavy head. All she needs is rest. Clinging to escaping words is exhausting. She lays her heavy head down, for a day, or two. Or even three. She does not know.

It is difficult to create an understanding of the inability to read due to a disturbance of the mind. Outside of linearity we are forced to question the nature of the implied truth, therefore “the author erodes the logic through which we determine chronology or truth” (Brown 96). This leaves us at the mercy of the protagonist as we enter her world on her own terms and abandon our own compass for truth and sanity.

Thirdly, I use the vehicle of simplicity and beauty to enter into the horrific and unexpected, as seen in “Sometimes She Floats”:



Sometimes she floats,
her brain full of cotton wool
hovering over the edge of a cliff.
Her mother thinks it’s a problem,
the doctors too.
Diazepam, Prozac and Seroquel they try,
and yet even in her dreams she remains suspended in air.
She shuts her eyes really tight
and longs for solid ground or death.

Floating seems so easy and fun and a heightening experience- which mania can feel like in the beginning. However, the feeling of not being in control is one that follows this high and leads to paranoia. To relate the simple feeling of floating to the debilitating feeling of desiring death highlights this very important technique I use further in the poem “Seizing Happiness”:

In recent years I have become intent on seizing happiness⁴: to achieve this I have started sprinkling sugar in the plants: the light of the moon clarifies the injustice: bottles of wine mellow the shattering noise: it seems I can no longer wear shorts: my watch is stuck on the same time even though the second hand keeps moving: a drizzle of blood from a razor on my thighs every now and then keeps me human: he never picks up the call I really need him to: three nights in a row I lie with my eyes open: the circle of the well glistens in the sun as I lean over the top: it reminds me of how I like to dance on table tops: I'm not sure how the security guard let me in: the wind pulls at my skirt as I attempt to climb the mountain: you need to learn to sneak up on happiness, on him: my mother takes me to the hospital to find sleep: the moon keeps the stars company when I finally do: they wake me up at his doorstep: the grass is so green it befits a wedding: the words so airtight they can't tell that I'm lost: she holds her hand over my nose to make sure I'm still breathing: cupcakes in the oven, I will cover them in butterflies so they fly away: the chocolate crescents float by but they are too far for me to reach: my mother always comes at night, when I don't know she's watching, but I feel her prayers.

The form I use is unusual, as it does not follow the rules of punctuation nor do the lines follow linearity and narration. It combines simple images like cupcake, chocolate, the moon, the stars and even sugar. However, buried within are the lines that strike with stark precision in imagery, that hold the real experience of mania: the protagonists cutting their thigh with a razor, leaning over a well and insomnia among others. The combination of this many images, light and dark also highlight the overwhelming sensory overload that characterises a manic episode. It also

⁴ Line adapted from C.D Wright, *Steal Away: selected and new poems*. 2002

defies sanity and truth, but one does not require a complete understanding of the sequence to enter into the mind of the protagonist.

Fourthly, the inability to find words to express the experience of 'losing one's mind' is also evident in the poems in which the protagonist attempts to tell those closest to her. The first experience is her telling her former partner who asks about her hospital band in "Believe Me". In the poem she actually does not explain what she is going through- because there are no adequate words, so in this sense, the poem performs the inability of language to portray the experience of mental illness. This is also made clear in the poem "Tough Love" in which the central character can only say "The doctors say there is something wrong with me".

This inability is not only in terms of language, but also in terms of the understanding of the recipients. Because, in most of African households, there is little to no understanding of diseases that are not visible. One has to convince the recipient, in this case her brother and mother. This is why she brings up the doctors, to validate her diagnosis as having come from a professional. However, in both situations from "Believe Me" and "Tough Love", there is a reluctance to accept this diagnosis and even a sense of judgement, that she is somehow to blame for her illness.

The fifth technique I apply, that is very central part of the collection, are the conversations between the protagonist and the different therapists she encounters. It is in these sessions that we are opened up to the very intimate space of doctor and client. Therapy sessions are very private so it offers a space of insight into the very real experiences of someone who lives with a

mental illness. It is in this space, that the therapist, and not the protagonist herself, explains what her illness is, as we see in “Learning to Exhale II”:

“You suffer from rejection and abandonment issues,” the therapist explained. “This has snowballed into anxiety and depression, while you have a genetic predisposition to bipolar disorder. We can give you medicine for that.”

In addition, the poems: “Insomnia”, “Prozac” and “The Third Floor”, are where we encounter very real and substantial spaces and experiences that sufferers of mental illness are subject to - psychiatric clinics, medicine and its side effects as well as judgemental pharmacists.

The use of nature as a vehicle to carry the protagonist, who has experienced life in the invisible, isolated way that she has, is the sixth technique I apply in the collection. The effect of her illness on her view of herself gets to the point where she believes she does not deserve to breathe; it was therefore important to me to carry her gently, warmly and with dignity. This was in order to re-humanise her and also not reduce her to simply a mentally ill person or victim. This I did by using elements of nature – mainly water and trees. I refer severally to the protagonist as a fully formed tree and each experience that happens on her mind is connected to the body - her leaves, her fruit, her roots and her branches.

This use of nature as a vehicle is reminiscent of the reference to Yvonne Vera that I made earlier in this essay; the importance of using the beautiful to speak of the horrific and difficult things, in order to maintain the value of the characters in the text, who represents a larger group of people in similar situations. Physical beauty connotes symmetry, conformity, harmony

and beauty - which is a true reflection of the form of poetry. Beauty in art is creating ideal perfection in words and form, thus creating calm, majesty, and serenity and therefore creating promise – the promise of certainty and possibility thereby instilling hope. This is carried very well by Elaine Scarry’s theory that “...whenever one sees something beautiful, it is as though one has suddenly been washed up onto a merciful beach: all unease, aggression, indifference suddenly drops back behind one, like a surf that has for a moment lost its capacity to harm” (39). This experience can therefore inspire the desire to live beyond present suffering.

This is reminiscent of contemporary black women poets Upile Chisala (*soft magic, nectar*) and Ijeoma Umebinyuo (*Questions for Ada*) who use nature and the celestial to portray characters that are considered to be marginalised and largely objectified. This is to infuse them with wholeness and create texts that are healing. An example from Umebinyuo is as follows:

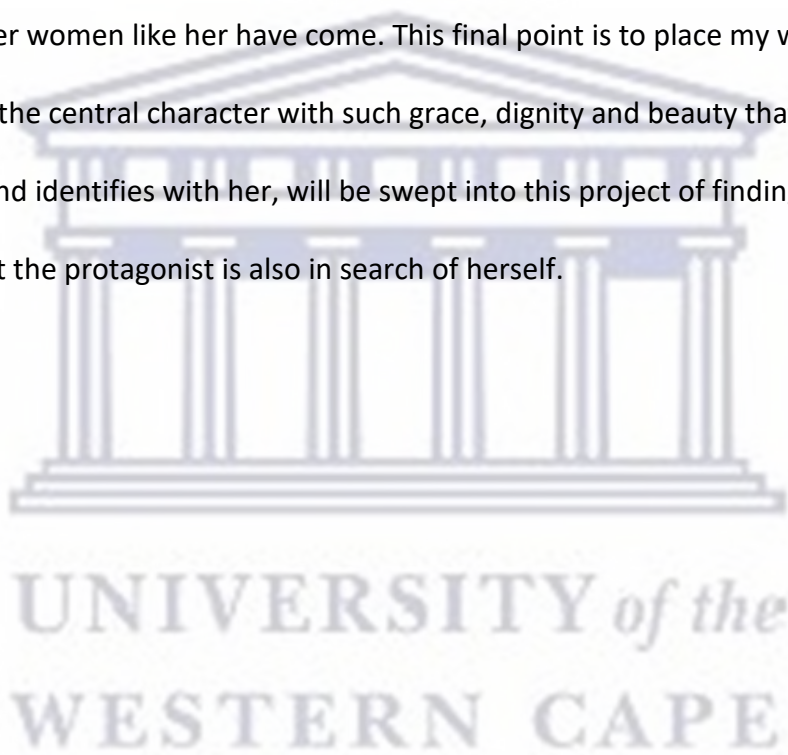
Forgive me father
but sometimes my God
is a woman
sitting on the kitchen floor
her hands holding her legs
screaming for help
without making a sound. (51)

And from Chisala:

My darling
You are the colour of the earth
You inherited holy
Let no one silence the glory in your bones
Let no one make you doubt
That you
Are

Indeed
Important. (36)

Following this tradition in my collection, in “The Fourth Wave”, the protagonist calls out to Yemoja, an African water deity who lives in the sea and is known to protect women and children. It is she who then comes to the protagonist in “The Sixth Wave” and gives her the ability to breathe underwater, as well as make a home in the ocean, where she has encountered other women like her have come. This final point is to place my work as a healing text, by handling the central character with such grace, dignity and beauty that anyone who encounters her and identifies with her, will be swept into this project of finding promise, hope and certainty that the protagonist is also in search of herself.



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